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# CornerStone

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

ISSUE 27  
JUNE 2006

**7** Does it stand up to scrutiny?



*Review of the Implementation  
of the Government's Integrated and  
Preventative Homeless Strategies*

## note from the editor



Last week, during a discussion about homelessness I was told, 'There's no way homelessness will be eliminated by 2010'. The reference was to the Homeless Agency's vision, and the comment was made in a way that suggested that the vision had been developed by rather naïve soft-headed idealists who didn't understand the ways of the world. And last week wasn't the first time I'd heard it said.

But the Homeless Agency's vision doesn't say that homelessness will be eliminated by 2010! What it does say is, 'that by 2010 *long term* homelessness and the *need for people to sleep rough* will be eliminated in Dublin'. Which is quite a different kettle of fish.

The *Review of the Implementation of the Government's Integrated and Preventative Strategies* which was published earlier this year looks at some of the issues that need to be tackled if the real vision is to be realised. In the last issue of CornerStone, Housing Minister Noel Ahern said that the government accepted the 'broad thrust' of the review's recommendations. So for this issue CornerStone asked five experts to tell us what they thought of the recommendations, and in the main they give it a thumbs up, although with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

As we went to press, *Counted In 2005* – the report of the Homeless Agency's triennial assessment of homelessness – was published. Its headline conclusions that overall homelessness dropped by one fifth between 2002 and 2005, and rough sleeping reduced by a third between 1999 and 2005, are both extremely welcome. Less welcome however is the fact that the number of people who are long term homeless remains stubbornly high. Despite having a gestation period more commonly associated with Dumbo, the detailed information on the nature and extent of homelessness in *Counted In* will be invaluable for planning future services. Homeless Agency director Derval Howley crunches some more numbers from this report on page 13.

At the latest estimate, about 1 in 10 of the population were born outside Ireland. This poses a serious challenge to homeless and housing services, many of which have yet to adapt their services to meet the needs of people with different cultural and linguistic needs. However Threshold – 15% of whose clients did not have English as first language in 2005 – has begun to make changes, as Bob Jordan explains in *Mind your language*. Threshold publishes its *Guide to renting* in Mandarin, Polish, Russian and French, which is a good start. However it is also estimated that between us we speak over 200 different languages, so even Threshold has some way to go...

Finally, Christine Debelius found time between packing and reorganising the Office of Housing in Melbourne to compose a final *Diary from down under*. CornerStone welcomes her back to Ireland and is secretly hoping that it won't be too long before she gets itchy feet again.

### 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

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

**HOME  
LESS**  
agency

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feature article

## Does it stand up to scrutiny?

Five NGO and statutory experts respond to *Review of the Implementation of the Government's Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies*

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# Action plan evaluation, and development of new action plan

A steering group has been established comprising representatives from the Homeless Agency's board and consultative forum to evaluate the current action plan (*Making it Home 2004–2006*) and to develop the new action plan 2007–2010. The group has met twice and has selected a consultant to facilitate the

consultations to develop the new action plan. The consultation process will have two distinct stages. The first will include consultations on the outline of the new action plan and written submissions will be invited from the public. The consultations for stage one will be completed by the end of July 2006.

The second stage will include feedback from stakeholders on the draft action plan for Dublin. Consultations will also take place with service users. The second stage of consultations will finish in September 2006. The action plan will be finalised by December 2006 and launched in early 2007. ■

## Counted In 2005

*Counted In 2005* is the report of the third periodic assessment of homelessness in Dublin, carried out in the last week of March 2005. It has been prepared by SPSS Ireland on behalf of the Homeless Agency. The report was launched by Mr Noel Ahern T.D., Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal on Thursday May 25th 2006.

The Homeless Agency commissions an assessment every three years, within the four Dublin local authority areas, to provide information on the number and type of individuals and households experiencing homelessness at a given point in

time. The survey method was developed through partnership with voluntary and statutory agencies and the survey takes place within the broader context of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's assessment of housing need, which is also conducted every three years. The findings from the assessment provide a basis from which we can understand and respond to the changing trends in the number and profile of people experiencing homelessness in Dublin. There is a fuller account outlining the outcomes of the assessment further on in this issue. ■



## Service evaluations

The Homeless Agency is responsible for monitoring and evaluating homeless services to ensure accountability for the expenditure of public funds on homeless services as well as the effectiveness of services in addressing the needs of people who are homeless. The first round of service evaluations commissioned by the Homeless Agency was completed in 2004 and eight services were evaluated in total.

In the first half of 2006, the evaluation programme is focused on

emergency services in Dublin for people who are experiencing homelessness. Questionnaires were issued to service providers in March 2006 with visits for physical inspections and focus groups with residents taking place in March – April 2006. The service evaluations will take account of quality standards outlined in 'Putting People First' as well as recommendations in the 'Review of Temporary Accommodation' completed on behalf of the Homeless Agency in 2005.

The steering group established to oversee the evaluation has agreed minimum, good and best practice standards in relation to a quality framework, which will provide a basis for the evaluations. The report on the evaluations is to be submitted to the Homeless Agency by the end of June 2006. In the second half of this year the Homeless Agency will undertake an evaluation of transitional housing providers. ■

# Homeless Agency budget 2006

The Homeless Agency has submitted its budget estimates to government and expects a public announcement on homeless services funding in May 2006. In 2005 the Homeless Agency distributed €37.1 in State funds for homeless services. This funding comes from the Health Service Executive and the

Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government through local authorities. This means that funding is provided for housing and healthcare supports.

The Homeless Agency has fulfilled this role since the approval of its first action plan in 2002. Since then State funding has increased significantly. Now over 70

different services are funded through the Homeless Agency and these are provided by voluntary and statutory service providers. Services include outreach to people sleeping rough, advice and information, food and day centres, emergency, transitional, longterm accommodation, settlement and tenancy sustainment services. ■

## FEANTSA

### 'Intervention Strategies on Social Exclusion and Homelessness in Europe'

Almost 130 policy makers, researchers and NGOs from more than 25 countries participated in a conference discussing 'Intervention Strategies on Social Exclusion and Homelessness in Europe' at a European Observatory on Homelessness in Dundee, Scotland on the 23rd of March 2006.

Derval Howley, Director of the Homeless Agency addressed the conference with a presentation examining the achievements and challenges encountered in tackling homelessness in Ireland.

The conference enabled the meeting of European representatives working in the area of street homelessness. By sharing practices they were able to compare the different types of actions undertaken in this

area in the European union. The conference also provided an opportunity to analyse the nature as well as the profile of the population who experience street homelessness and at how best to tackle the multi-faceted problems of people homeless.

One of the key aims of the conference was to promote partnership between public authorities and NGOs who are active in the area of street homelessness in large European cities. In this context an examination of local and national policies took place, which served to highlight the issues at stake and the challenges for European social policy in relation to rough sleepers in social emergency situations.

The conference was the starting point of genuine transnational cooperation on

the issue of homelessness and it was designed for all people involved in developing, implementing and monitoring social policy and services.

The Homeless Agency also attended a meeting of senior civil servants responding to or eliminating homelessness. Representatives from the Irish Government cross departmental team on homelessness, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Health Service Executive and the voluntary sector also attended. This meeting provided an open platform for discussion with civil servants from other countries throughout Europe and the aim is to continue this forum.

For further information on FEANTSA please log onto [www.feantsa.org](http://www.feantsa.org) ■

## Learning and performance

### An introduction to the homeless services sector

The Homeless Agency is currently developing a sectoral induction programme for new staff joining the homeless sector. The programme will include key information relating to an overview of homelessness, resolving homelessness, understanding homeless services, health and homelessness, housing options and information and learning.

The content of the programme will be clearly focused on new staff entering the sector however it will also be a useful reference tool for existing staff.

#### Competency framework

The Homeless Agency's learning and performance network, which includes representatives from voluntary and

statutory service providers recommended that a competency framework be developed as part of their strategy for 2005–2006. It was felt that such a framework would aid organisations in their selection, support and performance management process. The learning and performance strategy stated that a competency framework was critical to developing a quality workforce, in order to meet the needs of homeless people.

Phase two of the competency framework is due to be rolled out in the coming months.

The competency framework CEO briefing session took place on March 16th 2006. ADARE Human Resource Management addressed the group and gave

a presentation outlining the background, scope and vision of the framework.

#### Learning and performance programme

The 2006 learning and performance programme builds on the work done in the area over the past five years. The number of learning programmes and cycles has increased as a result of the growing demand and feedback from the sector. A new self advocacy course is being developed for people who are themselves experiencing homelessness in order that they can be supported in having a voice.

For information on learning modules please log onto the Homeless Agency website on [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie) ■



# The best laid plans...

When the 2005 figures for social and affordable housing completions were published in April this year, the press release trumpeted, 'Highest local authority output for 20 years', and housing minister Noel Ahern was quoted as follows: 'I am delighted with the local authority completion figure of 5,100 units for 2005 which is an increase of over 600 units on the output for 2004. Since this Government came into office in 1997 we have provided record resources and will continue to do so. The figure for this year is further proof of our commitment to the people on housing waiting lists.'

**But when the difference between the plan and reality is big, and getting bigger, then it is time to ask some searching questions.**

Most of that is true. But it's not quite the full story.

Take the headline first. In 1985 (20 years before 2005), local authority social housing completions were 6,523, over a quarter *greater* than the 2005 figure. And even if the minister was being sneaky and really meant 20 years from *this* year, in 1986 local authority completions were 5,517, still more than in 2005.

Perhaps that's being too picky, quibbling about a year here or there two decades ago? But more recently, in 2001 local authorities completed 5022 – only 2% less than in 2005, and in 2002 they completed 5074 – only 1% less than the 2005 total. The total dropped in 2003 and dropped again in 2004, so at the end of all that, the 2005 figure is not perhaps not quite so dramatic after all.

Then if you compare the actual output from local authorities, with planned output, the picture begins to look significantly less rosy.

In 2004, local authorities were asked by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to prepare five year social and affordable housing

action plans (SAHAPs). Each plan includes a detailed estimate of social and affordable housing output for each year from 2004 to 2008, based on the local authority's assessments of the need for social and affordable housing in their area. So the total housing planned to be produced in the SAHAPs is the minimum necessary to meet the needs of people on housing waiting lists.

According to the SAHAPs, in 2004, total local authority social housing output was planned to be 5884 homes, but the actual output was 4510 – 77% of planned output. But in 2005 the SAHAP total was 7207, and whilst the actual total of 5127 was higher than in 2004, it was only 71% of the planned total. So in 2005, local authorities' performance against their plans was actually worse than in 2004!

All this is illustrated in the table shown here.

rented housing (local authority and housing association) output is showing much less dramatic growth.

But how does it compare with planned output? It's the same story; local authorities planned to acquire 1089 social housing homes and 2201 affordable homes under this provision in 2005. But they actually only acquired 203 social housing homes – less than one fifth of the plan! And they only acquired 962 affordable homes under Part V – less than half of the planned total.

It is of course easy to sit on the sidelines and pick holes, and to mix metaphors; and it is, as anyone who has tried it, very difficult to produce accurate plans for the future. But when the difference between the plan and reality is big, and getting bigger, then it is time to ask some searching questions. ■

Actual social housing output in 2004 and 2005 compared with planned output

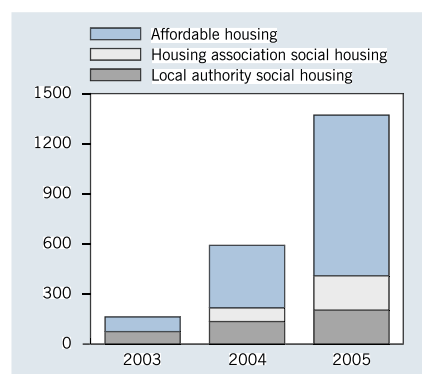
	2004 Planned output under SAHAP	2004 Actual output	2005 Planned output under SAHAP	2005 Actual output
Local authority own build and acquire	5,365	4,375	6,118	4,924
Local authority Part V	519	135	1,089	203
<b>Total local authority</b>	<b>5,884</b>	<b>4,510</b>	<b>7,207</b>	<b>5,127</b>
Housing associations own build	2,314	1,607	3,181	1,144
Housing association Part V	348	82	575	206
<b>Total housing association</b>	<b>2,662</b>	<b>1,689</b>	<b>3,756</b>	<b>1,350</b>
<b>TOTAL SOCIAL HOUSING</b>	<b>8,546</b>	<b>6,199</b>	<b>10,963</b>	<b>6,477</b>

Source: Social and Affordable Housing Action Plans, DoEHLG

And if you dig a little deeper, it gets worse. Housing associations completed fewer homes in 2005 than in 2004, and only met one third of the target in the SAHAPs.

Finally, what about Part V, the 20% of all new housing developments that is supposed to be reserved for social and affordable housing? At least output under Part V is going up, as the graph here shows.

You can see that affordable housing is really beginning to pick up, whereas social



# Another new housing tome

**H**ousing scribblers have been busy recently, judging by the flurry of new books on the market. The most recent is *Housing Contemporary Ireland: Policy, Society and Shelter* edited by Michelle Norris and Declan Redmond. CornerStone cannot be entirely unbiased in giving this book an unqualified recommendation since the editor co-wrote one of the chapters.

It is perhaps more likely to be bought by libraries and organisations since it costs a hefty €38, but for that you get 18 chapters written by 20 extraordinarily brilliant and eminent authors tackling housing from every conceivable angle. The three main tenures – owner occupation, private rented housing, and social rented housing – are covered comprehensively; a

section on housing and inequality includes chapters on homelessness and the Traveller Community; and there are five chapters on planning and the built environment.

If you want to be well briefed on current housing issues in Ireland – in order to get promotion, pass an exam, show off in the pub, or just to satisfy your curiosity, this is the book for you. ■

## Official recognition for ... voluntary bodies

**I**f you read your census form carefully – of course you did – you will have seen that in the question under housing tenure you were asked if ‘the nature of your occupancy’ was amongst other things, ‘rented from a voluntary body’. This

is the first time housing associations and co-ops have been given official recognition by the Central Statistics Office and it is to be greatly welcomed.

But does everyone who is a tenant of a housing association or a co-op

know that it is called a ‘voluntary body’? Perhaps it’s time to agree a more specific names for these independent non-profit making social housing providers. How about ‘housing association’ and ‘housing co-op’? ■

## The Housing Unit is dead – long live the Centre for Housing Research!

**T**he Housing Unit has undergone a makeover and is now called the Centre for Housing Research. This name better describes what it actually does, which is to improve the management of the social and affordable housing sector through research, training and policy advice. It’s a joint initiative between the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, local authorities and housing associations and co-ops and is administered through the Institute of Public Administration. The centre has seven staff and is headed-up by David Silke.

To give you a flavour of what the staff get up to, current work includes:

- Monitoring the implementation of the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS)
- Research and policy advice on

supporting low income home ownership

- Evaluation of the management and maintenance systems of Traveller-specific accommodation
- Developing best practice in relation to estate regeneration and housing practitioner skills.

The centre also runs training courses, information seminars and conferences specially tailored to the interests of housing practitioners and policy makers.

In addition to new research projects and training courses, over the next year, the centre proposes to develop a number of new initiatives, including:

- The collection and analysis of social housing statistics
- The development of a register of those interested in housing research

- The launch of a Post-Graduate Research Grants Scheme
- A redesign of its website and newsletter. ■

Contact the Centre for Housing Research as follows:

**Training and Administration**  
57–61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4  
Tel. 01 240 3600

**Research and Director’s Office**  
Floor 2, Block 4, Irish Life Centre,  
Lower Abbey Street, Dublin 1  
Tel. 01 889 8250

**Email**  
centreforhousingresearch@ipa.ie

**Website**  
www.centreforhousingresearch.ie

# Building Trust in the Community

As many readers will know TRUST has been providing medical and related services to homeless people for over 30 years. Building Trust in the Community is a national project created by TRUST which aims to give people the chance to help to change attitudes towards those who are homeless, and to make those who are excluded and outsiders in Irish society feel wanted.

A DVD called *Building Trust in the Community* featuring two documentaries – *Building Trust in the Community* – produced specially for this initiative; and *A Fragile City* about TRUST's work which was broadcast on RTÉ six years ago.

For further details on Trust or to order a copy of the DVD log on to [www.trust-ireland.ie](http://www.trust-ireland.ie) ■



# Ireland's Issues Homeless Street League expands

Ireland's Issues Street League Soccer programme is now up and running right across the city in the following locations:

Cabra Parkside, Cabra  
10am – 1pm Saturdays

Hartstown Community Centre, Blanchestown  
6pm Wednesdays

Irishtown Sports Centre, Ringsend  
10am – 1 pm Thursdays

Quarryvale Community Centre, Quarryvale  
10am – 1pm Saturdays

St Catherines, Marrowbone Lane, Dublin 8  
10am – 1pm Saturdays

By the time you read this the home international street soccer tournament involving Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will have happened. The all-Ireland homeless street soccer finals will be held in June; at this event the coaches will select a



CASP (Clondalkin Addiction Support Programme) team celebrate winning the 2005 Street Homeless League.

team to represent Ireland in the homeless world cup in South Africa which will take place in September.

For more information contact Sean Kavanagh on 01 873 5137 or [Issuesmag@iolfree.ie](mailto:Issuesmag@iolfree.ie) ■



# Does it stand up to scrutiny?



*Review of the Implementation  
of the Government's Integrated and  
Preventative Homeless Strategies*

The *Review of the Implementation of the Government's Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies*, which was published in February this year contained five priorities:

- 1 more long term housing**
- 2 local treatment of homelessness**
- 3 case management, approach**
- 4 better coordination of funding**
- 5 better data on homelessness**

In the last issue of CornerStone, Housing Minister Noel Ahern T.D. introduced the review and stated that the Government had accepted 'the broad thrust' of the report's recommendations. For this issue, CornerStone invited five people representing different interests to respond.



In addition to the 5 priority areas listed on the previous page, the review included 21 recommendations, which are presented here in a much reduced form.

- 1 Amalgamate and revise the integrated and preventative strategies
- 2 Devise a better funding mechanism to co-ordinate capital and revenue funding
- 3 Develop a more formal funding procedure
- 4 Establish a national homeless consultative committee
- 5 Homeless fora in major urban centres should learn from the Homeless Agency model and consideration should be given to funding them
- 6 The production of homeless action plans should be a statutory requirement
- 7 Establish a case management approach, based on individual needs assessment with provision for access to multiple services
- 8 Transfer resources from emergency accommodation to long-term accommodation
- 9 Long-term accommodation with appropriate support is more appropriate than transitional accommodation
- 10 The Access Housing Unit model should be copied elsewhere.
- 11 Local authorities and housing associations shouldn't create ghettos of homeless services or housing for ex-homeless people
- 12 Provide long term supported housing staffed by health workers for people who need it
- 13 Make sure discharge policies for people leaving mental health facilities and acute hospitals are adequate and properly implemented
- 14 Treat ex-offenders for their individual housing and other support needs rather than as ex-offenders per se, and recognise them as an especially at-risk group
- 15 Develop closer links between the youth homeless forum and the adult homeless forum in each area
- 16 Recognise victims of domestic violence as an at-risk target group
- 17 Develop early intervention preventative actions by wider social welfare agencies including indicators that act as an early warning system
- 18 Revise the definition of homelessness to produce a better understanding of homelessness for measurement and funding purposes
- 19 Hold regular homeless fora conferences
- 20 All government policy should be proofed for any potential impact it may have on homelessness or interventions targeted at addressing homelessness
- 21 FÁS and the vocational education committees should become more actively involved in the activities of local homeless fora

## Greg Maxwell

Manager, eastern region of Novas Initiatives

Let me declare an interest. I am one of those who believe the key objective of homeless action plans is achievable; by 2010 no one should be homeless for more than 6 months. Five years ago we all knew that the sector must up-skill and multi-task to an unprecedented extent, but we also knew it was achievable. Yes, simultaneously, we would implement effective prevention strategies, *and* substantially improve the range and quality of homeless services *and* radically improve long-term accommodation and support options especially for single people. It was and remains glaringly obvious – the solution is speed and ease of access to long-term appropriate accommodation.

The Fitzpatrick Report is quite compulsive and comprehensive in its analysis of developments in services. It records *inter alia* that enhanced access to emergency services has greatly reduced the number of people sleeping rough. It details how services have been upgraded and can be further improved and contains valuable analysis and recommendations. If my comments are not concentrating on these it's because others have very adequately done so.

It also makes some whopper assumptions; such as no additional funding is needed; just a reallocation within the sector. Thus ignoring the inequities in revenue funding between Dublin and the rest of the country (probably about 20% of unit costs). The report urges us to do more 'joined up thinking' and promptly dismisses its own advice by ignoring the main conclusions of the recent Brooke Report 2005.

I thought it was at least 10 years ago when reading the proposal for a medical model of long-term (institutional) accommodation for 'those individuals experiencing severe psychiatric problems'. Hopefully this will be ignored.

The lack of progress in effective prevention strategies gets minimal criticism. Didn't ministers publish the strategies without consultation shortly before a general election? Indeed, weren't they so

confident in their proposals they refused to take any questions at the press conference?

To be candid I think the report misses the 'big picture'. The Fitzpatrick report will help the sector to better manage homeless services; it will do little to eliminate homelessness. It is big on technique but devoid of vision.

On *the* key issue it repeats what has been said since the first known instance of homelessness – long-term accommodation is the solution. In 2001 the first Dublin homeless action plan highlighted this as the ultimate performance indicator for the sector and the action plans. This report has the evidence that increasingly we are failing in this *raison d'être* but gives the impression that it's just another (movable?) target.

To be candid I think the report misses the 'big picture'. The Fitzpatrick Report will help the sector to better manage homeless services; it will do little to eliminate homelessness. It is big on technique but devoid of vision.

Perhaps it now is. Is it not bizarre that we, who are committed to eliminate long-term homelessness in 5 years, rated (at the homeless fora) long-term appropriate accommodation at only 8th from 11 choices in the overall 'key factors to achieve our targets'?

The sector remains the best able to implement the key targets. But we must ensure that the last action plan in the 10 year cycle is relevant to people who are homeless and transforms their lives by making the provision of long term appropriate accommodation a reality.

*The views expressed by Greg Maxwell are personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of Novas Initiatives.*



## Vivian Geiran

Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST), Probation & Welfare Service

The Probation & Welfare Service welcomes the report on the review of the homeless strategies.

While the approach is comprehensive, the provisions of the report in relation to offenders are especially welcome. The previous strategy on homelessness recognised the unique difficulties facing

homeless offenders and provided for specific measures to address them. The Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST) in the Probation and Welfare Service (PWS) was set up as a direct result of the 2002 preventative strategy, and is a multi-agency response to these issues. HOST works to reduce and

prevent homelessness among offenders, across the country. We do this through development of improved PWS practices and by strengthening our partnership working with other agencies.

The main role and responsibility of the PWS is on assessing the risks posed by offenders, helping offenders to avoid reoffending and managing those under our supervision in such a way as to reduce the risk of future offending and harm. Homelessness has been consistently demonstrated to be a risk factor in relation to offending, and so is of considerable concern to us. But it is only through effective interagency work that communities can be made safer *and* homelessness addressed. Many improvements have been made in services affecting offenders over the last few years, through good partnership working. These include for example, the expansion of in-reach services to prisoners, in co-operation with the local authorities, Homeless Persons Units (HSE), voluntary organisations and the Prison Service.

**In welcoming the publication of the review, I would highlight its recommendation that ex-offenders must remain a key focus of future homeless strategy as an especially at-risk group.**

A significant percentage of offenders, both in the community and prison, experience homelessness. Many of those also have multifaceted issues to address if they are to become positively contributing members of society. These include drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues, relationship



## Noeleen Hartigan

Social policy and research co-ordinator with the Simon Communities of Ireland

The Fitzpatrick's review 'did exactly what it says on the tin'; a thorough review of current government homelessness policies was undertaken, it was independent, and it actively engaged the various stakeholders – including service users.

The priority recommendations, namely the provision of long term housing solutions, the co-ordination of funding between the responsible Government departments, the adoption of a person centred case management approach and meaningful homelessness prevention strategies, certainly echo Simon's vision of what is needed to move forward.

breakdowns, and poor education and employment experience. Research commissioned by the PWS has indicated that the pattern of homelessness among offenders often starts at a young age. Thus, the recommendation on the need to develop closer links between the Youth Homeless Fora and the Adult Homeless Fora is to be welcomed. Homeless offenders in the community who come before the courts and are referred to the PWS tend to either sleep rough or access emergency accommodation, with many finding it difficult to break that negative cycle. The recommendation on the establishment of a case management approach for addressing the needs of homeless individuals is particularly important in that respect.

In welcoming the publication of the review, I would highlight its recommendation that ex-offenders must remain a key focus of future homeless strategy as an especially at-risk group. They should also be treated for their individual housing and other support needs rather than as ex-offenders *per se*. Offenders can experience restricted access to housing and other services on account of their criminal history.

Despite the ongoing progress, challenges remain to be resolved. The review identifies one sub-group within the offender population that pose particular problems for service providers in sourcing appropriate accommodation. These are homeless sex offenders. The report notes that this issue is 'worthy of significant attention in the future and should be identified for priority intervention in the homeless strategy'. While a multi-agency group in Dublin has been working to address these issues, and some progress has been made, difficulties in gaining access to permanent mainstream accommodation has been a major barrier, which needs to be overcome as soon as possible, especially if public safety and prisoner reintegration is to be achieved.

The lack of housing options for people who are homeless – including such critical issues as the standards and capped rents in the private sector, the disproportionate allocation of local authority and voluntary housing, the lack of revenue funding to support those who cannot live fully independently, and the failure of Government to meet its own social housing targets – go largely unanalysed. The *real politik* of the housing market was outside the remit of the reviewers; unfortunate, particularly given NESc's failure to assess housing and homelessness in their recent report also. A new homelessness strategy cannot

be devised without some honest analysis on access to housing and some meaningful action for change.

Which brings us to one of the more interesting recommendations in the report – number 6, which states that the production of homeless action plans should be a statutory requirement.

The Department of the Environment have confirmed that legislation is being drafted that will oblige local authorities to produce homeless action plans. It is our understanding that the draft report original recommended that the plans themselves be put on a statutory basis. Indeed, the second most ‘critical priority’ identified by local stakeholders in the consultations process was ‘some form of statutory basis for the fora and action plans’ (p105 of the report).

We, along with Focus Ireland, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Threshold first called for a statutory basis for homeless action plans four years ago based on extensive analysis of their efficacy.

Nobody wants a situation where housing is only delivered under the threat of judicial review or court action. But a statutory obligation to produce a plan, as opposed to actually deliver housing may just maintain the status quo.

We look forward to seeing the proposed legislation. It is official state policy to deliver housing

“Nobody wants a situation where housing is only delivered under the threat of judicial review or court action. But a statutory obligation to produce a plan, as opposed to actually deliver housing may just maintain the status quo.”

rights through ‘fair and transparent access to quality public services’. This legislation would provide an ideal pre-election opportunity to deliver on this commitment.

Simon believes that Government is heading in the right direction on homelessness policy; we want to help them to deliver real housing rights to people who are homeless throughout Ireland. We are committed to providing meaningful policy and services solutions to homelessness and to working in partnership with Government to effect change. We look forward to the creation of the new National Consultative Committee on Homelessness, which will be charged with devising a new national homelessness strategy, and sincerely hope that Government will include our expertise and that of other national homelessness organisations in this Committee.

## Kathleen Holohan

Director of housing, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council

One of the five key priority areas that the review has identified is the provision of long-term accommodation with appropriate supports, which will allow homeless persons have a variety of progress routes out of homelessness.

The review recognises that the areas that have been most successful in securing long-term accommodation solutions are those local authorities that have formally committed to providing a proportion of their stock for homeless persons where the need exists. I agree with this conclusion, however it is only part of the solution as if the level of units available is low then the numbers available for letting to homeless persons will also be low. Local authorities have through their social and affordable housing action plans identified the framework necessary for the provision of additional housing accommodation to meet the needs of those seeking housing including the homeless. The challenge for local authorities will

be in achieving the targets they have set in these Plans. These targets can only be met if the various voluntary and statutory agencies continue to work in partnership to build on what has been achieved to date. The public and local politicians will also have to play their part by supporting proposals for social housing developments in their areas. Long-term accommodation can also be achieved through the private sector; this is evidenced by the success of the Access Housing Unit and through the work of resettlement officers. The roll out of RAS will provide opportunities for securing long-term accommodation for homeless persons. Local authorities and the voluntary sector should continue to explore opportunities for achieving long-term accommodation through agreements under Part V of the Planning and Development Acts.

While the provision of long-term accommodation is crucial in meeting the needs of homeless persons

“While the provision of long-term accommodation is crucial in meeting the needs of homeless persons it is accepted that for many homeless persons that accommodation alone is not the answer.”



it is accepted that for many homeless persons accommodation alone is not the answer. The recent launch of a tenancy sustainment service in the Dublin City Council area and the plans for the provision of a service in the three counties will be essential in facilitating the provision of long term accommodation for some homeless.

However there are many homeless persons whose long term needs cannot be met through a tenancy in a local authority, voluntary sector or private sector housing unit with or without appropriate tenancy sustainment services. I welcome the recommendation that *'dedicated long term supported accommodation staffed on an ongoing basis by*

*health workers must be provided to cater for the very specific needs of those individuals experiencing severe psychiatric problems that have difficulties with an independent living environment, where it has been agreed by the HSE and local authority that they are in need of such accommodation.'* Local authorities and the HSE will have to work closely on assessing the level of need in each area for such accommodation and agreeing on the solutions necessary to address these needs. The introduction of a case management approach to assessing the needs of homeless persons and the continuing localisation of homeless services as appropriate are essential to the implementation of this recommendation.



## Donal McManus

Executive director, Irish Council for Social Housing

**H**ousing associations and their increasing role in the provision of long-term social rented housing should be seen in the current context of the broad range of housing services developed and managed in the sector. Collectively housing associations in Ireland now manage over 19,000 homes, with output of new housing split evenly between provision for special need groups (including the homeless) and that of general family type housing. Housing associations provide around 1 in 4 of all new social rented housing per year and due the specialist nature of some of housing services provided by housing associations, which are also generally high demand in many areas, turnover of tenancies through casual vacancies has been low within the housing association stock. Housing associations currently provide the majority of specialist housing for the homeless. However, it is apparent from the housing association sector in 2006, there is a much greater potential to provide more long-term accommodation for the homeless compared to 2000, which coincided with both the launch of *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* as well as the launch of the previous National Development Plan 2000–2006.

The capacity of the housing association sector has significantly increased since 2000. Not only has overall housing output by housing associations increased in the last 6 years but also significantly, the required capacity building measures, such as increased dedicated staff resources in housing development, housing management, and in special

needs area, have been set in place to facilitate the expansion of the sector.

Despite this upbeat assessment, some obstacles encountered by housing associations in the development process still need to be resolved to allow for a significantly increased building programme. These range from continued streamlining of parts of the development process to ensuring the 'synchronising' in the timing of capital and revenue funding which was referred to in the review of the homeless strategies. The recent adjustments to the capital funding schemes will certainly provide a welcome boost in the planning of new projects for special needs groups such as the homeless. Collectively the housing association sector is working well below full capacity bearing in mind the increased number of new housing associations now active and also those larger housing associations who have continuous building programmes. A recent commitment in the Government framework *Building Sustainable Communities* was to ensure improved interagency co-operation where there is a care dimension in housing and this is welcome.

As well having this formalised at an institutional level, it will be essential for housing associations, as part of their service delivery role, that such inter-agency protocols between statutory agencies become effectively the guarantor in the process.

Whilst many homeless people may be housed by housing associations through the local authority waiting lists, there will still be a number of homeless target groups who require more intensive care support in the forms of sheltered and supported housing and this could be provided as part of the housing association housing building programme. Overall, it is imperative that a new National Development Plan 2007–2013 will provide for an expanded social housing building programme which in turn will act as the catalyst for housing association sector expansion. ■

The capacity of the housing association sector has significantly increased since 2000.

# Counted In | 2005

The assessment of homelessness for the Dublin area which took place in March 2005 was finally launched by Noel Ahern, Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal as CornerStone went to press.

**Derval Howley**, director of the Homeless Agency, summarises the main findings.

It is difficult to believe that a year has now past since I took up post in the Homeless Agency and harder still to match my expectations of the first couple of weeks with my memory of events.

I entered a bit of a whirlwind, taking up post in the second week of March and working toward the region wide periodical assessment – *Counted In 2005* – for the week of the 24th–31st March. Not quite the gentle induction to the sector that I had imagined!

The first week was filled with meetings, discussions, debate, negotiation and finally agreement on how the assessment would run, who would oversee

each aspect, the awarding of the tender to analyse the information and the planning of an information and advice day for service providers.

Having agreed the who, what, when, where and how we moved onto the analysing of the data and the writing up of the report. There were a number of validation checks to be carried out on the returns, which continued over the summer months. Delighted to be at the stage of printing and launching – what I had envisaged as a short few month project turned into a year long process. It is great now to be in a position to provide an overview of the findings.



Derval Howley,  
director of the  
Homeless Agency

## Overview of findings from *Counted In 2005*

<b>No of Homeless Households</b>	<b>1,361</b>
+ Partners	<b>169</b>
+ Adult Dependents (aged 18 and over)	<b>22</b>
<b>Total Homeless Population (adult individuals)</b>	<b>1,552</b>
+ Child Dependents (aged under 18)	<b>463</b>
<b>Total Homeless Population (adults and children)</b>	<b>2,015</b>



## What is the periodic assessment?

The periodic assessment on homelessness is a week long survey which the Homeless Agency carries out on a three yearly basis. It takes place within the broader context of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government's assessment of housing need which is also conducted every three years. The survey provides a profile of people experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough or accessing homeless emergency accommodation, day and food centres or hospital A&E departments. It also covers those that are registered as homeless on local authority housing lists within the greater Dublin area. This is the third time that an assessment of this type has been carried out using the same method. As such, it provides a picture of homelessness as portrayed through the surveys taken over a seven – year period. It reports on the extent and the profile of people experiencing homelessness at three levels.

### Rough sleeping

The report presents basic information in relation to people sleeping rough on the streets. The number of people reporting to sleep to rough increased from 1999 to 2002, but decreased between 2002 and 2005, with a significant overall decrease of 33% from 1999 to 2005. 185 people reported to be rough sleeping four or more nights of the week in the 2005 survey, compared with 312 in 2002 and 275 in 1999. This is reflective of some of the changes to services made during this period such as the expansion the street outreach teams, emergency accommodation provision and the introduction the Dublin city night bus service.

## Demographic findings

**Table 1: Gender Distribution of Homeless Persons Classified According to Gender 2005** (Note: Total number of adults N=1552)

Gender	Count	%	% respondents
Male	954	61%	<b>63%</b>
Female	550	35%	<b>37%</b>
No response	48	3%	
<b>TOTAL (N) 2005</b>	<b>1552</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

In 2005 the ratio of males to females was 2:1. This shows a slight increase in the proportion of females and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of males reporting as homeless from the findings in 2002 and 1999. However, most single people experiencing homelessness continue to be males (72%), which is slightly higher than the 2:1 ratio of males to females in the population.

**Table 2: Age group Distribution of Homeless Persons Classified According to Age Group 2005** (Note: Total number of adults N=1552)

Age Category	Count	%	% respondents
20 years or less	62	4%	<b>4%</b>
21–25 years	203	13%	<b>14%</b>
26–39 years	654	42%	<b>46%</b>
40–64 years	460	30%	<b>32%</b>
65 years +	39	3%	<b>3%</b>
No response	134	9%	
<b>TOTAL (N) 2005</b>	<b>1552</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

### People accessing homeless services

Secondly, the report gives an overview of people accessing the homeless emergency services and food and day centres. The number of people contacted through services in 2002 was 1,470, compared with 2005 when 1,317 households experiencing homelessness were surveyed through services.

### People registered as homeless on local authority lists

Thirdly, the report provides an overview of people registered on the local authority homeless housing lists within the Dublin area: Dublin City Council, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, South Dublin and Fingal. During this assessment the local authorities validated their waiting lists this meant that only those currently homeless, using homeless services or in contact with the local authority within the last six months, were included in the assessment.

As no validation was undertaken in the previous assessment it was important that the reduction due directly to the validation was taken into account before comparing across the years.

### Overall comparison

Having taken account of the reduction due to the validation process, the overall difference in the number of homeless households between the 2002 and the 2005 assessments is a 19% decrease. This is comparable with the experience of the Homeless Persons Unit<sup>1</sup> which saw a 22% decrease in the number of household presenting as homeless to their service in the same period.

<sup>1</sup> The Homeless Persons' Unit is responsible for delivery of a range of welfare services for homeless persons including assessments of homeless status, placement into emergency accommodation, identifying and facilitating move-on options and ensuring payment of state entitlements and access to medical services.



The average age reported by people in homeless households is 37 years old. However, females have a lower average age than that of males. The majority of those experiencing homelessness reported their age as between 26 and 39 years old. What is of significance is the decrease in the number of people under 20 years of age in comparison with the previous assessments. In 1999 there were 210 single people aged 20 years old or less and in 2002 there were 140 single people in this age group.

**Table 3: Household type Distribution of Homeless Persons Classified According to Household Type 2005**

Household Type	Count	%
Single Person	1046	77%
Dual Parent	101	7%
Lone Parent	119	9%
Couple Only	95	7%
TOTAL (N) 2005	1361	100%

Note: Total Number of Households N=1361

Single person households continue to form the vast majority (77%) of those experiencing homelessness. In 1999 single person households made up 87% of those using services and 75% in 2002.

**Table 4: Length of time homeless Distribution of Homeless Persons Classified According to Length of Time Homeless 2005**

Duration of Current Spell	Count	%	% respondents
Under 6 months	252	19%	23%
Between 6–12 months	146	11%	14%
Between 12–24 months	123	9%	11%
Between 24–36 months	88	6%	8%
More than 36 months	467	34%	43%
No response	285	21%	
TOTAL (N) 2005	1361	100%	100%

Note: Total number of adults N=1361

It is important to note that a large number of people did not give any answer to the length of time they were homeless. The percentage varies depending on whether we look the total surveyed or only those who responded.

The vision of the Homeless Agency is that by 2010, long term homelessness, and the need for people to sleep rough, will be eliminated in Dublin. The risk of a person or family becoming homeless will be minimal due to effective preventative policies and services. Where it does occur, homelessness will be short term and all people who are homeless will be assisted into appropriate housing and the realisation of their full potential and rights as citizens.

It is encouraging to see a change and a decreasing trend in relation to people sleeping

rough and although we have a way to go to ensure the need to sleep rough is eliminated I feel that progress has been made. The overall reduction in the number of people both in this survey and in people presenting to the Homeless Persons Unit is also something to be marked. However, of great concern is the fact that 467 individuals reported that their household was homeless for over three years (34% of households). The experience of homelessness was greater than 6 months for 81% of people within this survey. This is and will be our challenge to ensure that people's experience of homelessness is short term and that they are assisted into appropriate housing and have any support needs met. ■

It is encouraging to see a change and a decreasing trend in relation to people sleeping rough and although we have a way to go to ensure the need to sleep rough is eliminated I feel that progress has been made.



# Mind your language!

More and more non-Irish nationals are seeking advice from Threshold about housing problems, and most of them are living in the private rented sector.

**Bob Jordan** explains how Threshold is adapting its services in response.



Bob Jordan is Threshold's communications manager

Threshold's *Guide to renting* is published in Mandarin, Polish, Russian and French. The leaflets are available from Threshold's offices in Dublin (01 678 6096, [advice@threshold.ie](mailto:advice@threshold.ie)), Galway (091 563 080, [thresholdgalway@eircom.net](mailto:thresholdgalway@eircom.net)), and Cork (021 427 88 48, [threshold@eircom.net](mailto:threshold@eircom.net))

**A** growing proportion of people seeking advice on housing problems from Threshold are non-Irish nationals including immigrants, migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees and international students. Most live in private rented accommodation and many of the problems they face are common to all Threshold's

clients, including getting landlords to return rent deposits, poor accommodation standards and difficulties when they are given notice to leave their accommodation. However, overcrowding and problems with accommodation linked to employment ('tied accommodation') are particular problems for refugees and migrant workers.

In 2005, 15% of Threshold's 20,000 clients did not have English as a first language. The vast majority were from Eastern Europe; mainly Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Nigeria. Chinese students were also frequent callers. The majority of Eastern Europeans are couples and single people aged between 20 and 30 years of age, while Nigerian callers are usually families with children. Most

Threshold's advice workers are concerned because overcrowding can increase the risk of accidents and impede evacuation in the case of a fire.



The whole tied accommodation issue is complex because people don't know how much of their wages is going towards accommodation.

people contacted Threshold directly, either by telephone or by dropping in to one of Threshold advice centres in Dublin, Cork or Galway. But Threshold also received referrals from organisations such as SPIRASI (Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland.

Landlords failing to return rent deposits are a steady source of complaints. Stephen Large, Co-ordinator of Threshold's Advice Centre in Dublin, says *'Rent deposits are a major issue. Because people don't know their rights, they find it hard to challenge their landlord. Many foreign workers and refugees who come to us are on very low incomes and can't afford to lose their deposit. Unless they get their money back, they can't move on. It's a stressful situation.'*

*We try to solve the problem with landlords but we also give people tips for the future: get receipts every time you hand over money, take photographs of the condition of your flat when you move in, and write to your landlord promptly about any repairs needed. We also encourage them to tell their friends about Threshold.'*

Overcrowded accommodation mainly affects migrant workers but is also an issue for refugees. People live in overcrowded conditions in order to keep their rent payments low. But Threshold's experience is that where landlords or their agents are aware of overcrowding, they may charge per person rather than charge an overall rent and so tenants end up spending far more for less space. Threshold's advice workers are concerned because overcrowding can increase the risk of accidents and impede evacuation in the case of a fire. Overcrowding can also lead to stress and to conflict between tenants.

Sometimes a household is confronted with a variety of problems. Patricia Martin, an advice worker with Threshold in Dublin, says *'Some people come to us with one problem, maybe around rent, but then explain other problems they have suffered in silence. Often this is to do with poor standard accommodation. Things like with dampness, a lack of hot and cold running water, problems with heating and with exposed electrical wiring. With the person's permission, we contact the landlord and advise him or her of their obligations. If that doesn't work, we will contact an Environmental Health Officer or help the person make a case to the Private Residential Tenancies Board.'*

Particular problems may arise for migrant workers where accommodation is linked to employment. This applies to people working in hotels, construction or factories, for example, wood factories or assembly plants. In hotels, the

accommodation is on-site; in other situations, the employer arranges accommodation locally.

Deirdre Murphy, Co-ordinator of Threshold's Western Advice Centre in Galway, says *'A lot of accommodation for migrant workers is tied to employment. The difficulty is when a person has a problem with one, it affects the other. The whole tied accommodation issue is complex because people don't know how much of their wages is going towards accommodation.'*

*People are afraid to rock the boat, so they don't ask questions and are often surprised at the hidden additional costs. We had a recent case involving five or six foreign workers who were getting adequate accommodation but were presented with large heating bills unexpectedly.'*

Some people with limited English language skills prefer to call to Threshold in person rather than explain their housing problem over the telephone. Advice worker Patricia Martin says, *'Parents who have no English at all will sometimes ask their child to translate. One of my cases involved a ten-year old child whose parents were facing eviction. This raised the issue of upset to the child when he knew that his family could lose their home.'*

Most Threshold advice workers are Community Employment workers with excellent communication skills, a thorough knowledge of the housing system and empathy for people with housing problems, but few can speak in other languages. The ideal solution is to have staff that speak multiple languages, but the reality is that such language skills are scarce and in great demand, and Threshold does not have the resources to attract multilingual workers.

In order to overcome this problem, Threshold's advice workers set aside sufficient time to get the bottom of a person's problem but also to explain how their problem can be resolved. Written materials are also important. In this respect, Threshold's recently published 'Guide to Renting' is available in Chinese Mandarin, Polish, Russian and French; it has a high visual content including cartoon illustrations and uses simple vocabulary.

Threshold continues to increase its outreach work with groups supporting immigrant communities. As well as delivering services, Threshold also campaigns on policy issues affecting migrant communities and has strong links with organisations such as the Irish Refugee Council.

With increasing immigration and an expanding EU, Threshold anticipates that the number of people from immigrant communities seeking its housing advice will grow further and will continue to adapt its services to meet that need. ■



# An ounce of prevention...

...is worth a pound of cure, as the saying goes, and it's as true in homelessness as anywhere else. **Dr Jane Pillinger**, who was commissioned by the Homeless Agency to develop a comprehensive preventative strategy, outlines the results.

Dr Jane Pillinger is an independent researcher and policy advisor

An executive summary of *Preventing Homelessness: A Comprehensive Preventative Strategy to Prevent Homelessness in Dublin, 2005–2010* is available on the Homeless Agency's website at [www.homelessagency.ie/research/publications.asp#cat33](http://www.homelessagency.ie/research/publications.asp#cat33). If you'd like the full report, it's at [www.homelessagency.ie/downloads/publications/118.pdf](http://www.homelessagency.ie/downloads/publications/118.pdf)

## Introduction

Developing new approaches to preventing homelessness has become one of the most important policy challenges in recent years. More and more policy makers and service providers are aware of the importance of prevention and the longer term impact that early intervention can play in reducing the risks associated with homelessness. However, the complexity of this raises questions about the nature and focus of social policy and of service provision.

Moving towards a preventative approach in policy and service delivery requires there to be fundamental changes in the way that services are provided so that they can respond in appropriate ways to the multifaceted risks that some people face in our society. Preventing homelessness is as much about anti-poverty and social inclusion as it is about providing housing for people in need or difficulty.

## Causes and risks of homelessness

The research carried out for the Homeless Agency looked at how the interlinking causes and risks of homelessness can be prevented. Much of this research built on successful preventative interventions that already exist in Ireland and in other countries.

The research also looked at specific groups of people who are at risk of homelessness, such as homeless children and young people; families with children living in poverty, women experiencing domestic violence, older people, people with addiction problems, people with mental health difficulties, people leaving institutions, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and minority ethnic groups and new migrant communities.

Because the causes of homelessness are complex there is no quick fix or one solution to preventing

homelessness. In some cases a preventative approach means ensuring that there are appropriate services for those individuals and groups that currently fall through the service net. Sometimes this is about changing the way that mainstream services work, whilst in other cases it is about providing more targeted approaches for groups at risk, especially those with multiple difficulties.

The report identifies a number of policy responses and changes in service provision that need to be put in place in order to implement a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy to preventing homelessness. In addition, some of the issues that are identified in the report call for specific action in the areas of addiction and health issues; family and relationship issues; housing; poverty; education, training and employment; and the provision of supports and services for people at risk.

## What did service providers and homeless people think?

The research was carried out through interviews with homeless people, and focus groups and questionnaires to service providers. Several biographies were drawn up of homeless people or of people who had been homeless in order to identify where particular supports or interventions could have prevented someone being homeless.

It was interesting to work with homeless people in identifying what would have worked in practice and what is currently working. Several people identified the importance of early intervention and ongoing support to prevent a crisis or a series of crises in their lives, including help when there was a marital breakdown, support in the event of a teenage pregnancy, help and support where there has been sexual abuse, help early

...one of the main problems is that there is a general lack of coordination of services at local levels...

on with addiction problems or disabilities; support when leaving prison or mental health institutions; support in finding training and meaningful employment.

Many of those interviewed – both homeless people and service providers – identified the important of early intervention with families and children, particularly where there were signs of families being at risk, along with improved access to good quality housing.

### Existing work on prevention

The research collected together many examples of existing work that is being carried out by homeless organisations and mainstream service providers in areas such as housing, health, education and early years interventions. Examples include the provision of general housing support and information and advice services for people living in local authority housing; family support services for families living in poverty; childcare services for children at risk; and education provision for former prisoners. However, one of the main problems is that there is a general lack of coordination of services at local levels and no single form of assessment, including care and case management that coordinate housing, homeless, health, education, childcare and other services.

### A model for preventing homelessness

A model for preventing homelessness can be seen in figure 1. It highlights the importance of three key areas of policy change: early intervention to tackle individual and structural cause and risks that lead to homelessness, local responses to tackling homelessness; and coordination and integration of policy and service provision through inter-agency approaches.

This requires there to be a multifaceted approach in three main areas, which may also require different types of interventions and supports: preventing a crisis that leads to homelessness, preventing people remaining in homelessness and preventing recurring homelessness.

Examples of the types of interventions that prevent a crisis that leads to homelessness can be found in Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2** Examples of actions that can be put in place to prevent homelessness

Cause of homelessness	Action to prevent homelessness	Agencies involved
Young person leaves home; parents, relatives or friends are unable to provide accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family mediation services or intervention by local youth services to resolve situations that are near crisis point</li> <li>Provide support for a planned move.</li> <li>Appropriate accommodation for young person</li> </ul>	LA, HSE and voluntary organisations
Relationship breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early intervention through accessible advice and information</li> <li>Family mediation and counselling services</li> <li>Appropriate accommodation</li> </ul>	LA, HSE, voluntary organisations
Domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early intervention through accessible advice and information</li> <li>Actions to enable victims of domestic violence to remain in their own homes</li> <li>Provide more refuge facilities in local areas</li> <li>Appropriate accommodation</li> </ul>	LA, Estate management, voluntary organisations
End of tenancy in private sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Housing advice and information</li> <li>Schemes to provide better access to rent deposit schemes to let to potentially homeless people</li> </ul>	Local authority, voluntary organisations, private landlords, MABS
Rent and mortgage arrears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Housing advice and debt counselling</li> </ul>	LA, estate management, MABS
Individual unable to maintain a tenancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Settlement and other supports such as improving budgeting and life skills and assistance with rent</li> </ul>	LA, voluntary organisations
Lack of information about housing options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Housing advice and information</li> </ul>	LA, voluntary organs, Comhairle
Eviction from housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Housing advice and information</li> <li>Implement Anti Social Behaviour policy; training for staff about preventative measures</li> <li>Mediation services</li> </ul>	LA, CICs
Person leaves prison and is homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive sentence management</li> <li>Planned discharge and release from prison with mainstream agencies</li> <li>Development of skills and potential employment</li> <li>Appropriate accommodation for single people leaving prison</li> <li>Follow up and provision of through care and community supports based on case management as necessary</li> </ul>	Prison service, Probation and Welfare Services, HSE, FAS, LA, voluntary organisations, local area partnerships
Person is discharged from hospital and is homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discharge planning in liaison with statutory and voluntary sector</li> <li>Multidisciplinary approaches through care planning and case management</li> <li>Appropriate accommodation with relevant supports and community based services</li> </ul>	HSE, LA, voluntary organisations
Young person leaves child care and is homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan and provide appropriate accommodation and supports</li> <li>Implement the HSE's leaving care policy</li> <li>Multidisciplinary approaches through care planning and case management</li> <li>Education and employment opportunities</li> <li>Improve quality of child care interventions</li> </ul>	HSE, LA, voluntary organisations

## A comprehensive strategy for preventing homelessness

The five year strategy has nine specific areas of action.



If prevention is to be mainstreamed ... there will need to be a shift in orientation, culture and commitment from policy makers and service providers.

**1 Build prevention into existing strategies and services.** This can be achieved by integrating homelessness into local strategies and actions on homelessness and by ensuring that mainstream services in areas such as health, education, training and housing also focus on prevention as part of their service delivery. One useful mechanism is to ensure that all policy and service developments are proofed for their impact on homeless prevention.

**2 Improved evidence based approach.** In order to have well informed policy developments and services in the future it will be important to have improved data that help to identify trends in homelessness and also the causes of homelessness, in participation with homeless people. Government agencies need better methods for identifying the risks of homelessness and improved understanding of the causes of homelessness.

**3 Effective services and new ways of delivering services.** If services are to be more effective there is a need to build the capacity and quality of mainstream services. All of the evidence shows that services are the most effective if they are delivered and coordinated locally. Coupled with this is to ensure that there is engagement with local communities and that this is supported through community development approaches. As well, it is important that there are no unplanned discharges for prisons or mental health hospitals.

**4 Mainstream and permanent housing.** Providing more housing will of course help to prevent homelessness, but there is a real need to ensure that existing housing and homeless policies meet the needs of homeless people or those that are at risk of homelessness. There are a number of ways in which housing can more effectively meet people's needs, for example, by ending the housing of families in bed and breakfast and emergency accommodation, or revised policies regarding eligibility for housing, the provision of appropriate supports, and improved standards of temporary and privately rented accommodation.

**5 Families, children and young people.** Specific priority should be given to families, children and young people that are at risk of homelessness, for example, by addressing the housing needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence and young people with mental health difficulty. Schools, youth and community services have important roles to play in identifying children at risk of homelessness and there is a need for more information for young people about housing choices and homelessness.

**6 Information, advice and tenancy support/mediation.** Many people become homeless because they lack information about housing. Addressing

these needs requires more proactive advice, support and mediation through proactive estate management, anti-social behaviour policies, as well as tenancy support and sustainment schemes at local levels.

**7 Health related prevention.** Health services have an important role to play in preventing homelessness through an integrated approach, multi-disciplinary working and the provision of better access for homeless people to access mainstream health services. This includes effective treatment and support to prevent alcohol addiction and improved guidance and services for dual diagnosis.

**8 Education, training, work and meaningful occupation.** Homeless people need to have better access to education, training and good quality employment. This is particularly important for young people.

**9 Action to deliver on prevention.** Homeless prevention will be implemented if there is improved capacity for service providers to deliver on prevention. This means taking on new models of early intervention and prevention, better evaluation of the impact of prevention, learning from good practice and with resources earmarked for preventative work.

### Conclusion

A key issue is that in moving towards a preventative model there is a need to provide more affordable and appropriate housing choices, including supports where this is needed. This means improving the understanding of homelessness prevention and changing the approach and thinking about how to tackle homelessness through prevention. This builds on the success of the Homeless Agency in signalling new approaches to tackling homelessness, in identifying the size and scope of the homelessness problem, in highlighting the causes of homelessness, and in highlighting the need for new approaches to prevent and tackle homelessness.

Prevention will only work in practice if it is driven by national and local government and the HSE in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, and homeless people. Homeless prevention needs to be linked to other national and local strategies and social policies, in areas such as social inclusion, drugs and addiction, health and social care, education, training and employment etc. This also means that there is a need of better coordination to take place with schools, youth services, local housing and advice services, local family support services, community based drug and alcohol projects and other support services. If prevention is to be mainstreamed into all homeless activities / service provision through early intervention, awareness raising, and homeless proofing of activities, there will need to be a shift in orientation, culture and commitment from policy makers and service providers. ■

# Housing need: the poor relation in the Irish housing system

Drawing on their recent book, *Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*, **P.J. Drudy** and **Michael Punch** argue that the critical issue of 'housing need' has received inadequate attention while there has been an undue pre-occupation with the 'housing market' where houses are regarded mainly as 'commodities' rather than as homes and are bought and sold by many for speculation, investment and profit.

## Introduction

A secure home appropriate to need and at a reasonable cost is one of the most basic human requirements. Yet Ireland – now one of the richest countries in the world – has an ongoing housing problem. In fact, there are three basic problems – the continuing escalation of house prices, the high rents, poor standards and insecurity in much of the private rental sector and the

poor record in the provision of public housing in the light of increasing need and homelessness. The first two categories can be called 'market' sectors where those who can afford to pay the prices or rents will manage to get accommodation. The third 'non-market' category – those in housing need, including the homeless – simply cannot afford to enter the market. We deal with these in turn below.



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Ireland had the highest rate of house price inflation in the developed world over recent years

## Owning a home: the problem of affordability

Ireland had the highest rate of house price inflation in the developed world over recent years and there is evidence to suggest that much Irish housing is significantly 'over-valued' and 'unaffordable' for a significant minority. Consider, for example, that the average price of a new house in Ireland increased from €72,732 in 1994 to €249,191 in 2004 – a massive 243 per cent. The problem of high house prices is especially problematic in the Dublin area where new house prices rose from €81,993 to €322,628 or 296 per cent over the same period. All the major urban centres as well as rural areas and small towns showed similar increases. Despite constant reassurances of 'soft landings' prices have continued to escalate throughout 2005 and into 2006. For example, average new house prices rose by almost €40,000 in both Cork and Galway during 2005 alone.

How affordable are these prices? Estimates carried out by local authorities showed that one third of new households in Ireland over the period 2001–2006 would be outside the official affordability limit i.e. mortgage payments would take up more than 35 per cent of after-tax net salary. In urban areas this figure rose to 42 per cent and in Dublin to 50 per cent. Twenty years ago a mortgage could be obtained and a home purchased with one modest salary; today that would be a rare phenomenon. Overall, new house prices have risen over four times faster than house building

costs, and seven times faster than the consumer price index since 1994 (See Drudy and Punch, 2005). Had the cost of any other basic necessity skyrocketed in this fashion, there would have been a far louder public outcry. The many reasons for escalating house prices include population growth, higher employment, a lack of alternatives to house purchase, relaxed lending practices by the banks and building societies, and large windfall profits by landowners, property developers, investors and speculators attracted by the low capital gains tax of 20 per cent. A range of regressive property-based tax incentives over two decades have encouraged many people to enter the housing system as investors or

speculators, which pits them in direct and unfair competition with unfortunate younger first-time buyers. With an enormous revenue from VAT on building materials and stamp duty on house sales, the Government had little incentive to curb price increases. The end result is an arguably dangerous level of personal long-term debt for many young people, thanks to the heavy burden of high mortgages.

## Private rental: an alternative?

The private rented sector should ideally offer a viable alternative to house purchase, especially for young people who cannot afford to buy or who do not wish

to own a home at an early stage in their lives. However, private rental in Ireland has a long way to go if it is to compare with the situation in many European and Scandinavian countries regarding rent certainty, standards and security of tenure. The high cost end of the private rented sector in Ireland does seem to offer some good accommodation for individuals and couples with high incomes, although much of it especially in Dublin, consists of small one and two bedroom apartments unsuitable for families. However, those on low incomes fare much worse and end up in sub-standard and largely insecure accommodation.

The prevalence of private rental accommodation which fails to meet minimum standards (introduced in 1993 legislation) relating to health and safety is a matter of particular concern. The most recent available data for 2004 showed that 2,106 units (29 per cent of those inspected) were in breach of regulations. If this sample is representative, it would imply that (assuming the 60,000 units built since 1991 are in compliance) over 23,000 units in the private rental system do not meet the minimum standards.

Despite its obvious difficulties, the private rented sector is seen as a sort of 'safety valve' to resolve the public housing problem. Thus, rent supplement (a subsidy paid to private landlords in order to house tenants who cannot afford market rents) increased from just a few million euro a decade ago to over €350 million. It can be argued that this money would be much better spent in providing permanent accommodation for low-income families. The new Residential Accommodation Scheme (RAS) will likewise depend on the private sector to provide for public tenants.

## Housing need: the poor relation?

The difficulties in either purchasing or renting a home at an affordable price have contributed to the significant increase in the number of families and individuals in need of public housing over the last decade. We believe the most recent (2005) official figure of 43,700 families in housing need (which includes the 'homeless' category) seriously underestimates the number who actually require housing, but are not in a position to either purchase or rent at an affordable price. There are, we believe, two further categories of need. Local authority estimates show that, in the case of one third of new households formed in Ireland each year housing is, in effect, 'unaffordable'. This amounts to about 14,000 households. In addition to this, about 43,500 households were receiving rent supplement for accommodation in the private rented sector in 2004. Although these do not appear on official waiting lists, they can also be defined as being in 'housing need'. Putting the three categories together, we get a total in housing need of over 101,000 households or about 236,000 people.

The most obvious way to tackle housing need is to construct housing via the local authorities, housing associations or other not-for-profit organisations. The record of local authority provision over the eleven years has been rather weak. Provision is made up of newly-built houses and those acquired by the local



authority at market prices. The gross gain in the local authority stock (built and bought at market prices) over the last eleven years was 43,253 homes or an average of 3,932 each year. However, this gain was counteracted by the sales of 17,809 (1,619 each year) local authority houses to sitting tenants at a significant discount. The net gain was thus only 25,444 homes or an average of 2,313 each year since 1994. In the light of the significant housing need outlined earlier, it would be difficult to justify a continuation of the sales of local authority housing at a significant discount while at the same time purchasing at market prices, especially since tenants who wish to own homes can do so via affordable housing and shared ownership schemes.

A range of philanthropic bodies and housing associations, acting in co-operation with the local authorities and with government funding, have been active for some years in building houses for rent. For most of the period above they provided less than 1,000 homes each year, but with increased support from government rose to an average of 1,500 over the past three years.

In summary, local authorities and housing associations between them have provided an average net increase of only 3,300 homes per annum over the last decade. This is still a modest performance in view of the large housing need illustrated earlier. It seems clear that a low priority has been given over recent years to non-market provision in overall economic and social policy while some local authorities increasingly see themselves as 'enablers' or 'facilitators' of provision by the market rather than direct providers. Dublin City Council, for example, is committed to a significant increase in private housing provision in former Dublin local authority flat complexes via Public Private Partnerships. This invariably involves the handing over of significant tracts of public land.

### Housing for profit or housing as a home?

Do we see housing as yet another market commodity to be bought and sold for profit, or is housing to be regarded first and foremost as shelter and a home – a not-for-profit necessity – and a right to be claimed by all, irrespective of ability to pay? We suggest that housing provision and policy in Ireland have been heavily influenced by the aforementioned market-driven philosophy. The vast brunt of current provision is for sale for profit, or for speculative purposes. Those with resources or access to credit are able to purchase or rent homes, although increasing numbers do so with considerable difficulty, since there is virtually no control over escalating prices and rents.

We can also see our housing-for-profit system in action in the current provision of housing land, a critical and scarce resource, especially in our main urban centres. Nevertheless, land allocation and its price are also left to an imperfect monopolistic market process where relatively few landowners, developers and speculators accumulate land over a period of years and consequently exert considerable control over supply. The re-zoning of land and the granting of

planning permission for housing by local authorities are the final mechanisms that deliver large and entirely unearned financial gains for this single privileged group. Is this outcome of our market system in the interests of 'social justice' and the 'common good' as required by the Irish Constitution? We argue that it is not.

When we examine housing provision in a range of European countries and farther afield, we find that market forces can indeed play an important role. We also find, however, that in most countries the market is not generally allowed to dominate to the extent that it has done in Ireland. Home ownership is certainly encouraged but house price and rent inflation is not, and those who do not have the resources to enter the home ownership or private rental markets are catered for with a variety of innovative measures throughout Europe, Scandinavia and elsewhere.

### Conclusion

We would argue that housing can no longer be treated simply as a market commodity or 'get-rich-quick' speculative opportunity. Rather a house needs to recapture its traditional role as a social good and its universal status as a fundamental human right. To achieve this, policies must be implemented to ensure that every person has affordable, secure, good quality accommodation appropriate to their needs. To that end we propose a number of key principles and policy changes below.

- Housing should be treated as a social good, rather than as a commodity for trading or wealth generation. Housing policies should clearly reflect this principle.
- Housing is a fundamental economic and social need. The right to housing for all should be established in legislation in line with signed international covenants and agreements.
- Since land is a fundamental requirement in relation to housing provision and co-ordinated planning, the state should have a long-term strategy of land acquisition.

Key policies arising from these principles would include:

- The elimination of tax incentives which increase speculative demand and house prices and an appropriate capital gains tax to curb speculative activity.
- The indexation of rents in the private rented sector and the rigorous implementation of legislation regarding minimum standards.
- The establishment of a new broadly-based 'community housing' tenure which would cater for a much wider range of housing need as well as existing local authority tenants.
- Specific and sensitive policies to cater for those with special needs, including homeless persons, those with disabilities and the elderly.
- The imposition of a substantial land tax on windfall profits. ■

We would argue that housing can no longer be treated simply as a market commodity or 'get-rich-quick' speculative opportunity.

*Out of Reach: Inequalities in the Irish Housing System*, by P.J. Drudy and Michael Punch is published by TASC at new Island and available in bookshops nationwide.

# THE LAST DIARY FROM DOWN UNDER



Christine Dibelius worked for the Victorian Office of Housing in Melbourne Australia, and has now returned to her job as policy officer with Clúid Housing Association

Sadly for CornerStone readers, although happily for **Christine Dibelius**, she has returned to Ireland from her Australian adventure. However, she found time before rushing to the airport to pen a final diary entry.

## October

**S**pring has arrived in Australia and with it an invasion of visitors from home. Two sets of parents and two siblings are landing one after the other— there's lots of fun to be had as host, chauffeur and tour guide. Never mind there's a day job at the Office of Housing to attend to!

Having just joined the public service in March, I am very excited to see 'my' minister for the first time. She is announcing a funding package of \$75 million for the five newly registered housing associations, to be supplemented by \$25M in borrowings and third party land contributions. The attempt to move towards a UK model with housing associations accessing private finance appears to be off to a good start. Of course, I don't get to be introduced to the Minister, but have to be satisfied chatting to her chief of staff. Ah, the humble beginnings of a freshly baked civil servant.

## November

**W**hite ribbons are being handed out in support of the UN Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The family violence sector has indeed been given a lot of attention in Victoria,

as a recent study identified family violence as the main contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15–44 years. Data provided by homeless agencies shows that over a third of support episodes are being provided to clients seeking assistance due to family violence.

Since 2002 the Government of Victoria launched various strategies to develop an integrated response to family violence, including a strong police and judicial response and a well targeted human service response. As part of the latter, the intention is to diversify the approach to housing services and to move beyond the secure refuge model. This new accommodation strategy envisages greater outreach resources for women in other accommodation settings, including their own home, private rented accommodation or long term social housing. A brokerage project to assist women to access and maintain private rental accommodation is part of the overall plan, giving women an alternative to refuge accommodation where appropriate. This project sits alongside initiatives to offer emergency accommodation for men, if this will help women and children to remain in the family

Thank God  
that memories  
will last  
longer than  
the suntan.

home. This accommodation strategy for family violence is seen, at least by Government, as an investment in more cost-effective options than providing more refuges and a way of meeting demand through reform, not more of the same. The funding allocation towards all these initiatives has been welcomed as long overdue by community agencies, which were very concerned about the high numbers of repeat service users and the evidence of unmet demand. The lack of crisis accommodation is particularly highlighted coming up to Christmas, as caravan parks, the Australian equivalent of B&B solutions for homeless persons, are getting busier and are charging peak summer rents.

Other initiatives are to complement the housing response, e.g. a new Police Code of Practice for the investigation of family violence has been put in place. Attempts are made to improve the links between the legal system and social services to ensure that responses provided are appropriate and supportive regardless of whether a woman chooses the police or a support agency as her first port of call. A consistent risk assessment to be used by all players and strengthened referral pathways are being developed for this purpose.

The Victorian Housing Week also takes place during November – this is a week long celebration of public and community managed housing which is organised by the Office of Housing. The week's events are designed to raise awareness of good housing projects and to highlight the positive contributions made by tenants and local groups. Of course, there are lots and lots of barbecues – it is an Aussie summer after all. But the week also features the announcement of a number of scholarships for young people and the presentation of an annual award for a tenant who has made an outstanding contribution to the community. This year's winner, Ms Kim Ling Chua, a facilitator of laughter workshops, proves to be a great hit when she uses both the premier and the minister as demonstration objects for her laughter exercises, to the horror of the guardians of political etiquette and to the amusement of everyone else.

## December

No, it definitely doesn't feel like Christmas in this climate – but some things appear to be the same all over the globe. It's the season to eat too much, drink too much and frantically try to catch up with every person who might be considered a friend or a relative. We only have few of those over here, so we can happily concentrate on the eating and drinking. Luckily, December coincides with a clever fundraiser for a number of homelessness charities, whereby diners at participating restaurants are asked to donate a 'gold coin' – 1 or 2 Dollars. A pretty good strategy in a city that prides itself on being a gourmets' paradise! Everybody else's knowledge of the most exotic cuisines simply puts us to shame. We're still trying to figure out how to handle those chopsticks.

## January

The new Social Housing Advocacy and Support Programme (SHASP) comes to life statewide on January 1st. It is a tenancy sustainment programme for the public housing sector, which aims to ensure that applicants with more complex issues are appropriately assisted to have their housing needs addressed and that tenancies are sustained in the long term.

The Council to Homeless Persons had previously criticised the lack of post-settlement support as the system was designed for throughput – from crisis to transitional to long term housing – and not focused on preventing recurrent homelessness. Of course, it is too early to say what improvements SHASP will bring in this regard. But this is how it will work: the support is to be provided by community managed agencies to households referred by the local public housing office. The SHASP providers are contracted to provide a certain number of support episodes over a set time frame, with clear unit costs allocated to different types of assistance and with specified key performance measures.

The anticipated outcomes include fewer tenancy breakdowns, a reduction in arrears levels and fewer entries (or re-entries) into the homelessness system. Assistance will include activities such as developing arrears repayment plans, resolving neighbourhood disputes and helping tenants overcome literacy and language difficulties that prevent them from communicating with the landlord.

The new programme has been based on a trial project, which found that high level contact time with tenants was very important, that of course support needed to be focused on addressing underlying issues rather than mending the surface, and that early referrals from the public housing offices were critical. How well the providers and the referring housing offices adapt to the required partnership approach remains to be seen. As SHASP replaces a broader advocacy service provided previously, the Office of Housing will also have to tackle the perception that the focus on high needs tenants entails a loss of service for other tenants.

There are currently no plans to extend the scope of SHASP to community managed housing, partially due to the perception that community agencies both cherry-pick less difficult tenants and have closer ties with other support agencies. But a review of this decision surely will be needed when the hoped-for growth in the Housing Association sector becomes a reality.

## February

We're leaving Melbourne and I am clearing my desk at the Office of Housing. I can't say I will be missing the red tape, but I sure will be pining for some aspects of the Victorian housing sector on my return home. The social housing standards for example, with 100m<sup>2</sup> two bedroom units and 127m<sup>2</sup> three bedroom units, will appear like a sweet dream from a distant world. But what a learning experience it has been, and what a beautiful time we've had in sunny Down Under. Thank God that memories will last longer than the suntan. ■

I can't say I will be missing the red tape, but I sure will be pining for some aspects of the Victorian housing sector on my return home.



# TALLAGHT HOMELESS ADVICE UNIT

Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit has been running for 13 years, and for the first 12 of them it operated out of basement premises in St Mary's Priory in Tallaght town centre. Then early last year it moved to new premises in Tallaght's main street, and business boomed. **Fran Cassidy** jumped on the LUAS and met THAU's manager, **Geoff Corcoran**.



“ The homeless problem in Tallaght should be dealt with out here. Prevention and early intervention have to happen in the local area. ”



And fifteen years ago people were marching against drugs clinics. Now every main estate in Tallaght has one. So there are lessons there.

**T**he homeless problem in Tallaght should be dealt with out here. Prevention and early intervention have to happen in the local area.'

So says Geoff Corcoran who has managed Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit since September 2003, and who offers a refreshingly forthright analysis of homelessness issues in the west Dublin suburb.

I ask Geoff's about the extent of the problem in Tallaght.

'We dealt with over six hundred people last year. Some of these are in hostels, some in B&Bs and some in transitional housing. South Dublin City Council figures don't include those sleeping rough, staying with friends, or living in precarious or overcrowded circumstances. Also people are taken off the homeless list if they don't stay in contact. While you'll get a letter every six months or so on the housing list, if you're on the homeless list it's up to you to contact them, and you might be the least equipped person to do that.

'And the Homeless Persons Unit will say that if you're not accessing homeless services after six weeks they can't support you either, which means people don't get the services or supports around homelessness that they need. And unfortunately we are still sending people into town because there aren't enough ancillary services here: and then there can be a sense that if people move into town, there is no need to provide services locally.'

Geoff argues that while the council might fear that if they open up the homeless lists then large numbers would claim to be homeless, it should actually be possible to verify peoples' housing situation.

'You can't just blame the council either. It's around general housing policy. Unless the council are given the go ahead to build houses they're going to have a huge waiting list. It can be politically awkward too. No councillor can afford to say 'I support a hostel for actively drug using young men in your area' when these may be the same young men that were kicked out for anti-social behaviour. That's the bind. It's just one of the difficulties of working in the community and with the client groups that we do.'

But changes in mindset are possible according to Geoff.

'Look at traveller accommodation or drugs' projects. Now you have a legislative scheme where each local authority has to provide traveller accommodation and, while some of it is poor, they're generally good accommodation and getting better. And fifteen years ago people were marching against drugs clinics. Now every main estate in Tallaght has one. So there are lessons there.'

**W**e are standing outside THAU's new premises at 510 Main Street.

'People won't walk miles for your service and it took ages to get a suitable premises. Luas and bus routes are pretty close, the council offices, the Square and the community welfare offices are all within a ten minute walk and the Belgard addiction service isn't far away.'

Geoff seems pleased with the compact two-storey shop-front premises. 'Downstairs is for clients. It's relaxed and informal. We have a reception area, two offices with phones and computers, and a larger 'drop-in room' big enough for working with families. There is also a tiny kitchen. Upstairs, there is a room that doubles as a staff canteen and a place for storing clients' possessions; two offices shared by project workers Simon and Suzie and our outreach workers Francis and Kate and a small office where Dorothy and Aine do administration.' He pauses and adds proudly, 'We also have two toilets.'

When the history of the THAU is recounted, one realises that two toilets is progress indeed.

'From 1993 to 1999 volunteers and CE workers ran a part-time service at the back of the Dominican Priory. In 1999 they got local authority funding and became more structured. Over time the focus changed from youth homelessness to adults and eventually information provision became the strongest element. Before I started the staff were part-time and there were no policies and procedures. It took time to sort. In 1999 we moved to the front of the Priory where we were until 2004. But it was still to be honest, a bit all over the place.'

For example?

'We had two small basement rooms with no emergency exits overlooking a rat infested bank of earth. There was no direct access for clients; they had to go through the reception of the priory and weren't always let through. There was a difficulty as some of the priests actually lived in the building and did not feel comfortable about strangers wandering through their home

'It was a ten minute walk to the far side of the building to get water and we had to escort people to the toilet inside the Priory proper, which was undignified. But saying all that, if it hadn't been for the Dominicans the project wouldn't exist.

'When we moved here we changed our logo, and looked at it as a new start.'

I note that the sign above the newly painted door says 'Housing Information Centre'.

'There's been a debate as to whether we should call ourselves Tallaght Homeless or Housing Advice

I wouldn't say homelessness or housing problems have got worse in the area, although they're definitely not improving either, but we're in a better position to deal with them.

Unit. If you call yourself a homeless service there's a perception that you're dealing with one specific client group. If you're a housing service it's politically easier, people can more easily accept that you're here – there was already a drug service up the road and some locals had difficulties with that. When we settled on putting 'Housing Information Service' on the sign we feared we mightn't get that homeless client group and wondered were we re-enforcing the fact that many people don't know that there is a homelessness problem out here, but I don't think that has been the case.

'Since we moved in here we've more than doubled the amount of people using the service. I'd attribute that to increased accessibility and awareness of the service, and to regular opening hours. I wouldn't say homelessness or housing problems have got worse in the area, although they're definitely not improving either, but we're in a better position to deal with them.'

What type of people use the service?

People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We get a spectrum from people who are working and in private rented but need to move out, through people who would be on rent allowance and maybe threatened with eviction, to people sleeping rough who come in for a cup of tea or a sleeping bag. And it's a broad range including travellers, non-nationals, basically anyone who needs us.

'We try not to refer people on if we can deal with the problem but it's not about numbers or making people dependent on us. It's the opposite really. If someone comes in and they can get a flat themselves we'll give them the space to do it. If they need support to do it we'll give them that. If there is somewhere else they can do it better we'll link them in to that.'

'As well as providing the computer and phone we help people around getting registered with the Council, or getting in to transitional housing or B&B accommodation. We provide social welfare and rent supplement advice. Then we link people in to other supports – drug supports, training supports, mental health supports, whatever they need. It's all around finding supports for keeping people in the area.'

'We do find people will come back to us year in year out. That's a problem: someone gets private rented, it falls down and they're back again, so now we're looking at what we can do around helping people before that happens.'

'Most of our clients come through word of mouth. It's an open door policy, no appointments. We are getting better at raising awareness of who we are and what we do. That's one of the major tasks of outreach workers.'

I wonder is street outreach effective here.

'It's limited. Unlike town, you don't find people sleeping rough in an area like Tallaght. In town there is a perceived security in staying in a group or being visible. The security in Tallaght is that you're hidden; so people would sleep in fields, in cars, in garden sheds or squats, or different nights with different friends. There were efforts made at doing soup runs here in the past, which weren't sustained because they couldn't find people. Although obviously if we know of someone sleeping rough we go to them.'

'The first thing the outreach worker did here was to go to local organisations that deal with homeless people such as drug projects, family support projects, mental health projects and general community projects. You assume everyone knows who you are but the reality was no one did. We asked these services what was needed rather than simply foisting ourselves on the area.'

'Then we looked at running clinics. We did one in a B&B and the residents were our client group, but if you're doing them in a community or a drugs project it's as much about letting the staff know we're here and what we do. We can do a clinic for say six months in a drug project and maybe upskill their staff so that if we're not there, they can do a bit of work themselves. If there is a problem we're at the end of the phone and they have a face and name for us.'

'We sit on as many forums as are useful – there's a drugworkers' forum, a local homeless forum, a community platform, community development committees, domestic violence networks and mental health networks. We also give talks, contact local media and attend open days. We do publications. The *Out of the Gaff* book is a directory of south Dublin services and we've done an information card informing people locally what we do.'

Is private rented the answer to Tallaght's housing problems?

'If it is of good quality, available and secure, then I think it can work especially with the floating support model where people go in and help tenants sustain tenancies, which we do to an extent. But if the accommodation isn't there or people are excluded from it then it's not the answer.'

'In Tallaght three bedroom houses are the norm, so there is no single persons' accommodation unless people are willing to move into shared houses. And that is often unsuitable. Many need space and support rather than moving in with three strangers. And a lot of shared housing is people renting rooms in their own houses and they don't want people on social welfare. There's always going to be a need for some kind of social housing.'



'There are people we work with for whom the private rented sector just isn't open. People who have difficulties around mental health or addiction, or travellers and non-nationals, these groups can all have difficulties getting landlords to accept them as tenants.

Sometimes that's not the case of course. Recently someone in the psychiatric hospital rang a landlord from downstairs. I heard him saying 'Three of us in a psychiatric ward are looking for a flat'. The landlord actually thought that it was his mate winding him up and said 'no problem, come on up.' They did, ended up moving in, and are still there. We link in around them with the psychiatric services and the home help team and our outreach team drops up to them – it was once a week but it's dropped off. Of course that reflects well on that particular landlord. But if it goes wrong there's nothing we can do.

'If we make a phone call on somebody's behalf and it falls down, that's what the agent will remember. If we get five people in and everything works out grand the agent won't go 'that worked out well.' We're trying to make links with estate agents, explain what we do and try and break down the stigma because we're a homeless/housing service. But a landlord often wants guarantees that if the tenant runs off, we'll pay the rent. We can't make a financial commitment, so ultimately it's up to the landlord to decide if a potential tenant is acceptable.

'And that's assuming people can find landlords who will take rent supplement. Often people are priced out of the market. The rent supplement caps should be higher if you want to accommodate people. Currently they buy nothing. The best a single person can hope to get is a bedsit and there are very few of those. If one-bedroom apartments are all that are available then a single person should be entitled to that.'

What accommodation is needed here?

'Anything built would be used' Geoff asserts.

'There is a huge need for emergency family accommodation out here. And there is a need for accommodation for active drug users or people with mental health problems. I don't just mean hostels. Self-contained units would be ideal: properly managed, pretty small – maybe ten people, with a high level of support for people who need it on a short to medium term basis. And there needs to be move on options. There are some very good transitional programmes but there often isn't a point if you're throwing people out after two years. The move on options would be long term supported or independent housing.'

And other services?

'Currently if somebody is in crisis and needs somewhere to stay, all we can do is ring the freephone

in town. The HPU should have something out here so that people can register as homeless without having to go into town. Community welfare officers should have local clinics. There are instances when people have to choose between going to the HPU in town or attending their methadone clinic.'

Should the THAU be replicated elsewhere?

Yes, as long as there are other ancillary services to back it up. In isolation there is only so much we can do and that is where we are hampered. Links with other services are crucial. Then once someone is settled in you can link him or her with whatever help they need, be it mental health or whatever. There is no point dropping a homeless/housing service in without consultation or without linkages. I suppose it took a long time for us to work our way into the position where we are now.

**No councillor can afford to say 'I support a hostel for actively drug using young men in your area'.**

Anything else?

One thing worth mentioning is our corporate links. I know some have difficulties around private companies undertaking what they see as the government's job but it works really well for us. We work closely with Johnson and Johnson. Obviously their staff can't work with our client group as we have to respect client confidentiality, but they wanted to get involved. It started with hygiene packs for rough-sleepers. Then their general manager brought his skills to our management committee. They do fundraising and toy collections for us: we had a client who moved into a council house and as a teambuilding day they did a changing rooms exercise and did it up. Lots of other great things as well. It's been excellent for us.

A lot of companies are very keen in getting involved like this, providing you don't approach them looking for money, and it is something organisations in other areas might think of looking at, although obviously it's double edged and there are risks on both sides. ■



# CornerStone Questionnaire

**Frank Mills**

Director of social inclusion, HSE south western area

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

My first job after finishing college in the mid-70s was housing manager with a large housing association in Birmingham. I became involved in the private rented sector when I worked in community welfare in the health board, and my thesis for my Masters degree in 1989 was on housing subsidies for low income households. In 1999 I was given a new brief by the health board to develop health services for homeless people.

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

I feel I only began to fully understand homelessness when I started working full-time in the area and started linking in with the other stakeholders, both statutory and NGOs. I now believe strongly that we should move from managing homelessness to ending it!

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

A 'Housing First' policy. The emphasis should be on the provision of appropriate long-term housing i.e. appropriate in terms of size, location, quality and supports. I have learned over the years that it is impossible to

deal effectively with issues like mental health, addiction and physical health while people remain homeless. The evidence shows that when people are provided with an appropriate home of their own their physical and mental health can improve dramatically.

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

That 'there but for the grace of God go I'. People do not choose to be homeless. What homeless people want is a fast-track out of homelessness and not to be 'minded' indefinitely by homeless services.

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

Poverty and inequality are inextricably linked. We have one of the most unequal societies in Europe. As long as that situation pertains the figures for relative poverty will remain high. There will always be some people who become homeless due to an unexpected crisis in their lives.

Our aim should be to ensure they don't remain homeless. I believe we should have a target that no person remains homeless for more than four weeks. I think that is achievable if all the resources currently involved in the provision of homeless services were refocused on both prevention and on fast tracking people out of

homelessness. To refer back to Q. 3 this can only be achieved if we have a pool of appropriate accommodation that people can access.

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

I am a great believer in not re-inventing the wheel. I have learned a lot from other countries. For example, Glasgow has shown that it is possible to successfully re-house people who have been long-term in shelters into independent housing, with supports based on their needs.

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

On the one hand the difference is reducing as we move towards full funding and service level agreements. On the other hand NGOs can attract volunteers and these can be very important, particularly in the area of helping people to successfully settle into independent living.

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

I currently work in the area of social inclusion in the Health Service Executive. This is much broader than just homelessness so if the problem was solved I would still have plenty to do! ■

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