

Report on Errors in Data on Homeless Emergency Accommodation Usage in Dublin

From: Dr Cliodhna Bairéad and Prof Michelle Norris, Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin

To: Ms Mary Hayes, Director, Dublin Region Homeless Executive, Dublin City Council.

Date: 13th of November 2023.

Introduction.

On the 27th of September we were notified by senior officials in the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) that they had identified some inaccuracies within the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS) database that is used to manage the allocation of emergency accommodation for homeless people and to generate data on users of this accommodation. These officials had identified an over count of emergency accommodation users in the monthly reports on the numbers of homeless people generated from the PASS database between January 2022 and July 2023.

We were asked by these officials to review why this over counting had occurred to ensure appropriate measures can be taken to ensure it does not occur again. In addition, we were asked to provide advice regarding making appropriate changes to the monthly homeless reports published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) based on data generated by the DRHE from the PASS database. This report explains how this review was conducted and sets out its findings.

Implementation of the Review

On the 6th of October we met with DRHE management, including its director Mary Hayes, to discuss the overcounting which occurred on PASS between January 2022 and July 2023. In this meeting it was decided that, to gather the information required for the review, we would be given direct access to the PASS database and the relevant data in the DRHE's offices and access to relevant DRHE staff to interview.

On the basis of this agreement the data coalition and checking phase of the review was implemented as follows:

- On the 11th of October, Dr Bairéad visited the DRHE offices and was provided with excel spreadsheets containing all the information gathered by its research team regarding the overcount. This information was reviewed, analysed, and summarised.
- On the 12th of October, the PASS records on all the emergency accommodation users included in the overcount were individually reviewed by Dr Bairéad to establish the length of time they had each spend in emergency accommodation. This exercise established that DRHE estimates of the scale of the overcount were correct.
- On the 13th of October, Dr Bairéad returned to the DRHE to examine the implications of the information gathered for reporting on the total number of homeless single adults who had used emergency accommodation during the period when the overcounting occurred. Along with the DRHE research team, each monthly homeless report published by the DHLGH between January 2022 and July 2023 was examined and compared to the information gathered on over counting.
- On the 16th of October, Dr Bairéad visited Parkgate Hall, where the Central Placement Service (CPS) for all state funded emergency accommodation in the Dublin City Council area is located. CPS management showed Dr Bairéad the different reporting software databases they use to confirm emergency accommodation bed occupancy.

Between the 19th and 31st of October this information was reviewed, analysed by Prof Norris and Dr Bairéad, and compiled into this report.

Background: The Development of PASS and Reporting on Homelessness

PASS is a software programme used by local authorities and the DRHE to track the occupancy of beds in emergency accommodation for homeless people that they fund. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that were traditionally the main providers of this accommodation also have access to this programme so they can log occupancy of the emergency accommodation they offer and keep records of assessments of need and service engagement.

Since 2016, monthly 'Homeless Reports' that detail the number of users of emergency accommodation for homeless people have been published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. These reports are based on point in time (PIT) reports generated from the PASS system for each region of the country during the final week of each calendar month. As a live resource allocation system, the information stored on PASS changes constantly. Staff of homeless service providers, the DRHE and local authorities all book emergency accommodation, discharge residents, and insert notes on clients on PASS every day. This means that the PIT reports generated from PASS are reflective of the numbers of homeless emergency accommodation users registered on this system when the report was run.

As the number of homeless people increased in recent years, the DRHE started to use private emergency accommodation (PMA) such as private hotels and B&Bs. These private accommodation providers are not specialist homeless service providers and may not provide accommodation for the long term, therefore, they were not given access to the PASS database.

In the Dublin City Council region, CPS staff originally recorded bookings into and departures from private emergency accommodation by regularly contacting accommodation providers. This was time consuming and, to improve this system, CPS introduced queue systems management software called Front Desk, which the private emergency accommodation providers could access to record service user arrivals and departures. This system was successfully used by private accommodation providers between January 2022 and July 2023 for this purpose. However, the Front Desk System was not integrated into PASS and data from the former had to be manually entered into the latter system by CPS staff for the purpose of monitoring overall

emergency accommodation usage and generating data for the DHLGH homeless reports.

In July 2023 these arrangements were replaced when private emergency accommodation was fully integrated into the PASS system and use of Front Desk was terminated. From then on, all entries and exists from all forms of emergency accommodation for homeless people were recorded on a single software system – PASS.

Cause of Overcounting

Our review indicates that the overcounting of users of emergency accommodation in Dublin between January 2022 and July 2023 was due primarily to the concurrent use of the Front Desk and PASS systems at this time and specifically to administrative errors that occurred during the transfer of data from the former system to the latter.

During the period when Front Desk was being utilised by private emergency accommodation providers to record arrivals and departures for their accommodation, the manual transfer by the CPS of data on arrivals into private emergency accommodation appears to have been accurate. However, when some service users departed from PEA and the booking was closed on Front Desk, their departure was not recorded in all cases on PASS and their accommodation booking was not closed on PASS.

Critically, from the perspective of implementing this review because all bookings, arrivals and departures from PEA were correctly recorded on Front Desk, it was possible to retrospectively check the accuracy of the transfer of this information to PASS. Our investigation of this issue indicates that a total of 299 PEA bookings were recorded erroneously on PASS as being 'open' (i.e., still occupied) past the date when the relevant service user had left the accommodation and recorded erroneously in some DRHE monthly homeless reports.

These errors commenced in 2019, prior to the introduction of Front Desk, when one departure from PEA was not recorded on PASS and consequently this bed was erroneously marked as still occupied. Two more PEA bookings were mis recorded as being open in 2021. However, following the introduction of Front Desk the number of

recording errors that occurred when data from this programme was being transferred to PASS increased.

Table 1 below details these data recording errors and their evolution between January 2022 and July 2023. In this Table, the aforementioned three PEA bookings made in 2019 and 2021 that were not closed are included in the figure for January 2022, as the starting point for the analysis. The figure for this month also includes one other new PEA booking that was erroneously not recorded as closed during that month. Table 1 reveals that a relatively small number of PEA bookings were mistakenly not recorded as closed during each month 2022 (this varied from a low of 2 in February to a high of 11 in November). The same errors in transcribing data from Front Desk to PASS increased during the first six months of 2023, from a low of 27 in January to a high of 80 in July, when this reporting error was noticed.

Notably, these errors impacted *cumulatively* on reporting of total numbers of adults in emergency homeless accommodation in the DHLGH homeless reports. In other words, when four PEA bookings were erroneously not closed in January 2022, total numbers of adults in emergency accommodation were artificially inflated by four. However, these four bookings remained open in February 2022 and a further two bookings were erroneously not closed this month, so the total number of adults in emergency accommodation was artificially inflated by six and so on.

The recording errors detailed above were noticed by DRHE staff in July 2023 and all the private emergency accommodation bookings that had erroneously been left open on the PASS system were closed by August 2023. Consequently, the DHLGH homeless reports covering the period from August 2023 did not contain these data errors.

Table 1: Cumulative Overcount of Bookings and Adjusted Monthly Figures

Month	All Reported Adults in Emergency Accommodation	All Reported Single Adults in Emergency Accommodation	New Private Emergency Accommodation Bookings Not Closed	Cumulative Private Emergency Accommodation Bookings Not Closed	Total Adjusted Adults in Emergency Accommodation	Total Adjusted Single Adults in Emergency Accommodation
Jan-22	4580	3194	4	4	4576	3190
Feb-22	4711	3256	2	6	4705	3250
Mar-22	4886	3343	3	9	4877	3334
Apr-22	4991	3365	2	11	4980	3354
May-22	5173	3519	4	15	5158	3504
Jun-22	5258	3597	7	22	5236	3575
Jul-22	5209	3509	10	32	5177	3477
Aug-22	5326	3537	2	34	5292	3503
Sep-22	5356	3541	5	39	5317	3502
Oct-22	5558	3673	4	43	5515	3630
Nov-22	5655	3741	11	54	5601	3687
Dec-22	5793	3833	9	63	5730	3770
Jan-23	5946	3943	27	90	5856	3853
Feb-23	6012	4004	11	101	5911	3903
Mar-23	6137	4072	21	122	6015	3950
Apr-23	6288	4128	29	151	6137	3977
May-23	6358	4141	42	193	6165	3948
Jun-23	6424	4192	26	219	6205	3973
Jul-23	6576	4274	80	299	6277	3975

Findings:

As explained above, the core finding of this review is that errors in the transfer of data on private emergency accommodation usage for single adults from the Front Desk database to PASS data resulted in the overstatement of numbers of homeless people in the DHLGH monthly homeless reports between January 2022 and July 2023. In total PEA usage figures were overstated by 299 because of these errors. However, as explained in Table 1, these errors impacted cumulatively on reporting of total numbers of adults in emergency homeless accommodation in the DHLGH homeless reports. Numbers of homeless people were erroneously inflated by 4 in the January 2022 report, but this rose to 299 by July 2023. These errors were noticed by DRHE staff by the latter date and all errors eliminated by the PASS database by the following month, therefore the DHLGH reports that cover the period since August 2023 are accurate,

Notably, these homeless data reporting errors did not impact on homeless people's access to emergency accommodation or spending on homeless accommodation by the DRHE. This is because Front Desk was used to manage the allocation and funding of private emergency accommodation between January 2022 and July 2023 and data entry into this database was accurate.

The number of misreported departures from emergency accommodation was not large enough to have a significant impact on overall trends in recorded homelessness in Ireland between January 2022 and July 2023. 9,150 individuals were recorded as homeless in the DHLGH monthly reports in the former month, thus the data reporting errors examined here inflated total homelessness numbers by 0.04%. 12,847 people were homeless in July 2023, and this figure was inaccurately inflated by 2.3% by the data recording errors reported here.

These errors are unlikely to reoccur because the use of Front Desk in conjunction with PASS was terminated in July 2023. From then on, all entries and exists from all forms of emergency accommodation for homeless people were recorded only on PASS and thus the potential for human error during the manual transfer of data from one software system to another was eliminated.

Recommendations:

Amendments to Published Homelessness Data Reports:

As mentioned above, due to the live nature of PASS, it is not possible to exactly replicate the past monthly homeless reports generated by the DRHE exactly. Instead, to ensure the accuracy of the DHLGH reports, we suggest that the DHLGH publishes an 'erratum statement' to accompany its next monthly report. This should explain the errors that occurred in the reporting of data on homelessness between January 2022 and July 2023 and published revised total adult and single homeless adult figures for each month between these dates as set out in Table 1.

Future Homelessness Data Recording and Reporting:

PASS is a live, administrative data system which, to fulfil its primary purpose of managing the allocation of emergency accommodation, must allow system users to change information on behalf of the individuals they work with. In reporting terms this means that it is not possible to replicate reports exactly, even for the same date and reason, once more than a few hours have passed. To appropriately report emergency accommodation use, the DRHE run a point in time report each month on behalf of the DHLGH. This report contains the number of emergency accommodation beds which were used in the region during the last week of each month.

At the start of each month, the DRHE liaise with CPS to confirm the monthly bookings have been inputted into PASS for the last week of the previous month. Once the booking inputting process for beds used has been confirmed, the DRHE run a report which contains the weekly bookings. This report includes demographics such as age group, citizenship, and household composition. A manual has been produced by the DRHE to this process and is followed by each region of the country when generating the monthly point in time emergency accommodation usage report.

By following the same methodological approach systematically each month, the live nature of PASS can be mitigated as the trend in emergency accommodation use over time can be established rather than relying on exact numbers for a specific date. To strengthen this methodological approach further, we suggest that all regions run their Point in Time report on a set day each month.

Changes to the PASS System

Currently on PASS where cancellations occur, no end date is generated on the clients booking history. This means that the booking, while recognised by the system as being cancelled, looks at an initial glance to be open. This is a confusing feature which should be changed solely for the purposes of user clarity. Once a booking has been cancelled, the 'end date' should be autogenerated as the date the cancellation occurred.

Additionally, in some cases PASS will 'auto-arrive' or 'auto-discharge' clients for their bookings. This means that staff may not control the status of a client within the PASS system at all times. To ensure consistency of reporting we recommend that all automated changes to bookings in PASS be switched to manual changes. This will ensure that staff using PASS can correctly record when people have or have not used a bed and whether they have presented to the accommodation booked on their behalf or not.

Conclusion:

We are satisfied that that the cumulative overcounting which occurred between January 2022 and July 2023 was an unintentional oversight caused by using two data recording systems currently. The solution already implemented of adding the PEA portal on PASS is satisfactory in addressing the issue. We have added additional suggestions which may be implemented to reduce confusion and improve data reporting consistency in the future. We have also suggested what we have determined to be the most appropriate method of reporting and recording the adjusted figures for the months impacted by the cumulative overcounting of bookings on PASS.