

Executive Summary



SETTLEMENT first

ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HOUSING ACT 1988 AND
INTEGRATED STRATEGY 2000 IN MEETING THE HOUSING NEEDS OF PEOPLE
WHO ARE HOMELESS



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Any omissions or errors are the researchers' own.



The views expressed by author/s are not necessarily the view of Combat Poverty Agency.

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For over twenty years the Simon Communities of Ireland has been committed to ensuring a strong legislative base to achieve equity in access to quality housing for people who are homeless. In the early 1980's Simon began a campaign for legislative reform, which resulted in the passing of the Housing Act 1988. This Act is central to housing and homelessness policy in Ireland: it provides a legislative definition of homelessness; requires local authorities to assess the numbers of people homeless and their housing need; enables local authorities to meet people's housing needs through their own housing stock or through funding other housing agents and empowers local authorities to develop a scheme of letting priorities. Despite the lobbying of Simon the Act did not put a statutory duty on local authorities to meet the housing needs of people who were homeless. However, during the Dáil debate on the Bill, the then Minister for the Environment argued that while a statutory duty would place an unfair legal burden on local authorities he, as Minister would not approve a scheme of lettings from any local authority which did not prioritise homeless people and further, that if the Act were proved to be ineffective it would be revised.

Measuring the effectiveness of legislation in achieving its set objectives is particularly difficult. For example, an over simplified analysis of the relative effectiveness of the Act might point to the substantial increases (274%) in the numbers of people officially assessed as homeless in the period since the Act came into force. However, the quality and accuracy of the official data renders such an exercise particularly problematic. Thus, while this research set out to assess the numbers of people housed, it also sought to understand how the legislation is interpreted in practice, and how the relevant actors - statutory and voluntary agencies - understand homelessness and housing exclusion and their responses to it. In addition, the research sought the views of those seeking housing. Furthermore, it sought to understand the influence of the introduction of 'Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy' on access to housing in the period since its introduction in May 2000.

If the introduction of the 1988 Act marked a fundamental shift in policy on homelessness, and the Integrated Strategy a further movement forward, it is likely that we are on the verge of a third, equally important shift in national

policy. Born out of increased partnership working and a shift in priorities from meeting emergency needs towards permanent housing we hope this research will prove a useful resource in our new shared vision of how to end homelessness in Ireland.

One clear indication of this shift in emphasis can be found in the revised National Anti Poverty Strategy (NAPS), Building an Inclusive Society 2002 where Government highlighted that "rights encompass not only the core civil and political rights and obligations but also social, economic and cultural rights and obligations that underpin equality of opportunity and policies on access to education, employment, health, housing and social services." The Strategy commits Government to increase access to quality services as a mechanism for making these rights real; it also commits that 'detailed standards in relation to access to services will be set out', including indicators and transparent mechanisms for ensuring the implementation of and adherence to these standards.

We very much hope that the findings from this research will highlight both the gaps and the potential opportunities for Government in fulfilling the NAPS commitments. This new vision for increasing access to housing could be realized through the new Social and Affordable Housing Action plans under which Local Authorities are to plan on a five year basis the specific housing and settlement provision for people who are homeless.

This research was funded by the Combat Poverty Agency under the aegis of the Working Against Poverty research grants scheme. We are very grateful to the Agency to their support. The Simon Communities of Ireland Federation Board matched the funding awarded by the Agency and after a process of public tender the project was awarded to TSA consultancy who we believe have undertaken an extremely important piece of work producing both a professional and highly accessible report. As such, the report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Simon Communities of Ireland; rather it reflects the considered professional views of the consultants that we have engaged. The Simon Communities of Ireland are committed to generating a productive debate on the nature, extent and solutions to homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland and we see this

research as an important contribution to that debate.

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The Simon Communities of Ireland is the federation of seven Simon Communities in the Republic of Ireland: Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, Midlands, North West and South East. Simon provides a range of services to people who are homeless including street outreach, emergency services, settlement support and long-term housing. We are committed to the elimination of homelessness in Ireland and to using our expertise as a service provider to progress solutions with our statutory and non-statutory partners.

Introduction

This research was commissioned by The Simon Communities of Ireland, with the objective of assessing the impact of the Housing Act 1988, and Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy (2000) on people who are homeless in accessing long-term, stable accommodation.

The Housing Act, 1988 sets out a definition of homelessness; requires local authorities to assess the numbers of homeless in their area; empowers local authorities to provide accommodation to homeless persons and to set up a Scheme of Letting Priorities, and allows local authorities to set aside a particular number or proportion of dwellings for homeless people.

Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy (2000) is the key Government policy statement on homelessness. The Strategy called for action plans and Homeless Forums on a county basis, clarified the responsibility for funding homeless services and made undertakings for additional accommodation to allow people to move out of emergency provision.

The *methodology* employed in this research was a detailed questionnaire returned from eight local authorities (including nearly all major urban areas), in-depth interviews with statutory and voluntary service providers and people who are homeless and a number of focus groups.

Questionnaires were returned by

Dublin City Council
South Dublin County Council
Dun Laoghaire / Rathdown County Council
Galway City Council
Cork City Council
Dundalk Town Council
Longford County Council
Wicklow County Council

In depth interviews with a cross range of actors took place in: Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Longford and Waterford.

The 1988 Housing Act

Three of the fundamental elements of the Housing Act 1988 were reviewed: the definition of homelessness; the Homeless Count undertaken by each local authority in their functional area; and the assessment of housing need, conducted by each local authority (for all groups in need of housing, including those homeless).

It was found that *there is no commonly agreed definition of what constitutes homelessness* in local authorities or in Homeless Persons Units and voluntary organisations. The way the Act defines homelessness leaves considerable ambiguity, allowing agencies to widen or narrow the definition of homelessness dependent on their perspective and/or the individual that presents.

The majority of local authorities surveyed said that the *Homeless Counts did not provide an accurate reflection of the numbers of people homeless* in their areas. In the main local authorities said that there was an under-reporting of the extent of homelessness. From interviews, local authorities identified the following problems in the counting of homelessness: an over-dependence in some local authorities on their housing list and administrative records as the basis for the Homeless Count; no agreement as to who is considered homeless, and therefore to be included in the Homeless Count; and a lack of detail in the Count to use as a basis on which to plan long-term housing and other services.

The research also found that there was *little crossover between the homeless counts and the assessment of housing need undertaken by the local authority*. People who are counted as homeless, unless they are already on the local authority's housing waiting list, must make a separate application for local authority housing.

While the Housing Act 1988, never specified that a local connection is required for a person to be accepted by the local authority as in need of housing and eligible for housing from them, in practice *a local connection is required in some of the local authorities* studied. In addition, although the Act does not specify it, *some local authorities consider those people evicted from local authority or private rented accommodation as "intentionally homeless" and consequently as ineligible for housing*. The analysis of the scheme of letting

priorities, undertaken as part of this research, identified two local authorities, which included in their list of overall priorities, 'families or persons rendered homeless *through no fault of their own*'.

Access to Local Authority Housing

From data provided by Local Authorities in the survey *313 units of housing were allocated to people who were homeless in 2002, and 326 units, in 2003*. These figures represent 8% and 16% of total allocations in these areas for these years, respectively.

A comparison of the 2002 figure (313) to the data arising from the Homeless Count in 2002 for the relevant areas showed that *allocations to people who are homeless in 2002 represented 10% of the total number of people who were homeless in these areas*. Overall the greatest proportions of local authority housing allocations to people who are homeless have been by the Dublin local authorities and by Dundalk Town Council with very low but increasing proportions of people who are homeless housed by other local authorities outside Dublin.

Given the paucity of data recorded by local authorities, a comprehensive analysis of numbers of local authority houses allocated to people who are homeless was impossible. This is an important finding in itself, and suggests a need for a mechanism to monitor the progress or effectiveness of the legislation.

It was also found that there is a discrepancy between the type of homeless households that are housed by the local authorities and the type of homeless households that apply for housing.

Single persons account for 68% of those on the current homeless list in local authorities and yet only 43% of allocations to homeless households (collectively between 1998-2003) were to single homeless persons. In all local authorities, the proportion of allocations to single homeless persons is lower than their actual percentage on the homeless housing list.

The length of wait for homeless households is a concern, with those local authorities who answered stating that the length of wait varies from a "minimum of two to three years" to "up to six years to be housed". Five of the eight local authorities did not give a response to this question or did not

record the average length of wait to be housed. Through interviews it was found that in most local authority areas, people who are homeless follow the same procedures as any other applicant for local authority housing and as such, can expect to wait at least as long as non-homeless applicants of the same household type. However because the majority of homeless applicants are single persons and because single persons wait longer than other household types to be housed in all local authorities, in practice the average wait for a homeless applicant is longer than a non-homeless applicant.

Access to the Private Rented Sector for people who are homeless

Single people who are homeless also find it difficult to access housing in the private rented sector, even though this sector has become, by default, the most commonly used form of mainstream long-term housing for people who are homeless. Issues that arise for people who are homeless include:

- low maximum rent levels under the rent allowance scheme for single persons leading to fewer landlords accepting rent allowance
- a general lack of supply for single person units, leading to higher rates of rent
- poor quality of some accommodation, which is often of much lesser quality than "transitional" and some "emergency" accommodation
- lack of ongoing support for people placed in private rented accommodation

While the private rented sector is a commonly used and useful step for resettlement it was found that the willingness of some local authorities to embrace *private rented accommodation as the move-on option for people who are homeless is an abnegation of responsibility*, because of the problems cited above and because it was never intended in the Housing Act 1988, nor in Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy (2000), to be one of a range of long-term housing options employed.

Housing services provided by voluntary organisations

While much voluntary housing is designated specifically for people who are homeless, it is typically designed for short periods for people in emergency housing need. In some services, people occupy this emergency

accommodation for very long periods. For these individuals, *emergency accommodation is effectively their long-term settlement option.*

Housing intended as transitional accommodation also has people staying for very long periods. After the transitional programme is complete, long-term housing placement is rarely immediately available. Further difficulties in housing people post transitional housing include: the relatively high quality of transitional housing, which means that some people on some programmes are reluctant to accept lesser quality step down accommodation; and the fact that there is more intensive enforcement of rules and regulations in transitional housing compared to long-term housing, leading to more people caught infringing the rules of the service and being returned to emergency homeless hostels.

There are some examples of long-term housing provision provided by voluntary organisations, which has resulted in a widening of the housing options and increased supply of long-term accommodation, as well as the ability for the voluntary organisation to manage the allocation process more closely. In spite of these successes, *voluntary organisation's overall contribution of long-term housing units to people who are homeless remains small.* Five out of the 417 units built in the period March - Sept 2004 under the Capital Assistance Scheme were built by voluntary organisations working with homeless people.

Aspects of the present funding system militate against voluntary organisations becoming more active in developing long-term housing. Government funding for social housing is weighted towards capital and construction costs, with limited funding for management or for support for vulnerable people in their homes. Most available funding for supporting vulnerable people who are homeless, for example 'Section 10' and Health Service Executive funding, are principally available only for emergency and transition accommodation.

Interviews with people who are homeless

While many representatives of voluntary organisations interviewed believed that local authority accommodation is the optimum outcome, many people who are homeless did not agree. *Only one-third of interviewees who had applied to the local authority for housing expressed a preference for local authority housing above the private rented sector or voluntary housing provision.* A third of

interviewees had actually rejected offers of local authority accommodation. Some of the stated reasons why local authority accommodation is not preferred, were:

- Local authority estates are viewed in some cases as experiencing endemic anti-social behaviour problems and offering limited support to residents
- Older Person Dwellings (OPDs) were often offered as the only available option for single people but typically these were not viewed as suitable by active single men
- Local authorities tend not to offer larger housing units to single people with occasional access to children (for example parents of children who are separated or divorced), which the person seeks
- The move to independence is worrisome for some people and some people wish to stay with the present agency that they know and trust
- Some local authority housing is located in out-lying areas, where public transport is often limited, leading to intensified isolation.

It would be wrong to infer from this that people who are homeless are not interested in moving on from emergency accommodation. While some voluntary and statutory homeless service providers interviewed stated that many people who are homeless were not ready or capable of living independently, 22 of the 25 people who are homeless interviewed for this research expressed a preference to move on to more long-term stable accommodation and an ability to manage their tenancy.

The role for settlement support services

Settlement support services are still in their infancy in Ireland. Before expanding these services further, issues which may need to be addressed include: a lack of definition of the settlement officer role; a lack of interagency work between settlement teams and the local authorities' allocations sections; and a lack of an evaluation mechanism to assess and guide the existing settlement services.

When effectively organised, *settlement services pay for themselves* by freeing up expensive emergency hostel beds and supporting people in less expensive long-term accommodation. Most people who have been formerly homeless in long-term housing, while requiring initial assistance, do not need

significant help after about three months, but some of those settled do need continual occasional intervention.

Conclusion

Without long-term stable housing virtually no supportive intervention for people who are homeless works. Housing often needs to be accompanied by supportive services, at least in the short-term, but such support services without long-term stable housing cannot end a person's homelessness. With the right support, even people with extensive histories of substance abuse have left emergency accommodation and obtained stable long-term housing. Furthermore, the evidence cited in this study not only shows that making more long-term housing available works to end homelessness, but also that, for people who are homeless with substance abuse and mental health histories, these service provisions are virtually cost-neutral.

Despite this, it would be unfair to say that local authorities have completely failed in their role to implement the Housing Act 1988. While the Act gave form to an official identification of the issue of homelessness, it was never intended to explicitly direct the manner by which homelessness should be solved. Rather it allows the local authorities considerable flexibility in meeting the housing needs of homeless people.

"Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy" went much further than the Act but it too failed to articulate and formulate one best practice approach to meeting the housing and support needs of homeless people.

This articulation of one best practice approach is now being sought by the multiple agencies involved in addressing the apparently growing phenomenon of homelessness in Ireland today. Any new clear direction and strategy - we recommend one based on a "settlement first" approach - will need to be reflected by Government financing that makes long-term stable housing and settlement support the main methods for addressing homelessness, thereby widening voluntary effort away from its predominant emergency provision.

A. General

i. "Settlement First"

We recommend the adoption of a "Settlement First" approach by all Government Departments, local authorities, the Health Service Executive and voluntary organisations involved in the delivery of services to homeless people. We recommend that local Homeless Action Plans should also adopt the "Settlement First" approach and should set out how each of the agencies involved through the Homeless Forums will work together to achieve placement of a greater number of homeless people into long-term housing.

B. Implementation of the Act

ii. Homeless Definition

Government should formulate a definitive interpretation of the definition of homelessness in the Housing Act 1988, so that the same national understanding of what constitutes homelessness is applied and understood by all statutory and voluntary agencies. This would best be achieved through a national directive issued jointly by both the Departments of Health and Children and Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) or the "Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy" Interdepartmental Group, setting out, as a minimum, the service response that the common "homeless" scenarios outlined in our research should be entitled to receive.

As part of a definitive interpretation of the definition of homeless we also recommend that the eligibility for those counted as homeless be narrowed in some cases (we recommend that people housed long-term in "supported housing" should no longer be included in the Homeless Count) and widened in others (we recommend that DEHLG should give consideration to ensuring that the Homeless Counts include the "hidden homeless" and those staying in hospitals because they have no where else to stay).

iii. Homeless Count

In order to provide timely and useful information, we recommend that the process of counting homelessness should be conducted annually or on an ongoing basis. If this is felt to be difficult, in the short term, we recommend the count return to being every two years (as previously in 1991 and 1993) rather than every three years as presently.

We also recommend that all local authority areas follow the same methodologies in compiling their count and that DEHLG ask local authorities to detail and publish information on homeless household size, age, etc, to allow for homeless households' housing needs to be more clearly identified. Finally, we recommend that any new agreed Count format should be the basis for a uniform Health Service Executive, Homeless Forum and Local Authority estimate of housing need and the planning of new services.

iv. Allocations

We recommend that DEHLG should require each local authority to make clear those groups that the local authority will house and those groups that the local authority will not house. For example, if people under 30 years of age or households with a history of anti-social behaviour are barred *in practice* from being allocated housing by a local authority or if a local connection is required before an application is accepted, this should be made known to all parties at the start of the process and publicly debated at a national and local level.

We also recommend early meeting and in-depth assessment by the local authority, once the homeless household's local authority application has been accepted, such that the type of housing sought, the type of supports required and the length of time the household is likely to wait are identified at the start of the process.

Clarity and transparency can also be achieved by the incorporation of an appeal mechanism in the local authority housing application process so that excessive waits, misplaced applications, incorrect criteria for rejection of applications, etc. can be investigated independently. This might be overseen by DEHLG, the Ombudsman's Office or another independent agency.

Finally, in the context of voluntary organisations supporting the application of homeless service users, we recommend that voluntary organisations acknowledge that not all homeless service users want to apply for local authority housing, but that all homeless service users should be informed of their entitlement to apply and be given the option of support when making their application.

v. Links between Homeless Count and Housing Assessment

We recommend greater links be made between the Homeless Count and the local authority Assessment of Housing Need. We believe this can be achieved by incorporating into the existing Homeless Count detailed housing need assessments of those people recorded as homeless, or (in our view preferably) by completing a separate detailed housing assessment of the housing needs of people who are homeless, to understand what their long-term housing requirements are, what additional support needs if any they have and what mainstream housing providers need to do to accommodate these housing needs.

C. Local Authority Housing

vi. Developing housing that reflects the household profile and expressed needs of people who are homeless.

We recommend that local authorities develop and allocate sufficient single person type accommodation that, as a minimum, reflects the type of homeless households that apply for housing from them and that they allocate larger units to homeless single person households with access to children. We also recommend, in the development of new housing stock, local authorities address the present unattractiveness of their housing stock to some homeless people by incorporating features such as caretakers, a mix of unit sizes and a mix of tenure types in new developments.

vii. Local authority allocations to homeless service users based on consultation with homeless service providers

We recommend that a special allocation system be introduced in all larger local authorities, whereby an agreed minimum number of units of local authority accommodation are made available to homeless service users. Consultation between local authorities and homeless service providers can help local authorities know in advance the numbers of units of housing they will allocate and voluntary organisations can work with homeless service users to plan, prepare and support their settlement. This approach, rather than local authorities working off their housing and homeless lists exclusively, is preferable if "homeless service users " are to be housed, although this should not imply that local authorities no longer need to make allocations to homeless people from their general housing waiting lists.

viii. End the separation of homeless and allocation functions

We recommend that all local authorities partner their homeless and allocation functions. In smaller local authorities the homeless officer may also be a housing allocations officer; in larger local authorities the teams might work closely and share working arrangements. We recommend this because of the need, in our view, to develop a clearer link between the concerns raised in the Homeless Forums and outcomes, in terms of allocation of local authority housing.

D. Voluntary organisations

ix. Voluntary organisations facilitated to meet long-term housing needs

We recommend that all voluntary organisations working with homeless people adopt a "settlement first" approach, such that they facilitate the development of new long-term housing in the areas they work, particularly addressing the housing needs of single homeless people. To facilitate the development of this approach, DEHLG needs to address the funding

mechanisms that support people in long-term voluntary housing . We recommend that DEHLG should consider raising the thresholds on smaller units of accommodation through the Capital Assistance Scheme, especially in urban areas like Dublin, thereby facilitating voluntary organisations attempting to develop self-contained accommodation for single homeless people.

We recommend, once DEHLG removes the barriers from making this happen, voluntary organisations should develop their long-term build strategies based on the homeless assessments and priorities identified in the homeless forums and not on the numbers registered for housing with the local authority.

We also recommend that DEHLG and the Irish Council for Social Housing facilitate voluntary housing providers to record on an annual basis the number of allocations of their housing that they make to homeless people.

Finally, we recommend that voluntary organisations providing long-term housing attempt as much as possible to break the linkage between the provision of housing and the acceptance of rules and strictures, so that a tenant, in order to remain in occupation of housing, need only adhere to the conditions of the lease - pay the rent, don't damage the property, do not act anti-socially - and is not required to participate in treatment or activities.

x. The numbers of transitional housing units should be managed

Because of the present new realities in the private rented sector, where access for homeless people is somewhat easier and where security of tenure is improving, we believe that there may be a need to reassess the role of transitional housing. An adoption of the "settlement first" approach also has implications for transitional housing.

Our research has found that placements in the private rented sector with support can be as least as stable as those in transitional accommodation. In this changing housing environment, we recommend as a first step that a cost benefit analysis be conducted on the effectiveness of current transitional housing mechanisms. Dependent on the findings of this analysis we

recommend that homeless service providers use the private rented sector with support as a transitional/ settlement option for homeless people instead of seeking to develop new transitional housing.

xi. Emergency housing supply should be re-examined.

Evidence from our research suggests that there is now a sufficiency of emergency accommodation in most urban areas in Ireland. If more long-term housing options are made available and settlement supports become more available and organised, such that long stay residents are moved out to more appropriate accommodation, then there is no reason in our view why some emergency housing should not be closed.

We recommend that the first steps in a process of disengagement from the provision of emergency housing in Dublin should start with some private emergency accommodation. However in the medium term, there may also be a need to look at the role and range of voluntary sector organisations involved in delivering emergency accommodation. While we acknowledge that it is politically difficult for statutory agencies at local level to remove or shift funding from well known voluntary service providers, even in the case of weak service delivery, we believe this issue may need to be faced in coming years, assuming the "settlement first" model is adopted by all agencies.

As part of this re-examination of the role of emergency housing, we recommend that, if more long-term housing options are made available and settlement supports become more available and organised, in the medium term voluntary organisations that provide emergency accommodation to homeless people should have the Section 10 payments of any residents who have stayed longer than 12 months in their emergency accommodation examined and possibly stopped and that a different funding mechanism and regulatory framework should be put in place instead.

We also recommend that some accommodation presently classified as emergency accommodation but housing homeless people for extended periods should be re-designated as long-term accommodation and thereby provide a long-term safe home for these residents. In our view this should only be done if standards of accommodation, privacy, independence and level

of care match prescribed norms. In cases where standards do not match these norms then re-designation should be deferred until government funding is provided to improve living conditions in the re-designated properties and the work is carried out.

E. Private Rented Sector

xii. Special measures are developed to facilitate homeless people's access to the private rented sector.

While raising the rent cap may offer some additional supply to rent supplement applicants, landlords who presently accept rent allowance claimants are likely to merely increase their level of rents and it is unlikely that many new entrants will enter the subsidised rental market. Instead of raising the rent cap for all rent supplement applicants, we recommend the following measures:

- That SWA Circular 06/03 is reinforced and applied more frequently by Senior Community Welfare Officers so that it becomes common for homeless households to be positively discriminated in their move out of homelessness and into stable rented accommodation.
- Voluntary organisations are facilitated to engage with private landlords and lease properties from them and subsequently to a homeless household. Experience from the UK shows that this approach is the most successful in increasing supply.
- In the application of the Rental Assistance Scheme, voluntary organisations working with homeless people be contracted to manage some of the housing units that the local authority will be asked to manage.
- Statutory and voluntary homeless settlement officers should be empowered to set up a tenancy. For example if a settlement officer accompanying a homeless person find a private rented accommodation, and it matches both their expectations, the CWOs should be instructed to issue payment rather than duplicating the work of the settlement officer and following their own assessment process.

- The model established by the Access Housing Unit, operated by Threshold in Dublin, be extended to other cities in Ireland, perhaps first to Cork or Galway on a pilot basis.
- We also recommend, as an option to voluntary organisations, that the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Social and Family Affairs should consider allowing the current funding offered through Rent Allowance to be provided to voluntary sector service providers to facilitate them to borrow to build accommodation for people who are homeless.

xiii. There is an end to placements in very poor quality private rented accommodation

Very poor quality rented accommodation cannot be classed as a stable long-term housing option. We recommend the scaling up of local authority private rented sector inspections, particularly where CWOs restrict the relocation of tenants on the SWA scheme. We also recommend that CWOs refuse to deal with landlords not registered with the Private Residential Tenancies Board and do not refer homeless people to very poor quality private rented accommodation, no matter how difficult to place the CWOs consider the person to be.

xiv. End rent allowance restrictions to those who refuse local authority accommodation

Official policy is that if a person is in rented accommodation funded through rent allowance and refuses two or more offers of local authority accommodation, they are no longer eligible for rent allowance. Persons in privately run emergency accommodation, in contrast, may make as many refusals of local authority accommodation as they like and will still have access to emergency accommodation. We recommend that people staying in private rented accommodation should be considered as eligible for rent allowance even if they refuse a number of offers of local authority accommodation.

F. Settlement

xv. Interagency collaboration

While the Homeless Forums have been welcomed as a positive innovation in some areas, the Forums clearly cannot address all the elements associated with effective interagency collaboration. We recommend that, supplementary to the Homeless Forums, which are concentrating on strategy and funding, that another more operational level of coordination is developed in each local authority area, as required among homeless statutory and voluntary service providers. This delivery vehicle, perhaps called Homeless Settlement Forums, could include the relevant HSE director of services, voluntary homeless organisations, mental health services and a local authority housing officer and could meet monthly to arrange and review accommodation, care and support needs of individual cases, thereby overcoming the difficulty of co-ordination and cooperation.

xvi. Prevention of homelessness for at risk groups

The three at risk groups we considered in this report are discharges from prison and hospitals and people experiencing domestic violence.

We recommend that models of good practice in the discharging of homeless people from hospitals and prisons should be developed by the Departments of Health and Children, Justice and Law Reform and Environment, Heritage and Local Government and that this be clearly communicated to all hospitals and prisons.

Part of that good practice should include an early flagging of homeless people with mental health problems, starting at the admission stage and monitored as care needs change. We also recommend that emergency accommodation should no longer be considered as appropriate accommodation into which people staying in a mental health unit are discharged.

More checks are also required on prisoners who claim to have homes into which they can be discharged but who are actually homeless. We recommend that the fact that someone is homeless should not delay their

discharge from prisons but that private rented sector accommodation with support be provided to assist their transition from prisons.

Regarding people vulnerable to or victims of domestic violence, we note that there is scope in existing legislation for local authorities to take action to protect people experiencing violence in the home so that the victim of violence maintains the accommodation. We recommend that this could be done through either inserting into a tenancy agreement that domestic violence is grounds for eviction; or through interpreting the (Miscellaneous) Housing Act, 1997 (which covers anti-social behaviour of tenants in local authorities and other social housing providers) such that violent behaviour includes violence against the person on the tenancy and therefore gives grounds to local authorities for exclusion and eviction of the perpetrator.

xvii. DEHLG to monitor process of local authorities' allocations to homeless people

We recommend that DEHLG develop new IT and a common data recording system that is adopted and followed by all local authorities. As part of this new data collected we recommend that DEHLG record the numbers of units of local authority housing allocated to all households and then a breakdown into housing types, including homeless households and that this is published in one of their Housing Statistics Bulletins annually.

G. Funding

xviii. Funding needs to facilitate homeless voluntary service providers make the transition and become providers of long-term housing.

We recommend that the funding regime is organised so that support can be provided by organisations to enable homeless people maintain stable, independent and long-term housing. We recommend this be in the form of a mainstream current funding top-up to voluntary housing providers that provide long-term accommodation and support to vulnerable formerly

homeless people. We also recommend that this funding top-up allows for the employment of floating support workers so that units of housing allocated can be spread out (particularly important in rural areas).

xix. Co-ordination of service delivery

Another major concern about the present funding regime is the lack of transparency and lack of reference to settlement outcomes. In the short-term, we recommend a review of the funding of homeless services, conducted independently of the review of "Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy". Dependent on the findings of that review, we recommend that funding be re-organised through either (a) a central national fund, administered by a unit composed of membership from the DEHLG and DHC or (b) in the major urban areas, locally through one channel, (with some similarities to the Homeless Agency in Dublin), whereby the local authority and health service executive funding is administered together. This second suggestion could be piloted first in Cork and then applied to other areas if successful.

Both approaches are advantageous in that they facilitate evaluation of moneys administered on the basis of value for money considerations and they make possible funding to voluntary organisations based on three year plans and measured settlement outcomes.

