

**12** A new joint campaign on homelessness and housing

**15** Rethinking renting

**18** Harm reduction in Canada

**21** Housing Contemporary Ireland

**23** Portrait of a Project:  
Foundations Project

# CornerStone

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

ISSUE 28  
OCTOBER 2006

**9** Towards 2016  
Michelle Norris  
on the partnership  
agreement



## note from the editor



Earlier in the summer, the 2005 Housing Needs Assessment was published, which gives a breakdown of households on local authority housing waiting lists. The assessment shows that in the four Dublin local authorities (Dublin City Council, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown, Fingal and South Dublin) just under 20% of the households on housing waiting lists are non-Irish citizens. And the number of refugee households or people with permission to remain in the state on Dublin waiting lists has risen by about 50% since 2002.

So the launch of a Cities for Local Integration Policy (CLIP) network aiming to improve the integration of immigrants in 25 European cities in Dublin in September was a very welcome development. The network, which is supported by the European Foundation, the Council of Europe and the City of Stuttgart will be run by the Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, and one of the first issues it will study will be housing supply for immigrants in the 25 cities.

We can learn a great deal from other European countries, most of which have had a far longer experience of immigration than Ireland. Many mistakes have been made, which we can avoid, and there are many examples of good practice, which we can copy.

Homeless services too can learn from others. In London the Simon Community, which estimates that at least 30% of people sleeping rough in central London are from Central and Eastern European countries, has sought help from Barka, a Polish homeless charity. Whilst significant steps have been made in Ireland (e.g. the Threshold initiatives reported in CornerStone issue 27, June 2006), more needs to be done to ensure that ethnic minorities are aware of the services available and are able to use them.

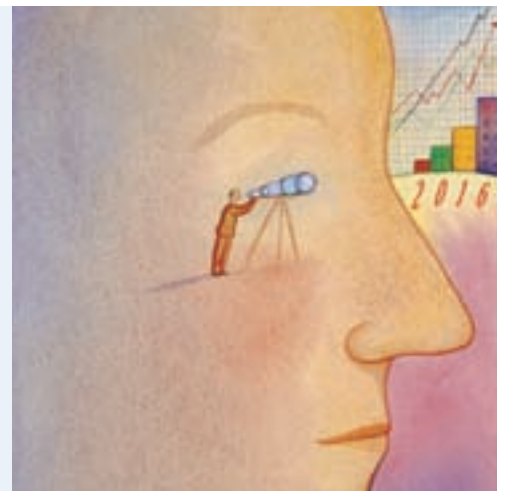
Since the last issue, both the Housing Needs Assessment, referred to above, and the 2005 Annual Housing Bulletin have been published. These publications are hugely important, both for monitoring progress towards achieving targets (most local authorities have not performed well here), and for developing future plans. But the Housing Needs Assessment, which must take thousands of person hours to produce, is flawed by not allowing for detailed analysis of the data. Furthermore, it is not really an assessment of housing need at all, it's an assessment of the housing needs of people who are eligible for local authority housing, which is a different thing altogether. Also, no attempt is made to distinguish between different degrees of housing need, which greatly weakens its value. Finally, the assessment of homelessness contains two completely contradictory figures, which seriously undermines its credibility. The government's new policy framework, (originally promised in 'early 2006' but yet to see the light of day) will, it is claimed, include a 'new means of assessing need'. We hope to be able to report favourably on this in future issues of CornerStone.

### Simon Brooke

Editor of CornerStone · Housing and Social Policy Consultant

The Homeless Agency is a governmental body launched in May 2001 which is responsible for the planning, co-ordination and delivery of quality services to people who are homeless in the Dublin area. The staff team, is advised by a consultative forum, and reports to a board of management comprising representatives from the statutory and voluntary sector. The agency brings together a range of voluntary and statutory agencies that are working in partnership to implement agreed plans on the delivery of services

to people who are homeless, assisting them to move rapidly to appropriate long term housing and independence. A major task is the implementation of the second three year plan *Making it home* covering the period 2004–2006. The Homeless Agency co-ordinates all homeless services in the Dublin area; delivers some direct services; provides training and other supports; monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of services; carries out research; and administers funding to homeless services.



# CornerStone

#### EDITOR

Simon Brooke

#### ADVISORY GROUP

Eithne Fitzgerald, Independent  
Brian Harvey, Independent  
Derval Howley, Homeless Agency  
Jo Ahern, Homeless Agency  
Brendan Kenny, Dublin City Council  
Alice O'Flynn, Health Service Executive

#### PUBLISHER

The Homeless Agency, Parkgate Hall  
6–9 Conyngham Road, Dublin 8  
Telephone 01 703 6100, Fax 01 703 6170  
Email: [homeless@dublincity.ie](mailto:homeless@dublincity.ie)  
Web: [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie)

#### CONTRIBUTORS

- Michelle Norris lectures in social policy at UCD
- Caroline McGrath is director of advocacy at Focus Ireland
- Daithí Downey is policy analyst at Focus Ireland
- Sam Priestly is low threshold sector manager at DePaul Trust
- Tom Dunne is chair of the Private Residential Tenancies Board and head of the School of Real Estate and Construction Economics at DIT
- Fran Cassidy is a writer and researcher
- Kathleen Holohan is chair of the Homeless Agency board and director of housing at Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council

#### DESIGN

Identikit Design Consultants

#### PRINTING

New Oceans

The views expressed in CornerStone do not necessarily represent the views of the Homeless Agency, its management board, or consultative forum

**HOME  
LESS**  
agency

9



feature article

## Towards 2016 Michelle Norris on the partnership agreement

**Michelle Norris** welcomes the strong focus on housing in the national partnership agreement

# contents

ISSUE 28  
OCTOBER 2006

12



15



18



## 2 HOMELESS AGENCY NEWS

Competency framework; action plan 2007–2010; common assessment tool; numbers presenting at HPU down; service evaluations

## 4 NEWS

Affordable housing initiative disappears; assessment of housing need 2005; domestic violence; eat well, be well; Focus Ireland conference; annual housing statistics bulletin

## 12 JOINING FORCES

**Caroline McGrath** describes 'Makeroom' – a new joint NGO campaign

## 15 RETHINKING RENTING

**Daithí Downey** opens up a new housing debate

## 18 HARM REDUCTION VANCOUVER-STYLE

**Sam Priestly** shares her experience of the harm reduction debate in Vancouver

## 21 REVIEW: HOUSING CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

**Tom Dunne** is impressed by the latest housing tome

## 23 PORTRAIT OF A PROJECT

The Foundations Project

## 26 CORNERSTONE QUESTIONNAIRE

**Kathleen Holohan**, chair of the Homeless Agency board and director of housing at Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council

# Competency framework

The Homeless Agency commissioned the development of a competency framework for the homeless services sector in 2005 as part of the Learning and Performance Strategy 2005/2006. This framework was developed to underpin the vision of 'meeting the needs of homeless people by developing a quality workforce'. The competency framework was designed following extensive consultation and dedication from many workers at all levels within the sector. It outlines in detail the behaviours that people working within the sector would need to demonstrate in their roles to ensure that service users have access to a skilled and competent workforce who can meet the sectors real needs in an effective and holistic way.

Phase 2 of the competency framework commenced in August 2006. It will benefit individual organisations and services, particularly with regard to

recruitment procedures. Phase 2 of this project will be linked to recruitment and selection and will deliver clearly defined job descriptions, a range of assessment tools, guidelines manual for managers, workshops supporting the recruitment process and also an opportunity for organisations to share knowledge.

Phase 2 of the competency framework will be rolled out by March 2007 and will allow staff within the homeless sector to develop skills in the area of competencies and facilitation, learn best practice from leading specialists in the field of competency frameworks, have the opportunity for personal and professional development. The competency framework will bring a number of benefits to the organisation including a common language for performance across the sector and also a measurement process including key indications of what behaviours will be valued and recognised.

The rollout of the competency framework will take full cognisance of the roles as determined in the report 'Work Worth Doing' in which staffing in 140 homeless services throughout Ireland was reviewed. The rollout will align the competency framework competencies for all levels for the following roles across the sector as outlined in the report: project manager, project leader, project worker, assistant project worker, night worker and child care worker.

The continued success of the competency framework is reliant on the commitment of all organisations in the integration of the framework into the recruitment and selection processes within the homeless services sector. The Homeless Agency has received a very positive response from the statutory and voluntary sector. ■

## Action plan 2007–2010

Moving on from Making it Home 2004–2006, the next action plan will run from 2007–2010. The focus of the new plan will be to work to achieve the vision, which is that *by 2010, long term homelessness and the need for people to sleep rough will be eliminated in Dublin. The risk of a person or family becoming homeless will be minimal due to effective preventative policies and services. Where it does occur, homelessness will be short term and all people who are homeless will be assisted into appropriate housing and the realisation of their full potential and rights as citizens.*

The new action plan 2007–2010 will aim to ensure that all actions and initiatives undertaken by the Homeless Agency Partnership are focused on the achievement of the vision by 2010. The plan will have appropriate targets in addressing homelessness before 2010. The period

2007–2010 should see the further development of a sustainable, interacting network of homeless services that will continue to provide for service users needs.

The new action plan 2007–2010 will take recommendations from the evaluation of *Making it Home 2004–2006* and also feedback from service users, the Homeless Agency board, consultative forum, action plan steering group, local authorities, Homeless Agency networks and working groups, voluntary and statutory organisations and service users.

The key strategic aims of the new action plan will focus on the prevention of homelessness for those at risk, the provision of effective services in each local area to address the accommodation, housing, health and other relevant needs of people who are homeless in that area and also ensuring sufficient long-term supports as required, for people who are homeless, especially single person

households. The action will be published in early 2007.

The first round of open consultation days took place in June 2006, which focused on evaluating the implementation of *Making it Home Action Plan 2004–2006* and received feedback for priority actions for the new action plan.

The second round of open consultations took place on Friday September 1st and Tuesday September 5th 2006 and had a strong attendance from organisations working with people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin. In addition to the consultations that took place with independent consultant Simon Brooke and various organisations on an individual basis, this was the second opportunity to discuss the proposed direction of the action plan. A full day consultation was held with the board and consultative forum on September 18th to review the action plan. ■

# Common assessment tool

The Homeless Agency, Dublin City Council and the Health Service Executive met in July 2005 to consider development of a common assessment tool for use across homeless services. As part of the meeting a presentation was made by a group from Northern Ireland First Housing Aid and Support Services who have established a clear process for assessing people who present as homeless in relation to housing, healthcare and other support needs. The

Health Service Executive agreed to pilot assessments in three emergency services and then roll out to all homeless service providers in Dublin in 2006.

The assessment tool is a technique, which will allow homeless services to assess a homeless person's needs in a holistic and comprehensive way so that they can formulate a care plan to address their needs. The pilot commenced in January 2006 in three homeless services including Back Lane, Cedar House and Abbey Street and

targeting people who were using homeless services for three years or more. All staff in these homeless services completed training in relation to the implementation of the assessment tool and will adopt the use of the assessment in the autumn.

A consultation day with chief executive officers from organisations within the homeless sector took place in early September. The assessment tool will then be rolled out to the rest of the homeless sector in October/November 2006. ■

## Fewer people presenting to the Homeless Persons Unit

There has been a significant reduction of 27% in the number of people presenting to the Homeless Persons Unit in the period January – June 2006 in comparison to January to June 2005. From January – June in 2006, 944 people including new and repeat presentations accessed the Homeless Persons Unit, while 1292 people accessed the service during the same period in the 2005.

The Homeless Persons Unit assesses a person's homelessness status and places them into appropriate emergency accommodation on behalf of the local authorities and works to identify move on options for people who are accessing its

service. It also ensures payment of state entitlements and access to medical services for people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin.

The Homeless Persons Unit is a service provided by the Health Service Executive and is responsible for the delivery of a range of services to homeless persons within the Dublin area.

The Homeless Persons Unit is based on both James Street and Wellington Quay and offers services from 10am – 5pm with the focus of the service being advice and information relating to accommodation, social welfare payments and the organisation of appointments. A single man who

is experiencing homelessness can access homeless services by calling to the Homeless Persons Unit in James Street, while women and families can access homeless services by calling to the Homeless Persons Unit in Wellington Quay.

The HPU can also be accessed through the freephone night service 1800 724 724 between the hours of 5pm to 1am.

The night service works in partnership with the street outreach teams and Dublin City Council Night Bus offering information, advice and support to people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin. ■

## Service evaluations

The Homeless Agency is responsible for monitoring and evaluating homeless services to ensure accountability for the expenditure of public funds on homeless services as well as the effectiveness of services in addressing the needs of people who are homeless.

The Homeless Agency is commissioning an independent body to conduct the evaluations of up to twenty-one transitional housing services and to provide the first interim report on initial

overall findings to the Homeless Agency in October 2006. A second interim report will be due on November 2006. The final report will be due on January 24th 2007.

The successful tenders will provide an evaluation framework that addresses the principles of effectiveness, efficiency, and ongoing relevance of services as well as conclusions and recommendations in relation to individual services and the provision of transitional and support services as a whole within the Dublin area.

It is envisaged that the evaluation process will commence in the autumn and we expect that the final report will be received by the Homeless Agency in early 2007. The tender process took place and submissions were received by the Homeless Agency in July 2006. The consultants will be tasked with drawing conclusions and making recommendations on the future role of transitional services in Dublin. Any gaps within individual services and across the sector will also be identified through this process. ■

# Affordable housing initiative: now you see it...

Remember *Sustaining Progress*, the partnership agreement for 2003 – 2005? You may recall that it included a commitment to, ‘a new initiative aimed at further enhancing the supply of affordable housing, with the objective of increasing the supply of such houses by 10,000 units.’ *Sustaining Progress* went on to say, ‘...the Government is committed to an ambitious scale of delivery of affordable housing for the target group through this new affordable housing initiative and (my italics) the other affordable housing coming through arrangements under Part V of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended’.

In other words, the 10,000 affordable housing initiative homes are *in addition to*

affordable housing provided by Part V.

Turn then to the Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin for 2005:

**Substantial progress has been made towards meeting the target of 10,000 Affordable Housing Initiative units as outlined in *Sustaining Progress*. ... By the end of 2005, 1,548 units had been provided under the Initiative, including (my italics) affordable housing made available through Part V arrangements.**

So all of a sudden, the 10,000 extra affordable houses aren't extra at all, because they include affordable housing produced under Part V.

Is this or is it not a rolling back on the *Sustaining Progress* commitment?

*Sustaining Progress* said the affordable housing initiative is in addition to Part V. The Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin said it included Part V.

It makes a big difference. *Sustaining Progress* referred to ‘measurable progress to be made by the mid-term review’. Well, it's measurable all right. If you have a magnifying glass that is. Unaccountably the bulletin forgot to tell the reader how many homes have been provided under the affordable homes initiative (not including housing built under Part V) up to the end of 2005. The answer was 124.

However, the Affordable Homes Partnership, established to co-ordinate and promote the delivery of affordable homes in the Dublin area, has ambitious plans to deliver 17,000 homes by 2009. ■

## Assessment of housing need 2005

Every three years, local authorities carry out an assessment of housing need in their area. Each local authority looks at the households on its housing waiting list, and households registered as homeless, and divides them among ten categories of need. (It's actually not quite as simple as this because not all people on waiting lists are included, but most are.)

The headline result of the 2005 assessment that was published in the summer is that the total number of households assessed as being in housing need in 2005 was 43,684, which is 10% less than the total in 2002. And if you take account of population changes, the percentage of the population on housing waiting lists fell by nearly 25% between 2002 and 2005. This is of course very good news indeed, and it is the first time that the total has reduced since the first assessment in 1991.

For the latest assessment, the DoEHLG has provided more information than ever and for this it should be congratulated. The detailed report is available on an Excel spreadsheet which when printed

To get the housing needs assessment, go to [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie) and click on 'housing statistics' in the terracotta coloured box on the bottom right of your screen.

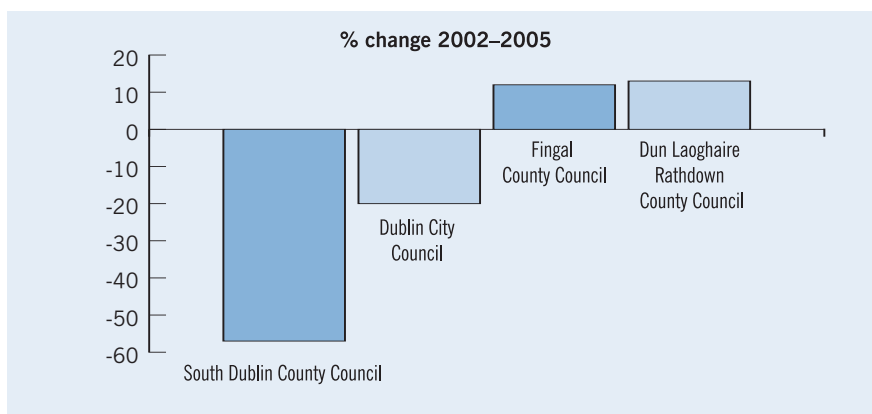
runs to 132 pages – enough to keep the most hardened number cruncher happy for days. Although, despite the quantity, detailed cross-tabulation analysis is unfortunately not possible, which reduces the value of the data. For readers who

would prefer to be poked in the eye with a sharp stick, CornerStone has done the analysis for you.

### Local authority totals

Although the overall change between 2002 and 2005 was a reduction of 10%, among local authorities this varied hugely. The changes in the Dublin authorities waiting lists are shown below.

The South Dublin County Council total dropped more than any other local authority in the country.



## Categories of need

The table on the right shows how the numbers of households in each of the ten categories changed between 2002 and 2005.

CornerStone suggests you ignore the whopping 220% increase in the number of children leaving care which may be a consequence of someone's pen slipping. (The assessment claims that in 2005, 81 children left care in Sligo County Council and another 44 in Enniscorthy Town Council – between them accounting for nearly half the national total.)

But aside from this rogue result, you can see that half the categories show a significant reduction, and two show a significant increase. These are disabled people and those who can't afford their existing accommodation. This last is the biggest category by far, accounting for more than all the other categories put together. This is somewhat surprising since rents in the private rented sector were lower in 2005 than in 2002, but Dr Eoin O'Sullivan of Trinity College Dublin, (who put ideas into *CornerStone's* head for this analysis that *CornerStone* is grateful for) suggests that the reason is that local authorities were requested to deal with this as a residual category where households who did not fit into any other category could be conveniently placed.

## Homelessness

There are apparently no homeless people at all in Leitrim, Mayo or Sligo county councils or in 2 of the 3 divisions that constitute Cork County Council. Furthermore if you exclude Dun Laoghaire Rathdown, the average number of homeless households in each county council is – wait for it – 6. Yup, 6. This may be in part a problem with definitions, since a number of local authorities with emergency hostels in their area seem not to have included the hostel residents as homeless, but whatever the reason, it needs looking at.

There is a serious local anomaly too. According to *Counted In 2005* (the Homeless Agency's homelessness survey, carried out at the same time as the housing needs assessment), 185 people had slept rough for at least 4 of the previous 7 nights. But according to the housing needs assessment there were only 2 rough sleepers in the Dublin City Council area; 30 in Dun Laoghaire Rathdown; 1 in Fingal; and none in South Dublin.

The total national figure in the assessment for the number of people

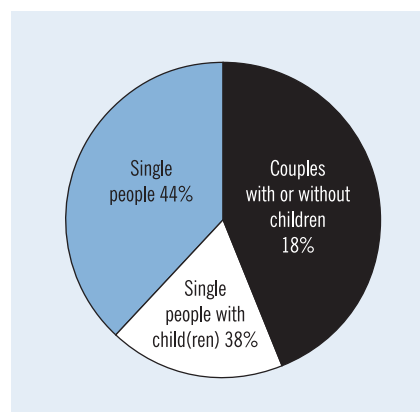
Category	Number in 2002	Number in 2005	Change
Homeless	2,468	2,399	- 3%
Traveller	1,583	1,012	- 36%
Unfit or materially unsuitable accommodation	4,065	1,725	- 58%
Overcrowded accommodation	8,513	4,112	- 52%
Involuntary sharing	4,421	3,375	- 24%
Young persons leaving care	82	262	+ 220%
Medical or compassionate reasons	3,400	3,547	+ 4%
Elderly	2,006	1,727	- 14%
Disabled	423	480	+ 13%
Not reasonably able to meet the cost of accommodation	21,452	25,045	+ 17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>48,413</b>	<b>43,684</b>	<b>- 10%</b>

sleeping rough is 74. But hang on a minute; if you turn to another table the total is 41!

Even if some of the difference between the assessment and *Counted In 2005* is due to the fact that most rough sleepers are not registered on housing waiting lists, the yawning gap between the two surveys and the very low level of reported homelessness by some county councils does not inspire confidence in the accuracy of the figures quoted.

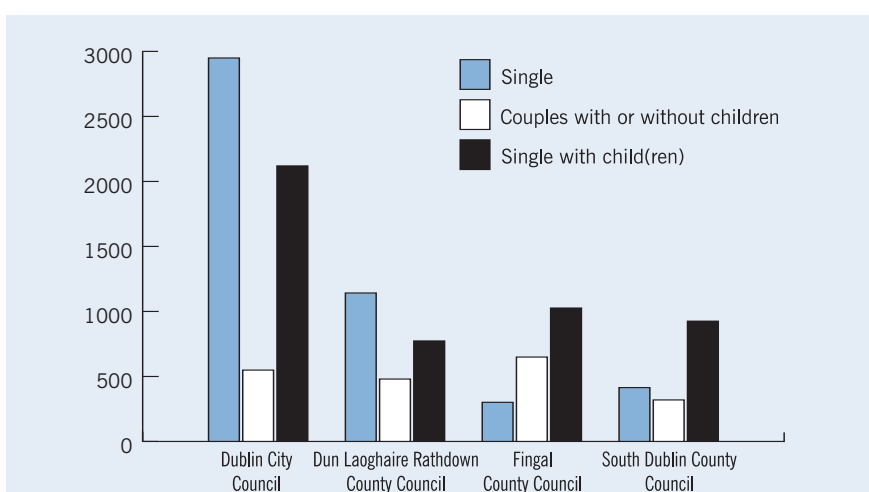
## Household breakdown

The pie chart shows the national picture: single people make up the biggest group, and their share increased from 32% in 2002 whilst the other two groups' share dropped.



## Household breakdown of housing waiting lists

The make up of the four Dublin authorities' lists are all different, as you can see in the graph below.

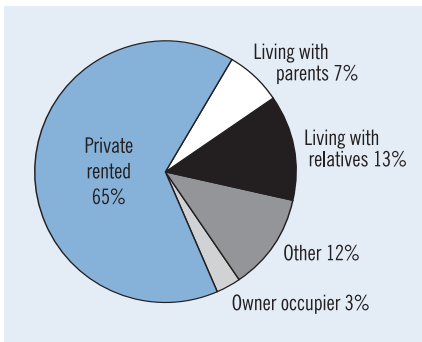


## Compared with the national average:

- Dublin City Council has more single people, and far fewer couples with or without children.
- Dun Laoghaire Rathdown more or less fits the national average.
- Fingal has far fewer single people, and more couples and families.
- South Dublin County Council has fewer single people, and more single people with child(ren).

## Housing tenure

So where were all the people on the waiting list living whilst they waited?



The answer as you can see, was mainly in private rented housing. This was particularly the case for couples with or without children – 78% of them were in the private rented sector.

But the assessment contains a rather strange anomaly. In order to get rent supplement you have to register on the housing waiting list of your local authority, whether you want social housing or not. So there are some people on housing waiting lists who do not actually want social housing because they're happy in private rented accommodation. But of course no-one knows how many, so local authorities have been asked to 'generally

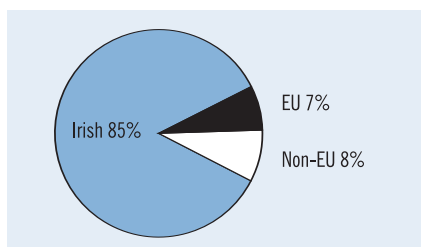
exclude' people on their waiting lists who have been in private rented accommodation for less than 18 months on the basis that they have not established a long-term housing need.

## Length of time on list

The length of time people spend on the waiting list has not changed much at all since 2002. In all 60% of households were on the list for less than two years and 10% for more than 5 years. Interestingly single people appear to be housed nearly as quickly as the other two groups, which you might not expect.

## Nationality

The assessment included information on the nationality of the applicants and the total figures are as follows:



**Nationality of households in the national housing needs assessment**

The great majority of households are, as you can see, Irish nationals. The 2002 assessment did not provide the number of EU households on waiting lists, but did count the number of non-EU citizens. Non-EU citizens means people who have been granted refugee status or permission to remain in the state, but who have yet to take Irish citizenship. This figure increased from 5.5% in 2002 to 8% in 2005. Overall in Dublin there are more non-EU citizens on waiting lists than in the country as a whole.

But it is very important to be clear that the needs assessment does not provide figures about ethnic origin. Many people who are Irish citizens would not describe themselves as ethnically Irish, including for example those refugees who have been given Irish citizenship, or people who married an Irish person and acquired Irish citizenship by naturalisation, or ethnic minority households from other EU countries who have settled here and applied for social housing. In this respect the housing needs assessment is a very weak tool for examining trends in housing need among ethnic minority households. ■

# Women experiencing domestic violence

*Housing Policy and Practice for Women Experiencing Domestic Violence* can be downloaded from the Homeless Agency's website, [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie) or if you want a hard copy you can get one from Sonas Housing Association tel 01 830 9088, email [info@sonashousing.ie](mailto:info@sonashousing.ie)

**H**ousing legislation should be amended to make specific reference to domestic violence. So says *Housing Policy and Practice for Women Experiencing Domestic Violence* which was published earlier this year. The report, produced for the Eastern Regional

Planning Committee on Violence Against Women, includes the results of a survey of six local authorities (the four Dublin authorities plus Wicklow and Kildare County Councils).

The survey found a wide variation in local authority responses to women out of

home because of violence and recommends that local authorities and the HSE should draw up a national set of guidelines that would ensure consistent responses across the country.

Other recommendations include incorporating a clause in tenancy agreements that specifically states domestic violence is a ground for eviction; and adopting a co-ordinated approach to women out of home because of domestic violence involving local authorities, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector. ■

# Eat your heart out Jamie Oliver!

**W**ell, perhaps eating your heart is not terribly helpful nutritional advice, but Jamie Oliver is not the only one to provide popular, nutritional and easy-to-cook recipes; Focus Ireland can do it too.

As part of its annual Eat Well, Be Well health promotion initiative Focus Ireland has published a food and health eating magazine, a copy of which accompanies this issue of CornerStone.

The initiative aims to show the importance of a healthy diet for people surviving on low incomes, to highlight the barriers which often act to prevent this and to offer information and advice



on food, diet and nutrition. The idea originally came following the recommendations of Focus Ireland's research into food poverty (Hungry for Change, 2003 [www.focusireland.ie](http://www.focusireland.ie)), which showed that people who are homeless suffer from poor diets and inadequate nutrition due to low income and poor access to cooking facilities.

The magazine is a useful and practical resource to a range of different organisations offering food services and

also to groups working with people on low incomes. Some of the features include healthy eating for kids and mums-to-be as well as eating for a healthy heart. There is information on super foods and nutrition and a special report on food for good health. You will find cooks' tips from Focus Ireland catering staff plus thirty-two easy low-cost recipes to help you eat well and be well. So if you fancy starting your lunch with corn and potato chowder, moving on

...people who are homeless suffer from poor diets and inadequate nutrition due to low income and poor access to cooking facilities

to Moroccan spiced sweet potato stew, and finishing with fruit pavlova, you need look no further. ■

# Annual housing statistics

The Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin for 2005 follows the new cool format of the last bulletin and kicks off with an up-beat assessment of house prices. You'd think that by now people would have realised that up-beat assessments of house prices are dangerous things to do wouldn't you? But the authors fell for it. The bulletin says confidently, '...in the 2 years from June 2003 to June 2005 the rate of increase for second hand houses in Dublin fell from 23% to 10% and nationally from 18% to 10%.' True, but since then house price inflation has gone up again – by March 2006 the rate of increase for second hand houses in Dublin was up to 17.5% and nationally up to 14.4%. So the gains of 2005 have already been nearly wiped out.

## Social housing

The bulletin then refers to key policy developments in 2005, and rightly includes Social and Affordable Housing Action Plans in this list. Every local authority has to have a SAHAP, which is a five year plan for social and affordable housing running from 2004 – 2008. And a very good thing they are too. Apart from anything else, if you have a plan you can compare your progress towards meeting the targets in your plan. However, this, the bulletin omits to do. Perhaps it's because, as reported in CornerStone issue 27, the actual output was far less than planned output.

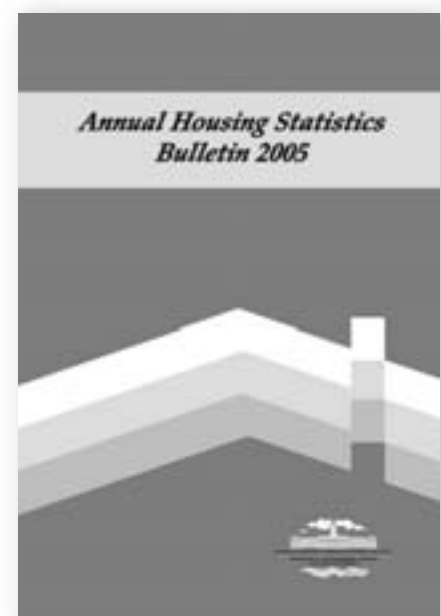
The bulletin also admits that housing association output is disappointing: 'The activity by the voluntary and co-operative sector was less than anticipated due to

To get a copy of *Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin 2005*, go to [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie) and click on 'housing statistics' in the orangy/browny box on the bottom right of the screen.

delays encountered with a number of projects.' This rather skates over a growing and serious problem. Housing association output in 2005 was in fact lower than 2004, 2003, and 2002. Housing associations have been pressing vigorously for changes in the over-complicated development process to speed up development, but to date with little success.

## Private rented sector

The new housing policy framework *Building Sustainable Communities* which was published in leaflet form at the end of last year stated, 'We will continue with measures to modernise the private rented sector now that new Private Residential Tenancies legislation is operational.' One would have hoped that 'modernising' would include a) raising the currently very low legal standards, and b) ensuring that minimum legal standards are complied with so that tenants can live in safety. Unfortunately however, the bulletin reports the same old story of a generally lamentable performance by local authorities, which have responsibility for policing standards in private rented housing. Dublin is the exception – 80% of all inspections of private rented dwellings



were carried out in the Dublin area, with Dublin City Council accounting for over half of all inspections in the country.

Of the rest, 18 county councils and 1 city council did not inspect a single dwelling in 2005. Seven county councils and 1 city council inspected less than 4 dwellings in 2005.

It is difficult to see how a credible policy in relation to the private rented sector can be maintained if so many local authorities are allowed to ignore their responsibilities.

(As CornerStone went to press housing minister Noel Ahern announced that an Action Programme to promote improvement in standards of private rented accommodation is to be undertaken. We will keep you posted.) ■

# Festival of Home



**W**hat is the connection between housing and home? Isn't housing about more than just bricks and mortar – isn't housing the location of home? And what is home? Is it a place of security and comfort from which family is nurtured and friendships develop? Is it a place of belonging, where identity is formed, a safe place from which the wider world can be explored? If so, what is the role of the state in enabling people to create and sustain a home?

Focus Ireland is hosting a **Festival of Home** at the **Royal Hospital Kilmainham**

**on 22nd and 23rd November** that will explore these questions and seek to stimulate a debate around housing and home in Ireland. This two day event will include:

- ShowHome – an exhibition of mixed media that provides participants with an opportunity to explore their understanding of home through film, art, literature and workshops.
- Building Housing or Creating Homes? – an international conference

that will examine the connection between housing and home. Delegates will be given the opportunity to debate the meaning of home and examine issues including housing provision and responses to homelessness. Speakers will include Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, David Clapham (Wales), Suzanne Fitzpatrick (UK) and Mette Mansaker (Norway)

For further information please email [info@theeventoffice.ie](mailto:info@theeventoffice.ie) or telephone 01 2842687. ■

## New director for Simon Communities of Ireland

**F**ollowing Conor Hickey's move to Crosscare, the Simon Communities of Ireland have appointed Patrick Burke to the post of federation director. Patrick has been director of Threshold since 2003, and was previously a founder member of Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit. He has

worked extensively in urban and rural development in South America and in Ireland. Patrick's primary role will be ensuring the delivery of the new Simon strategy *Ending Homelessness, Creating Home* in partnership with the eight individual Simon's in the Republic of Ireland. ■



Patrick Burke

# TOWARDS 2016

The latest partnership agreement – **Towards 2016** – looks likely to be ratified soon. **Michelle Norris** assesses the agreement's housing commitments.

**T**owards 2016 is the latest in the series of national agreements stretching back to 1985 marks a departure from its predecessors in a number of respects. Firstly, the time frame of the social and economic policy development plan it contains is significantly longer than that of previous agreements – *Towards 2016* covers a ten year period. Secondly, the social and economic policy commitments it contains are far more wide-ranging, detailed and sophisticated than is the norm among previous agreements. This latest agreement

addresses 28 different policy areas, in addition to policies relevant to the different lifecycle stages (children, people of working age, older people and people with disabilities) and of course pay, the workplace and employment rights. Thirdly, detailed plans for monitoring the implementation of these commitments are included and in addition, the housing commitments contained in *Towards 2016* are much more extensive than the norm among previous agreements. These are summarised in Table 1.



Michelle Norris lectures in social policy at UCD

**Table 1 Towards 2016 – Housing Policy Commitments**

## Key principles

- Continuing improvements in the quality of houses and neighbourhoods, including improvement of consumer information in relation to housing.
- Providing tailored housing services to those who cannot afford to meet their own housing needs, and in this way responding to the broad spectrum of housing need.
- Developing inter-agency cooperation where there is a care dimension.
- Maintaining the impetus for the delivery of housing at affordable prices to the market, including through State supported schemes, and other appropriate innovations, such as measures to support first time buyers.
- Progressing the social housing reform agenda set out in the Department of the Environment's *Housing Policy Framework*.

## Specific commitments

- Proposals will be developed to provide a more comprehensive and objective means of assessing housing need associated with the provision of housing advice.
- The delivery of social and affordable housing will be enhanced, these housing options will be expanded and shared equity and affordable rental options will be explored.
- 2,000 additional local authority and 1,000 voluntary and co-operative social rented dwellings will be provided between 2007 and 2009 in addition to 1,000 contractual arrangements for new supply under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).
- The RAS will be implemented in full.
- The local authority Traveller accommodation programmes will be implemented.
- The Affordable Homes Partnership will implement initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing in the Greater Dublin Area. In addition this agency will assist the roll-out nationally in areas of communications campaigns in relation to affordable housing matters, common approaches by local authorities in relation to Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000–2004, and application systems for affordable housing.
- Local authorities will enable the supply of 1,000 additional sites/ dwellings to the voluntary and co-operative housing sector between 2007 and 2009.
- The National Building Agency will establish a dedicated unit to support local authorities in undertaking regeneration and remedial programmes.
- Minimum standards regulations for the private rented sector will be updated by the Department of Environment and effectively enforced by Local Authorities.
- The Government's Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies will be revised and amalgamated. The revised strategies will aim to eliminate long term dependence on emergency accommodation by 2010.
- The continued development of sheltered housing options for older people with varying degrees of care support will be encouraged.
- New protocols for inter-agency co-operation where there is a care dimension additional to accommodation needs will be developed and implemented.
- The grant schemes for older people in private housing will be reformed to improve equity and targeting.
- A National Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities will be devised.

## Implementation framework

- Local implementation framework – local authority development plans, social and affordable housing action plans and active land management strategies.
- National framework for implementation and investment – the National Spatial Strategy and the National Development Plan.
- Monitoring of implementation – the National Housing Forum and committees under its aegis to address: homelessness; housing for people with disabilities; sheltered housing.

### Focus on housing

The strong focus on housing in the new national agreement is appropriate and welcome in view of the significant challenges in this area which the country faces. In addition, the inclusion of a detailed implementation strategy, which makes provision for the requisite research, data gathering and monitoring, indicates that the prospects of these housing commitments being actually translated into practice are good. The last national agreement – *A Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* – included a number of housing related commitments which were not implemented, such as the establishment of a housing advice service – notably this commitment is restated in the current national agreement. Therefore, the Irish Council for Social Housing and the National

Association of Building Co-operatives which were the key non governmental housing organisations involved in the negotiation of *Towards 2016* deserve great credit for their efforts.

### Social housing

This said there are aspects of *Towards 2016* housing commitments which raise concern and the social housing commitments are in this category. For instance although the agreement states that achieving the recommendation made in the recent National Economic and Social Council report on housing that an additional 73,000 social housing units should be provided in the period 2004 to 2012 'is of continuing relevance'. However, the agreement commits government to providing an additional 3,000 social

rented dwellings and 1,000 new dwellings under the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) between 2007 and 2009. Projections based on total social housing output in 2005, indicate that if met, this commitment would result in the construction of a total of 6,810 dwellings per annum (including those provided under the RAS) or social dwellings between 2007 and 2009, or a 51,816 dwellings over the eight year time frame envisaged in the NESC report. The reasons for this divergence are not explained in the agreement, although it does state that the social housing targets will be re-examined in light of a review of the methods used to assess social housing need. Such a review is long overdue so this commitment is very welcome. There is evidence that the current assessment methods significantly over estimate the extent of social housing need among some groups (in terms of the proportion of applicants who would actually accept a social tenancy if offered one) while underestimating need among other groups.

The agreement also addresses the barriers to delivery of these social housing commitments, specifically it promises:

Active engagement with the voluntary and co-operative sector to increase their role in delivering on needs, through a rationalisation... of administrative and approval arrangements... improvements in funding arrangements and measures to enhance the governance of the sector... and to further assist the voluntary and co-operative housing sector... the Government will arrange for additional land/units to be provided for the purpose of meeting the housing needs identified.

This commitment is very valuable because output of voluntary and co-operative social housing has actually fallen in recent years, from 1,981 dwellings in 2002 to 1,350 in 2005. If the social housing output targets proposed in *Towards 2016* are to be met it is very important that any barriers to output by the voluntary and co-operative sector are assessed quickly. However, the fact that this sector was granted direct access to Housing Finance Agency funding by the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002, but to date no dwellings have yet been developed using this mechanism, does not bode well for the prospects of speedy reform of arrangements for funding and approving voluntary and co-operative dwellings. In addition, in my view comprehensive research into the barriers to all types of social housing output, not only that provided by voluntary and co-operative housing associations, is appropriate. There is evidence for instance that the land use planning system is a significant barrier to the delivery of halting sites and group housing schemes for Travellers. Research of this type would allow for all the barriers to social housing output to be systematically identified and addressed.

## Affordable housing

My concerns about the affordable housing commitments in *Towards 2016* are the opposite to the

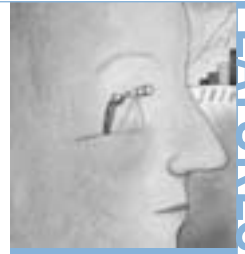
abovementioned concerns about the social housing commitments. In my view there is a danger that too much affordable housing will be produced. Admittedly there is a clear need for more affordable housing in Dublin, the mid east and to a lesser extent the other cities, because the significantly higher house prices in these locations are not counterbalanced by higher incomes. So the advent of the Affordable Homes Partnership to expedite affordable housing output in Dublin is welcome. However, in my opinion, outside the main cities, demand for affordable housing is limited, and there is anecdotal evidence that rural local authorities have had difficulties in selling stock of this type. One of the problems with this is that affordable housing demand is difficult to gauge. The Part V of 2000 Planning Act requires that affordable housing need is assessed with reference to the proportion of the population who would have to devote more than one third of their net income to buy a starter home locally. However the lack of robust local house price and incomes data means that such calculations are not straightforward. This challenge is amplified by the fact that the local authority operational areas (on the basis of which estimates of affordable housing demand are derived) may not match the functional area of local housing market. So although the data for Waterford City for instance might indicate high affordable housing need, potential buyers may prefer to buy a house in a village in County Waterford where prices are cheaper rather than an affordable dwelling in the City. Consequently I would suggest the information available for assessing affordable housing demand should be addressed by the Department of the Environment in order to ensure that the additional affordable housing proposed in *Towards 2016* is provided in appropriate locations.

## Private rented housing

The agreement contains a very welcome commitment to review the minimum standards for private rented dwellings. The existing standards are basic to say the least. However, it is critical that these revised standards are adequately enforced. To date enforcement activity on the part of local authorities has been limited, so it is vital that they are adequately resourced to carry out this work.

## Homelessness

In recent years significant strides have been made in addressing the problem of homelessness particularly in Dublin. The commitment to review and amalgamate the Government's integrated and preventive homeless strategies in order to develop a holistic response to the needs of homeless people should build further on this progress. However, it is disappointing that the agreement makes no mention of the issue of long term housing for formerly homeless people which is obviously key to overcoming this problem. In order to ensure that adequate housing is supplied arrangements should be put in place for monitoring the number of social rented dwellings allocated to formerly homeless people. ■



In my view there is a danger that too much affordable housing will be produced.

Four NGOs – Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities of Ireland, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Threshold are joining forces to campaign collectively under the banner ‘Makeroom’ to achieve a joint vision to end homelessness by 2010. **Caroline McGrath** outlines the agenda.



## JOINING FORCES

Caroline McGrath is director of advocacy at Focus Ireland

**O**ur shared understanding is that the vision means no one will have to sleep rough because of a lack of appropriate services, no one will have to live in emergency accommodation for longer than is an emergency and no one will become homeless due to a lack of services or inadequate housing provision.

In developing the alliance we recognise that achieving an end to homelessness is not within the grasp of the agencies individually, and that policy and political level change will be most effectively achieved through joint collaborative working.

The agencies have a long history of working together most notably with the research ‘Housing Access for All’ undertaken in 2002. Amongst other things the research called for an independent review of

national homeless policies – a call that was responded to with the publication earlier this year of the Fitzpatrick’s report.

The alliance is an exciting development; grounded in a shared belief by working together we can achieve an end to homelessness by 2010. We are confidently setting forward a programme of change necessary to achieve this. We acknowledge that this will require significant effort to work together to harness our energies and to mobilise public and political support. If we cannot achieve this goal then as a society we have very grave and searching questions about the choices we are making and the legacy we are handing to the generation of people who have lived long term in emergency conditions or who struggle daily against the persistent risk of losing their home.

The organisations have identified shared objectives necessary to achieve an end to homelessness and have outlined a vision and objectives for our work. Placing housing and support services at the centre of the work of the alliance is a recognition that despite progress in provision of services in recent years, the relative slow reform of access to housing and long term

### Speaking about the initiative Colette Kelleher of the Simon Communities of Ireland explains:

“The individual differences between our agencies reflects a diversity of need and the appropriateness of ensuring choice and services based on the needs of the people who use them. Such differences are to be promoted and valued. Yet behind the diversity each of our agencies is committed to a similar goal – the ending of homelessness. We recognise the strength and value of working together and are committed to ensuring that our collective voice is clear, makes a difference and achieves an end of homelessness by 2010”

support services is a major stumbling block to progress on eliminating homelessness.

Pooling our shared direct experience, research, and policy knowledge the organisations have developed both a clear analysis of the key areas of reform and very specific recommendations for action that will form the basis of the work of the alliance. These objectives are outlined briefly below:

**Declan Jones of Focus Ireland outlines the mission of the alliance as follows:**

“We are committed to creating a society where each person's right to housing is met by suitable, affordable and high-quality housing and support services. We have worked together to identify priority issues which must be addressed to achieve this vision with a very clear focus on influencing the increased provision of housing and related support services for people at risk of and experiencing homelessness”

## Housing needs assessment

The time is ripe for the introduction of a housing needs assessment system. The Dept of the Environment in its Housing Policy Framework ‘Building Sustainable Communities’ flagged the need for a ‘new means of assessing need’ and noted that this may require legislative change.

The alliance supports this proposal and will be advocating that such an assessment system should:

- Put a clear statutory duty on local authorities to assess housing need
- Comply with the principles of human rights legislation in particular on prevention of discrimination and the right to a fair trial
- Deliver on the Governments commitment to meet housing, health and other social and economic rights through an explicit statement of entitlement and transparent access to quality public services

## Social housing output

The alliance concurs with the view of the National Economic and Social Council that ‘a high level of ambition is now required for social housing’. Despite the modest commitments to increase output in the social partnership agreement ‘Towards 2016’, we remain concerned that these commitments cannot be met without very practical and significant reforms of our housing system. In addition to the reform of the funding system committed to within the draft social partnership agreement, the alliance will be actively advocating the following actions to promote increased social housing output:

- Establishment of dedicated Part V teams with local authorities with significant Part V developments to enhance the efficient and effective conclusion of Part V agreements
- Introduction of a revenue funding stream to support maintenance and management costs for housing associations providing social housing

## Support services

Government policy is focused increasingly on ensuring that people do not have to rely on traditional homeless services for accommodation and on moving people to long term housing options. This emphasis is welcomed and has been strongly advocated and supported by the member of the alliance. However we are equally aware through our daily work that this strategy cannot succeed without a proper investigation and action on peoples support needs. At present there is no policy or funding in place for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness who provide long term support.

To address this issue the alliance will be working to achieve the following:

- Increase in the level of supported housing and introduction of a revenue funding stream to fund on site care and support costs of people living in supported housing
- Clear legislative responsibility on local authorities to meet people's housing needs and a legislative responsibility on the HSE to meet peoples care or support costs
- Full integration of people who have been homeless into the primary care teams in their communities with increased investment in community supports

## Housing costs

Rent supplement is the only housing support available to many people. More than 60,000 people in the private rented sector depend on rent supplement and the cost of the scheme has become substantial at €368.5 m in 2005. The alliance is advocating the following actions as a matter of urgency to help people at risk of or experiencing homelessness who qualify for rent allowance. To this end the alliance is seeking:

- Improved administration of rent supplement
- Review of rent caps to reflect the real market cost of renting
- Extension of rent supplement, on a means tested basis to people working more than 30 hours
- Publication of the Dept of the Environment's plans for pilot schemes to deliver affordable rental housing to the ‘working poor’
- Root and branch review of rent supplement to ensure adequate support is in place to meet the housing costs for those in social and private rented accommodation

## New standards for accommodation in the private rented sector

Standards of accommodation in the private rented sector are beneath acceptable standards and a comprehensive standards programme to protect all tenants is essential. To this end the alliance will be actively campaigning for the development of a staged reform process including:

- Updating existing minimum standards regulations
- A self certification system whereby a landlord must certify with the Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) that a property complies with minimum standards and is fit for the purpose of renting – an NCT for housing
- A well resourced local authority inspection programme
- Better quality information on fire safety enforcement and the enforcement of minimum dwelling standards to measure progress

## Social inclusion

Homelessness is about more than housing. It is about being denied the right to live with dignity and to participate in your community. It is the most extreme form of social exclusion. To really make an impact the needs of the whole person – income, health, employment, support and civic engagement – will have to be addressed.

The Fitzpatrick's report evaluating national homelessness policy recognises the importance of proofing Government policies against the impact on homelessness. Government have acknowledged that rights encompass social, economic and cultural rights and obligations and that these should underpin equality of opportunity and policies on access to education, employment, health, housing and social services. Action to make this commitment a reality would include:

- Improved mechanisms for poverty proofing and a real commitment to taking a joined up Government approach to homelessness
- An explicit statement of entitlement to services for individuals.
- Mechanisms to monitor access to, and the quality of, services as part of the new homelessness strategy.
- Ensuring new primary health care services are accessible to people who are homeless

### Patrick Burke, Director of Threshold highlights the commitment of the agencies to the programme.

The challenges in achieving the reforms identified are significant but each of the actions laid out are achievable and necessary. The timing of our coming together is important given the proposed partnership agreement, the development of a new national development programme and a general election year – we cannot pass up this opportunity to create a legacy of ending homelessness and owe it to the people we work with every day to be ambitious and to set the bar high

The agenda is ambitious but nothing less is required if we are to make real and sustainable progress in our work over the next three years.

Establishing an agreed programme of action is the first step – implementing it is the hard point and the alliance has set its sights firmly on the new national homelessness policy as well as the forthcoming general election as core targets to progress its work.

We have already submitted a joint response to the Fitzpatrick's evaluation of homelessness policy and are seeking active and direct involvement by our organisations in the

development of new national policy on homelessness and any forums established to progress national policy.

But influencing homelessness policy is not enough. So many of the actions required to resolve homelessness lie in the responses of communities

to those out of home and in the political support for the fundamental reforms of housing and social policy required to move the agenda forward. A 'MakeRoom Campaign' will be launched later this year and will seek to bring the message of the alliance to the public and political arena. While

specific funding to support the work of the alliance and its campaigning work is not yet in place, the alliance promises a thought-provoking, challenging and engaging programme of work to ensure that the agenda and its reform programme is at the heart of the general election campaigns and to the forefront of public debate in the year ahead. The campaign will seek the support of political parties in the run up to the general election and will provide an opportunity for both organisations and the public to become actively involved in the campaign. ■

### Kieran Murphy of the Society of St Vincent de Paul outlines the desire to actively and directly engage with the development of new national policy on homelessness.

Collectively the members of the alliance have a deep knowledge of the impact of exclusion, poverty and housing policy on the lives of individuals – we witness every day how macro social, economic and housing policy is impacting on individual lives. This knowledge must be harnessed if we are to effectively prevent people becoming and remaining homeless. One of the core objectives of the alliance will be to ensure that each of our organisations can effectively and directly influence and input into national homeless policy development





# Rethinking renting

Earlier this year, Focus Ireland organised a series of workshops which examined rental systems in Ireland and elsewhere. Why did Focus Ireland choose rental systems as a topic? Did the contributors rise to the challenge of making rental systems interesting? And what was the outcome? **Daithí Downey** reveals all.

**T**he future? Yes, it's a big unknown. Nonetheless, it's something that we policy wonks plan for all the time (that's 'know' backwards just in case you think I'm being rude). In fact, it's quite commonplace to seek to change and influence the future to meet our own interests and needs.

So when Focus Ireland decided to reflect on the main pathway out of homelessness today, we quickly realised that the future development and operation of both the social and private rental sector in Ireland is crucial to both our *raison d'être* (the prevention and elimination of homelessness and housing need among our customers) and to the delivery of our strategy to 2010 that aims, *inter alia*, to provide up to 800 units of housing.

We therefore embarked on an effort to bring some new and innovative analysis to bear on the substantial

question of how we might re-think the Irish rental sector. In co-operation with the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at Trinity College Dublin, we planned a series of three high-level 'think tank' style workshops during spring and early summer 2006. Attendance was composed of representatives from the major statutory and non-statutory housing bodies in Ireland, policy-advisory and policy-making bodies and leading Irish academics.

Organised under the general title of 'rental reform in Ireland' the workshops began with the presentation of an outline discussion paper on behalf of Focus Ireland entitled '*Toward a Unitary Rental System in Ireland*'<sup>1</sup>. This paper established the basis of the workshops and posed a number of key questions. Central among these was a consideration of whether our current rental system can be



Daithí Downey is policy analyst at Focus Ireland

<sup>1</sup> A copy of this paper is available on request. Please contact Focus Ireland's Information Officer at [mmccann@focusireland.ie](mailto:mmccann@focusireland.ie)

## In a dualist rental system, the social rented sector and the private rented sector are kept separate from one another..

classified as a 'dualist' system and what would be the opportunities and obstacles to transform the sector into a 'unitary' system.

The unitary/dualist thesis is associated with the work of Professor Jim Kemeny (Uppsala University, Sweden) who began to analyse European rental systems in the early 1990s. His investigation led him to classify rental systems in Europe as either unitary or dualist.

The basis of a unitary rental system is that the same rental system operates in social rented housing and private rented housing and that rents are based on true costs. Thus, housing for people on low incomes is integrated into the broader housing system rather than being kept separate from it, and there are no regulatory barriers to competition between profit and non-profit providers. In turn, this means that rents in both the private and social rented sectors are based on the true costs of providing rented housing. This, according to Kemeny, will lead to a dampening of rents, raised housing standards and increased security of tenure.

In a dualist rental system, the social rented sector and the private rented sector are kept separate from one another, with the social rented sector operating as a safety net for households unable to afford market rents or mortgage payments. This differentiation, which is necessary to prevent the non-profit making landlord obtaining the full benefits from the maturation of its portfolio and undercutting the rents of profit making landlords, is maintained by a number of measures. These include restricting social rented housing to low income households, a factor that arguably maintains the stigma associated with social rental.

Our paper also explored two key concepts underlying the formulation of the unitary/dualist thesis, namely that of the social market (where the state intervenes to ensure that social and economic goals are attained) and that of maturation. Maturation refers to the growing gap between the costs of servicing a debt on a house built some years ago and a house built today due to inflation of building costs, asset prices and land prices.

One consequence is that in the unitary system, a non-profit making organisation seeking only to cover the costs of renting a property, can rent out a ten-year old house at a substantially lower rent than a similar newly built house. Accordingly, this process of maturation allows a non-profit landlord to charge rents below those charged by profit making landlords.

A key challenge to the workshop participants was to work through the likely implications of adopting a unitary rental model in Ireland. Our paper suggested that three major changes would be required, namely:

- Replacing the differential rent system with a cost-based rental system;
- Establishing a tenure-neutral housing benefit system; and,
- Reforming the financing of social rented housing.

We also considered the likely impact on the extent and degree of residualisation in social housing under a unitary system, before considering what the likely financial consequences (in terms of savings and costs) its adoption might generate. We highlighted the potential advantages and disadvantages of adopting a unitary system before turning to the development of a policy framework capable of delivering positive and long-lasting change to the Irish rental sector if reform to realize a unitary rental system was undertaken in the near future.

As you will have guessed by now, we raised more questions than we provided answers. Nonetheless, the first respondent to this paper, John O'Connor, chief executive of the newly established Affordable Homes Partnership rose to the occasion with aplomb.

In his formal response, the issue of 'affordable rental' was detailed and the process of how access to housing is a continuum across different tenures explored as part of a critique offered on the formulation of Kemeny's original thesis. We learned that the unitary model was perhaps more idealised that real across the EU and that while growing maturation does allow non-profit landlords to benefit from reducing debt burdens, in

Ireland our long-standing and deeply embedded policy of tenant purchase undercuts this positive effect by transferring socially owned stock into private ownership.

The example of Holland was explored in detail to illustrate this argument before John O'Connor presented an overview of the complexity of national housing systems by way of an introduction to the key issue of who would provide and manage affordable rental housing in Ireland. He concluded on a cautionary note, suggesting that while a case for policy reform can be achieved, the *realpolitik* of the



Irish political system must be recognized. The delivery of political support for policy reform is crucial and we needed to recognize that the best result possible was more often the outcome of reform rather than the best possible result.

This point was echoed by our next formal respondent, Dr Rory O'Donnell, chief officer of the National Economic and Social Development Office (NESDO) and director of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) who spoke at the second workshop. His response was based on the substantial analysis of housing performance and policy undertaken by the NESC in 2004<sup>2</sup> that concluded the transition to a unitary rental system in Ireland was not feasible in current circumstances for a number of reasons.

Foremost among these is the current political climate and its overwhelming preoccupation with the house price boom affecting entry to the majority housing tenure in Ireland, namely owner-occupation. Also of significance is the ongoing impact of residualisation among social housing tenants, their related poverty position and low socio-economic status that, it was argued, reduces the opportunity to move to a regime based on economic (therefore higher) rents. In sum, income inequality is a major block to the transition from dualist to unitary rental systems.

Instead, the NESC conclusion was to support policy development that re-targeted supply subsidies to private landlords in return for agreed approaches to allocations or rents alongside the development of a cost-rental sector through the subsidisation of not-for-profit or limited-profit housing providers. The NESC also argued that state subsidy to reduce initial costs and rents was critical to the development of such cost-rental operators.

As you will have guessed by now, we raised more questions than we provided answers.

The second workshop also heard two additional presentations arising from participant's stated interests. The first, from Rosalind Carroll, a senior Dublin City Council official, gave a detailed account of the workings one of the major policy initiatives undertaken since the NESC recommendations, namely the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). There was significant interest among workshop participants in how the RAS was being implemented and how it may represent a stepping stone towards a cost-rental regime. A vigorous question and answer session ensued.

A presentation from Brian O'Gorman, chief executive of Clúid, one of the larger Irish housing associations, followed. He outlined how a shift to a cost rental regime for approved housing bodies would generate income adequate for service provision that

We learned that the unitary model was perhaps more idealised than real across the EU...

would protect the property asset, improve housing management and help avoid some of the perverse side effects of the current system, particularly the risk of losing new gains to social housing stock under Part V development. This risk arises due to high overhead costs for the maintenance and management of Part V social housing units that in the main are in the form of higher density apartment developments.

Our third and final workshop was the one where we tried to stitch as many of the issues that had arisen together. We were greatly assisted by the presence of one of the leading housing economists of British academia, Prof. Christine M.E. Whitehead of the London School of Economics and the University of Cambridge. Her presentation was a literal tour de force of the contemporary issues facing social housing provision, and included a compelling account of how housing investment had become globalised and could no longer be regarded as separate from the overall international financial system. The implications of this for any national or local policy reform that sought to change the modal operation of rental housing are significant and not to be underestimated. She laid down a number of challenges, including what we thought the optimal scale of the rental sector in Ireland to be and what factors we think will make social landlordism more desirable?

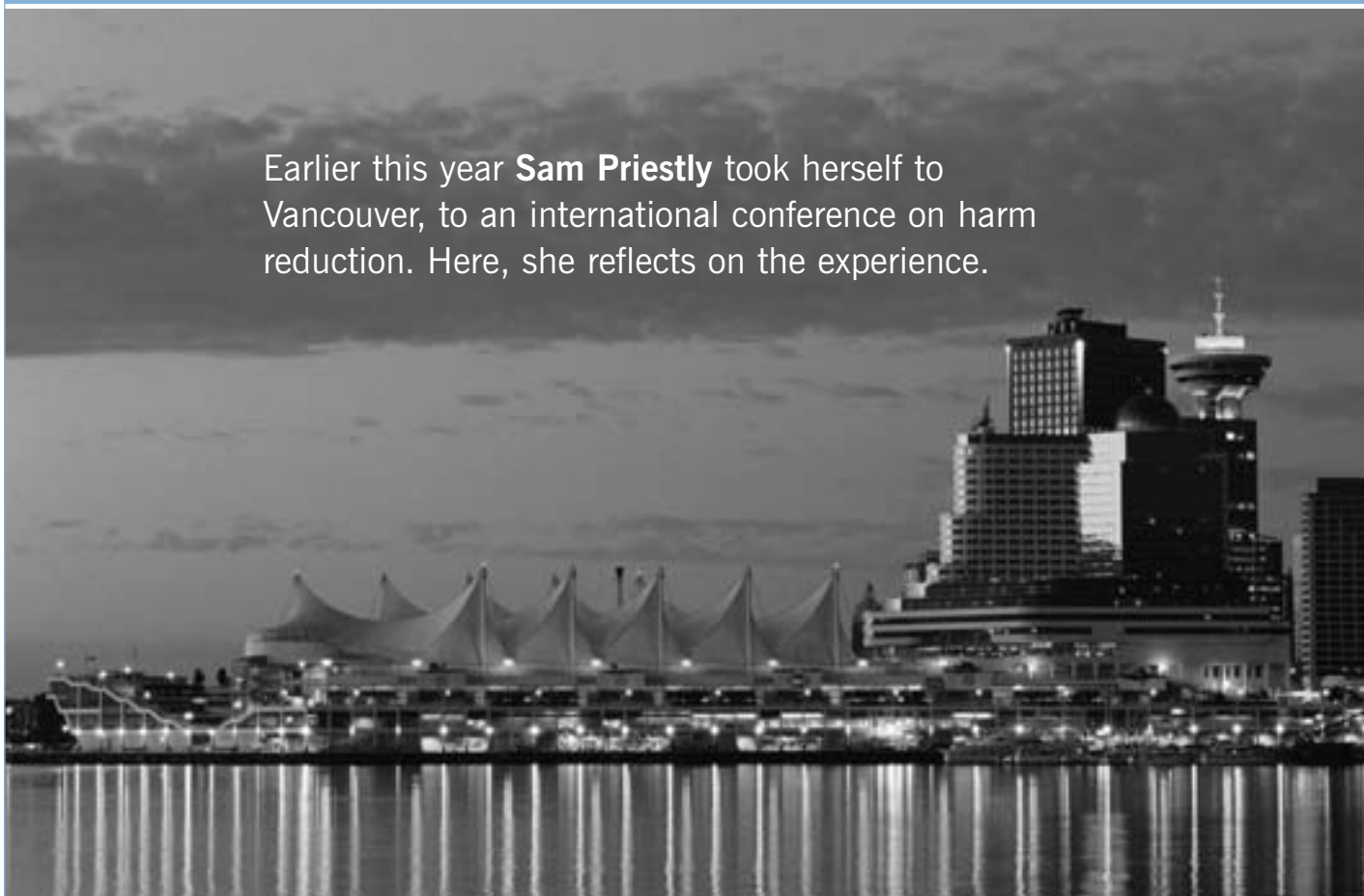
Notably, Prof. Whitehead delivered a robust defense of how the British housing benefit system worked to support low-income tenants. It ensured adequate rental income to registered social landlords. This was being used to restructure social ownership, pay for improvements in housing standards to meet the new British 'decent homes' standard and allowed resources to be concentrated on the neediest in the social sector by providing the current income required for the UK's *Supporting People* programme. She concluded that housing benefit was a very successful mechanism to keep people out of housing poverty.

Over the period of the workshops there was a lot more discussion, analysis and questioning and overall we were extremely pleased by the degree of participation. So now we aim to build on this work and are in the process of generating a publication for early 2007 based on the proceedings of the workshops. This will act as a record of the work undertaken and offer insights to attaining a better, more equitable and sustainable rental sector. The future of Irish rental? Perhaps now more of a known unknown. ■

<sup>2</sup> NESC (2004) Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy, Report No. 112, Dublin: National Economic and Social Council.

# HARM REDUCTION VANCOUVER-STYLE

Earlier this year **Sam Priestly** took herself to Vancouver, to an international conference on harm reduction. Here, she reflects on the experience.



Sam Priestly is low threshold sector manager at DePaul Trust

#### FURTHER READING ON HARM REDUCTION

- *Consumption rooms* by Rita Lavelle in *Brass Munkie*, (April 2006) Uisce magazine,
- *Harm reduction, A BC community guide*. [www.health.gov.bc.ca/prevent/pdf/hrcommunityguide.pdf](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/prevent/pdf/hrcommunityguide.pdf)
- *The two traditions of harm reduction* by Ian Wardle (Feb 2005) published by Lifeline, ([www.lifeline.org.uk](http://www.lifeline.org.uk))
- *Harm reduction, present and future* by Walter Cavalieri, (Nov 05).  
[http://harmreduction.org/research/policy/hr\\_cavalieri.html](http://harmreduction.org/research/policy/hr_cavalieri.html)
- *Nothing for us, without us* (VANDU, Canada) <http://pubs.cpha.ca/PDF/P31/22817e.pdf>

One of the lasting memories of the 17th International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm, held in Vancouver in May this year, apart from the heartening company of several hundred like-minded harm reduction practitioners, was the dovetailing of the culture of 'first nations' – the various societies of indigenous peoples of Canada – throughout the event. Inspirational speakers from Canada's first nations,

distinctive music, energetic dance, social activities and a film fest was the perfect combination to the four days of progressive but also obvious struggles in the Harm Reduction movement.

Urgency for action was the topic of the opening address from the two chairs of the themed 'Peer conference' (Protection, Empowerment, Equality, Respect). Each year a host country committee forms to organise the conference under the umbrella of the

International Harm Reduction Association ([www.irha.net](http://www.irha.net)). Ninety-four countries were represented at a full and well-organised event. The energy was at a high from the start with non-stop action from early morning project visits in East Downside at 7.30am, followed by full days of conferencing with lunchtime poster presentations, and evenings filled with various meetings and AGMs. There was a definite intention to get the most out the week with the clear acknowledgment of the infrequent opportunities to share such company and the appreciation that in a relatively 'resource scarce' sector many people, including myself, felt privileged to attend. There was a high representation of health professionals (primary / public health) from Canada whose lobby for harm reduction in the health agenda seemed successful and was encouraging to bring home. Speakers were largely from educational / research backgrounds with a lesser but inspiring balance of grassroots speakers. Representation also included addiction and social sector groups, law enforcement agencies, rights based groups, young peoples lobbies and of course the promoted but still vastly under represented services user groups and individuals (who could be called the *real* experts!).

**B**ecause harm reduction is largely based on the pragmatic concept of working with people where they are at, the conference's 'living room sessions' were natural, thought provoking and one of the most honest conference forums I have experienced. The sofa seating area, hosted by largely grassroots practitioners encouraged a realistic open debate over the broad spectrum of Harm reduction issues.

The drug normalisation movement (which is associated with calls for legalisation) had a strong presence, with organisations such as Transform holding a healthy debate with more pragmatic health organisations such as MISC (Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) from Sydney who are five years in successful operation. Global prohibitionism and the war on drugs is one rarely debated myself or with my peers in the harm reduction sector back in Dublin and yet an essential strand and lesser described campaign for harm reduction.

As one conference speaker suggested, 'prohibition is actually more dangerous than drugs themselves', describing prohibition as the 'elephant in the room'. I would suggest there would be a few other issues in Ireland that might also come into this category, such as dual diagnosis, and public concern over offending. With the increasing prison populations brought home recently by the overcrowding in Mountjoy, further community debate on alternatives is key.

Harm reduction is often defined in terms of three strands: providing accurate information about drug use and associated risks; developing skills of safer drug use; promoting more accepting attitudes.

*Harm reduction: A BC Guide* (see box) states, 'Harm reduction is a set of non-judgemental policies and programs which aim to provide and or enhance skills, knowledge, resources, support that people need to live safer, healthier lives. It encourages people to build strength and raise self-confidence'.

Harm reduction is of broad interest to the community due to public concern (discarded drug paraphernalia), public health (rising rates of HIV and Hepatitis C); public interest ( drugs task forces involving local residents); and public pressure (pressure on local councils to be seen to be doing something about the substance use).

Widely known strategies of harm reduction include needle exchange programmes, methadone maintenance treatment, proactive outreach and education programmes, medical prescription of heroin and other drugs and supervised consumption rooms.

Harm reduction can help move a person from a state of chaos to a state of control over their own life and health. Safe housing and supportive acceptance in hostels through 'value neutral and humanistic' staff approach is often the only drawbridge available to many people. Indeed it is arguable that harm reduction, contrary to some opinions where it may be said to encourage more harmful behaviour, actually provides the first gateway to treatment and health services.

Keeping the threshold low can be a challenge to services both in terms of attracting the resources and gaining public acceptance of a service. Critical to this is the political will and partnership working with the state to ensure services are developed to meet complex needs.

**'Harm reduction is a set of non-judgemental policies and programs which aim to provide and or enhance skills, knowledge, resources, support that people need to live safer, healthier lives. It encourages people to build strength and raise self-confidence'.**



**M**y own delegation from the Depaul Trust Ireland was primarily focused around low threshold good practice and homeless services, looking at

next steps in terms of reducing the immediate consequences of substance and lifestyle related harm.

The strongest experiences I brought back with me were from the East Downside visits to harm reduction projects and services. The professionalism, vast experience and sensitivity of the teams we met, who were mainly from Vancouver community health service were impressive. This made the minibus group tour in a fragile area of the city at 7.30am, bearable for both us fleeting visitors but more importantly the people of the area who use, and were indeed largely responsible in campaigning for, the services we visited.

Other services we visited included Pigeon Park Savings Bank where you can open an account

using a nickname or tattoo for identification, a day drop in with no rules but those of common sense and respect-based unwritten contracts, the safer injecting site that receives between 600–900 visits a day (some multiple visits) and an all night drop-in which provides ‘all in one’ services that had a ‘lived in’, proud and a ‘life celebratory’ feel in the midst of extreme poverty.

Consumption rooms have of course been an issue for Dublin harm reductionism for some time. They are well established in other countries – for example The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Spain have set up 62 consumption rooms in 36 cities between them. At the conference there was no shortage of experience and convincing research to suggest that safer injection sites/ consumption rooms

have a strong place amongst other services in harm reduction good practice.

As many readers will be aware the IHRA conference was hosted in Belfast last year. Several of my colleagues in Depaul trust attended this event and it would appear that the main themes they came away with in 2005 were not formally carried through into this year's conference. To my knowledge there was only representation from five Irish organisations at the Vancouver conference. In chatting to these representatives from both Dublin and Belfast, we were in agreement that it would have been beneficial to have had a stronger collective mandate from Ireland to bring to the conference. This mandate could in future ensure that some of the key innovations in harm reduction in Ireland are shared internationally and that delegates could make the best use of presentation themes and workshops relevant to development areas in the Irish context.

The Depaul trust in its commitment to harm reduction is actively looking, in partnership with other relevant agencies, to work on our approach to the Warsaw IRHA conference next year (13th–17th May 2007). We would suggest it is time to recap and move forward, addressing areas to:

- Communicate successes
- Further reduce barriers to acceptance of harm reduction
- Develop locally driven harm reduction strategy
- Promote greater self advocacy – service users involvement in Ireland
- Explore current practice and move forward.

As helpful as the experience of presentations, papers and workshops for all of us practitioners is the invaluable networking and contacts made at such events. The impressive and comprehensive conference literature and consequent communications has been as much of a tool on my return from Canada. A service users booklet called ‘Nothing for us, without us’ (see box) is a practical and honest reference point when working back in Ireland to progress the already well established service users lobby.

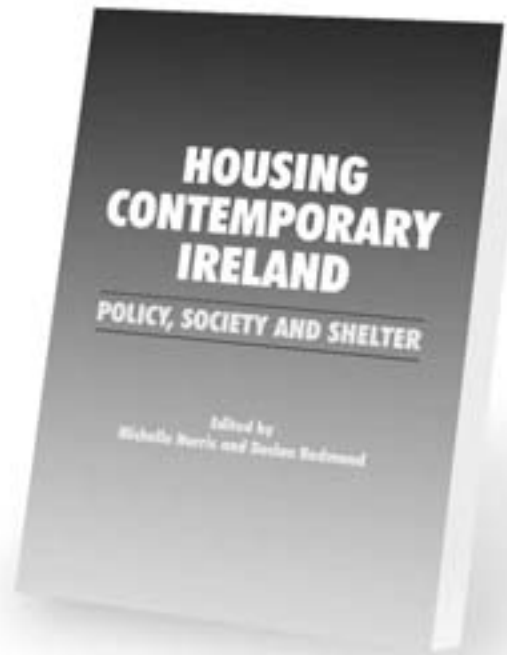
One of the lasting messages to colleagues on my return was that from the experience and dialogue I would feel that we are well placed amongst the harm reduction community. Even though we should encourage ourselves to develop future innovations, ensure clear mandates to future conferences and further challenge our commitment to self advocacy by services users (sponsoring places). Harm reduction is as much about the ability to maintain a passion to meet needs. It is the willingness to take risks and to keep moving services forward and to then encourage a national commitment to this. ■

Keeping the threshold low can be a challenge to services both in terms of attracting the resources and gaining public acceptance of a service. Critical to this is the political will and partnership working with the state to ensure services are developed to meet complex needs.

Other services we visited included Pigeon Park Savings Bank where you can open an account using a nickname or tattoo for identification...

# A very welcome and comprehensive contribution

**Tom Dunne** is impressed with *Housing Contemporary Ireland: Policy, Society and Shelter*.



Property, particularly residential, is of central interest to the Celtic Tiger Irish. In former times the land question dominated and perhaps drove the political agenda for much of the last two centuries. Periodically in the 20th century housing became an acute issue provoking policy responses which shaped prevailing tenure patterns. Providing houses for rural labourers in the 1930s and the housing crises of the 1960s led to significant interventions by the state including the direct provision of houses in substantial numbers. Clearly, land and property have been important to the Irish for a long time.

The demand for houses and the phenomenal increase in the housing stock since the start of the 21st century are profoundly reshaping the Irish experience. Perhaps, therefore, we should not be surprised that residential property is a topic often discussed by the chattering classes. Property investment and second homes, some in destinations opened up by that other phenomenon of the celtic tiger, the low fares airline, add a new and exotic dimension to conversations about housing unimaginable to people chatting in any pub in the Ireland of the 1960s.

Of course people remain aware of housing problems. The plight of the homeless, local authority waiting lists, tenant rights and the predicament of the first time buyer all make the headlines. Issues such as one-off housing in the countryside and the speed of development in urban areas keeps the interface of the planning system and housing to the forefront of people's minds. The tribunals, and in the absence of any mechanism to capture the value created by state provided infrastructure, the conspicuous, obscene to some, wealth made out of

developing residential property provoke a feeling that those seeking houses are exploited.

All these issues receive a lot of media converge in Ireland. Surprisingly however, for a topic of such importance and general interest there is relatively little academic research into housing issues. Perhaps this has been due to a lack of good statistical information about housing and property in general which would provide the raw material for sound academic research.

A lot of what informs popular debate therefore, about the owner-occupied sector in particular, is produced by participants in property markets. The construction industry and estate agents, who have access to information, have been publishing reports for some time. In more recent years, since banks found mortgage lending so profitable, their economists have become increasingly prolific on the residential property market. These interests now dominate the media.

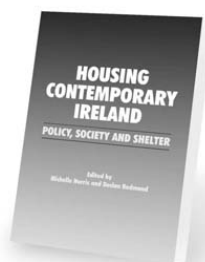
There is a pressing need for more balance in the information available on housing and for reflective contributions on the various issues surrounding the transformation taking place in the way we house ourselves and the way we finance and own residential property. The editors of this book are, therefore, to be congratulated for pulling together contributions from many of those writing and researching in housing and related fields and providing the first comprehensive review of housing in Ireland for many years. A reader interested in developing an informed view about housing in contemporary Ireland will find most of what is required in this book in a readable and accessible form.

When setting the context the editors point out that the high levels of new housing development have been remarkable and have had, and will continue to



Tom Dunne is chair of the Private Residential Tenancies Board and head of the School of Real Estate and Construction Economics at DIT

Surprisingly however, for a topic of such importance and general interest there is relatively little academic research into housing issues.



**A reader interested in developing an informed view about housing in contemporary Ireland will find most of what is required in this book in a readable and accessible form.**

have, major economic, social and spatial consequences. As they say, we are only beginning to appreciate the detailed outcomes and impacts with respect to access and affordability and our understanding of the environmental and spatial consequences is underdeveloped.

For those wanting a more reflective view about the dominance of owner occupation in Ireland, Cathal O'Connell's piece gives a very good perspective on how this came about. Certainly a greater understanding of the role of public policy in creating this state of affairs is needed if we are to find the right balance between the various tenures for the conditions in Ireland today.

Correctly in my view he concludes that the preference for owner occupation may taper out if the strategy of broadly based supports for this sector does not re-emerge. As he remarks, if this does not happen, assumptions that Irish households make about the housing choices available to them will have to be reappraised. This is an important conclusion and the issue deserves much more discussion.

The contributions of Dáthi Downey and of Tony Fahey and Brian Nolan provide much to inform such a discussion. The latter make an important point that affordability problems may be less a feature of the home purchase sector than public discussion of house prices would lead one to expect.

Section III on the private rented sector is no less illuminating and Michael Punch in particular provides challenging reading for those with conventional views about house markets. While not everyone would agree with the sentiments expressed in this contribution, this is a voice that needs to be heard more often.

The historical development of social housing in Ireland is covered particularly well by Michelle Norris who makes the significant point that despite the impressive achievements of the sector they are rarely extolled.

From the other contributions in Sector IV it is clear there is a need to increase the stock of social housing in Ireland substantially. It is, however, also a sector with problems including finding appropriate funding and management mechanisms.

In their discussion on the changing nature of the housing associations sector Simon Brooke and Vanda Clayton observe that relatively little is known about Irish housing associations and their activities. This reflects the general paucity of research into housing in Ireland mentioned earlier. As they say there has been a shift towards encouraging housing associations and although the reasons for this are pragmatic rather than ideological, the case for increasing the role of housing associations in Ireland is persuasive.

Also in this Section for those not familiar with what is often seen as a problem apart, Eoin O'Sullivan's contribution on homelessness will be particularly illuminating. Although the underlying cause of homelessness can be seen to be in the interaction of the housing and labour markets, the accessibility of the private rented market became greater during the late 1990s and early 2000s for these vulnerable

households a finding that might surprise.

Section VI covers a wide range of the issues surrounding the relationship of the planning system to housing. All of the contributions here are stimulating and informative.

Michael Bannon outlines the broad spatial frameworks now in place in the state and precedes this with an interesting commentary on the nature of planning and on the introduction of planning to Ireland. He provides a reading that is a particularly useful resource for those looking for an understanding of the role of planning in housing.

What comes over is a view that we have a comparatively laissez faire system, a view many developers would disagree with. Interestingly he comments that planners in Ireland are now expected to play a role similar to that of planners in Britain under Thatcherism in the early 1980s, reduced to being an enhancer of the value of land and other private property. Again this view would not be shared by developers.

Planning is always a contentious subject as it attempts to balance the needs of the environment and existing property owners with the demand for new housing. Also in an era dominated by neoliberal economic thinking, the notion of central or even local government planning done on a basis that it is possible to predict what the market will require not to mention to identify the means of providing it, goes against the philosophy of the times. Bannon's piece appears to reluctantly detect this.

**S**peaking of the disposition of our time, the question of the political economy of land and how to capture increases in value due to infrastructure provision and planning decisions is one which has deep roots in the history of economic thinking as well as a particular contemporary relevance in Ireland. Declan Redmond, Brendan Williams and Michael Punch discuss this and provide an interesting critique of the 9th Report of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution. The issue of value capture is a difficult one and finding a workable mechanism to do this is important. The discussion here will help to inform people of the issues.

The final section usefully puts Irish housing into the European context and finds that the system here performed impressively in comparison to other EU states. Also in this section a revealing list of the micro and macro level problems which exist with Irish housing is identified.

The book itself is well produced and the editors have done a good job in structuring the contributors into coherent sections. The chapters are readable and accessible to the general reader. It will be of interest to students and practitioners and journalists looking for background information on housing issues. Derry O'Connell's contribution which I found particularly appealing will be of particular interest to architects and planners. All in all this is very welcome and a comprehensive contribution to the literature on housing in Ireland. ■



# FOUNDATIONS PROJECT



Terrie Scurry receives her FETAC certificate from Peter Sheridan and Cora Rafter.

Foundations Project helps homeless people to access a wide range of education opportunities. **Fran Cassidy** visited the project's office in Parnell Square and met **Clare Schofield** and **Warren Pherson**.

‘I previously worked in street outreach where I’d meet people existing in chaos’, Foundations’ project co-ordinator Clare Schofield remembers, ‘and I did wonder how education might fit in there. But you quickly recognise that in terms of empowerment and motivation, education is the key.’

‘We have this dual identity here. We are primarily an education service, but we were brought into being under the Integrated Strategy<sup>1</sup> to cater specifically for people using homelessness services.’

This position ‘on the fringes’ of the homeless sector yields some pertinent insights, and the fact that Clare’s colleague Warren Pherson was a service-user four years ago adds a further layer of perspective to our conversation.

Clare and Warren begin by explaining that the Foundations project has developed into three distinct strands – adult education, a playgroup and an after-schools initiative. A fourth strand based on peer initiatives is in its infancy. They assert that they are fortunate that the VEC allows them to take

a necessarily broad view of adult education, and gives them leeway to experiment which enables them to be flexible.

‘We know that if we want to get the more marginalised within the homeless services involved,’ Clare explains, ‘we have to specifically target them and also appeal to everyone else. I remember a great moment early on when we were doing questionnaires in Cedar House. One guy was terrified of education because he could barely read and I was explaining that we could support him with that, and then another guy started talking about quantum physics and I didn’t have a clue about that. So there is such a diverse range of needs there.’

The Saturday social club – the BAT club, which Warren describes as ‘a back door to getting people into education’, combines a very informal drop-in facility incorporating requested activities such as free internet access, creative writing, table tennis and pool competitions, with some quite experimental and specifically targeted activities including graffiti art and DJ workshops.



Fran Cassidy is a writer and researcher

**Open six days a week**  
**Phone 878 6658 and ‘ask for Warren’**  
**Afterschools phone number 8746635**

<sup>1</sup> *Homeless Integrated Strategy*. The Homeless Agency 1999

Clare adds that 'a crucial thing for us when Warren came on board was that instead of someone like me doing outreach, you've someone saying 'well here's what I've done to move myself on.'

Foundations also run structured weekly or more intensive tri-weekly adult education programmes that encompass information technology, health and fitness, literacy, music, and gardening. For practical reasons the courses are quite short and many have 'rolling enrolment' whereby people can drop in and out depending on their personal situations. There are also motivational programmes incorporating interpersonal skills and an introduction to education. Cora Rafter, the project's erstwhile literacy and education worker, organised FETAC accreditation for many of their courses. This formal recognition and the accompanying graduation ceremonies has engendered a sense of achievement amongst participants, and encouraged some to continue for further qualifications in mainstream education.

Currently Foundations Project's adult education courses are run both onsite in hostels and in Parnell Adult Learning Centre in Parnell Square. The VEC have other adult education facilities throughout the city that the project aims to refer people on to over time.

As regards the other strands of the project, Clare explains that they now have two programmes for children: a playgroup in Dublin 7 and an after-schools group in Dublin 1.

'Our playgroup services originated because there was no way of providing education for parents without also offering childcare. We started with The Dominick Street programme where we used a Youthreach premises and then re-located to the Holy Family Parish Centre on Manor St. The Parish Centre has a brilliant sports hall, and a children's play room that we use twice a week for pre-schoolers and children up to eight years old. It's a good model, as you're not compelled to find and open premises at a massive cost – at €22 per session it's a bargain –and people are integrating into community facilities.

'Our original playgroup worked well, but we were requiring that parents participate in an education programme to access it. Then we realised that many parents involved were already well motivated and often accessing other childcare services as well. Also, for families in B&B it's really important to have some free time away from your children, even just to do shopping or laundry. We began targeting needier families and the focus shifted to providing for their children, and the parents' participation in education is optional

now. Now we have a lot more families coming in and we are more confident that we are reaching those who need it most.

'Our After-school project is targeted at children growing up in emergency B&B's. We know of one recently housed family for example, who were using homeless services for twelve years. The project is based in Sean Mc Dermott Street in a small flat belonging to Dublin City Council, which is attached to a VEC school, and it caters for 5–12 year olds.

'We also have a good presence in the B&Bs because we do an Outreach Children's Book Club.

We run summer projects for these children – we just had 30 kids for 5 weeks doing trips out and things – which is a nice initiative. People in B&Bs are often just languishing and it can be hard to get the people involved because there are no project workers based there to encourage them to come to us.

'Some of the hostels on the other hand, and particularly some individual project workers within the hostel system, are very good at sending people in our direction although there is always room for improvement in this regard. And of course we do outreach and advertise in all the hostels too.'

With regard to advertising, Warren is responsible for the fact that the Foundations' poster is possibly the most widely displayed piece of literature in Dublin's hostels. Such is its ubiquity that it could even be spied on a night-shelter wall in a recent Fair City storyline. The credit in that instance however apparently goes to a particularly competent set designer whose mother works in CDVEC's head office.

'Posters are important but outreach is more effective' Warren explains. 'With outreach people get a name and a face. So they're not coming to a strange building not knowing who they're going to meet – they're looking for someone they already know. They recognise that you're meeting them on their terms. That's important. When I was using services, there's no way that I would have just strolled in somewhere to ask about a course.'

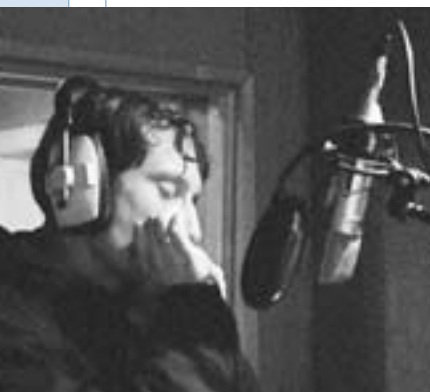
Warren has worked full time with Foundations for the last four years in programme development and facilitation, as well as being primarily responsible for liaising with the various homeless services. 'My involvement' he says 'dates back to when Clare brought the computer course down to Cedar House. There was a good group of lads there and we decided that we would get into education and keep each other motivated.'

Clare adds that 'a crucial thing for us when Warren came on board was that instead of someone like me doing outreach, you've someone saying 'well here's what I've done to move myself on.'

Warren agrees. 'People think that if I can get there, they can too. So my simply being there acts as motivation. I always tell them, I'm nothing special – I'm just a regular guy like yourselves who got a break and was able to work with that. I get instant credibility. It could work the other way too of course but I haven't faced that yet.'

Warren and Clare are keen advocates of the potential of peer education as a stepping stone out of homelessness. 'I'd always expressed an interest in coming back into services' Warren remembers 'and when a role opened up here Clare gave me a shot at it. You need to balance theory with practical experience. Qualifications can be very theoretical but the life the lads are leading isn't theory, it's real. At the end of the day working in homeless services can be a hard job and you get knocked but everybody gets knocked. That's life.

'We've been lucky with the peer approach' Clare notes. 'We have a tendency in the homeless services



Adult education student Eddie Murphy

to encourage anybody that manages to move on to stay away. Effectively all that knowledge base is lost. But in Foundations a couple of the facilitators came through the hostel scene, as did Warren, and Wes who is now effectively a full-time sports facilitator and childcare worker.'

Foundations are hoping to repeat a peer-workers' training course that has produced three full time project workers in homeless hostels from a group of ex service-users. Warren speaks with some conviction about the importance of listening to service users and humanizing homeless services.

'We treat people here the way they want to be treated. People sense if their dignity is respected and it's important to treat them as adults. In a homeless situation people can feel very disempowered. If a worker is heavy-handed it can feel like power-tripping. Services talk about not wanting to create a homeless sub-culture but some of the policies and procedures that are in place can help lead to that. If people present with behaviour problems, workers must address that, but they have to balance those policies and procedures with common sense.

Clare takes up the theme. 'All these systems and rules exist in services, and you're told that these are for safety and they are readily accepted. People think that all hell will break loose if they are not in place. But as far as possible we run with very informal barring and discipline procedures and we haven't had any major problems. People respect that more.

'I would worry about the extent that the services "pathologise" people for want of better word. It's almost as if once you are in a homelessness service, your life is under a microscope. I wouldn't like that and I think that all of us who work with people who are homeless need to think about it.

'I'm not being simplistic but people who hold down houses and jobs often have huge personal difficulties around substance abuse or whatever. But once you are in a homeless service this huge focus is put on your problems. I worry that sometimes services almost dis-empower people and can make them think that they have more problems than they do. People's problems don't entirely account for their homelessness and they don't have to be neatly solved for them to move on. The homelessness is the lack of housing.

'Early on we decided to only do minimal assessment. We take a name, a date of birth to monitor our age profile, and a phone number in case we have to cancel classes. We also ask about literacy levels, and if somebody has learning difficulties, we ask about key workers because we like to ensure that people have one and keep in contact with them if they do. Other than that we don't ask loads of questions.

'It is a tension in services however because on the other hand there are people languishing in homeless situations and some sort of assessment process needs to be entered into to work that out. They are looking at a common assessment tool and I think that would be good because if you are going to a new service, you don't want to be giving your information repeatedly. But it would be nice to think that the people delivering it

would do so in an empowering way where the person in question identifies their own needs. Generally people can identify a lot of what they need. If someone else is identifying the need and you don't recognise it, then you are not going to be accepting of it.'

'I also think we have got to start getting realistic with homeless people about their accommodation options. Some people are in services assuming that they are going to end up with a council place. They would be better in private rented accommodation leading a normal existence albeit with some support. We've seen people go through transitional accommodation and we've sat here and thought he/she doesn't need it, but it has become the rite of passage through homeless services. The private rented sector should be strengthened hugely; a large number of people live in the private rented sector for quite long periods of time. Permanent housing is obviously the ideal, but isn't going to be possible to provide for everyone in homeless services anytime soon. What Access Housing are doing works really well.'

'We'd love to develop things like mentoring or a buddying systems where you might take a group of people that have worked their way through the services and offer them some basic training on the semi-professional relationship they'd need to offer an after care or befriending service. In terms of tenancy sustainment it could be significant in combating social isolation.

**W**arren points to a danger of services 'holding on to people in a world of homelessness that is insular and institutionalised, and which they come to believe is the only world'. Both he and Clare emphasise the importance of progression routes towards re-integration to society.

'One key link we need to work on is with the network of fabulous community education facilities. You can't underestimate the importance of having participation in the community in some shape or form, especially say for tenancy sustainment. There's currently not a lot of support for people once they hit the mainstream and colleges need to work on that. What happens is that people go into the mainstream and they hit a difficulty and become disillusioned and drop out. There are also problems with the benefits including a nightmare around supplementary welfare allowance. We would advocate for a role being created in colleges with responsibility for 'non-traditional students'. Not just for people with a homeless background, but for anyone who has been out of education or work for a long time.'

Warren points out that while education has a huge role to play, 'there's something about earning a wage – it's being on the pigs back again so to speak'. They speak of someone they worked with who did the Business In The Community course and is now a manager with Marks & Spencers.

'He told us about the huge difference it made to him to actually be treated with full respect like a normal citizen.' ■



Adult education student  
Tommy Morley

**We treat people here the way they want to be treated. People sense if their dignity is respected and it's important to treat them as adults.**



# CornerStone Questionnaire

**Kathleen Holohan**

Chair of the Homeless Agency board and director of housing at Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council

## **When and why did you first get involved in the area of housing and homelessness?**

In 1988 I was transferred to the Housing Department of Dún Laoghaire Corporation which was around the time that the Housing Act 1988 was introduced so local authorities were coming to terms with how they would implement the new Act. I went to Camden with colleagues from other local authorities and the Health Board to see how their services operated. It was so different to the situation in Dublin at that time, however since then many of the different types of services that we saw then have now been provided in Dublin.

## **Has your understanding of homelessness changed since then?**

Yes very significantly. I now understand that meeting the needs of homeless people is not just about providing a roof over someone's head but can require the provision of a wide variety of services and supports to meet the needs of the individual

who is experiencing homelessness. The key to being able to provide the necessary responses is the partnership model that has been developed through the Homeless Agency and its constituent members.

## **What one policy initiative would make the most difference to homelessness people?**

Increasing access to long term housing with the supports that the person or households need, with particular emphasis on reducing the length of time that someone is homeless.

## **What have you learnt from homeless people you have met?**

That generally they never expected to find themselves homeless in the first place and that they are looking for someone who can support them in getting out of homelessness.

## **Do you think poverty and homelessness will always be with us?**

Yes, but I think we can ensure that when it happens that it is of as short

a duration as possible and that people will know where they can go to get help and support in resolving any problems they have.

## **What's the main difference between NGOs and the statutory sector?**

NGOs have greater flexibility in how they can respond to new issues and needs as they arise. Generally it has taken the statutory sector longer to respond but I think this has changed significantly in recent years.

## **What would you do if the housing and homelessness problem was solved and you were no longer needed?**

I'd either be working in another Department in the Council or I would take a totally different career path whatever that might be!

## **Do you give money to people who are begging?**

Generally I don't as I prefer to give to specific organisations. ■

CornerStone is distributed free by the Homeless Agency. If you know someone who would like to receive CornerStone, or you would like your own copy, contact:

**Homeless Agency**  
**Parkgate Hall**  
**6-9 Conyngham Road**  
**Dublin 8**  
**Tel 01 703 6100**  
**Fax 01 703 6170**  
**Email [homeless@dublincity.ie](mailto:homeless@dublincity.ie)**  
**Web [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie)**

**HOME  
LESS  
agency**