



Protect the vulnerable, homeless charity tells State

Demand up 48% on 2007 for Simon Community services

FIONA GARTLAND

THE SIMON Community has called on the Government to protect the vulnerable and marginalised of society in the current economic climate.

Speaking at the launch of the homeless charity's annual report, CEO Sam McGuinness said that the number of sleeping bags handed out by the charity trebled in the first six months of 2008 compared with the same time last year.

A *Twelve Month Snapshot* highlighted the increasing demand on the charity's services and stressed the need for the Government to maintain levels of funding for the homeless sector.

The report also highlighted the work of seven service users who took part in a photography class organised through the charity.

The charity found that the first six months of 2008 showed a 48 per cent increase in people seeking services from the "rough sleeper" team, which encourages people sleeping on the streets to access accommodation and services, as compared with the first six months of 2007.

Referrals by the team to the homeless persons unit increased by 74 per cent during the same period, from 243 in 2007 to 424 in 2008.

Mr McGuinness said that 2007 had been a very disappointing year because they had great hopes for the Homeless Agency's *Key to the Door Action Plan*, but they found there was no funding.

"It's not okay that we should have people sleeping on the streets of our city," he said.

Mr McGuinness said that after

last year's disappointment the charity decided to present their own business plan to the Government with a set of priorities, and they were hopeful that the Government will take it on board.

"Or else I'll be sitting here this time next year saying 2008 was a disappointment," he said.

"To all of us ... that is not acceptable."

Also at the launch, *Irish Times* journalist Fintan O'Toole said that, particularly at a time of economic downturn, the responsibility of the Government was first and foremost to those most in need. The right to a home was part of everyone's rights as citizens, he said.

He said that if homelessness was not solved when we had the money, then the problem was not money, but political will.

"Chances are ... unless there is a real public demand, the budget will not contain funding provisions for homelessness and the funding of the homelessness strategy will be an afterthought," he said.

He said that although homelessness was a complex problem one of the factors contributing to it is the economic situation.

"If nothing else happens the likelihood is that you are going to see a very significant further rise in demands for services and in the numbers on the streets," he said.

"Here's a social disaster ready to happen to a lot of real people, whose humanity we can see in these photographs and we're guilty, if we sit back and watch this happen, or colluding in it."

The photographs included in the annual report were taken by

service users Ben Mullane, Tony Gorman, Ann Moran, Noel Brennan, Theresa Timmins, James Healy and Michael Smith.

Mr Brennan, who spent his childhood in and out of industrial schools, first met the Simon Community in Cork where he was staying with a group of people, including a one-legged musician.

One night, he found the musician eating newspaper because he was so hungry. He contacted the Simon Community and they gave him food.

He said that photographs had always held a fascination for him.

As a teenager, he was shown a group photograph and could not recognise himself in it, he said.

"That time in my life is a period lost, deleted from my life," he said.

The photography course gave him a chance to express himself and learn up-to-date skills. He was both thrilled and mortified to see his photographs on display, he said.

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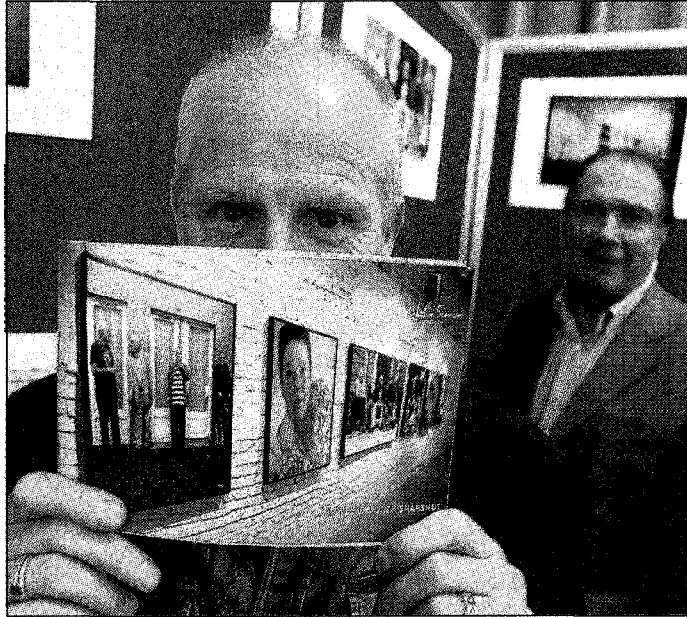
Page: 5

Extract: 2 of 2

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Dublin Simon Community CEO Sam McGuinness and service user Noel Brennan. Photograph: Maxwells