



Minister critical of e-mail campaign by homeless group

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THE GOVERNMENT Minister responsible for housing has criticised a coalition of homeless organisations for launching an e-mail-based campaign which, he says, will waste the time and resources of his staff.

MakeRoom, an alliance including Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities of Ireland, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and Threshold, yesterday launched a lobby campaign in an attempt to ensure forthcoming legislation has a greater emphasis on homelessness.

The online campaign allows users to send an automatic e-mail to TDs and Ministers with direct responsibility for homelessness, urging them to "put homelessness at the heart of this housing Bill".

However, anyone who sends an e-mail to the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Michael Finneran, will receive an automatic reply from his office defending his actions and criticising the campaign.

"I believe it is legitimate to question whether the use of resources to mount this sort of campaign can be justified in the context of the current economic climate and the range of demands and priorities arising," the Minister says in an e-mail.

"...It should be fully understood that if my department is to respond to correspondence and queries arising on foot of the sort of campaign recently launched by MakeRoom, it can only be done by diverting some of those scarce staff resources away from the priority work of actually implementing the new homeless strategy and getting the best pos-

sible value from the increased funding that we are providing for homelessness."

A spokesman for the Minister said the campaign group received funding from the department.

"The Minister is angry that this group, who should be well aware of his commitment to the plight of the homeless, would waste the valuable time and resources of the civil servants endeavouring to deal with the issue of homelessness."

However, the MakeRoom organisers have defended the campaign as a legitimate way of highlighting gaps in the housing Bill on the issue of tackling homelessness.

"Web-based campaigns of this kind are a cost-effective and efficient way for people to get in touch with their elected representatives about issues that matter to them. It is particularly timely given the launch of the Taoiseach's new interactive website and focus on the 'smart economy'".

MakeRoom added that the Minister's response was automatically generated, and unlikely to consume any staff resources.

It is calling on everyone who wants to "help end homelessness" to log on to their website (www.makeroom.ie/takeaction) and sign up to the campaign.

"We believe the housing Bill could make a real difference to the lives of many people who are currently homeless, and, indeed, serve to prevent others becoming homeless in the future, but only if a number of gaps which we have identified are addressed.

"We believe that with reasonable amendments the Bill could become a truly valuable tool for meeting the Government's target of ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough by 2010."