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CornerStone

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

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10 Believing it can be done

Mary Higgins reflects on eight years at the Homeless Initiative and Homeless Agency

note from the editor



As many readers will know, Mary Higgins left the Homeless Agency at the end of January after eight years as director of the Homeless Initiative and the Homeless Agency. Mary will be joining the ranks of the self-employed and working as an independent consultant.

Since she announced her departure, a number of people have asked me why someone would voluntarily exchange such a job for the insecurity of freelance work. But in my experience too many people in senior positions outstay their welcome, and someone who decides to leave before they run out of steam, or fall out with everyone in sight, should be congratulated.

A friend of mine was asked in an undertone by a senior civil servant why Mary was leaving. 'Because it's the most stressful job in Western Europe that's why!' came the sharp reply. Well, perhaps not the most stressful, but certainly not a sinecure, especially when you have set yourself the goal of eliminating homelessness.

Mary's passion and commitment to this target and her total determination to achieve it is absolute. Her insightful analysis and ability to see beyond traditional responses have helped greatly in the process of establishing effective ways of preventing and responding to homelessness. And if on occasions that has meant a few feathers have been ruffled, and a number of orthodoxies challenged which may have made life uncomfortable for some; then that is a small price to pay.

Her enthusiasm, her constant questioning of conventional thinking, and her irreverence are infectious and I know many people who Mary has inspired and encouraged to think differently about homelessness and responses to it.

Another friend invited Mary to a conference a couple of years ago, at which Mary asked a number of extremely pertinent questions and made a some pithy interjections. My friend was absolutely delighted. 'I must invite Mary to all my conferences!' she said. 'At last – someone who can inject a bit of life into them!'

Practically everyone will agree that a great many aspects of homeless services have improved during the last eight years. And no, this is not all due to Mary! But there is no doubt whatsoever that the Homeless Initiative and Homeless Agency have under her direction played a key role in establishing an agenda for action that is being implemented, and one which has a very wide degree of support from both NGOs and the statutory sector.

Speaking personally, I have valued hugely Mary's support and guidance during my time as editor of CornerStone, even though this has led on a few occasions to frantic last minute rewrites!

I am sure that all CornerStone readers will join me in wishing Mary the very best in whatever she takes on next.

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

Patricia Bourke, Dublin City Council
Eithne Fitzgerald, Independent
Brian Harvey, Independent
Mary Higgins, Homeless Agency
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@indigo.ie
Web: www.homelessagency.ie

CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Higgins is the outgoing director of the Homeless Agency

Simon Brooke is a housing and social policy consultant, and editor of CornerStone

Lisa Moran is curator of education and community at the Irish Museum of Modern Art

Cathal O'Connell lectures in the Department of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork

Muireann Morris is director of Sonas Housing Association

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**HOME
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agency

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But do I really believe homelessness can be eliminated? Well, yes I actually do, fervently.



feature article

Believing it can be done

Mary Higgins reflects on eight years at the Homeless Initiative and Homeless Agency

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Action plan progress



Prevention and intervention

A consultant has been contracted to complete a **comprehensive homelessness preventative strategy** by March of next year. This work will be overseen a working group including representation from voluntary and statutory services and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government which is in the process of commissioning a review of the national homeless strategies, including the preventative strategy. Discussions are underway with **Comhairle** on an **information programme** for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The **Access Housing Unit** has been expanded to include a tenancy support service and protocols have been developed between the Unit and the **Irish Prison and Probation and Welfare Services** to facilitate the securing of private tenancies for people leaving custody, who would otherwise be homeless. Proposals for **tenancy sustainment** services have been considered by the Agency Board and it has been agreed that there should be one service for Dublin.

Existing services and initiatives are continuing in accordance with the action plan. In addition: Consultants have been engaged to develop proposals on a model of **case and care management** and **outcome measures** for the homeless

sector. A project, piloting such an approach to the needs of rough sleepers is in the process of evaluation and will inform this work, which is due for completion in the near future. Consultation is taking place on proposals to improve the **coordination and effectiveness of responses to rough sleepers**. Consultants have been contracted to make **proposals** to provide for the education, health and welfare **needs of children** in homeless families and to **review the role of food centres**. Both projects will be completed by March 2005. A working group is preparing proposals on the type of new structure or **system required to support the delivery of services in local communities** to be considered by the Board in December.

Addressing data deficits

Over the last few years a number of deficiencies have been identified with the information available on homelessness: The **Counted In** surveys have shown a discrepancy between the number of households in contact with homeless services and the number registered as homeless with local authorities; it is clear that agencies both within and outside of the homeless sector use different criteria for describing someone as homeless and there is very little information on flows in and out of homelessness.

Addressing these problems is a priority for the Homeless Agency over the coming two years and a whole section of the current action plan is dedicated to addressing these problems. Steady progress is being made in implementing actions in this section: A **review of information systems and definitions** of homelessness used by local authorities, the Homeless Persons Unit, health boards, Drugs Services and Probation and Welfare Services has been completed and the findings will be used to inform the development of agreed definitions and data collection. A system is in the process of development which will provide key information including the numbers of people becoming homeless, the numbers in temporary accommodation and the number of lettings to homeless households by local authorities and through the Access Housing Unit. **Dublin LINK**, the data base of people using homeless services is currently used by all emergency and settlement services. Transitional housing projects and other services will be added to system during December. A process of **consultation** with homeless services and other relevant bodies has been undertaken to inform proposals for the Homeless Agency **research programme 2005–2006** which will be considered by the Board in December and Dr Evelyn Mahon, Senior Lecturer Trinity College, has agreed to

chair a research advisory group. A working group has reviewed the **Counted In** methodology and efforts will now be made to ensure that everyone who is homeless is registered with a local authority before the next assessment in March 2005.

Leading coordinating and measuring performance

Working groups, worker networks and local area forums continue to meet and form an important element of the work of the Homeless Agency in developing partnership working and consultation. A consultant has been contracted to review the effectiveness of these structures by next March. Bookings are now being taken for the **Learning and Performance Programme** for 2005. The programme focuses on two streams: Professional Practice Skills which are aimed at equipping workers in the sector to assist homeless people out of homelessness through a case management approach; and Understanding Life Issues which deals with issues such as mental health, trauma and drugs and alcohol. Monthly workshops will also be held on various topics of relevance to workers. The programme is available on our website www.homelessagency.ie and bookings can be made on line.

The website continues to be developed and improved on an ongoing basis, providing an important resource to the homeless sector and other agencies.

Monitoring the use of the website is carried out regularly and shows a continual increase in use. In **October** there were **2,553** visits to the site, accessing **6,981** pages. The most frequently visited page is the home page, followed by the research and publications page. The Directory of Services is the most frequently downloaded document. **Hostels Online** is an internet based system showing vacancies in homeless accommodation. A review of it has just been completed showing a level of under-utilisation. The Agency will be supporting services to use the system more effectively and will expand it to include all emergency accommodation over the coming months. The management and administration of the assessment and allocation of **funding to homeless services** is carried out by the Homeless Agency. A proposed budget was submitted to government in August in agreement with the action plan and representations continue to be made to various government departments for the introduction of multi annual funding. Notwithstanding the lack of government commitment to this, three year service agreements are due to be signed by Dublin local authorities and health boards and services by the end of this year. **Evaluations** of new services have just been completed. Consultants have been appointed to **review the funding arrangements** and to complete **unit costing** for homeless services by the

middle of next year. The contract for the **independent evaluation** of the Homeless Agency and the action plan has been awarded to the Institute of Public Administration.

Changes in board and forum

Declan Jones, Chief Executive Officer has been selected by the Voluntary Network to replace Greg Maxwell as one of its representatives on the Homeless Agency Board. Greg was sacked from his position as Chief Executive of Dublin Simon in the summer. Orla Barry of Focus Ireland has been selected as vice chair of the Consultative Forum. ■



Stop press! New director for Homeless Agency

The Homeless Agency has appointed Derval Howley to the post of director. Derval is currently the manager of the National Drugs Strategy for the Eastern Regional Health Authority where she previously held the posts of acting service

manager for social inclusion and research officer. She is a member of the National Drugs Strategy Team and the National Advisory Committee on Drugs. Derval has direct experience in homelessness, having previously been both research officer and

street outreach worker with Dublin Simon Community, and she holds a PhD in sociological research in on street begging in Dublin city. Derval will be starting work with the Homeless Agency around the beginning of March. ■

Dynamic but unbalanced

This phrase could describe accurately a number of individuals known to **CornerStone**. However, the context here is not character assassination, but the headline analysis of the Irish housing system provided by NESC in its recently published report on housing.

The first thing to say about *Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy* is that it is big. The main report and seven background papers fill 500 pages, and not all of it is holiday reading.

The report kicks off by identifying the problems (referred to euphemistically as 'anxieties'). These are:

- The *stability* of the housing market. Or rather, the lack of stability as shown by ever-rising house prices;
- The degree of *inequality* in the system. That is, the fact that some people have done very well out of the housing boom, and others are unable to get a decent home at all;
- The *sustainability* of settlement patterns, neighbourhood design and housing density developed in recent decades which are storing up huge social environment budgetary and economic problems in years to come.

After examining these, the report concludes that the Irish housing system is 'dynamic but unbalanced'. 'Dynamic' refers to the huge increase in the supply of housing in recent years, and the large number of policy initiatives taken since the early 1990s. 'Unbalanced', refers to lots of aspects of the housing system including:

- Imbalances between demand and supply, especially in Dublin in the early years of the housing boom;
- An unequal distribution of opportunities and pressures across income groups;
- An imbalance between the provision of private and social housing;
- An imbalance between home ownership and rental, with an insufficient rental sector, although this is moderating;
- A series of imbalances that weaken the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the system:

- An imbalance between housing development and infrastructure;
- An imbalance between low-density suburban development and consolidation of urban areas;
- An imbalance between extensive development outside cities and the creation of compact urban satellites;
- Until recently, an imbalance between construction of houses and apartments;
- An imbalance between one-off rural housing and settlement in rural villages;
- An imbalance between the building of second homes in rural areas and the primary housing needs of rural dwellers;
- A severe imbalance between the number of people working in housing construction and the number of skilled people working on analysis of spatial development, strategic spatial planning, integration of housing and infrastructure and planning control;
- A somewhat unbalanced distribution of state supports to different actors in the housing system; and,
- In the views of some, but not all, an unbalanced distribution, between landowners and wider society, of the increase in land values or 'betterment' that arises as a by-product of general economic and social development.

So, no shortage of imbalances, and no shortage of problems to tackle.

According to the report, this leads to four key policy challenges:

- 1 To achieve high-quality, sustainable, development in both urban and rural areas;
- 2 To provide an effective range of supports to those households that fall below the affordability threshold;
- 3 To assist the market to continue to provide a high level of supply;
- 4 To ensure a tax and subsidy regime that supports these goals.

The NESC takes the view that the main way to achieve these is, 'in the areas of planning, urban design, infrastructural investment, land management and public service delivery rather than in manipulating tax instruments to alter the supply or demand for land or housing'. Secondly NESC says that quantity can

be increased without sacrificing quality; in fact the two can be mutually reinforcing.

The report and background papers contain an extremely detailed and comprehensive analysis of a number of key

aspects of the housing system in Ireland. There's far too much to even attempt to summarise here so we'll miss out the analysis completely and jump to the end – after all most people only want to know the recommendations and everyone else can read it for themselves.

Before going to the recommendations there is one important aspect of this report that needs emphasising, and one that will be missed by those who do not read the full report. Not only, as mentioned above is the analysis detailed and comprehensive, it is also very strong, but the strength of this analysis does not appear to be matched by the strength of the recommendations that follow.

Fifteen years ago, in 1989, NESC published *A Review of Housing Policy* by John Blackwell, which had a huge influence on the development of housing policy in Ireland. It remains to be seen what will be the legacy of *Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy*, but it is an important report which deserves a wide-ranging debate. So the next issue of *CornerStone* will include analysis of its content – what was left out as well as what was left in, as well as assessments of its likely impact.

'So, no shortage of imbalances, and no shortage of problems to tackle.'

But what about homelessness?

The NESC report barely mentions homelessness, saying only that 'programmes identified to combat homelessness be maintained at the highest level of priority'. It states that because the focus is on the housing system at a broad level, 'a number of specific issues such as Traveller accommodation and homelessness have not been

considered in any significant detail.' NESC goes on to say that addressing the broader housing issues, particularly supply, the report, 'will contribute significantly to attaining the policy goals outlined for these particular groups.'

But the fact is, homelessness is more than a problem of a lack of supply of appropriate housing, important

though this is. Furthermore it is essential that prevention and responses to homelessness are fully integrated into the housing system, and significant progress has been made in this area. So by leaving it out, there is a risk that if attention is focused on this report, as it should be, homelessness will once again be marginalised.

The NESC's job is to analyse and report to the government on 'strategic issues relating to the efficient development of the economy and the achievement of social justice'. The council includes 30 people

nominated by the government; business and employers organisations; Irish Congress of Trades Unions; agricultural and farming organisations; and community and voluntary organisations. NESC reports have to be

supported by the wide range of interests represented on the council, so it is inevitable they will represent a compromise and perhaps explains why the recommendations appear weaker than the analysis.

Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy Recommendations

Sustainable Housing and Integrated Development

To secure the overall spatial strategy:

Identify and prioritise the next generation of infrastructural investments necessary for sustainable settlements and a competitive economy. For Dublin, it is crucial that the further transport investments are identified soon and given priority.

To secure the links between settlement and transport at regional level:

Ensure an active engagement of the central Department with the regional and local authorities to scope out a desirable pattern of long-term settlement for each region, city, gateway and hub.

Create enhanced capacity and capability to undertake spatial analysis and use this to support planning and decision making at national, regional and local level.

To ensure that development reflects the principles of sustainability:

1 County development plans must be informed by long-range strategic plans for local and regional spatial development;

2 The principles of sustainable neighbourhoods must be reflected in the projects proposed by builders and given permission by planning authorities;

3 Local authorities must create and maintain quality local infrastructure and services necessary for sustainable neighbourhoods; and,

4 The overall planning process must be efficient and fast.

Meeting the challenge of social and affordable housing

A high level of ambition is appropriate for social and affordable housing

Create an expanded and more flexible stock of social housing – adding in the order of 73,000 permanent social housing units to bring the stock to 200,000 dwellings by 2012 – in a manner that is consistent with other public investment needs and sound public finances.

Modify the tenant purchase scheme to better support wider strategic objectives and actively consider directing tenants who wish to purchase solely to the Shared Ownership and Affordable Housing Schemes.

To create a wider range of graduated supports for 'intermediate' households:

Continue to supply Affordable Housing at least in line with current targets.

Explore the possibility of retargeting existing supply subsidies in return for agreed approaches to allocation or rents.

Explore ways of developing a cost-rental segment in the Irish housing system.

To ensure adequate resources for social and affordable housing:

Factor increased social housing provision into the next National Development Plan.

Create a defined revenue stream for housing bodies providing on-site and care supports.

Adopt a more proactive approach to the acquisition and/or development of land, including land banking, using compulsory purchase powers where necessary.

Land, land management and betterment

In addition to land-use strategies over a long horizon and land for enhanced social and affordable housing, both listed above, there is a need for:

- Sufficient active land management to ensure delivery of housing;
- Through enhancing existing elements of active land management;
- Through selective compulsory purchase of land before zoning;
- Betterment-sharing measures, designed in a way that does not damage supply;
- Especially where public land management provides an opportunity for negotiated betterment sharing.

A tax and subsidy regime to support housing policy

Ensure a tax and subsidy regime which supports the goals outlined above, assists the housing industry to provide adequate supply, does not exacerbate cyclicity and preserves sound public finances.

- Retain mortgage interest tax relief (MITR) for owner occupiers, given its importance to recent purchasers;
- Retain MITR for landlords and tax relief for tenants, subject to compliance with regulatory standards, in order to promote a vibrant market in private rental;
- Review designated area tax reliefs which are due to expire in 2006;

- Retain stamp duty, but consider amendments, such as providing incentives to trade down and increased bands or thresholds;
- Consider a separate tax on second homes to cover the higher costs of infrastructure and to encourage the provision of primary dwellings;
- Explore a tax or loan instrument to aid

acquisition of deposits for owner occupied housing —attention being paid to the position of the housing cycle, overall levels of indebtedness and vulnerability to interest rate increases.

Each of these must be considered in the context of the wider tax and economic policy framework.

Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy is published by the National Economic and Social Council. You can get it from NESCC, 16 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, or Government Publications Office, Sun Alliance House, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2. It will cost you €5 if you're a student or €15 if you're not. But if you want it free, you can find it at www.nesc.ie/docs/housing/housingindex.htm.

Seven background papers are available only on line at the above address:

- 1 Introduction to background analysis
- 2 Analytical approaches to housing
- 3 The demand for housing in Ireland
- 4 The supply of housing in Ireland
- 5 The interaction of supply and demand
- 6 The provision of social and affordable housing
- 7 Approaches to land management, value and betterment. ■

Budget news

Finance minister Brian Cowan's first budget contained three measures that may be of interest to

CornerStone readers:

- **Expenditure on social housing has been increased.** The allocation to local authorities and housing associations has been increased by about 9%. Press reports referred to an additional €50m for local

authority housing, but the origin of this is not clear. Overall the government hopes that local authorities should be able to *complete* 5,500 houses this year compared with 4,500 in 2004.

- **Stamp duty for first time buyers of second hand houses is reduced.** The saving for a first time buyer buying an average second-hand house in Dublin

costing €308,000 will be €11,550 representing just under 4% of the price.

- **Private rented tenants will be able to claim tax relief on higher rents.** A single person aged under 55 will be able to claim tax relief on an annual rent of up to €1,500 (previously €1,270). This represents an increase of approximately 88c per week. ■

European and Irish housing atlases

Remember when Ireland was famous for having the highest levels of owner-occupation practically anywhere on the globe? Well, not any more; Ireland's owner-occupation rate has fallen slightly in the last couple of years to around 77% and mass privatisation of housing in some former communist states has led to almost

universal owner-occupation. For example in Bulgaria it is 96.5% and in Romania an amazing 97.2%.

How does **CornerStone** know this? From the latest Housing Unit publication – *Housing Developments in European Countries* – that's how.

Although housing is not a EU competency, the importance of housing

and its relationship with other policy areas which are EU competencies is acknowledged, so since 1989 the housing ministers of EU states have met regularly to discuss issues related to housing policy and sustainable development. To mark its presidency of the EU, Ireland prepared a report on recent housing developments in Europe

(including applicant countries which is why Bulgaria and Romania are included).

Interestingly, the report demolishes the myth that housing policy developments have been the same in all eastern European countries. The transformation from near universal state housing to near universal owner-occupation (c.f. Bulgaria and Romania above) is not itself universal. In the Czech Republic for example, less than

half the population own their own homes; and in Poland only 55%.

Housing Developments in European Countries is an invaluable resource and provides a unique distillation of housing policy activity in Europe.

A second tip-top tome from the Housing Unit focuses attention on Ireland.

Housing Policy Review 1990–2002 is the definitive guide to recent housing

policy development in Ireland and includes sections on:

- Demand, supply, price and affordability
- Housing policy developments
- Supporting home ownership
- The private rented residential sector
- Social housing
- Meeting special housing and accommodation needs

There is enough here to satisfy the most obsessive housing hack and whilst the lemon-yellow graphs are a bit hard on the eye early in the day, if you want to know whether the take-up of thatching grants has increased in recent years or what Peter Bacon actually said, you need look no further. For more about this report, read the review on page 18. ■

Housing *Developments in European Countries* is published by the Stationery Office and costs €20; *Housing Policy Review 1990–2002* is also published by the Stationery Office and costs €8.00; *Training and Information for Tenants* is published by the Housing Unit 57–61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4. Tel 668 6233. Free to local authorities, housing associations and tenants groups. €12.70 to everyone else. You can download it from www.housingunit.ie/publications.html

Participation in training and information

Just about everybody agrees that tenant participation is a Good Thing, even if just about everybody has a different idea of what it means. And if tenant participation is to mean anything at all then tenants must be included in the process, and if tenants are to be involved in the process, then provision of training and information is essential.

So the Housing Unit's printing presses, which are at this stage red hot, have churned out yet another

magnificent manual all about training and information for tenants.

The handbook, *Training and Information for Tenants*, which is the latest in the *Good Practice in Housing Management: Guidelines for Social Housing Providers* series, covers the ground comprehensively. It emphasises that the very process of developing training and information systems for tenants must itself be a form of tenant participation because if tenants aren't in at the beginning then it won't work. ■



'An abrupt unwinding...'

In discussions of house prices we've become used to euphemisms such as 'hard landing', 'soft landing', 'speculative bubble'. But here's a new one: 'an abrupt unwinding of the housing market boom'. This extraordinary phrase emanates from the International Monetary Fund in its recently published report on Ireland.

Euphemisms are often ways of trying to avoid frightening people. A director of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant reportedly referred to a 'spontaneous energetic disassembly' when the power station blew up. In this case perhaps the

'...perhaps the IMF was scared that if it warned of a 'property crash' it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.'

IMF was scared that if it warned of a 'property crash' it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, the IMF warned that the impact of 'an abrupt unwinding of the housing market boom' on employment and private consumption could be significant. And since this 'unwinding' would be a bad

thing the IMF recommended removing tax relief on mortgage interest payments, and introducing a market-value-based wealth tax on property, graduated to tax second homes at higher rates.

Although one should never reject the possibility of change, the residential property tax was highly unpopular and abolished in 1994 – and it's difficult to imagine any of the main political parties promoting such an initiative, even if it does make good economic and social sense. ■

People and projects

Daisyhouse Housing Association has received a second Q-Mark and was the 'most deserving cause' at the National Quality & Excellence Awards Ceremony organised by Excellence Ireland Quality Association where Daisyhouse benefited from a charity auction, a raffle and a donation envelope.

Focus Ireland's annual report 2003 has won the Charities and Not for Profit Organisations award in the Published Accounts Awards organised by the Leinster Society of Chartered Accountants. The awards recognise achievement in setting benchmarks for excellence in financial reporting. ■



(LtoR) Cathy McKiernan, Excellence Ireland Quality Association (EIQA); Shane Brennan, manager, Daisyhouse Housing Association; Anne Marie Fallon, EIQA.



(LtoR) Evelyn Fitzpatrick, director of finance and administration, Focus Ireland; Declan Jones, chief executive, Focus Ireland; Pauline Costello, marketing manager, Focus Ireland.

It is planned to expand this news section about going on in homeless and housing services, so if you have news about your project or organisation that you think others might be interested in, please contact the editor, either directly, or via the Homeless Agency. It doesn't have to be about quality like the two stories above; it could be a new initiative, news about senior appointments, good practice developments. Remember that people love looking at photos of people they know (or if they're honest photos of themselves), so if you can provide a photo you'll have a much better chance of getting your story printed. ■

Opportunity knocks?

... is the snappy title of the latest report from Threshold which deals with institutional investment in the private rented sector. Threshold is committed to strengthening the private rented sector in Ireland and believes that if financial institutions were to invest directly in the sector, good quality private rented accommodation and good management practices would become the norm. So the study was commissioned to look at the potential for Irish financial institutions to enter the private residential rented market.

Recommendations include:

- More data on rents and yields from both commercial property organisations and the Private Residential Tenancies Board.
- Monitoring of pilot projects providing subsidised rental housing through Public Private Partnerships.
- The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and the Department of Finance should explore ways in which institutional finance could be attracted to fund social housing.
- The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the

Department of Finance should examine the potential for special purpose investment vehicles to promote investment in the private rented sector.

Opportunity Knocks? Institutional Investment in the Private Rented Sector in Ireland, by Tony Crook and Steven Rowley, is available from Threshold. Phone 01 678 6098, Fax 01 677 2407, email info@threshold.ie ■

93% owner-occupation in Ireland?

First prize for the weirdest research on housing published in 2004 must go to *Women and Men in Ireland: their modes of transport and their housing tenure*. This extraordinary report was commissioned by the National Development Plan Gender Equality Unit and comprised two surveys based on allegedly random samples of 600 men and 600 women carried out in 2001 and 2004.

The housing section reports that the 2001 survey showed that about 74% of men and women lived in owner-occupied housing; about 12% in private rented housing, and about 10% in local authority housing. So far so good; these figures are

in general accord with reality, although a few percentage points too high for private and local authority renting.

Then the 2004 survey found that 93% (!) of men and women were living in owner-occupied housing; 4.5% (!) in private rented housing; and 2.5% (!) in local authority housing. There wasn't much difference between men and women.

The simple fact of the matter is that these figures are wrong. Hopelessly wrong. The true figures for 2004 would be about 77% owner-occupation, about 11% in private rented housing, and about 7% in local authority housing.

Warning bells should have rung when the authors discovered that there

appeared to be fewer people living in apartments in 2004 than in 2001. This they say is 'intriguing'.

The housing bit of the research aimed 'to examine ... the housing tenure of women and men in Ireland.' Well it got that one plain wrong, and since housing tenure is wrong, all the other answers about rent/mortgage payments, facilities, number of rooms etc are unreliable too.

After reading this report, **CornerStone** went and lay down in a dark room for a while, tormented with the thought that he must be missing something obvious. If so, apologies all round, but if not, then it's truly weird. ■

Children and housing

A recent publication from the Children's Research Centre provides a good example of some of the problems inherent in undertaking research that aims to examine the impact of housing conditions on occupants. (Editors confession: I wrote it, so this discussion is not unbiased.)

The problem is this: say you want to examine the effect of housing conditions on children's well being. You do your research and find that children in housing in bad repair have worse health than children living in housing in good repair. Bingo! Bad housing is bad for children, hypothesis proved, go out and celebrate.

If only it were so simple. Firstly, people who live in housing in bad repair generally have lower incomes than people living in housing in good repair. So how do you know it's the housing that's making them ill rather than the poverty? Secondly, even if you do manage to eliminate income (and sometimes this is possible) and show that bad housing is bad for children, why is this? What is the relationship between disrepair and ill-health? Where's the causality? In some cases of course a

'...children of lone parents are far more likely ... to experience conditions that may adversely affect their well-being.'

causal relationship can be determined; for example mould spores, which grow in damp conditions, can become airborne and trigger asthma. So the discovery of an association between dampness and asthma confirms a hypothesis

based on knowledge of the mechanism of the spread of disease. But in other instances, establishing causality is difficult, if not impossible.

It is things like this that ensure a researcher's job is never boring. Frustrating perhaps, but never boring.

Anyway these riddles are dealt with in *Housing Problems and Irish Children* as follows: One, there is enough research from other countries to show that there is a definite association between some aspects of housing and children's well-being. In other words bad housing really is bad for children. Two, in some cases causality can be established, and in others – well, perhaps it doesn't matter too much what the precise mechanism is. If we know that bad housing is bad for children, then it is reasonable to assume that

good housing is good for children, even if we don't know precisely why the bad housing is bad for children.

Housing Problems and Irish Children used existing data sources to establish that some children in Ireland are likely to be adversely affected by the housing conditions they experience. In particular children of lone parents are far more likely than children in other households to experience conditions that may adversely affect their well-being. The report makes a number of recommendations that aim to focus on improving housing quality for all, but in particular those most likely to be affected.

Housing Problems and Irish Children: the impact of housing on children's well-being by Simon Brooke, is published by the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College. So is *How Housing Conditions Affect Children's Lives: a review of existing research* which provided the context for the report about children in Ireland. Both are free and available from the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin 2. Tel 01 608 2901, crcentre@tcd.ie, www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre. ■

As many readers will know, **Mary Higgins** is leaving the Homeless Agency. In her final contribution to **CornerStone** as director she reflects on the last eight years.

BELIEVING IT CAN BE DONE

Mary Higgins is the outgoing director of the Homeless Agency

...moving into the 'system' as it were, was for me a natural progression

I came into the homeless sector just over eight years ago, as the Administrative Director of the Homeless Initiative, the precursor to the Homeless Agency. The Homeless Initiative was established by the then Minister for Housing, Liz McManus TD with a brief to create a framework for the development of homeless services in the Dublin region. This was a response to a growing awareness that the response to homelessness by both voluntary and statutory agencies was fragmented and characterised by a good deal of mutual distrust.

This was a new structure which, as I saw it, presented genuine opportunities for making some changes in the way that homelessness was dealt with. The fact that it was based in a statutory body was attractive and a challenge. Coming from over twenty

years working in the community and voluntary sector as a front line worker and manager, but always as an advocate for change, moving into the 'system' as it were, was for me a natural progression. I was ready to go from being on the outside, criticising public bodies and telling them what they should be doing – to actually having responsibility for doing it.

As it turned out the first responsibility was to try and get the various elements of the homeless sector talking to one another. I knew things were a bit polarised but didn't realise quite how much. And this wasn't just between the voluntary and statutory sectors but within each of them. Being at a meeting with the health board and local authorities was like being at a tennis match watching them lobbing responsibility from one to the other! The voluntary agencies had no

common ground at all and I remember the early days of the Consultative Forum where it took several meetings before anyone would speak.

In 2000 the government strategy on homelessness, *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* was published, and in 2001 the Homeless Agency was established to operate the framework established by the Homeless Initiative. The Agency was launched on foot of the publication of its action plan *Shaping the Future* which set out a detailed three-year programme of work. The Agency took over many of the functions of the Initiative and became responsible for the planning, co-ordination and delivery of services to people who are in the Dublin area. Partnership is the cornerstone of the government strategy and of both the Initiative and the Agency. Much effort has been invested in making it work and it has come a long way from those early days – collaboration and consultation are now embedded as a way of addressing homelessness in Dublin and this is generally regarded as one of our main successes, (although it is still a delicate relationship, requiring lots of care and attention!). But how ever good a partnership, it is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Its main strength has been its capacity to come to grips with the issue of homelessness, to design and articulate a way of addressing the issues and to keep focused on the goals of eliminating homelessness and addressing needs. In doing this it has been possible to change attitudes, particularly among decision makers, and persuade them that homelessness is solvable and preventable, if certain steps are taken.

Change doesn't happen suddenly and it usually isn't radical when it does happen but occurs slowly over time, as a result of steady and sometimes tedious work which chips away at systems, structures, policies and people, taking what ever opportunities that present themselves. Much of the work of the Initiative and the Agency has involved such actions, which individually sometimes have limited consequences but together may have a significant impact. The current government strategy, which is widely regarded as taking a changed approach, was directly influenced by the submission made to the Cross Department Team by the Homeless Initiative. Action plans have provided a focus and a structure to work within. Research has revealed deficiencies in services, clarified the needs of people who are homeless, made people see the issue differently and exposed inaccuracies in official statistics which will eventually be addressed. New services such as the city council bus, the wet shelter, detox facility have provided alternatives to the streets for many people and others such as the Access Housing Unit have created pathways out of homelessness. The provision of improved funding, training, advice and other supports, together with an emphasis on quality standards, measurement and evaluation has brought about improvements in services which, by reducing the length of time people spend homeless, ultimately reduces the extent of homelessness.

“...collaboration and consultation are now embedded as a way of addressing homelessness in Dublin and this is generally regarded as one of our main successes...”

Other things have been more difficult to change or progress. Some structures and systems, particularly those at central government level, such as funding regimes and the continued compartmentalisation have not supported the strategy and have caused delays and frustrated its implementation. Practices in other areas have also caused problems. Public sector staff who refused to cooperate in the implementation of agreed improvements, supported by trade unions and unopposed by management, caused pointless delays and undermined the partnership process. Voluntary bodies unable to either grasp or accept that much of what they had advocated has been conceded, have continued to behave as if they are the only ones which can see the light, have unscrupulously pursued a fundraising agenda based on false claims of growing numbers and government inertia, and have severely tested the patience of their partners. This would not be possible of course were it not for some media which happily regurgitates their material without analysis or examination and views any official information on the issue as suspect.

Despite these few problems, overall real progress has been made in addressing homelessness. Figures from services for 2004 indicate a reduction in the number of people presenting as homeless and an increase in the number of people moving on out of homelessness and as the general housing and employment situation improves this trend is likely to continue.

“I absolutely believe that homelessness is a symptom of failures in our public and social support systems – and systems can be fixed.”

But do I really believe homelessness can be eliminated? Well, yes I actually do, fervently. I absolutely believe that homelessness is a symptom of failures in our public and social support systems – and systems can be fixed. All right, you may not be able to prevent every single personal crisis or family row that might propel someone into homelessness. But we can ensure that if that happens that there are services and interventions, which will either provide alternative accommodation or support the family back together again. By focusing on the prevention of homelessness rather than responding to homelessness, we can ensure that homelessness doesn't become a permanent way of life for people who are too poor, voiceless and weak in society to make demands for anything better. But homelessness will only be eliminated if people believe that it *can* be eliminated. My hope is that my work of the last eight years has instilled this belief in enough people so that it will become a reality. ■

HOUSING HEALTHCHECK

In June 2003 **Simon Brooke** applied his stethoscope and gave the housing system an overall healthcheck. In this issue he takes it out again and updates the diagnosis.

Simon Brooke is a housing and social policy consultant, and editor of CornerStone

The aim of housing healthcheck is to highlight danger spots in the housing system; areas that need watching carefully; and those which are running smoothly.

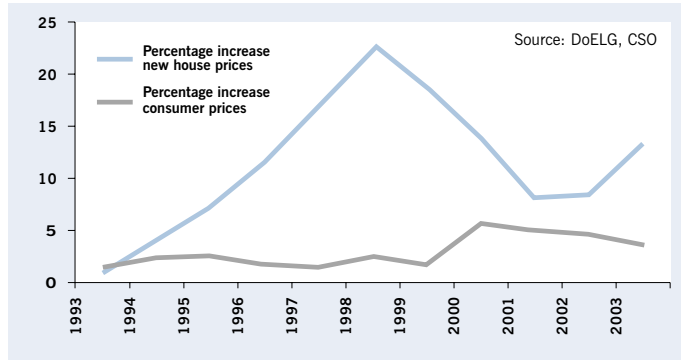
This exercise is of course only as good as the available data. Some information is simply not to be had – a detailed picture of rents in the private rented sector for example. In other areas there are doubts about accuracy – for example, the extent to which the local authority assessments of housing need accurately reflect housing need. A particular weakness of much of

the data is that it says little about what is happening on the margins. The fact, for example, that average private sector rents may be going down does not tell us anything about what is happening at the bottom end of the market where there may be particular difficulties of access. The same applies to affordability; average measures of affordability tell us nothing about households that are really struggling to stay afloat financially.

However, pooling information that is available provides a very revealing picture of the housing system in Ireland today.

HOUSE PRICES

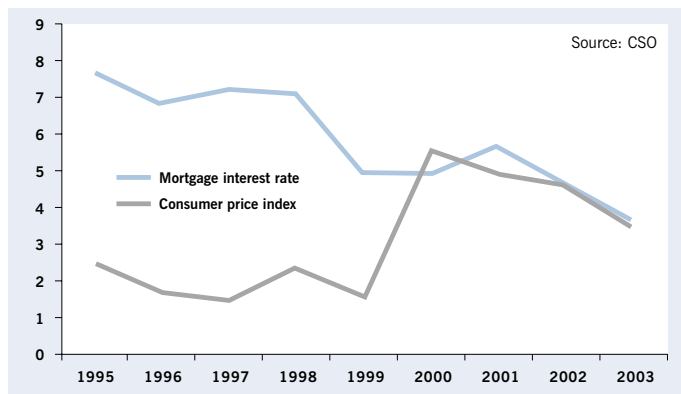
Last year I was unwise enough to claim, 'there are significant signs that the market is settling down...' I should have known better – practically every pundit has been wrong about house prices and so was I. Although the real percentage increase (i.e. compared with inflation) dropped very significantly over a number of years, in 2003 inflation fell and house prices sped up again. My confident declaration that 'supply and demand are beginning to converge' has shown itself to be the exact opposite of the truth, unless of course a speculative bubble is being inflated, in which case it will all end in tears. The trouble is, a speculative bubble is invisible – until it bursts.



Diagnosis: Serious. Despite increasing housing output, prices continue to rise.

MORTGAGE PAYMENTS

Mortgage interest rates have fallen by nearly half in the past eight years. If you go further back the drop is even greater – in the early 1990s mortgage rates peaked at around 15%. Mortgage rates and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) have converged in the last couple of years, which means that anyone who has a mortgage is in effect paying no interest at all. This is a very good example of the inflation paradox: if you have a mortgage and your income is keeping up with the cost of living, then roaring inflation is exactly what you want, since your repayments, which are fixed, become relatively smaller. This year Irish inflation has fallen further from its peak in 2000 and is now at euro zone average.



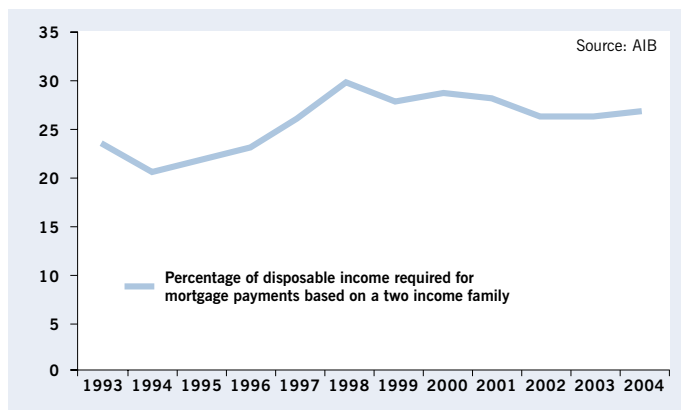
Diagnosis: Healthy, as long as inflation stays low.

AFFORDABILITY

This graph, which is taken from an AIB Economic Research Unit report shows the percentage of the disposable income of a two income household that would be spent on a mortgage if they bought an average new house. One person is assumed to be earning the average managerial wage and one the average industrial wage.

The important feature of this graph is the trend rather than the actual percentages. Obviously a couple with lower incomes, or a single person earning the average industrial wage would have to spend a much higher percentage of their income on their mortgage, but in all cases the trend would be very similar.

The graph shows that despite huge increases in house prices, the percentage of income spent on a mortgage was lower in 2002 than any year since 1997. This is because interest rates have fallen significantly, incomes have increased, and direct taxes have reduced; and together these have outweighed the increase in house prices. However,



if interest rates were to rise, it would have an immediate negative impact on affordability.

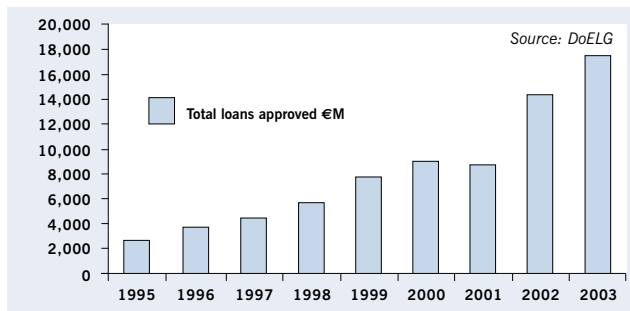
There are serious affordability problems in the private rented sector, but without detailed data on rents it is extremely difficult to quantify these.

Diagnosis: Surprisingly healthy – so long as interest rates stay low.

LEVEL OF HOUSING DEBT

The total value of loans approved for house purchase (new houses and other houses) has mushroomed and in 2003 loans of over €17 billion were approved, more than six and a half times the total lent in 1995. There was a significant drop in activity towards the end of 2001, coinciding with uncertainty about prices, but right from the beginning of 2002 people started buying again.

Diagnosis: Serious, and has the potential to have significant dampening effect on the economy.

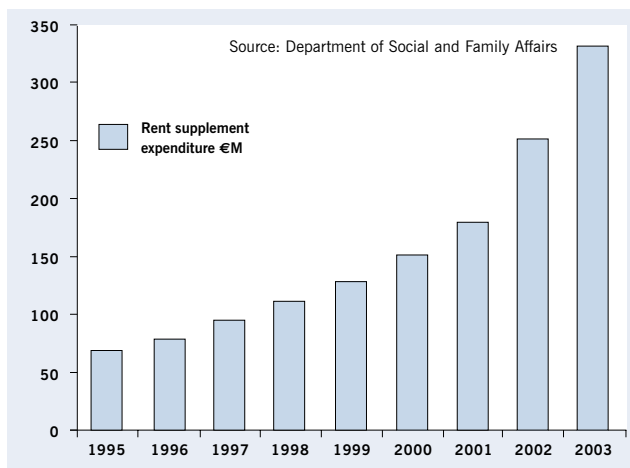


RENT SUPPLEMENT

The total amount spent on rent supplement, which assists people on SWA to pay private rents, has multiplied by a factor of nearly five in seven years. Partly in response to these spiralling costs, eligibility for rent supplement was reduced earlier this year and all those who are claiming rent supplement must now register on their local authority housing waiting list – it is reported that some local authority waiting lists have doubled as a consequence.

A new scheme has recently been announced that will involve local authorities assuming responsibility for meeting the long-term housing needs of people who have been claiming rent supplement for more than 18 months. This scheme has the potential to have a significant positive impact on the housing circumstances of many low income households.

If landlords show more enthusiasm for registering with the Private Residential Tenancies Board that they have with local authorities, then crucial information about rent levels will become available and the PRTP will be able to actively monitor rent levels.



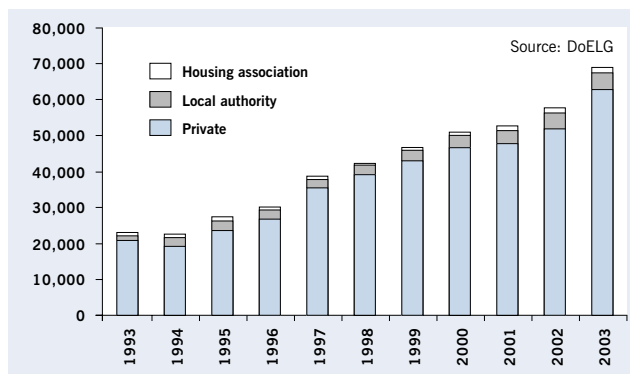
Diagnosis: Cuts in rent supplement will reduce the housing options of people whose options are already very limited. However the Rental Accommodation Scheme has the potential to help many people on low incomes.

HOUSING OUTPUT

Private house completions have increased every year for nine years, which is a remarkable achievement. It's even more remarkable when compared with other countries – Ireland is building more houses per capita than any other European country.

Local authority output in 2003 was up only 2.6% on 2002, reaching just over 4,500. The National Development Plan target (which is rather confusingly based on starts rather than completions) of 40,100 starts between 2000 and 2006 will not be met. Housing association output, which is now accounts for over a quarter of total social housing output, continues to rise.

The 10,000 affordable homes promised in the national partnership programme are in addition to this, and at the time of writing none have been built.

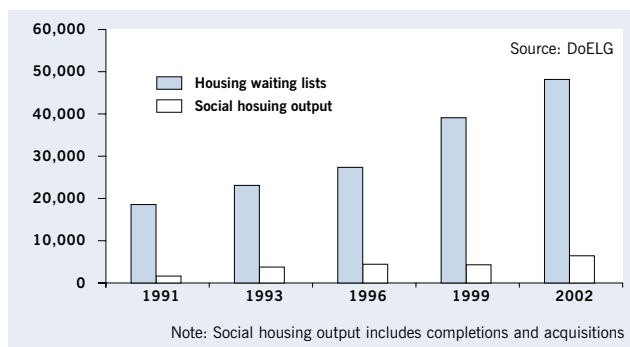


Diagnosis: The private sector has performed extremely well. But it is increasingly unlikely that social housing targets will be met.

HOUSING WAITING LISTS

Housing waiting lists have increased hugely during the last decade, culminating in a total of 48,413 in 2002. Total social housing output (local authorities and housing associations) has failed to make much of an impact and the gap between the two is increasing. Affordability problems have contributed greatly to the increase in housing waiting lists; between 1993 and 2002, the number of households with affordability problems increased by nearly 2½ times, compared with an overall increase in numbers on waiting lists of just over two thirds.

Although commentators are increasingly questioning the accuracy of housing waiting lists as a measure of the extent of housing need, there is no doubt that the gap between housing need and social rented housing provision is growing. ■



Diagnosis: Serious. The gap between households in housing need and social housing provision is huge and getting bigger.



'If a man has only two pennies he should use one to buy bread and the other to buy a rose.'

Chinese proverb

Bread and a rose

The argument for public art

Introduction

Mary Higgins, director of the Homeless Agency

Parkgate Hall is the hub of homeless services in Dublin. It accommodates the Homeless Agency, Dublin City Council's Homeless Services Section and the health board multi-disciplinary and psychiatric outreach teams. The building is used extensively by people who are homeless availing of the services in the building and by homeless service providers who attend meetings, seminars and training sessions there. The building is owned by Dublin City Council and refurbished with funds from the council and the Eastern Region Health Authority.

In keeping with central government and Dublin City Council policy it has been agreed to commission a work of art which will be installed in Parkgate Hall. This won't be an existing painting or piece of sculpture

but something which is specifically related to homelessness and which will engage with both the providers of homeless services and the users of those services. Invitations to tender for this work have been invited and submissions will be judged by a panel which includes internationally renowned artists and teachers Nigel Rolfe and Allannah O'Kelly; Lisa Moran who is the curator: education and community at the Irish Museum of Modern Art; Mary Higgins, director, Homeless Agency; Máire Twomey, Dublin City Council and Justin Parkes, social inclusion manager, South Western Area Health Board, and with previous experience of the arts and health projects.

Lisa Moran discusses this project and its potential role as a means of stimulating debate on both art in public places and homelessness.

The Homeless Agency is commissioning a public art project for Parkgate Hall which houses the statutory bodies involved in homeless service provision in Dublin. In the relatively new field of public art commissions, the majority of which are development-driven, this represents a welcome and challenging engagement with, and acknowledgement of, the role of art in public spaces.

One of the strongest and most consistent arguments put forward in response to public art commissions is to question the allocation of public funding for such initiatives when other issues, such as housing, healthcare and homelessness, need resources. Articulated in terms of 'either/or', this argument, if taken to its logical conclusion, implies that state investment in art, and public art in

Lisa Moran is the Curator of Education and Community at the Irish Museum of Modern Art

...of course housing conditions have to be improved and poverty and homelessness ended. But this does not mean that we should not improve the physical environment and the quality of life in the City.

particular, should only occur when these other issues are resolved. It also implies that public funding for art or housing are mutually exclusive rather than mutually beneficial.

In response to criticism of state funding for The Spire, David Connolly, Director of Dublin Inner City Partnership and member of the Monitoring Committee for the O'Connell Street Integrated Area Plan said: 'Of course we have to continue to tackle heroin abuse; of course housing conditions have to be improved and poverty and homelessness ended. But this does not mean that we should not improve the physical environment and the quality of life in the City.'¹ In this argument he proposes the consideration of social, economic and cultural issues in terms of a continuum rather than a hierarchy of needs. The difficulty in pursuing this argument is that attitudes in Ireland towards the visual arts tend to consider art in decorative or recreational terms, precluding a more complex understanding of the role and value of art in society. These attitudes are perhaps a consequence of a dominant oral culture, and, ironically, inadequate state investment in the arts, particularly in the area of arts education and audience development initiatives.

Many people have little or no experience of the visual arts. Those who do, and who are disposed, will visit galleries and museums. However, with the

increase in public art initiatives over the past fifteen years, those who do not, or who are not disposed, are encountering visual art in the public arena. These encounters with art in public spaces are stimulating debate

about the purpose and value of such work, particularly when it is realised with public money.

There are several reasons attributed to this recent increase in public art practice: shifts within contemporary arts practice taking into consideration the role of site and context in the creation and understanding of an artwork; a desire on the part of the artist to work collaboratively outside the studio/gallery paradigm; an increase in interdisciplinary practice; and most significantly the establishment of Per Cent For Art Schemes by Government Departments. The Per Cent For Art Scheme provides the means by which local authorities can allocate a percentage of their capital expenditure commissioning works of art. While the scheme has been in place since the 1970s, it was only in the context of the recent economic boom, with its attendant infrastructural and development

programmes, that its potential could be realised on a significant scale. Examples include Wood Quay by Michael Warren (1994) outside the Civic Offices, Sintenel by Vivienne Roche (1992-94) on Patrick's Street, Clanbrassil Street Stones, by Eileen McDonagh on Clanbrassil Street (1993) and, most recently, The Spire by Ian Richie (2003) on O'Connell Street.

The increasing visibility of art in public spaces will continue to inform and provoke debate; however, without preliminary exposure to the visual arts afforded by arts education, the discourse about its meaning, value and, most importantly, its potential, remains stagnant, characterised by literal and cynical responses. Harriet Senie, a critical writer on public art, notes, 'An involuntary audience in a public space has as its primary frame of reference the context of daily life...Without an accompanying art education component, the public audience is excluded from the art experience ostensibly intended for them and the art remains a foreign object on familiar turf.'²

In light of this possible antagonism, one of the key arguments for public art has been to emphasise its functional or utilitarian aspects, such as the potential for public art to enhance or improve a public space, and, in some cases, to be interactive in the form of furniture, such as Vincent Browne's Palm Tree Seat in Temple Bar (1992). Art in public spaces can successfully serve such purposes; however, if it is unconstrained by an entirely utilitarian agenda it can also serve to draw attention to, or even contest, the use of public space. A potential consequence of redevelopment programmes, particularly in the context of public/private partnerships, is to dislocate existing communities and, in some instances, to generate homelessness through 'gentrification' of run-down areas. This is a complex issue, often overlooked in the consensus-building process around public art projects.

The Homeless Agency's public art commission represents a unique opportunity for an organisation advocating on behalf of homeless people to engage with some of these issues. In *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche proposes that 'homeless people and public spaces are integrally linked.'³ She suggests that genuinely responsible public art must 'appropriate' space and disrupt, rather than seek to transcend urban social conditions. She questions the tendency of 'new public art' to represent public space as a unitary space which neutralises conflict, 'I contend that conflict, far from the ruin of democratic public space, is the condition of its existence.'

Deutsche cites the example of a public art project, *The Homeless Projection's*, by the Polish artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko, which sought to contest the gentrification process in Union Square Park, in New York, in

¹ Letter to the Irish Times, 18/12/2002.

² Harriet F. Senie, *Baboons, Pet Rocks, and Bomb Threats: Public Art and Public Perception*, in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, Ed. Harriet F. Seine and Sally Webster, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

³ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, MIT Press, 1996.

⁴ Wodiczko's project was shown in at 49th Parallel, Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art, in 1986 and was proposed but never realised as a project to be performed temporarily in Union Square Park.

the mid-eighties. Driven by private developers, the park was reconfigured and a number of historical monuments were refurbished. There was significant support for the proposed 'improvement' to the Union Square area resulting from this redevelopment process; however, it was not without a cost, mainly to immigrant working-class communities and homeless people who were 'evicted' from the area. Wodiczko's project involved projections of homeless people (users of the park prior to redevelopment) onto the refurbished monuments as a means of mobilising 'vision and memory', drawing attention to the consequences of this redevelopment on a section of society not represented in the development plans.⁴

Deutsche draws mainly on examples of redevelopment programmes in New York City, where the correlation between gentrification and homelessness can be clearly identified. In Ireland, however, where many redevelopment programmes are very recent,

there are examples of public art programmes, such as Breaking Ground in Ballymun, which attempt to address rather than neutralise these issues.

Art in public spaces may be decorative, pleasing, enhancing and inspiring, but it may also be provocative, disturbing and challenging, requiring its audience to reflect on its nature, location, context and meaning. Public art projects may provoke debate and discussion before they are even realised. For some projects, dialogue can be an integral element of the artwork.

The intention of the Homeless Agency, in collaboration with Dublin City Council, to commission a work of art, represents a unique opportunity for the voice of an excluded sector to be heard and for the relationship between homelessness and redevelopment to be explored. This can happen not only through the development and installation of the artwork, but also through the attendant discussions and debates this commission will provoke.

⁴ Wodiczko's project was shown in at 49th Parallel, Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art, in 1986 and was proposed but never realised as a project to be performed temporarily in Union Square Park.

SOME COMMENTS FROM HOMELESS SERVICES

Sister Angela Burke DC

Vincentian Housing Partnership

I think it is a brilliant plan to commission a work of art for Parkgate Hall. Art inspires/ enkindles/ provokes dignity, a sense of well-being, and it can create a welcoming and warm atmosphere, an atmosphere where one feels respected. We mustn't forget that people who are homeless are foremost people, people who merit dignity and respect. Our own homes reflect how we see and value ourselves, the places we work reflect how we are viewed and valued. A building that is cold and grey gives the impression of a lack of respect and care for those who use it. Why should the foyer of the Homeless Agency, where people who are vulnerable come to, not also reflect how they are viewed and valued? A painting reflecting the issues of homelessness will provide cause for reflection by both those who are homeless and others who visit the offices of the homeless agency.

Jack Dunphy

Crosscare

This is a non-issue. Life without art would be a dull monotone existence. This controversy is a contrived exercise in hypocrisy.

Dermot Kavanagh

Merchants Quay Ireland

Public art can enrich a city, and it is appropriate that the city invests in public art, just as it is vital that they invest in homeless services. Art is often seen as an elitist concern, however it can also be an effective way of challenging common stereotypes and promoting attitude change. In this context it is no

bad thing that some of the city arts budget is to be used to depict the reality of life for homeless people. It is an even better thing that homeless services are resourced to change this reality.

Howard Russell

Salvation Army

I believe that being able to create a work of art and the ability for others to appreciate what it has to say are both gifts from God. I have been able to read stories of pain and joy through the creativity of homeless men and women who would otherwise not have been able to articulate their feelings. Knowing the wealth of talent that lies quietly dormant within the homeless community, it would be my hope that someone with first hand experience comes forward and benefits from this opportunity.

A spokesperson

Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland encourages and facilitates people using our services to explore areas including art therapy, general arts and music through a number of programmes we run and on a partnership basis with our staff and customers. We even had a Christmas CD released last year by the Focus Beats which was a band made up of people using our Coffee Shop and Brendan Cunningham who is the manager of that service.

Peter McVerry

Arrupe Society

Art, music and drama can really allow young homeless people to express themselves and communicate. ■



REACHING MATURITY?

Housing policy in Ireland has comprised a proliferation of schemes and initiatives which have occurred on a reactive, ad-hoc, piecemeal basis. But a new publication from the Housing Unit could change all that, says **Cathal O'Connell**.

Cathal O'Connell lectures in the Department of Applied Social Studies, University College, Cork

One of the most frequent observations made by observers of Irish housing policies over the years has been the absence of an in-depth and systematic knowledge base by which to assess, analyse, and critique the performance of the various elements of the housing system. In other words, a crucial ingredient in the capacity to be reflexive about our housing policies and the system they have given rise to has been missing.

To further complicate affairs this deficit has been compounded by the proliferation of a vast array of specific schemes and initiatives which have occurred, particularly in the course of the last decade, on a reactive, ad-hoc, and piecemeal basis and then passed off as representing a coherently thought out housing policy.

We have not developed a policy based on the pursuit of genuinely inclusive and widely subscribed to aspirations about housing and accommodation for Irish society which would in turn be complemented by evidence based assessments of how well these were being achieved. Instead we have settled to date for a

largely unreflexive approach which holds that so long as the dominant (as opposed to agreed) objectives are being met, then all is well and policy is working.

In practical terms this has meant that as long as the barometer of home ownership hovered around the eighty percent mark our housing policy was deemed to be successful and all the schemes and initiatives were justified as they were clearly contributing to this the 'tenure preferred by the majority of the population.' The only problem was that apart from occasional reviews from organisations such as NESC we rarely lifted the lid to see what was really going on in the system.

But at what cost to a balanced and equitable housing system was this occurring? Again this was hard to ascertain because policy making rarely undertook any process of self examination or self reflection at a detailed evidence based level where the performances of housing measures and initiatives could be scrutinised. Ultimately however the costs and consequences have become amply and simplistically clear to us all in the form of a totally skewed housing system dangerously keeling over to one side.

It is important, however to bear in mind the capacity (though it is often left unrealised) of systems to innovate and to embrace fresh thinking and approaches to their subject matter. The Irish housing system is a case in point. Institutional innovation has begun the process which has been missing for so long – evaluation, assessment and critique of housing policies. The dynamic behind this process of innovation has been the Housing Unit. Originally conceived of as a training entity for local authorities within the Institute of Public Administration, the Housing Unit has in a confident and robust fashion driven the agenda of housing research and broadened its remit to develop a comprehensive and sophisticated approach to the assessment of housing policy and practice. It would not be inaccurate to suggest that the Housing Unit has effectively become an intelligence source through which housing knowledge is scientifically and systematically generated as a resource for policy makers, analysts, practitioners and the public more generally.

The unit's most recent publication – *Housing Policy Review 1990–2002* is testament to this sense of innovation. The authors, Michelle Norris (the unit's director) Nessa Winston of UCD, have undertaken a forensic investigation of the workings of the housing policies implemented in Ireland in the course of the 1990s. Despite the mass of empirical material, which less competently handled, could have overwhelmed a publication such as this, the authors have succeeded in distilling a sea of data into an intelligible and accessible form without losing sight of the scale and complexity of what is going on. They have achieved this very skilfully and produced a document which fulfils multiple ends: for the newcomer the review is a snapshot of housing and accommodation issues in present-day Ireland set in a historical and comparative (EU) context. For the policy maker (and politician) there is an authoritative and measured assessment of housing performance, and for the housing analyst and more critical observer there is a wealth of data at hand which will prove to be a major resource and time saver when it comes to constructing policy critiques.

So what does the report tell us about the housing system in practice? Empirically it provides a wealth of thought-provoking facts. Ireland has topped the European league for new dwellings since at least 1995. Since then there has been an inexorable rise and nearly double the 26,000 built that year were produced in 2002. (This trend continues with a year end estimate of 80,000 for 2004!!) But what proportion of these are social housing dwellings and are adding to the stock of public housing assets? In 1995 15% of dwellings were social housing, but by 2002 the contribution though numerically greater was proportionally lower at 11%. This was despite the fact that housing need had risen sharply from 27,500 households in 1996 to 48,413 in 2002. Many of

these households have been accommodated in the newly resurgent (partly incentive driven) private rented sector which the review informs us has been experiencing rising rent inflation of ten to fifteen percent by the late 1990's and early 2000's. The knock on effect of this in public spending on SWA rent supplement is also tabulated – rising from 30,000 households costing €100 million in 1995 to 55,000 households at a cost of €260 million in 2002 and rising. These data on rent increases are disturbing when viewed in the light of recent ESRI analysis of the links between private renting and risk of poverty.

The only problem was that apart from occasional reviews from organisations such as NESCC we rarely lifted the lid to see what was really going on in the system.

Speaking of house price inflation – the issue which garnered the most political and media attention in the period under examination, the review also fleshes out the rising costs of home ownership and shows that a house which cost around €60,000 in 1990 cost nearly €220,000 in 2002. No other EU country has experienced such sustained housing output or housing inflation as Ireland did. This leads us to what is really the central message arising from this review. The consistent orientation of housing policies pursued during the 1990's, no differently to previous decades, has been the continued promotion of private housing options – either through home ownership or private rental investment ownership as the central tenet of Irish housing policies. Most of the others are poor relations which wilt in the face of strong lobbying or political pressure – the most notable recently being the dismantling of social and affordable requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000.

So where does housing policy go in the wake of this review? While authors are understandably tempered in the tone of their critique, that makes it no less robust, and it is clear that much housing performance does not measure up in their eyes. Constructively, and with characteristic innovation, the review findings indicate what the focus of the next phase of the national housing research agenda should be: ongoing evaluation, continued assessment, further examination – all of which will promote better housing policy and practice. On the basis of this policy review housing policy formation in Ireland with all its attendant flaws and weaknesses may finally be moving into a stage of maturity and self evaluation and if the agenda arising from this review is pursued we will gradually reach a point where our future housing policies can be shaped in the context of a solid evidence base. ■

Link

Housing Policy Review 1990–2002
by Michelle Norris and
Nessa Winston is
published by the
Stationery Office and
costs €8.00

Muireann Morris outlines the services women who have experienced domestic violence need; and describes the role played by women's refuges.

A little documented route

Violence in the home and homelessness

Muireann Morris is
director of Sonas
Housing Association

Sonas Housing Association recently published its model of work in supported transitional housing for women and children made homeless because of domestic violence. It was commissioned to demonstrate the need for appropriate emergency, transitional and long term responses.

There are many routes into homelessness, and one of the less documented of these is domestic violence. The word 'home' should conjure up an image of comfort, warmth and safety but for many women and their children, home is a dangerous place; so unsafe that they are forced to leave.

Records show that a relatively low number of women access the legal system, which is the only way that violent men can be held accountable and thus ensure women and children's safety. Available data shows that a large number of applications for civil orders designed to protect women in their own homes are withdrawn by applicants before they are heard.

There are many routes into homelessness, and one of the less documented of these is domestic violence.

One of the reasons for this is that the time when a woman starts to take action to protect herself may be the point when the abuser becomes aware that she is seeking assistance. It is widely documented and experienced by us that this is the most dangerous time for a woman, and some women, who are aware of the grave risk to their physical safety at this time, choose to drop the application in an attempt to reduce the danger to themselves.

Good practice should concentrate on keeping women and children safe in their own home and removing the abuser. However, this is not always possible and when the home is no longer a safe place to be, the stark choice for too many women is to

become homeless. Some will be homeless for a short period; some will experience several incidences of homelessness, and some will lose their homes.

In order therefore to determine the most appropriate response to the individual or family, early assessment, which we acknowledge is not always easy, is vital. The necessity for this is to distinguish between the events which have precipitated this incidence of homelessness and the original cause.

It appears that in general homeless services only record one reason as the cause of homelessness. So for example, citing overcrowding as the primary cause for leaving the family home may well conceal violence as a primary cause. It is difficult to disclose to a housing or homeless officer at a counter the fact that you have been abused. It is easier to say you couldn't get on with your family.

Without this crucial knowledge, an at best ineffective, and at worst inappropriate placement, of a homeless woman and her children may be made. Sonas research shows that early, thorough assessment acts not only as timely intervention but also prevention against entry into a long period of homelessness in inappropriate accommodation, without support.

We often hear the word 'chaotic' used when talking about the behaviour of persons who are homeless, but the experience of many women is that their experience of recurring homelessness is itself chaotic. Our research showed that a majority of women had left their homes a number of times and lived in a variety of circumstances such as family or friends, a women's refuge, a homeless hostel, bed & breakfast whilst they were homeless. It suggests strongly that timely assessment is a preventive measure that we should pursue.

Following on a number of earlier reports, our research echoed the general consensus that bed & breakfast accommodation is totally inappropriate for families and in particular those forced to flee violence but who may be still endangered.

Our study reaffirms that women's refuges are critically important as the first frontline response to women's entry into homelessness because of domestic violence. The study clearly highlights that refuges provide a focus on women and children's safety, based on their knowledge that the point of attempting to leave and post separation are the most dangerous times for women. In particular, access to workers with expert knowledge on risk assessment, safety planning, the trauma of violence, and the complexity of women's struggle to leave a violent relationship, enable women to make informed decisions for the safety of themselves and their children and seek to reduce the incidences of homelessness.

There are three Women's Refuges in the Eastern Region – Rathmines, Coolock and Bray. Between them, they have a capacity of 24 family spaces. In 2003, 584 women and 1352 children accessed crisis accommodation in the Eastern region. One of the refuges recorded 333 occasions on which they were full to capacity and had to refuse families. An identical number across the three refuges were refused access for a variety of reasons – women with addiction and other problems may not be accommodated in refuges. In *Making it Home*, the three year plan for Homelessness in Dublin it states that there are sufficient emergency beds in Dublin but it is clear that the distribution of these beds is not meeting a demonstrated need; at least two more refuges are needed – one in Dublin 15 and one in Tallaght, both of which are in the Dublin Action Plan. In addition, a high dependency unit for women run on refuge principles would address the needs of those unable to access refuges.

Supported transitional housing may be the appropriate next step for some families, but by no means all. Many women should by-pass this form of interim supported accommodation, but for a significant number it can act as a brake on

recurring homelessness.

Transitional housing or time limited floating support can only operate effectively if there are sufficient move-on units. It is crucial that negotiated targets are agreed by every transitional housing provider with the relevant council(s). This puts the onus firmly on the local authorities who have a vital role in supporting families who have been displaced from their homes because of male violence.

With no written policy in place there is a disparity in practice amongst local authorities in responding to women out of home. Within the six eastern area local authorities there is marked disagreement as to how they can assist women and children in this situation while at the same time improving stock and estate management. A provision in the UK Housing Act 1996 allows for a unilateral notice to quit on the grounds of evidenced domestic violence, while councils can repossess a house /flat where one joint tenant has been forced to leave because of violence. These measures are just an example of good practice expanded upon in the Homelessness Code of Guidance produced by central and devolved governments in the UK for their local councils; a code we have called on the Department of the Environment here to pursue.

Prevention of men's violence to women cannot be addressed by homeless and housing services alone. It is a much more complex issue requiring greater awareness and intervention. Recognising it as a major cause of women and children's homelessness is vital to allow appropriate resources to be channelled in an effective manner to facilitate appropriate assessment, accommodation and support and prevention of recurring homelessness. ■

It is difficult to disclose to a housing or homeless officer at a counter the fact that you have been abused. It is easier to say you couldn't get on with your family.

Link

Safe Home, Sonas Housing Association's model of supported transitional housing is available from Sonas Housing Association, tel 01 830 9088 or info@sonashousing.ie



CornerStone Questionnaire

Alice O'Flynn

Director of homelessness and social inclusion, Health Service Executive

'One thing I have learned is that any one policy initiative on its own does not make a huge difference unless it is joined up, targeted and sustained...'

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

Way back I volunteered with Dublin Simon and worked in a night-shelter on the quays and then later in a new house they opened for people with mental health issues. I was young and wanted to change the world!

Has your understanding of homelessness changed since then?

Yes, very much so, having worked in England and Scotland in a range of different organisations both statutory and voluntary.

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

One thing I have learned is that any one policy initiative on its own does not make a huge difference unless it is joined up, targeted and sustained... so policy initiatives that address poverty, housing and unemployment that are targeted, sustained and joined up would make a difference.

What have you learnt from homeless people you have met?

That they are individuals with different needs and strengths and should be respected and listened to and have a say in how services are planned and provided.

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

Absolutely not – but we have to organise differently at all levels to make the changes needed.

Can you think of anything we can learn from another country about tackling homelessness?

Yes, I think there is lots to learn from other countries ... and three key things stand out when you look at how European countries, Scandinavia or America have tried to tackle homelessness ... you need to have a plan as to what needs to be done with good leadership, the plan has to be funded adequately and sustained and finally but really importantly the

range of needs of homeless people have to be addressed by excellent integrated services.

Can the voluntary sector do anything that the statutory sector can't?

Mmm ...it can respond more quickly to need at times, it is also able to take risks and can be more flexible and innovative.

Which matters most, charity or political change?

Both.

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

Homelessness is only one part of my job but if I did not have my job and could get some finance I would open a bookshop and café that played great music, fantastic food and inspirational art on the walls!

Do you give money to people who are begging?

No, not usually. ■

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 info@homelessagency.ie
Web www.homelessagency.ie

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