

Left out in the cold



A REVIEW OF RURAL HOMELESSNESS IN IRELAND



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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is often considered to be an urban phenomenon however, it in fact is an issue experienced in many rural areas too. It is often 'hidden'² in rural contexts which can make it more difficult to see and indeed measure. In September 2012 the CSO released figures estimating that there were 3,808 people who were counted in accommodation providing shelter for people who are homeless or were identified sleeping rough on Census night (April 2011), of these, 1,433 were outside the Dublin region³. This is the first time the CSO undertook this count as part of the Census. As the geographical breakdown was only done by region outside of Dublin it is difficult to quantify how many people were homeless in the other major cities and towns around the country and how many were homeless in more rural parts of these regions. The lack of robust data on homelessness and the difficulties assessing the extent of rural homelessness is also a challenge identified in other EU countries.⁴

This paper aims to explore the experience of rural homelessness in Ireland especially among the eight Simon Communities in Ireland. It explains how rural homelessness can differ from urban homelessness and some of the challenges that arise, both for people experiencing homeless and those at risk, and service providers. It concludes with some recommendations to address the issues identified. Initially, however, it explores Government Commitments in relation to homelessness and the current policy context.

¹ Paper prepared following consultation with the eight Simon Communities in Ireland based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East.

² Hidden Homelessness refers to people who may be staying in insecure accommodation, unfit or overcrowding accommodation, sleeping on friends/family couch. They are not visible to the public but are in need of a home.

³ CSO Census 2011 Special report on Homelessness www.cso.ie

⁴ FEANTSA policy Statement Housing Led Solutions to Homelessness in Rural Areas June 2013

Government Commitments in relation to Homelessness

Reflecting pre election commitments and the signing of the Simon Pledge⁵, homelessness was identified as a priority in the Fine Gael/Labour *Programme for Government 2011-2016*. In addition, the *Housing Policy Statement 2011* outlines that

“Delivering more and better outcomes for vulnerable, disadvantaged and special needs households, while achieving maximum return for the resources invested in these areas (for example through the introduction of the ‘housing first’ approach to homeless services), will be a key priority for the Government” (P4)

The Government's *Homelessness Policy Statement* launched in Feb 2013 consolidated this commitment endorsing a housing led approach with the main focus being:

- Supply – availability and supply of secure, affordable and adequate housing along with appropriate facilities and supports.
- Prevention – effective action to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of homelessness.
- Support – foster a culture that promotes independent living with supports as appropriate.

‘In an Irish context, housing-led is about the rapid provision of secure housing, with support as needed to ensure sustainable tenancies’ (Homelessness Policy Statement; 2013; p2).

This policy Statement contained the renewed commitment to end long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016, using the said housing-led approach. It also established a Homeless Oversight Group to review the approach being advocated in the Statement, identify obstacles and propose solutions.

The Homeless Oversight Group reported⁶ in December 2013 for the first time and the main outcomes included the establishment of a Homelessness Policy Implementation Team and a Central Implementation Unit approved by Government in February 2014. The key part of their work is the implementation of the *First Report of the Homelessness Oversight Group* which is being pursued through a structured plan

5 Prior to the Election 2011 the five main political parties in the State; Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and the Green Party signed the Simon Election Pledge, pledging that if elected to Government that they would ensure that tackling homelessness would be a top priority(2013)

6 www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,34865,en.pdf

‘...to make the transition from a shelter-led to a sustainable housing-led response to homelessness and to achieve the 2016 goals for homelessness’ (p4).

This *Implementation Plan on the States response to Homelessness* approved by Government in May 2014, outlines 80 actions to address homelessness and identifies the lead statutory agencies with responsibility. Critically, it requires reporting to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy⁷ which is chaired by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD (Irish Prime Minister) on a quarterly basis.

The Simon Communities are very supportive of all of these commitments to achieve the goal of ending long term homelessness. We firmly believe that with sufficient resources, political will and national direction this goal can be achieved. In fact, it must be achieved; people who are homeless must be prioritised.

Current Policy Context

The prolonged economic crisis has meant that more people are at risk of homelessness, more people are becoming homeless and more people than ever are turning to the Simon Communities for support. The Simon Communities in Ireland saw a 24% increase in the number of people using our services in 2012⁸, and the numbers continue to grow.

There still is not a definitive count of the number of people who are homeless in Ireland. Best official figures available are from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures released in September 2012 which indicated that 3,808 people were either counted in accommodation providing shelter for people who are homeless or sleeping rough on Census Night April 10th 2011. Of those 3,808 people, 1,648 or 43% were in emergency accommodation. This is a minimum figure and things have deteriorated significantly since 2011. The Dublin Regional Homeless Executive rough sleeper count for Spring 2014 indicated that 127 people were sleeping rough on one night in Spring, a 35% increase from Spring 2013 count. This is despite increased numbers of emergency beds being made available. Official rough sleeper figures for other parts of the country are not available at this time.

The availability of suitable housing with support is crucial to achieving the Government's commitment of ending long term homelessness by 2016, using a housing-led approach. This remains a very real challenge in the current economic climate. However, it requires more than just housing; those with higher support needs must have the option of accessing appropriate support as necessary. This includes housing support and health and social care support based on need.

⁷ www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Taoiseach_and_Government/Cabinet_Committees/Social_Policy_for_attachment_to_main_page_.html

⁸ Simon Communities in Ireland Annual Report 2012, most available figures.

Ireland is in the middle of a housing crisis with 89,872 households on the social housing waiting list. The €30 million housing stimulus package announced as part of Budget 2014 was welcome but inadequate in light of such high levels of need. This was to some degree acknowledged with the announcement of the Investment Stimulus Package in May 2014 of €50 million in capital funding. However, this will not stem the growing tide of housing demand. It is now clear that a significant impetus is required to address the ever growing social housing need. The Private Rental Sector still remains the only housing option for many people. However, rent inflation has reached double figures in the capital and continues to increase in other major cities and larger towns across the country. In addition to this, the number of rental properties available has continued to decrease since 2011. The most recent Daft.ie rental report for Q1 2014 reported rents nationally are now 8.9% higher than one year previously. There were 5,800 properties available to rent nationwide as of May 1st 2014, the lowest level since October 2007. On securing private rented accommodation, tenants remain vulnerable to scheduled and unscheduled rent increases. The majority of people on social welfare are dependent on rent supplement to access and remain in housing. This is becoming more difficult for many with rents now being above the rent supplement limits and a growing number of landlords unwilling to accept rent supplement payments.

Lack of available social housing and barriers preventing people accessing housing in the private rental sector has made it more and more difficult to secure accommodation. This is not only causing homelessness but, it is also preventing people from leaving homelessness. People who are homeless are being effectively trapped in expensive emergency homeless accommodation far longer than they should be.

A new approach is required involving significant investment in social housing provided to the local authorities and the approved housing bodies in greater numbers. The Simon Communities welcome the development of the New Social Housing Strategy and have made a submission to the preparation of same. This Social Housing Strategy must address immediate needs as a matter of urgency; provide a sustainable way of supplying long term social housing, particularly for people who are vulnerable; and tackle past failures in terms of housing policy and provision in Ireland. Any vision for the provision of social housing into the future must at its core be inclusive, meet the range of needs and supports, provide for a range of housing types and reflect the reality of changing life circumstances of tenants in terms of building life-long adaptable housing.

What is a 'Rural' Area?

One of the challenges at looking at the issue of rural homelessness in Ireland is that there is no specific definition of rural homelessness. This is further compounded by the fact that there is no one agreed definition of a rural area thus many variations are used. The Central Statistics Office (CSO), for the purpose of the Census, use the term 'Aggregate Rural Area' to describe the population outside an 'Aggregate Town Area'⁹ and this includes towns with a population of less than 1,500¹⁰. Research undertaken by the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA) defines rural areas as 'small towns, villages and open countryside with population of less than 4,500 people'¹¹. Alternatively, a Government White Paper on Rural Development (1999) described rural areas as all areas outside the five major urban areas of Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford¹². The National Spatial Strategy (2002) identified five broad categories of rural areas including:

- Areas in close proximity to large urban areas and with high population densities.
- Areas where population and agricultural employment have started to decline and where replacement employment is required.
- Areas where population decline has been significant
- Areas that are remote including parts of the west coast and the islands.
- Areas that are culturally distinct such as areas on west coast of Ireland and Gaeltacht areas, which are sparsely populated and can experience the highest levels of isolation.¹³

Rural Poverty in Ireland

The latest SILC¹⁴ report for 2012 shows that the 'at risk poverty rate' in Ireland increased to almost 17% from 16% in 2011 and 15% in 2010. This increase is as a result of the drop in average equivalised income by 5% from €21,440 in 2011 to €20,856 in 2012. The group most 'at risk of poverty' were people living in households where there was 'no one at work' at 37%, this is an increase from 30% in 2010. This figure was at 35% people who were unemployed. The 'at risk of poverty' rate for people living in accommodation that was rented at below the market rate or rent free was almost as high at 34%. If all social transfers were excluded from income, the 'at risk of poverty' rate would actually be as high as 50%. This is a steady increase from 40% in 2005. This highlights the ever increasing dependence on social transfers by individuals in order to remain above the 'at risk of poverty' threshold.

9 Towns with populations of 1,500 persons or more

10 CSO Census 2011

www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011vol1andprofile1/Profile1_Statistical_Tables_and_Appendices.pdf

11 Northern Ireland Housing Executive 'Draft Rural Action Plan 2013-2015

www.nihe.gov.uk/rural_homes_and_people_draft_action_plan_2013-2015.pdf

12 O'Sullivan, E, 'Homelessness in Rural Ireland' Ch 11 in Millbourne, P & Cloke, P "International Perspectives on Rural Homelessness" (2006).

13 nss.ie/pdfs/Completea.pdf

14 SILC is Annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions carried out by CSO

In 2012 over a quarter (27%) of the population experienced two or more types of enforced deprivation. This compares to 25% in 2011 and 12% in 2007. People living in accommodation that was rented at below the market rate or rent free experienced a high deprivation rate of 51%. Those living in households with one adult and one or more children experienced a rate of 50%. Those describing themselves as unemployed also had high levels of deprivation at 49%. The deprivation rate among those NOT at 'risk of poverty' continued to increase in 2012 to 23% from 21% in 2011 and 19% in 2010. This shows that even people with an income above the poverty threshold are unable to afford a basic standard of living.

It is important to note that poverty is experienced differently in rural areas. For example there are more opportunities to 'shop' around in urban areas with greater choice and more competition, transport and services. In addition, there are more chances in urban areas to take up employment opportunities and volunteering. Pobal¹⁵ commissioned a report to provide information on changes in deprivation which have occurred in each local area over the five year period of 2006-2011. The report found that although Ireland as a whole has been affected by the economic downturn, the five major urban centres were least affected with the distant commuter counties outside Dublin most affected by the economic crisis. Kildare, Meath, Wexford, Roscommon, Cavan, Laois and Offaly have experienced the most significant decline in the five year period¹⁶.

14 SILC is Annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions carried out by CSO

15 Pobal is a not-for-profit company and a registered charity working on behalf of Government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion, reconciliation and equality.

16 Haase, T & Pratschke, J 'The 2011 Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (SA)' August 2012



ISSUES IN RURAL AREAS

Although the causes of homelessness in rural areas are very similar to homelessness in urban areas, including poverty, inequality (structural), institutional, relationship or personal causes, there are some distinct differences between rural and urban homelessness. One of the most common differences is that rural homelessness tends to be more ‘hidden’ than in urban areas with fewer people appearing to sleep rough. Instead they stay with family and friends, couch/sofa surf or live in over-crowded and unfit accommodation. This phenomenon has been relatively underexplored in the Irish context until recently. In 2013 an independent review¹⁷ of the Regional Settlement Service (RSS) run by Midlands Simon Community, the only region wide service in the region, was undertaken. This review outlines that a housing led approach can have successful outcomes and impact in rural settings and the outcomes are verified in the review. Furthermore, in September 2013 the first ever conference on Housing First and its application to rural areas was held hosted by Midlands Simon Community with Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)¹⁸.

¹⁷ Review of Regional Settlement Service (2013) Murtagh and Partners

¹⁸ Papers/presentations that are available on www.ait.ie

Housing

Poor quality accommodation is a major problem in many rural areas, where people can often accept living in substandard conditions as a way of life. This is especially true amongst single men in the North West region evidenced by research carried out in this area. Two separate studies carried out in West Sligo¹⁹ among single men between 35 and 65 and North Leitrim²⁰ among older people in rural areas found people living in sub standard housing with lack of basic amenities and with a high level of acceptance of substandard conditions. 56% of respondents of the West Sligo study reported they felt that their living conditions were good yet some of the interviewers' comments relating to those same conditions indicated they were substandard, compared with those regarded as acceptable by society generally²¹. The CSO, as part of Census 2011, carried out a report on 'The roofs over our heads'. It showed that 1,845 private households in rural areas around the country had no piped water supply in their homes and 1,858 private households had no sewerage facilities²².

Housing supply is also an issue with a lack of one-bedroom properties of adequate quality available in many rural areas. This may mean that even though a person may want to stay in their local area they may have to move elsewhere to access housing.

Services

A major problem in rural areas is availability and access to services, both homeless services and support services. There are fewer homeless services available in rural areas and where they are available many are at development stages²³ or are compromised by geographical distance. Access to services and necessary support services are greatly hindered by geographical distance and lack of transport in rural areas. Where new emergency accommodation has opened, people often need to travel some distance to access it. Where public transport does exist, people may not always be able to make appointment times when reliant on public transport. This can be a particular concern in the more remote rural areas, where people may live some distance from the nearest bus stop and have to walk or rely on others for lifts. Difficulties with access to transport, public or otherwise was highlighted in a study carried out for Simon Communities on older people who are homeless where some of the interviewees, many of whom were in poor health, had to walk for over a mile to the road to the nearest bus stop²⁴. The study on Rural Ireland for Older People found that approximately half of all people who took part in the survey were prevented or limited from attending hospital or other health related appointments because of lack of access to transport²⁵. Furthermore, anecdotal information suggests that people using Simon services in rural areas have had to discontinue accessing support services due to lack of transport in the area²⁶.

19 West Sligo Forum "Land of Rugged Beauty: Unmet needs of today become tomorrow's problem"

20 R.I.S.E (Rossinver Integrated Social Enterprise) "Rural Ireland for Older People: A snapshot of Life for Older People in the Rossinver and Kiltyclogher areas of County Leitrim (2008)

21 West Sligo Forum "Land of Rugged Beauty: Unmet needs of today become tomorrow's problem"

22 www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011profile4/Profile,4,The,Roof,over,our,Heads,Full,doc,sig,amended.pdf

23 The first emergency service for the counties of Laois and Offaly only opened in 2012.

24 Walsh, K (2013) *Homelessness, Ageing and Dying: Exploratory research looking at the needs of older people who are homeless as they age, and are faced with the issues of serious ill health and dying*. Simon Communities of Ireland.

25 R.I.S.E (Rossinver Integrated Social Enterprise) "Rural Ireland for Older People: A snapshot of Life for Older People in the Rossinver and Kiltyclogher areas of County Leitrim (2008)

26 Visit to North West Simon Community

Rural Isolation

Rural isolation is a problem reported in many rural areas, where people may be living alone some distance from their nearest neighbours. The lack of, and distance from, social activities further exacerbate this problem where people often need to travel to the nearest town to access social activities. This can be challenging or impossible if there is no access to transport or where people do not have the resources to pay for public transport.

Homelessness in rural areas - issues arising

Availability and Access to Homeless and Support Services

The availability of homeless services is lower in areas outside the larger cities of Ireland and access to services can be one of the major reasons why people migrate to cities. There may be little or no access to services in smaller towns, with a perception that homelessness does not exist or is not a serious problem in rural areas.

There is concern that unaddressed support needs can contribute to people being at a greater risk of becoming homeless in rural areas. In addition, support services are critical when helping people to move out of homelessness. Another challenge reported is the closing down of banks and local post offices in more rural areas making it difficult for people to collect social welfare payments.

Transport

Geographical distance is a hindrance for both service users in accessing and service providers in providing homeless services. People need to travel, sometimes long distances to the nearest town to services and in some communities the range of services that are provided are limited. Access to support services such as mental health and drug and alcohol services are also equally hindered by geographical distance.

A study carried out by Crisis UK on rural homelessness found that one of the disadvantages of being homeless in a rural area was relying on public transport to meet appointment times whether it is with homeless services or other support services and the possibility of missing appointments if transport is delayed²⁷.

This is supported by feedback from the Simon Communities suggesting that transport was one of the biggest barriers for service users accessing services and support services in rural areas in Ireland. Even where public transport is provided it is limited, bus times don't always coincide with appointment times or people may not have the resources to pay for the cost of transport.

²⁷ [www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/TheyThinkIDon'tExist\[1\].pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/TheyThinkIDon'tExist[1].pdf)

Availability of Suitable Housing

The availability of suitable, affordable housing can very often be as much of a problem in rural areas as it is in urban areas; however, it can manifest in different ways. The building of social housing is now at a virtual standstill throughout the country, meaning that the private rental market plays an important role for people moving out of homelessness, be it in urban or rural area. Revised Rent Supplement limits were introduced in June 2013 by the Department of Social Protection. Although the rent limits increased in many urban areas, they were reduced in a lot of the more rural counties. The lowering of the rent supplement thresholds has caused much difficulty in finding suitable accommodation in areas outside the major cities. Although the rents are lower outside the major cities²⁸, so too are the rent supplement limits. It was difficult to find accommodation within the old limits in some of the bigger towns within these counties, so it is even more difficult at the reduced rates.

One of the major difficulties in rural areas is accessing housing for single people as the majority of the available houses have 3 and 4 bedrooms. Housing can be often distant from public transport or other facilities. Rent very often falls outside the limit for a single person²⁹. If a single person who is homeless applied for rent supplement for such accommodation they generally would be refused on the basis of being 'overly accommodated'.

In some areas where emergency accommodation is available options are limited and not suitable for problematic drug and/or alcohol users. In relation to poor quality accommodation, there is very little, if any, financial support to make improvements to such accommodation, especially for people under-65 and limited grants for those over 65 and in poor health. In addition, there are limited move on options available in rural areas for people trying to move out of homelessness.

Isolation, loneliness and boredom

Common problems reported by people who are homeless or who have recently moved out of homelessness, whether in urban or rural areas, are isolation, loneliness and boredom. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that isolation and boredom is exacerbated in rural areas because of the physical isolation and geographical spread in rural areas which is compounded by the lack of public transport. In the aforementioned study carried out for Simon Community on older people who are homeless, the issues of isolation and boredom were frequently mentioned³⁰. Although this study was specifically carried out with people who were older, this can also be a problem for people of all ages who are or have been homeless in rural areas. Population decline in rural areas has contributed to the lack of social events and activities in these areas.

28 Daft Quarterly Rental Report www.daft.ie/report/

29 Seanad Éireann-04/Jul/2012 Rent Supplements: Motion. debates.oireachtas.ie/seanad/2012/07/04/00012.asp

30 Walsh, Kathy (2013) *ibid*

Feedback from the Simon Communities suggests that there can be significant stigma attached to people who are homeless in rural areas than in urban areas. This can be due to the tight knit nature of rural communities where people generally know one another and there is a perception that homelessness doesn't exist in their area. It was also reported that there can be poor perception of individuals who are 'well known' or have a 'history'. There were two contrasting impacts expressed, on one hand a tight knit community can act as a support (protective factor) however on the other hand, if someone is perceived as being different or as being 'known', the stigma can compound isolation. There was also concern that this stigma might mean that those living in inadequate accommodation in remote areas or those experiencing homelessness may not come to attention of homeless services until the person is in extreme crisis or hospitalised.

Issues arising for Homeless Service Providers in Rural Areas

Funding/Costs

In a study in the UK on the delivery of homeless services in rural areas, a common problem among homeless service providers was that funding generally was lower in rural areas than in urban areas³¹. This study went on to argue that services in rural areas tend to rely more on charitable donations to help fund services which are generally also lower in rural areas. The study also found that cost of running homeless services were higher in rural areas than urban areas. This was mainly due to wider geographical spread and irregular transport services. Service providers who provide outreach services in rural areas frequently incur extra travel cost as a result of this. Use of public transport by service providers is not an option in most areas as it is unreliable, costly and time consuming. A hidden cost can be the extra cost of mobile phone bills as clients have no office to call to so workers need to contact people using mobile phones most of the time.

The Simon Communities report that they incur extra costs as a result of the geographical spread associated with rural homelessness. The cost of travel to deliver their services was one of the major costs. Lack of statutory funding can hinder the development of much needed services, with the development of homeless support services established in one Community region being funded solely by donor funds. The aforementioned review³² of the RSS in the Midlands outlines that the states funding of services in Midlands is significantly below that in urban areas at only 1.5% of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government homeless budget. This is regardless of the metric used, i.e. funding per service user or per outcome or per bed.

³¹ Homeless Link Rural Homeless Project 'Supporting Homelessness Agencies to deliver services in Rural Areas' homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/Homeless%20Link%20Rural%20Homeless%20Report.pdf

³² Ibid

Range of Services Provided

Although there were no cuts to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government Homeless Budget for 2014, the 2013 cuts, implemented by Local Authorities, only came into force in Q4 2013 and were disproportionate across the country. In addition, there have been cuts across other budget lines, for example HSE funding to homeless service has seen cuts by approximately 20% since 2010³³. This comes at a time when the number of people using homeless services continues to increase. One of the major implications of reduced funding is that the range of mainstream services provided in rural areas are now more limited. Cutbacks and reduced public funding are also putting people at greater risk of homelessness and preventing them from moving out of homelessness. Services that had been provided remotely e.g. council outreach offices have been cutback and moved back to headquarters. Another example cited was a day-care service which was provided with a bus for people with mental health issues, this was initially cut from three visits per week to two visits and is now cut to just one visit per week. It is suggested that for many this was their lifeline and the cut has led to a decline in not only their mental health but also their physical health. There is a need for some of the services that are provided in urban areas, such as outreach, supports to help people back into education/employment etc but due to lack of funding and low staffing levels organisations may be unable to provide such services. In addition, staff retention can be an issue in smaller towns.

33 www.independent.ie/irish-news/charities-dublin-homeless-services-at-breaking-point-29179484.html



RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS RURAL HOMELESSNESS

We must find more options and better, more sustainable ways to house people and to support people in housing in the longer term. Critical to this is preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place and supporting people to make the smooth transition from emergency accommodation to independent living. Crucial elements to achieving this are income adequacy, rent supplement and health and social care supports. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, the Department of Social Protection and the HSE along with other Government Departments play a vital role in ensuring access to housing, to social welfare and to the critical support services. All essential when working with people who are homeless, preventing people from becoming homeless and supporting people to move out of homelessness.

1 Homelessness Policy

The Homeless Policy statement outlined the Government's commitment to ending long term and rough sleeping homelessness by 2016 using a housing-led approach. The establishment of the Homeless Oversight Group and the publication of the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness* are a strong indicator of the Government's commitment to reaching this target. However, it needs a continued commitment by whole of Government and resourcing is critical if this target is to be achieved.

We recommend

- That homelessness is prioritised as the most acute form of social housing need.
- Continued commitment from the whole of Government to ensure that the 2016 target is achieved.
- That there is urgent action on the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness* and that it is monitored and reported upon on a regular basis.
- That the voluntary sector is included in all processes and structures as key partners in meeting this target.

2 Housing First/Led Approaches

The Government's Homelessness Policy Statement launched in February 2013 endorses a housing led approach with the main focus being on supply, prevention and support. This is in line with the key policy recommendations at EU level, including the Social Investment Package which calls on Member States to tackle homelessness by adopting long term, housing-led, integrated homelessness strategies at national, regional and local level³⁴.

We recommend

- That housing first/led approaches are implemented and supported in rural as well as urban contexts as a matter of urgency. These approaches have been proven to be effective in such settings³⁵.

³⁴ ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1061&langId=en

³⁵ Murtagh and Partners (2013) *ibid*

3 Resources

The Government must make clear commitments regarding funding across all key departments with responsibility for addressing homelessness until 2016. This was identified in the *First report of the Homeless Oversight Group*. The Simon Communities in Ireland saw a 24% increase in the number of people using our services in 2012. The numbers of people becoming homeless have continued to grow, especially in the last few months, far beyond what was anticipated in this *First Report of the Homeless Oversight Group* which was published at the end of 2013.

We recommend

- An increase in the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government housing budget and the homeless budget to meet growing demand.
- The Budgets of the other Government Departments responsible for homelessness namely Department of Health (HSE) and Department of Social Protection must be reversed back to 2013 levels at a very minimum, as outlined in the *First report of the Homeless Oversight Group*.
- The government must commit to a short and long term investment in housing first/led solutions to ensure that the necessary housing and supports are in place prior to withdrawing funding from emergency accommodation, currently a vital part of measures in place to address homelessness.
- Homeless services working in urban and rural setting must be adequately resourced to facilitate this transition.

4 Tailored services to meet local/regional need

When working with different people with different needs it becomes clear that the approach must be tailored to suit, so too when providing services in different regions. Local and regional services must be tailored to meet the specific context in which they are operating. Vast geographical regions in rural areas may need different configurations of services than more densely populated urban regions. For example, the agreement of a protocol for the operation of the Resettlement Support Service (RSS) in the Midlands between the four local authorities, the HSE and Midlands Simon Community has facilitated a new service to operate effectively across a rural region. They also need to be adaptable and flexible to meet changing needs.

We recommend

- Responses to homelessness must be nationally driven but locally developed and delivered to ensure they are responsive to changing needs and that people can remain in their communities where they have family and other support networks.

36 www.dcenr.gov.ie/Energy/Energy+Efficiency+and+Affordability+Division/retrofit+Consultation.htm

37 www.ncaop.ie/publications/research/reports/Housing_Exclusion.pdf

5 Housing Supply

A range of housing options must be explored to meet the long-term housing needs amongst people who are homeless, including social housing, leasing initiatives, CAS, RAS, Capital Advanced Loan Facility and the Private Rented Market. The Social Housing Strategy currently in development must address immediate housing needs as a matter of urgency.

One of the objectives of the Better Energy Programme³⁶ as set out by Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources, is to improve the energy affordability, health and comfort levels of vulnerable customers within society. Such grants and other home improvement grants need to be extended to people under-65, who are vulnerable. Very often people aren't aware that such grants are available. A report by the National Council on Aging and Older People on Older People's Experience of Housing Exclusion found that people weren't aware that grants were available to make essential home improvements³⁷. More information about the availability of these grants needs to be provided to people who live in such housing conditions.

We recommend

- Work on the implementation of the new Social Housing Strategy needs to happen once published, which is expected to be in the third quarter of this year.
- A proportion of all social housing allocation must be ring fenced for people moving out of homelessness in urban and rural areas.
- Provision needs to be made nationally for higher rent payments under the Rent Supplement Scheme and HAP to support people moving out of homelessness to secure accommodation, similar to the Rent Supplement Initiative currently operating in Dublin.
- Extension of the new Dublin Protocol for families at risk of homelessness on a nationwide basis.
- The Capital Assistance Scheme must continue to be resourced, especially for special needs groups including people who are homeless. It is critical that a proportion of these allocations are for developments in rural areas.
- Extension of home improvement grants to people under-65, which can help them remain in their own home.

³⁸ www.pathwaysvermont.org/Housing-First.html

³⁹ FEANTSA Policy Statement: Housing-Led Approaches to Homelessness in Rural Areas June 2013

6 Flexible Support

The success of housing led approaches is predicated on the provision of open ended support based on need. It is an even greater challenge to get this right in a rural context. It is also important that services recognise the fluctuations in support which may be required. It is important that access to support, both general and specialist, is improved upon. Cuts to frontline staff in statutory bodies are making it more difficult for people to access these services due to longer waiting times for appointments and longer waiting lists.

We recommend

- It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment nationwide and that further cuts to services are avoided.
- Support services (such as mental health and drug and alcohol services) in rural areas are more flexible to ensure those who need their service can access them e.g. opening hours to allow for those that need to rely on public transport to attend their appointments.
- Plans for the provision of support services must take account of the intensity of support required to meet the diverse needs of service users and the timescale that support may be needed for.

7 Innovative responses

Using information and communications technology can help support people who are homeless in rural areas by providing services, both homeless services and support services, in a person's own home. Pathways Housing First Vermont³⁸ is an example of how housing-led approaches can be adapted and implemented in rural areas. The programme has made innovative technology-based adaptations to the original Pathways programme, through the use of refurbished computers and mobile phones by both service providers and services users. This has enabled them to overcome the geographical spread of service users, lack of public transport and lack of access to health and social services.³⁹ This requires adequate resources; a reliable and efficient broadband and mobile phone network in all parts of the country.

We recommend

- The exploration of innovative responses which have been proven to be effective in addressing rural homelessness in other jurisdictions.

8 Inclusion of people who are homeless in rural specific schemes and developments

It is important that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are included as a target group in initiatives and developments in rural areas. Their needs may actually be similar to other excluded or vulnerable groups who are already targeted.

Examples

- A. *Rural Development Policy* has a role to play in helping tackle rural homelessness and this needs to be incorporated at a national and EU level. LEADER is an EU instrument for local development which allows local authorities to develop their area. It helps local rural communities to implement strategies for improving quality of life, which can also address social inclusion issues⁴⁰.

A new Commission for Economic Development in rural areas was established in October 2012 to carry out an extensive public consultation on the future economic potential of rural Ireland and how best to channel funding and resources between 2013 and 2025. One of its objectives is that Ireland is recognised as a modern, fair, socially inclusive and equal society⁴¹. In order to achieve this they must recognise addressing homelessness is a central part to their objective on achieving a social inclusive and equal society as both a rural and an urban phenomenon.

- B. The *Rural Transport Scheme* was set up to provide a quality public transport system nationwide in rural Ireland responding to local needs⁴². The scheme provides a door to door service so is useful to people with mobility difficulties or who may live a few miles from nearest main road. However, the service is not suitable for everyone as times are not regular meaning people cannot always rely on it to make appointments. More flexibility is needed within the scheme so everyone who needs to can make more use of the service.

We recommend

- People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are included as a target group for inclusion in initiatives and developments in rural areas.

40 www.environ.ie/en/Community/RuralDevelopment/EURuralDevelopment/RuralDevelopmentProgrammeLEADER2007-2013/

41 www.ruralireland.ie/

42 <https://www.pobal.ie/FundingProgrammes/RuralTransportProgramme/Pages/Rural%20Transport%20Programme.aspx>



CONCLUSION

Although homelessness is usually associated with urban areas, evidence from the Simon Communities around Ireland indicates that it is also very much a rural phenomenon. The causes of rural homelessness are similar to those of urban homelessness but differences between the two do exist. The most common difference is that rural homelessness is regularly 'hidden'.

Difficulties arise specific to rural settings for people who are homeless and service providers. The geographical distance can be a barrier for people to access homeless services and other support services and for service providers to reach those people who are in need.

There are a number of other barriers to accessing services that are more prominent in rural areas. Lack of transport is one of the major barriers for people who are homeless in rural areas. This in turn is a cause of other issues associated with homelessness, such as isolation/boredom, difficulty for people to make hospital and other support services, employment and educational opportunities.

Service providers incur extra costs in providing homelessness services in rural areas. Outreach services are required in rural areas because of the difficulty of people getting to services in bigger towns/cities. Regular contact by telephone with service users is required, meaning higher phone charges are incurred by service providers.

The Government's Homelessness Policy Statement endorses a housing-led approach to ending long-term homelessness. This approach is very effective in addressing homelessness; however the flexible supports need to be in place for it to work efficiently. Ending rural homelessness requires an interdepartmental and a multidisciplinary approach. Other Government policies, such as rural development policies, rural transport policies and communication and energy policies to name but a few, need to acknowledge that homelessness exists in rural areas and their work can go some way towards helping and even preventing rural homelessness.

APPENDIX 1

Homeless Risk Factors – what we know

- CSO figures in 2011 indicated that **3,808 people** were counted in accommodation providing shelter for people who are homeless or sleeping rough on census night. This is a minimum figure.
- In April 2014, Dublin Regional Homeless Executive confirmed **127 people** were counted as sleeping rough in Dublin. This is a minimum figure.
- There are **89,872 households** on the social housing waiting list.
- The **number of properties available to rent has decreased** and **rents have increased** since 2011, with the latest Daft Report for Q1 2014 reporting that rents nationally were 8.9% higher on average than same period in 2013. This was also the fourth quarter of continuous growth in rent. According to Daft.ie website there were 5,800 properties available to rent nationwide as of May 1st 2014, which is the lowest level since Oct 2007⁴³.
- The number of people who are in receipt of rent supplement remains high at **78,000** despite changes in eligibility (meaning less people are eligible). Since 2005 the number of people in receipt of Rent Supplement has increased by approximately 50% to the first three months of 2013.
- In 2012, **16.5% of people in Ireland were at risk of poverty**, although only a slight increase from 16% in 2011, it is a further increase from 14.7% in 2010⁴⁴.
- There have been increases in deprivation amongst those NOT at risk of poverty⁴⁵. The deprivation rate among this group increased to **23% in 2012 compared to 13.7% in 2009**. Since 2007, this rate has more than doubled.
- The number of people with nothing left of their incomes when all essential bills are paid still **remains high at 14%**. Mortgage and rent continue to be the most expensive bills for majority of people, with groceries and utilities the next two most expensive.
- The Household Budget Survey for 2009-2010, published in 2012, shows that weekly household expenditure on housing has **increased by 56%** from 2004/05 to 2009/10.
- **Fuel and food poverty continues to increase** and people are making difficult choices. Throughout 2013, two-thirds of adults had to put off paying essential household bills. 28% had to sacrifice spending on food, 68% on clothing.⁴⁶ One in ten Irish people were unable to afford food in 2012 ⁴⁷.
- The number of people who are long-term unemployed is of great concern. This has remained at about **60% throughout 2013**⁴⁸.

43 www.daft.ie/report/Daft-Rental-Report-Q1-2014.pdf?v=1

44 CSO SILC Report 2012

45 'At risk of poverty' is an income measurement where deprivation measurements attempts to move beyond monetary indicators and to take better into account the actual standard of living that people enjoy. This measures those who are unable to afford at least two of the 11 items from a list of indicators to warrant a basic standard of living, such as unable to afford two strong pairs of shoes or invite friends or family over for a meal in the past month.

46 Irish League of Credit Unions 'What's Left' Tracker for Q4 2013 www.creditunion.ie

47 www.oecd.org/ireland/OECD-SocietyAtAGlance2014-Highlights-Ireland.pdf

48 Although the rate of long-term unemployment decreased from 8.2% to 7.2% over the year to Q4 2013, 61.4% of those unemployed are long-term. www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2013/qnhs_q42013.pdf

APPENDIX 2

Good practice examples

The Simon Communities have developed services to help tackle rural homelessness responding to local needs in spite of cutbacks in funding and greater costs that are incurred in providing services in rural areas. These services continue to be developed with limited resources.

Dublin Kildare/Wicklow: Dublin Simon Community has developed a Homeless Support Service in Kildare and Wicklow to assess the homeless population in these counties, carry out support to those in need, and report outcomes to Local Authorities. Offices have been established in these counties where they offer prevention, outreach and settlement support for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. This is solely funded by donors in each county. In Wicklow, where there is a lack of single accommodation units, they work with people and if appropriate suggest sharing with another suitable individual. They will support the service users to look for two or three bedroom accommodation. Where there is a lack of or difficulty in accessing transport, staff travel to meet the client in a place convenient to them. They also link in with other services, such as mental health services and social workers arranging for them to visit people in own home. Raising awareness of rural homelessness and how community support can help individuals is also a major part of their services along with building relations with estate agents and landlords.

Galway: Galway Simon Community recently opened up a resource centre in the county which provides information, advice, support and advocacy services in relation to housing and homelessness. However, the strategic plan reflects the need to explore the demand for services in rural areas.

Midlands: Midlands Simon Community have designed all services to respond to the phenomenon of rural homelessness such as the regional settlement service (RSS), emergency accommodation service (sharing waiting lists and maximising capacity around four counties), a Community Liaison Nurse service with each nurse covering two counties and a GP Pharmacy Nurse covering two counties. The RSS in the Midlands has developed as a model suited to rural areas and this service was reviewed in 2013. This review outlines that a Housing led approach can have successful outcomes and impact in rural settings and the outcomes are verified in the review. MSC have always had the Housing First Approach as our vision and MSC hosted the only ever National Housing First Conference in September 2013 and this conference with AIT has three papers/presentations that are available on www.ait.ie, all of which are applicable to the homelessness situation in rural Ireland. As part of the Housing led approach, MSC have 14 housing units with support services in Westmeath and Laois, demonstrating the potential that a housing led approach will have in rural settings.

The lead role that the four Local Authorities of Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath have played together with the HSE has led to improved services across the four Midlands Counties namely through their work on establishing Homeless Action Teams and through the effective working of the Midlands Regional Joint Consultative Homeless Forum.

Mid West: Mid West Simon Community works with rural schools, clubs and organisations to increase the awareness of hidden rural homelessness and to provide information on accessing appropriate services and housing support. The Housing team works with individuals and families to secure tenancies and aids in resettlement when housing availability arises. Mid West Simon Community are currently reviewing their strategic plan to address the need for services and supports in all areas, both urban and rural, of Limerick, Clare and North Tipperary.

North West: North West Simon Community provides a Tenancy Sustainment service on an outreach basis to people in their own homes. Funding was received from Peace III Programme on two occasions which helped to provide outreach work to meet men in their own homes and transport them to access training and information. It also enabled North West Simon Community to deliver a life-skills programme to single isolated men. In addition, practical supports such as skips, paint and other small grants are given to those trying to improve their homes. They also provide support to service users to access financial support from SVP, CWO and if in Local Authority Housing, advocate on their behalf for repairs or alternative accommodation.

South East: South East Simon Community have developed close links with the Higher Executive Officers within local Social Welfare Offices and Local Authorities to ensure that if a property for rent is identified, a service user can move in as quickly and smoothly as possible. There has been a housing-led approach developed to move service users into accommodation and to develop services around them once in the home.

Simon Communities in Ireland

The Simon Communities in Ireland are a network of eight regionally based independent Simon Communities that share common values and ethos in tackling all forms of homelessness throughout Ireland supported by a National Office.

The Simon Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, Midwest, Northwest and Southeast are uniquely placed to mobilise local support and respond effectively to homelessness issues in each region – local responses to local issues using local resources.

The Simon Communities are independently resourced and governed. We work collectively through a National Office to conduct valuable research, inform and influence national policy, best practice and raise public awareness of the common issues affecting people who are homeless in Ireland.

The Simon Communities have been providing services in Ireland for over 40 years. In 2013 we worked with over 5,000 people, including families, in both tackling and preventing homelessness.

Whatever the issue, for as long as we are needed, Simon's door is always open.

Services range from

- **Housing provision, tenancy sustainment & settlement services, housing advice & information services** helping people to make the move out of homelessness & working with households at risk;
- **Specialist health & treatment services** addressing some of the issues which may have contributed to homeless occurring or may be a consequence;
- **Emergency accommodation & support** providing people with a place of welcome, warmth & safety;
- **Soup runs & rough sleeper teams** who are often the first point of contact for people sleeping rough.

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