

Making the Right Choices



**Simon Communities in Ireland
Pre-Budget Submission 2015**

June 2014

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Introduction

Homelessness and Housing Crisis

We are in the middle of a homeless and a housing crisis. There are more people at risk of homelessness, more people becoming homeless and more people are turning to the Simon Communities for support. We saw a 24% increase in the number of people using our services around Ireland in 2012¹, and the numbers continue to grow. There are 89,872 households on the social housing waiting list, rents have increased by 8.9% nationally and the number of properties available to rent has declined sharply. Furthermore, rent supplement levels are proving insufficient to meet the cost of many rental properties. Cutbacks to funding for housing support, for health services, probation and welfare services, education and training services etc, all have knock-on effects that contribute to homelessness. This combination of factors can trigger homelessness in the first place but can also prevent people from moving out of homelessness. It is in this context that the Government has committed to ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016 using a housing-led approach.

It is now clear austerity budget measures are having the biggest impact on people who are most vulnerable in our society; significant policy shift is required to address our growing social housing and income adequacy needs. The reliance on the private sector to provide social housing has demonstrably failed. We need substantial investment in social housing allied to provision in private rented sector. It needs vision, decisiveness, political will and the commitment on the part of the practitioners and providers to deliver quality social housing. However, it also needs to be resourced.

Ending homelessness requires more than just housing; those with higher support needs must have the option of accessing appropriate support as necessary. This includes housing support, health and social care support based on need. The Government must reappraise the upfront investment required to generate the flow of accommodation that, along with adequate support, will enable people who have been homeless to take up sustainable housing options. Responses must be nationally driven but locally delivered to ensure people can remain in their communities, where they have family and support networks, when they run into income and housing difficulties.

Opportunities

We need to 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 that offer the most effective means of preventing people from becoming homeless and of supporting people to move out of homelessness.

Budget 2015 presents opportunities – an opportunity to address the social housing crisis in a meaningful way; an opportunity to ensure that we remain on target to meet our shared goal of ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016; and an opportunity to ensure income adequacy for those on low incomes and those who are at risk and most vulnerable. We urge the Government to take these opportunities.

¹ Simon Communities in Ireland Annual Report 2012

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 people 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.
- The **number of properties available to rent has decreased** and **rents have increased** since 2011. The latest Daft Report Q1 2014 reporting that rents nationally were 8.9% higher than same period in 2013. This was also the fourth quarter of continuous growth in rent. There were 5,800 properties available to rent nationwide as of May 1st 2014, the lowest level since Oct 2007².
- In 2012, **16.5% of people in Ireland were at risk of poverty**, although only a slight increase from 16% in 2011, it is an increase from 14.7% in 2010³.
- The deprivation rate among amongst those NOT at risk of poverty has increased to **23% in 2012 compared to 13.7% in 2009**⁴. Since 2007, this rate has more than doubled.
- The number of people with nothing left of their incomes when all essential bills are paid 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.** Throughout 2013, two-thirds of adults had to put off paying essential household bills. 28% had to sacrifice spending on food, 68% on clothing.⁵ One in ten Irish people were unable to afford food in 2012⁶.
- The number of people who are long-term unemployed is of great concern. This has remained at about **60% throughout 2013**⁷.

² <http://www.daft.ie/report/Daft-Rental-Report-Q1-2014.pdf?v=1>

³ CSO SILC Report 2012

⁴ '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.

⁵ Irish League of Credit Unions 'What's Left' Tracker for Q4 2013 www.creditunion.ie

⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/ireland/OECD-SocietyAtAGlance2014-Highlights-Ireland.pdf>

⁷ 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.

http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/2013/qnhs_q42013.pdf

Government Commitments

Reflecting pre election commitments and the signing of the Simon Pledge⁸, 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’ (Housing Policy Statement, 2011, 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 also contained the **renewed commitment to end long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016** using a housing-led approach. It also established a Homeless Oversight Group to review the approach being advocated in the Statement, identifying obstacles and proposing solutions. The Homeless Oversight Group reported⁹ in December 2013 for the first time and 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 ‘...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*¹⁰, 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 Policy¹¹ which is chaired by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD on a quarterly basis.

The Simon Communities are very supportive of these commitments, the work of the Homeless Oversight Group and the *Implementation Plan on the States Response to Homelessness*. We firmly believe that with sufficient resources, political will and national direction the goal to end long term homelessness by 2016 can be achieved. In fact, it must be achieved; people who are homeless must be prioritised in Budget 2015.

⁸ 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

⁹ <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,34865,en.pdf>

¹⁰ *Implementation Plan on the States response to Homelessness*

<http://www.environ.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,38053,en.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Taoiseach_and_Government/Cabinet_Committees/Social_Policy_for_attachment_to_main_page_.html

The Simon Communities Critical Priorities for Budget 2015

The Simon Communities call for action on three fronts to achieve the Government's goal of ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016.

- Access to housing for people who are homeless.
- Access to support in housing.
- Action to prevent homelessness.

1. Access to housing for people who are homeless

The Government has committed to ending long term homelessness by 2016 using a housing-led approach. The availability of suitable housing with support is crucial to achieving this. This remains a very real challenge in the current economic climate. It however 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.

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 access to Private Rented Accommodation is very restricted in the current market. 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 Oct 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. However, with rents now above the rent supplement limits and a growing number of landlords unwilling to accept rent supplement payments, this is becoming very difficult for many.

With the lack of available social housing and barriers preventing people accessing housing in the private rental sector it has become more and more difficult to secure accommodation. This is not only causing homelessness but 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.

It is argued that CWO's can exercise discretion in cases of undue hardship or risk of homelessness. However, the experience of the Simon Communities and indeed other organisations working in this area is that discretion is not being applied. In addition, the use of discretion as outlined in SWA Circular 21/11 is, at the very least, ambiguous.

The first report of the Homeless Oversight Group and the *Implementation Plan on the States Response to Homelessness* recommend that to achieve the Government's goal of ending long-term homelessness by 2016 "budgeted State funding for the sector, from the Department of Environment, Department of Health, Department of Social Protection and Local Authorities, be maintained at the 2013 level for the three years of the transition plan to 2016." (*Finances*, pg 19)¹²

However, the number of individuals and families becoming homeless has increased since the publication of the Homelessness Oversight Report.

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 is required to allow us to 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. Responses must be nationally driven but locally delivered to ensure people can remain in their communities where they have family and support networks, even when they run into housing and income difficulties.

This new Social Housing Strategy due in the third quarter of 2014 will explore new funding models to deliver a more sustainable social housing sector. There is a need to encourage more institutional investors (e.g. pension funds) to invest in the private rented sector by means of the Real Estate Investment Trusts provided for in Budget 2013. These have been in use for many years in North America and in many EU countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium. They were introduced in England in 2007. Although these trusts are rare in social housing, one such trust in New York, the Community Development Trust, has been very successful. In 12 years, they have preserved or added 32,500 housing units to America's social and affordable housing stock¹³.

There is an urgent need for a review of rent supplement limits and we welcome that the DSP are accepting submissions on the Review of Rent Supplement Limits in the coming weeks. The current situation is unsustainable and deteriorating rapidly. Rent limits need to reflect real rents; this can be achieved using the Private Rental Tenancies Board rent index and Consumer Price Index. We welcome that the pilot scheme of HAP has begun, but this will not be rolled out fully until 2015 meaning that until then people will continue to be dependent on rent supplement to help them move out of homelessness and prevent them from becoming homeless. In addition, the Simon Communities recommend that the budget for RAS at the very least is maintained for 2015 with additional units provided under the scheme.

The Housing Policy Statement (2011) recognised that the not for profit housing sector has a significant role to play in social housing supply. In fact AHB's can access funding which Local Authorities cannot; for example through the Housing Finance Agency (HFA), without this counting towards central Government debt, and from commercial banks. To make this a reality AHB's need to be supported to act quickly when opportunities arise.

¹² Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness
<http://www.environ.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload.38053.en.pdf>

¹³ <http://cdt.biz/whatwedo.htm>

The delivery of NAMA properties/units offer a real opportunity to address social housing demand once they are in areas where the necessary supports are in place for people to help them maintain and remain in accommodation. However, since the establishment of NAMA the transfer process of units to social housing has been extremely slow. The Government projected that some of the estimated 4,500 units, announced in Budget 2014, which will be provided for social housing will come from NAMA transfers. As of 31st March 2014, there were a total of 518 NAMA properties transferred to social housing with 166 units which have been contracted where completion work is on-going¹⁴.

Simon Communities critical priorities for Budget 2015

1.1 Social Housing and Homeless Budget

- There has been a significant increase in demand for homeless services over the past few months, far beyond what was anticipated in the Homeless Oversight Report. To meet this growing demand there needs to be an increase in the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government housing budget and homeless budget.
- 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 Homelessness Oversight Group*.
- The Government must commit to a short and long term investment in housing-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.
- We support Social Justice Ireland in their proposal to increase provision for Social Housing by €250 million with €83 million in capital expenditure¹⁵.
- 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.
- Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 is under review and must be retained but is in need of revision. See suggested revisions¹⁶
- A proportion of the overall social housing allocation must be ring fenced for people moving out of homeless.
- There is a need to encourage more institutional investors to invest in the private rented sector by means of the Real Estate Investment Trusts, provided for in Budget 2013.

1.2 Rent Supplement, HAP and RAS

- A review of rent supplement limits needs to be carried out immediately and should not wait until the end of 2014. Rent limits need to be brought into line with real market rents using the rent index and the CPI.
- Clearer direction on the use of discretion in cases of undue hardship and risk of homelessness is required.

¹⁴ <https://www.housing.ie/NAMA.aspx>

¹⁵ Social Justice Ireland Budget Choices 2015 <http://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/file/Budget/2015/2014-06-13%20-%20Budget%20Choices%202015%20downsized%20Version.pdf>

¹⁶ Part V should focus on social housing provision with a minimum of 20% for each planning permission granted. Percentage of units for Social Housing should be greater where the need and cost of living is greater. The Housing Agency should have a formal interest in directing Local Authorities in the allocation of Part V returns in line with their own Housing Strategies. Local Authorities should be given additional powers to determine what specific housing stock would fulfil the developer's obligations under Part V. This could avoid social segregation. The increased involvement of Approved Housing Bodies should be promoted in the delivery of Part V in addition to their early engagement in the planning process.

- 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 operating on Dublin.
- Extend the new Dublin Protocol for families at risk of homelessness on a nationwide basis.
- Fast track the roll out of the Housing Assistance Payment scheme ensuring that Local Authorities have adequate financial and human resource to implement HAP.
- A poverty impact assessment should be completed to assess the impacts revised rent limits are having on people.
- There should be no further increases to the minimum contribution to rent supplement.
- The budget for RAS should, at the very least, be maintained for 2015, with additional units provided under the scheme.

1.3 Approved Housing Bodies (AHB)

- Mechanisms must be explored to improve access to finance for Approved Housing Bodies e.g. review and revision of the Capital Advanced Leasing Fund (CALF) to make it more financially viable and to remove barriers to accessing finance through the Housing Finance Agency.
- The Capital Assistance Scheme must be resourced especially for special needs groups, including people who are homeless.

1.4 Private Rental Sector

- Tighter legislation needs to be ensured to protect those who depend on the Private Rented Sector for a home, especially in relation to inspections of rented properties to guarantee good quality housing for all.
- Implementation of a Deposit Protection Scheme to safeguard deposits as the loss of a deposit causes hardship and increases vulnerability, putting people at risk of homelessness.
- Department of Social Protection to issue new guidelines to Community Welfare offices so that there is clear statutory discretion to support and assist people to exit homeless and those at risk.
- Rent controls need to be applied as a matter of urgency.
- Clear incentives (tax breaks for landlords) must be considered in increasing delivery of private rented accommodation.

1.5 NAMA Property

- There needs to be ongoing work with all parties to ensure that the transfer and selection process of NAMA properties for social housing is fast tracked.
- As per the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness* Local Authorities are taking a second look at some of the properties NAMA offered in 2013 to see if some might be deemed suitable for a private and social housing mix, with a focus on meeting homeless needs (Action 24). This is welcome once they are appropriate to need.

2. Access to Support in Housing

Tackling poor health and wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, problematic drug and/or alcohol use and unemployment is critical to a housing led approach. Ensuring the availability of adequate services can help people move out of homelessness and also prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place. HSE cuts to homeless service have been approximately 20% since 2010¹⁷. Funding cuts to the voluntary sector working with people who are homeless must be avoided to ensure effective services are available to the people who are the most vulnerable in our society. Demand for our services continues to rise; we are well beyond the point of being able to do more with less.

Housing alone is inadequate in addressing the needs of people who are long term homeless. Approaches that maximise independence while providing support for as long as it is needed offer the most effective approach to ending homelessness. Open ended and ongoing support is critical to ensure a housing-led approach works effectively. It is evident ongoing support is needed and that it must be flexible and recognise fluctuations in the level of support that people may need¹⁸.

Effective solutions to addressing homelessness require that we avoid the pitfalls of a 'one-size fits all' approach. The Simon Communities support an approach to addressing homelessness that offers different types of housing appropriate to each person's needs including:

- Pathways Housing First – involving access to housing and visiting support in the form of intensive community treatment and enhanced case management.
- Communal Housing First/led – involving the provision of housing with supports based on site or nearby for people with high support needs whom visiting support arrangements have proved unsuccessful.
- Housing First Light – involving provision visiting (floating) support and case management for people with low to medium support needs.

There has been a rapid growth in opiate use amongst people who are homeless, especially outside of Dublin. This is in addition to the high levels of problematic alcohol use amongst this group¹⁹. Unfortunately, the Department of Health announced as part of Budget 2014 a 7% cut in the Drug Initiative. This fund, which goes to drug projects, was cut by €2 million to €27.95m for 2014. This funding has been cut year on year since 2008 with up to a 40% cut since 2008²⁰. It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment nationwide.

The filling of posts in mental health services continues to be an issue and mental health services continue to be under great strain with reduced staff numbers. We are concerned that any further cuts to this budget will mean that it will be impossible to achieve the level of services outlined in *A Vision for Change*.

¹⁷ <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/funding-cuts-put-services-for-homeless-in-jeopardy-227616.html>

¹⁸ Which Way Home? The Experiences of the Simon Communities Introducing Housing-led Services (forthcoming)

¹⁹ The Simon Communities of Ireland Health Snapshot Study 2011 demonstrates the many related needs experienced amongst people using Simon services around the country; people reported alcohol use (50%), drug use (31%), self harm (19%) and attempted suicide in the last six months (17%). In addition, 12% of participants reported an intellectual disability

²⁰ <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/excise-hikes-on-alcohol-punitive-and-short-sighted-246527.html>

Even with the challenges in the current economic climate, people who are homeless have been supported to gain qualifications and consequently secure jobs and housing. People aged 25 and under are on a lower payment and it is argued that this is to encourage take up labour market training and education courses. However, the cuts to Back to Education Allowances and the reduction in funding for some training courses is making it more difficult for young people to take up courses as doing so may in fact leave them worse off. In addition, the availability of such training/work schemes are not sufficient to meet the training needs of the numbers of young people on the live register.

Simon Communities Critical Priorities for Budget 2015

2.1 HSE Social Inclusion Budget

- The HSE ‘social inclusion’ budget has been cut repeatedly since 2008 and needs to be restored to 2013 levels if the Government’s goal of ending long-term homelessness is to be achieved, as outlined in the *First Report of the Homeless Oversight Group 2013*.

2.2 Drug and Alcohol Services

- It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment nationwide.
- There must be no further cuts to the Drugs Budget or the Drug Initiatives Budget.

2.3 Mental Health

- The development of Community Mental Health Services needs to be continued. We ask that the budget for mental health services be brought back to €35 million.
- We also support Mental Health Reform in their ask that the remaining €15 million, which was due in 2014 for mental health, is restored in 2015 and that this would go, in part, to developing crisis intervention services in all areas.

2.4 Education and Training

- The cuts to education and training in Budget 2013 need to be reversed to ensure people can take up courses or training and that when they do so they do not end up in financial hardship and/or worse off by doing so.

3. Action to Prevent Homelessness

The Social Protection system is essential in preventing people who have lost their jobs, those on low incomes and other vulnerable groups from falling into homelessness and poverty. Resources must not be further diverted away from people who are ‘poor and vulnerable’, whom this government has consistently pledged to protect. People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness fall into this category. Prevention and Early Intervention are critical to addressing homelessness effectively. They are also cost-effective.

The Simon Communities work with some of the most vulnerable members of our society, many of whom are dependent on Social Welfare payments. In the current climate, with the risk factors for homelessness on the increase, it is essential that measures are taken to avoid homelessness occurring in the first instance and that early intervention is facilitated in households deemed to be at risk. Although there may be initial costs involved, these would be minor in comparison to the cost of providing homeless services in the longer-term. Access to housing, to social welfare and to critical support services are essential to prevent people from becoming homeless and to support people to move out of homelessness.

The Social Protection Budget announced for 2014 was €19.6 billion. This was a €660 million reduction from the €20.26 billion for 2013. The *First report of the Homeless Oversight Group* and the *Implementation Plan on the States Response to Homelessness* recommend that in order to achieve the Government’s goal of ending long-term homelessness by 2016:

‘...budgeted State funding for the sector, from the Department of Environment, Department of Health, Department of Social Protection and Local Authorities, be maintained at the 2013 level for the three years of the transition plan to 2016.’ (Finances, pg 19).

The Social Protection Budget needs, at the very minimum, to be reversed to 2013 levels to ensure the Government’s goal of ending long-term homelessness is achieved.

The cost of some basic essential goods and services have continued to increase over the past number of years. The real value of the incomes for people on social welfare and in low paid jobs has reduced considerably as a result. Changes in the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) differ significantly to costs in the Consumer Price Index between the period 2008 and 2013. During this period the cost of a MESL increased by 3.25%, while cost of CPI decreased by 0.15%²¹. This is because the MESL looks at changes in prices of goods and services within the CPI basket of goods that are deemed essential for minimum standard of living such as food, clothing, electricity, home heating, health and education to name but a few. The prices of most of these goods have increased over the past five years. Home heating fuels and electricity prices have seen increases every year through extra taxes imposed on fossil fuels and price hikes by electricity and gas suppliers; people dependent on social welfare and on low incomes spend a larger proportion of their incomes on these basic goods and services. The introduction of water charges in 2015 will be another cost people will have to bear and will impact mostly on people on low incomes. The Irish League of Credit Union Tracker for the last four months of 2013 showed that 14% of respondents had nothing left after essential bills were paid; 28% of respondents sacrificed spending on food and 68% sacrificed spending on clothing and footwear. It also found that between

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http://www.budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/Papers/VPSJ_2013_CHANGES_IN_THE_COST_OF_A_MESL_IN_COMPARISON_TO_CPI_INFLATION.pdf

September and December 2013; household and utility bills increased by 3% from €719 in September to €740 in December, rent bills increased by an average of €67 in the three months and groceries increased by €17.²²

The reduction in social welfare payments to €100 per week for people aged under 25 without children and to €144 for those aged 25, increased to €160 for those taking up education or training, continues to be problematic. In our Pre-Budget Submission 2014, we highlighted the fact that those on Age-Related Social welfare payments are finding it extremely difficult to survive on this reduced income and are more at risk of becoming homeless, being on such low incomes and struggling to pay for basic necessities along with rent. It was suggested in Budget 2014 that the extension of the age group is to encourage people to return to training/education, a 'learning or earning' approach. However, although the number of places for such schemes was increased, they are still not sufficient to accommodate the large numbers of young people on the live register, approximately 57,000 as of April 2014, and there is still no guarantee of employment once training is completed. It continues to push more young people into hardship, especially those who are most vulnerable.

In addition, this approach makes a lot of assumptions – that young people live in the family home, that they have the choice to remain in the family home and that this is a safe and secure environment. Research looking at the pathways into homelessness highlights the links between family breakdown, violence in the home and a history of the care system as key predictive factors for adult homelessness. Such cuts further marginalise these young people and increase the risks of homelessness. This reduced payment is causing young people to become homeless and preventing young people from moving out of homelessness. People under 25 years in emergency accommodation are finding it extremely difficult to meet payments of bills and rent and are remaining in emergency accommodation longer than they should be as it is impossible to save for deposit.

In Budget 2013, the duration of Jobseeker's Benefit was reduced from 12 months to 9 months for recipients with 260 or more contributions paid and reduced from 9 months to 6 months for recipients with less than 260 contributions paid.

In our Pre-Budget Submission for 2014 we asked that the increase in prescription charges to €1.50 per item in 2013 Budget be reversed. However, these charges were increased further in the Budget to €2.50. There can be no more increases in prescription charges and we ask again that these charges be reversed to 2012 levels. These increased charges impact on the most vulnerable in our society. A report published in 2010 by the *Expert Group on Resource Allocation and Financing in the Health Sector*, recommended that such prescription charges not be imposed on medical card holders as they act as a disincentive to the most vulnerable and elderly people from seeking the medical attention they need²³.

²² <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/pressreleases/2014/title,8022,en.php>

²³ Social Justice Ireland Budget 2013 Analysis and Critique

<http://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/file/Budget/Budget%202013%20Analysis%20and%20Critique.pdf>

Simon Communities Critical Priorities for Budget 2015

3.1 Preventative and Early Intervention

- Additional funding is required to provide 'Information and Advice services' to households struggling to pay bills and remain in their homes.
- Early intervention initiatives must be resourced for people who fall into rent arrears with their Local Authority. Although there are some measures, they are not sufficient for very vulnerable tenants.
- Early intervention is also required for people at risk of eviction due to anti-social behaviour. Local Authorities need to ensure that measures as set out in their 'Anti-Social Behaviour Strategies' are flexible to allow for cases to be treated on a case-by-case basis with a clear support process.

3.2 Social Protection Budget

- The Social Protection budget should be restored to 2013 levels in order to help achieve the Government's goal of ending long term homelessness.

3.3 Basic Social Welfare Payments

- Basic welfare payments need to be increased in line with cost of living increases so people are not exposed to greater hardship.
- Reverse the length of time a person is on Jobseeker's Benefit back to 12 months.
- Realign Supplementary Welfare Allowance to basic social welfare payments.

3.4 Age Related Social Welfare

- We ask that cuts to welfare payments for young people, especially those that are vulnerable, are revised upwards in Budget 2015.
- Discretion of CWO's needs to be applied in cases for people under-25 with no assumptions that young people can fall back on family and remain in the family home.

3.5 Prescription Charges

- Reversal of the prescription charge increases.

Conclusion

The number of people who are homeless and the number of people at risk of becoming homeless continues to increase. The Homelessness Oversight Group and the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness* both recommended that in order to achieve the Government's goal of ending Long-Term Homelessness by 2016, all budgets responsible for homelessness (DECLG, HSE and DSP) must be maintained at 2013 levels. This was before the current crisis.

Both the Department of Social Protection and HSE budget were reduced in Budget 2014. Although the DECLG budget was maintained and extra stimulus package was announced in May, the situation continues to deteriorate and more and more people and families are turning to homeless services for accommodation and support. Meanwhile, the numbers on the Social Housing waiting list continue to grow.

Homelessness is the most extreme form of social housing need and must be prioritised in Budget 2015 if we are to meet the Government goal of ending long term homelessness by 2016. We urge the Government to take the opportunity in Budget 2015 to address the social housing crisis in a meaningful way; to ensure that we remain on target to meet our shared goal of ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016; and to guarantee income adequacy for those on low incomes and those who are at risk and most vulnerable.

Summary of the Critical Priorities for Budget 2015

The Simon Communities call for action on three fronts to achieve the Government's goal of ending long term homelessness.

1. Access to housing for people who are homeless.
2. Access to support in housing.
3. Action to prevent homelessness.

1. Access to housing for people who are homeless

Access to housing of adequate quality in areas where other supports are readily available is essential to ensure an effective 'housing-led approach'.

1.1 Social Housing and Homeless Budget

- There has been a significant increase in demand for homeless services over the past few months, far beyond what was anticipated in the Homeless Oversight Report. To meet this growing demand there needs to be an increase in the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government housing budget and homeless budget.
- 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 Homelessness Oversight Group*.
- The Government must commit to a short and long term investment in housing 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.
- We support Social Justice Ireland in their proposal to increase provision for Social Housing by €250 million with €83 million in capital expenditure²⁴.
- 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.
- Part V of the Planning and Development Act needs to remain but should be revised to ensure it focuses more on social housing provision.
- A proportion of social housing allocations must be ring fenced for people moving out of homelessness.
- There is a need to encourage more institutional investors to invest in the private rented sector by means of the Real Estate Investment Trusts provided for in Budget 2013.

1.2 Rent Supplement, HAP and RAS

- A review of rent supplement limits needs to be carried out immediately and should not wait until the end of 2014. Rent limits need to be brought into line with real market rents using the rent index and the CPI.
- Clearer direction in the use of discretion in cases of undue hardship and risk of homelessness is required.
- 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 operating on Dublin.
- Extend the new Dublin Protocol for families at risk of homelessness on a nationwide basis.

²⁴ Social Justice Ireland Budget Choices 2015 <http://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/file/Budget/2015/2014-06-13%20-%20Budget%20Choices%202015%20downsized%20Version.pdf>

- Fast track the roll out of the Housing Assistance Payment scheme, ensuring that Local Authorities have adequate financial and human resources to implement HAP.
- A poverty impact assessment should be completed to assess the impacts revised rent limits are having on people.
- There should be no further increases to the minimum contribution to rent supplement.
- The budget for RAS should, at the very least, be maintained for 2015, with additional units provided under the scheme.

1.3 Approved Housing Bodies (AHB)

- Mechanisms must be explored to improve access to finance for Approved Housing Bodies e.g. review and revision of the Capital Advanced Leasing Scheme (CALF) to make it more financially viable and to remove barriers to accessing finance through the Housing Finance Agency.
- The Capital Assistance Scheme must be resourced especially for special needs groups, including people who are homeless.

1.4 Private Rental Sector

- Tighter legislation needs to be ensured to protect those who depend on the Private Rented Sector for a home especially in relation to inspections of rented properties to guarantee good quality housing for all.
- Implementation of a Deposit Protection Scheme to safeguard deposits as the loss of a deposit causes hardship and increases vulnerability, putting people at risk of homelessness.
- Department of Social Protection to issue new guidelines to Community Welfare offices so that there is clear statutory discretion to support and assist people to exit homeless and those at risk.
- Rent controls needs to be applied as a matter of urgency.
- Clear incentives (tax breaks for landlords) must be considered in increasing delivery of private rented accommodation.

1.5 NAMA Properties

- There needs to be ongoing work with all parties to ensure that the transfer and selection process of NAMA properties for social housing is fast tracked.
- As per the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness*, Local Authorities are taking a second look at some of the properties NAMA offered in 2013 to see if some might be deemed suitable for a private and social housing mix, with a focus on meeting homeless needs (Action 24). This is welcome once they are appropriate to need.

2. Access to Support in Housing

Critical to a housing-led approach is tackling poor health and wellbeing, loneliness and isolation, problematic drug and/or alcohol use and unemployment. Ensuring the availability of adequate services can help people move out of homelessness and also prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.

2.1 HSE Social Inclusion Budget

- The HSE 'social inclusion' budget has been cut repeatedly since 2008 and needs to be restored to 2013 levels if the Government's goal of ending long-term homelessness is to be achieved, as outlined in the *First Report of the Homeless Oversight Group 2013*.

2.2 Drug and Alcohol Services

- It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment nationwide.
- There must be no further cuts to the Drugs Budget or the Drug Initiatives Budget.

2.3 Mental Health

- The development of Community Mental Health Services needs to be continued. We ask that the budget for mental health services be brought back to €35 million.
- We also support Mental Health Reform in their ask that the remaining €15 million, which was due in 2014 for mental health, is restored in 2015 and that this would go, in part, to developing crisis intervention services in all areas.

2.4 Education and Training

- The cuts to education and training in Budget 2013 need to be reversed to ensure people can take up courses or training and that when they do so they do not end up in financial hardship and/or worse off by doing so.

3. Action to prevent homelessness

Prevention and Early Intervention are critical to prevent homelessness from occurring and to ensure 'at risk' households are supported. Furthermore, this is more cost-effective in the long run.

3.1 Preventative and Early Intervention

- Additional funding is required to provide 'Information and Advice services' to households struggling to pay bills and remain in their home.
- Early intervention initiatives must be resourced for people who fall into rent arrears with their Local Authority. Although there are some measures they are not sufficient for very vulnerable tenants.
- Early intervention is also required for people at risk of eviction due to anti-social behaviour. Local Authorities need to ensure that measures, as set out in their 'Anti-Social Behaviour Strategies', are flexible to allow for cases to be treated on a case-by-case basis with a clear supported process.

3.2 Social Protection Budget

- The Social Protection budget should be restored to 2013 levels in order to help achieve the Government's goal of ending long term homelessness.

3.3 Basic Social Welfare Payments

- Basic welfare payments needs to be increased in line with cost of living increases so people are not exposed to greater hardship.
- Reverse the length of time a person is on Jobseeker's Benefit back to 12 months.
- Realign Supplementary Welfare Allowance to basic social welfare payments.

3.4 Age Related Social Welfare

- We ask that cuts to welfare payments for young people, especially those that are vulnerable, are revised upwards in Budget 2015.
- Discretion of CWO's needs to be applied in cases for people under-25 with no assumptions that young people can fall back on family and remain in the family home.

3.5 Prescription Charge Increase

- Reversal of the prescription charge increases.



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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