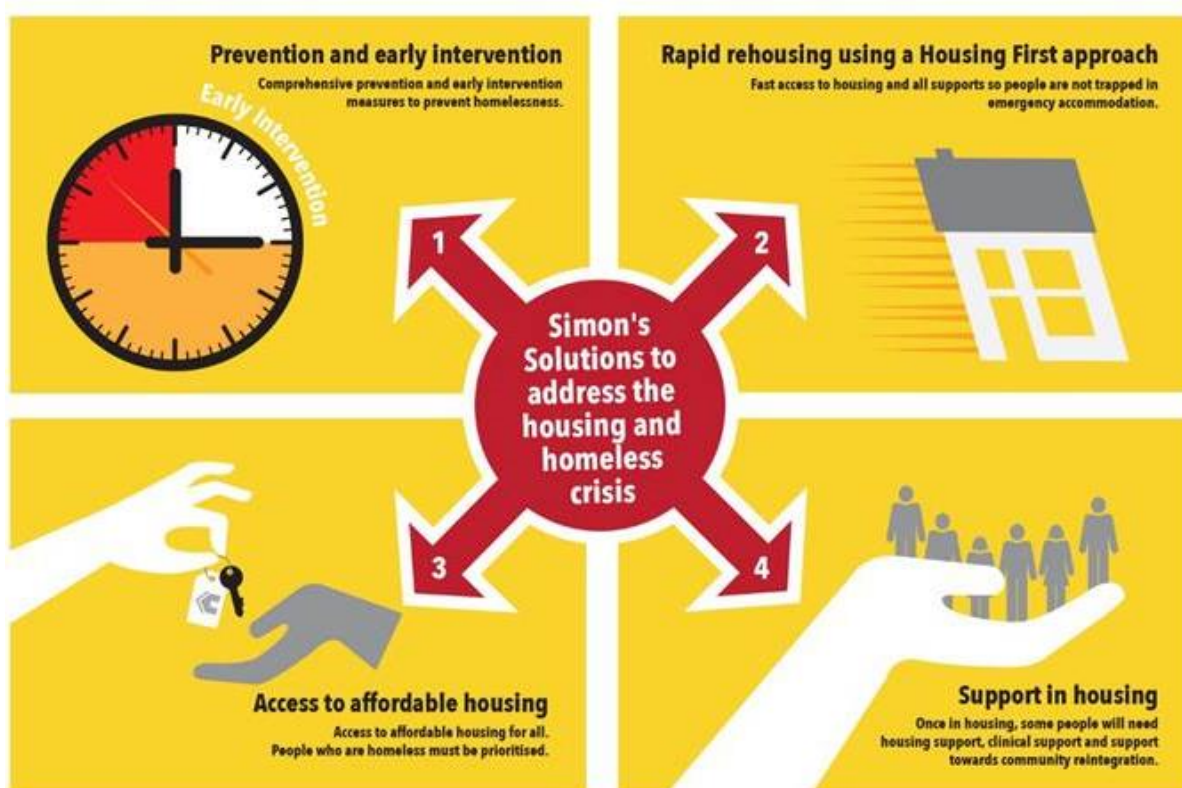


## ***Changing the Forecast: addressing the homeless & housing crisis***

### **Simon Communities in Ireland Election Manifesto Summary**



***February 2016***

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## Introduction

### **The housing and homeless crisis is nationwide**

Homelessness rarely has one single cause; usually it is due to a number of reasons. Primary causes relate to poverty, inequality and lack of affordable housing, often coupled with systems failures and individual circumstance. The Simon Communities come across many reasons why people become homeless and we deal with them all. We work with over 7,000 people a year, including those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our Annual Report in 2014 reported a 20% increase in the number of people turning to us for help. The number of people in emergency accommodation continues to grow highlighting the extent of the crisis and the vulnerability of many people who are homeless. This is a nationwide housing and homeless crisis affecting urban and rural areas. Limited access to housing and support services is increasing the risk of homelessness and is preventing people moving out of homelessness. Responses must be nationally driven but locally resourced and delivered to ensure people can remain in their communities where they have family and support networks, when they run into housing and financial difficulties, often times when these supports are most important.

### **Housing plus support in housing**

Housing alone will not end long-term homelessness; it is a big part of the solution but not the only part. The solution is supporting people to move out of homelessness as quickly as possible and into permanent housing with tailored support services, as necessary. This is called a Housing First<sup>1</sup> approach and it's an approach the current Government has committed to implementing to achieve their goal to end long term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016. We are very supportive of the Government's Housing First policy but access to housing continues to be a significant problem. The private rented housing market is under pressure with rents increasing and the number of properties available reducing, and with the Government's decision to leave rent supplement levels unchanged, our fear is that more vulnerable people will be priced out of their homes. There are at least 90,000 people on the social housing waiting list and new social housing plans will take a minimum of 2 years to begin to deliver. This is far too long for people trapped in emergency accommodation, for people sleeping on our streets and for those living on the edge of homelessness day by day.

**We need your help to ensure the next Government commits to ending long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by implementing the following:**

1. Comprehensive prevention and early intervention measures.
2. Rapid rehousing using a Housing First approach.
3. Access and priority for people who are homeless to affordable housing.
4. Adequate support for people once housed including housing support, clinical support and supports towards community reintegration, as necessary.

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Housing First' and 'Housing Led' are often used interchangeably for the purposes of the document we are using the term 'Housing First'

## **1. Comprehensive prevention and early intervention measures**

Comprehensive prevention and early intervention measures must be put in place to prevent homelessness from occurring and reoccurring. In the current climate, with so many people at the edge of homelessness, it is essential that measures are put in place to avoid homelessness and that early intervention is resourced for households at risk.

### **We call on the next Government to ensure the following:**

- RS and HAP limits<sup>2</sup> must be brought into line with real market rents and extend the (homeless) HAP nationally.
- Funding must be made available under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to provide additional resources for Prevention and Early Intervention services.
- There must be access to all necessary supports – housing support, clinical support and supports towards community reintegration - which can help to prevent people losing their tenancy.
- Since 2010 the HSE budget for homelessness has been cut by 20%<sup>3</sup> and the Drugs Initiative budget has seen cuts of up to 37% over the past six years<sup>4</sup>. At the very minimum, we ask that these cuts are reversed to ensure adequate prevention services are available. These cuts have had an impact on people who are homeless and are impacting on waiting times and waiting lists.
- Basic welfare payments need to be increased in line with cost of living increases so people are not exposed to greater hardship.
- The 12 month period that a person is on Jobseeker's Benefit before being means tested for Jobseekers Allowance must be restored so that people have the time needed to look for employment in a precarious labour market.
- Supplementary Welfare Allowance must be realigned to basic social welfare payments.
- The cuts to social welfare payments for young people must be reversed as a matter of urgency.
- The National Hospital Discharge Protocol for homeless persons must be fast-tracked and implemented in all hospitals across the country including monitoring and reporting.
- The current protocols and procedures being developed by the Irish Prison Service to ensure appropriate in-reach service to all prison settings need to be fast tracked and must be implemented as a matter of urgency.
- The next government must make sure that discharge policies and protocols are implemented, reviewed and monitored regularly, and amended as appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> The same limits are used for both Rent Supplement and the Housing Assistance Payment

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/funding-cuts-put-services-for-homeless-in-jeopardy-227616.html> ibid

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.citywide.ie/news/2015/03/04/citywide-calls-for-confirmation-of-appointment-of-minister-for-drugs/> ibid

**2. *Rapid rehousing using a Housing First approach***

Rapid rehousing using a Housing First approach, with fast access to housing and to any necessary supports in housing, must be resourced and implemented so that people in emergency accommodation have quick, sustainable exits from homelessness.

**We call on the next Government to ensure the following:**

- Emergency accommodation should only ever be used in the short term.
- Full implementation of the Housing First approach must happen as a matter of urgency.
- Short and long term investment in Housing First solutions are needed to make sure the necessary housing and supports are in place before any funding is withdrawn from emergency accommodation, which is currently the vital measure in place to address homelessness.
- In the future, where savings are made they should be ring fenced and redirected to specialist voluntary services such as Homeless Action Teams to ensure appropriate visiting and on-site support is provided to those in private emergency accommodation.
- Ensure greater regional balance in funding for homeless services and supports, for example the Midlands region only received 1.5% of the national budget in 2015.
- It is critical to actively prioritise people with the longest experience of homelessness and those with the most complex support needs for housing at the earliest opportunity.

### **3. Access to affordable housing**

Access to appropriate affordable housing is urgently required so people can move out of homelessness and to reduce the risk of people becoming homeless. People need the security and safety of their own home. Addressing other issues or problems a person or family may be experiencing in their lives is much more effective when people have a place to call home.

#### **We call on the next Government to ensure the following:**

- People who are homeless must be prioritised as having the greatest form of social housing need.
- Within this, priority must be given to those who are long term homeless and who have the most complex needs for housing. This is the most effective way of ending long term homelessness and reducing pressure on the emergency shelter system.
- Increasing housing supply across all tenures must be a top priority for the next Government to meet growing demand and to increase housing affordability. All options must be explored and acted on quickly.
- We support the National Economic and Social Council's (NESC)<sup>5</sup> call for a more active public role in driving housing supply and leading development, managing land and provision of urban infrastructure and we await a forthcoming NESC report on this topic.

#### **Social Housing**

- Implement and enhance the Governments *Social Housing Strategy 2020*.
- Develop progressive allocations policies for people who are homeless in line with Housing First principles.
- Announced as part of the *20 Point Plan on Homelessness*, 50% of allocations from Dublin Local Authorities must be allocated to vulnerable households including people who are homeless, this is 30% in the other major urban centres<sup>6</sup>. The Minister has issued further directions to Local Authorities obliging them to continue with these allocations until the end of January 2016<sup>7</sup>. The next Government must review the effectiveness of this initiative (and any similar initiatives) and issue further Ministerial Direction if required to ensure priority of allocations.
- All Local Authorities should be required to allocate social housing to homeless households and have a clear policy on this.
- Allocations should not exclude people who have a history of tenancy loss through rent arrears or anti-social behaviour.
- Housing should be viewed as a right by local authorities and as such people who are literally homeless must be housed to vindicate this right.
- All Local Authorities must explore what vacant properties can be brought back into productive use as quickly as possible.

<sup>5</sup> NESC, *Ireland's Rental Sector: Pathways to Secure Occupancy and Affordable Supply* May 2015

<sup>6</sup> Other Urban Centres include Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford *'Progress Report on Action Plan to Address Homelessness'* Feb 2015

<sup>7</sup> DECLG Statement on Number of people in Emergency Accommodation Sept 2015

<http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople/News/MainBody,43099,en.htm>

- Better use must be made of existing housing units and that vacant units must be brought back into use in a timely manner.
- Implementation of the planned multi-annual programme of Local Authority stock refurbishment as committed to in the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* must happen as a matter of urgency.
- The Capital Assistance Scheme must be resourced and protected as a key mechanism for the delivery of social housing to special needs groups particularly people who are homeless.

#### **Approved Housing Bodies (AHB's)/Voluntary Co-operatives**

- It is important to continue to develop partnerships with Approved Housing Bodies (AHB's)/Voluntary Co-operatives to bring some of these properties into use.
- The use of Local Authority land for development by Approved Housing Bodies should be promoted to ensure an increase in housing provision.
- AHB's/Voluntary Co-Operatives need to be supported to act quickly when opportunities arise and mechanisms must be explored to improve access to finance for example 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 (HFA).
- There is an urgent need to explore new funding models and mixed funding models including private finance, state funding and AHB's/Voluntary Co-Operatives working in partnership.
- Local Authorities must explore the potential to provide funding directly to AHB's/ Voluntary Co-Operatives to allow them to deliver increased housing, to support Local Authorities to deliver their targets and to respond in partnership with Local Authorities in parallel to their own development activity.
- We welcome commitments in the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* to introduce multi-annual development programmes for AHB's, to ensure the provision of housing is planned, funded and robust. These programmes need to be developed as a matter of urgency.

#### **Private Rented Sector**

- A comprehensive plan for the Private Rented Sector is required.
- We support NES's recommendations<sup>8</sup> for supply side initiatives and supports to increase the supply of affordable rental housing for low income and intermediate households.
- We welcome the rent stability measures that were announced in November 2015, meaning that rents are guaranteed for a two years period before there can be increased again, longer notice period for tenancy terminations and incentives for landlords to take on tenants in receipt of Rent Supplement/HAP<sup>9</sup>. This will need to be reviewed by the next Government and see if other measures be introduced to ensure greater protection for tenants.
- We continue to call for full rent certainty measure with rents aligned to the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

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<sup>8</sup> Ireland's Private Rental Sector: Pathways to Secure Occupancy and Affordable Supply (NES) May 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Environment 'Stabilising Rents, Boosting Supply'

<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,43556,en.pdf>

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- We support the recommendations from the recent NESC report 141<sup>10</sup> on developing a secure tenancy model for Ireland that could achieve this including; a mechanism for disciplined market rent adjustment; changing system of four year lease to a regime in which leases are effectively indefinite; removing sale of property as a reason for vacant possession and improving existing dispute resolution procedures.
- We call for rapid implementation of the Deposit Protection Scheme which is provided for in the recent amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act.
- Quality standards in the Private Rented Sector need to be improved including an effective inspection mechanism.
- There is a clear need to increase awareness of rights and responsibilities of both tenants and landlords.
- There is a need to resource and implement multisite Social Rental Agencies (SRA). This model is effective in other parts of Europe and can play an important role in tackling homelessness<sup>11</sup>.
- The *Social Housing Strategy 2020* commits to developing a Pilot Cost Rental Model, where housing providers raise finance to provide housing and charge rents that are sufficient to cover capital and ongoing maintenance and management costs. This should be a multisite pilot and actioned as soon as possible.
- A review of the Rental Accommodation Scheme needs to take place. Many landlords are not renewing contracts as they can get higher rent from private tenants.

### **NAMA**

- The expansion of NAMA Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) announced in the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* needs continuous monitoring once implemented.
- The *Implementation Plan on the States Response to Homelessness* recommended that 15% of NAMA properties should be ring-fenced for vulnerable groups. This target was achieved in 2014, (319 units) but demand has continued to grow. This target should be revised upwards from 15% to 25% with a focus on provision of accommodation and development opportunities. This would create an additional 530 units<sup>12</sup> of housing.
- 20% of the 20,000 NAMA new builds announced in Budget 2016 should be made available for social housing not just the 10% required under Part V and 20% should be affordable housing units. There needs to be ring-fencing of a portion of these units for people who are homeless.
- Exploration of an enhanced role for NAMA in the delivery of social housing.

### **Buy-to-Let mortgages in distress**

- Measures to support the holders of buy-to-let mortgages in distress must be put in place. Tenants of such properties must be protected and there is a need to avoid a reduction in the number of properties in the private rented sector.

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<sup>10</sup> (NESC) May 2015 ibid

<sup>11</sup> Decker, P, (2012) Social Rental Agencies: An Innovative Housing-led Response to Homelessness .FEANTSA.

<sup>12</sup> Based on the assumption that 15% delivered 319 units

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- It is important to ensure that buy-to-let properties are not left vacant for long periods and remain part of the private rented market or are brought back into use in a timely matter.
- No tenant should become or be put at risk of homelessness as a result of repossession of buy-to-let properties.

**Planning Standards and Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000:**

- The new Part V provision with priority given to delivering housing on-site or in the near vicinity of developments, and the removal of the financial contribution by developers is welcome. However, the reduction from 20% to 10% delivery is a concern considering the growing need for social housing. Priority for on-site provision is crucial for integration of housing for people who are homeless, social housing and privately owned and rental housing.
- The ‘use it or lose it’ system of planning as part of the Planning No.1 Bill<sup>13</sup> must be stringent enough to incentivise and speed up house building.
- The changes in planning guidelines for apartments announced at the end of 2015<sup>14</sup> will need to be closely reviewed and monitored. Forty-four percent of households on the social housing waiting list are single and the main requirement for housing for people who are homeless is single units.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/News/MainBody,39104,en.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Department of Environment ‘Stabilising Rents, Boosting Supply’  
<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,43556,en.pdf>

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#### 4. Support in housing

Adequate support in housing which is critical to the success of Housing First Approaches. Such approaches must be flexible and open ended support and resourced. The support offered needs to be three dimensional including housing support, clinical support and supports towards community reintegration, as necessary.

**We call on the next Government to ensure the following support for people in housing:**

##### Housing Support:

- Funding must be allocated to support work with people and families who have experienced homelessness once they have moved into housing e.g. Support to Live Independently (SLI) and intensive case management associated with Housing First Initiatives. This support ensures better quality of life for the tenant but increases the stability of the tenancy.

##### Clinical Support:

- Drug and alcohol services, mental health services, general health services etc. need to be flexible and adequately resourced to ensure supports are provided as needed.
- The recommendations of the *Working Group Report on Rehabilitation* focusing on housing for recovering problematic drug users, including drug users who are homeless must be fully implemented. This is a commitment in the *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness*.
- Harm reduction and recovery approaches must be an integral part of Housing First models.
- Alcohol and drug services must be tailored and targeted to the needs of people who are homeless with alcohol and/or drug related problems. This should include access to substitution treatment, detoxification, rehabilitation and aftercare services countrywide.
- Funding is required to ensure the full implementation of *A Vision for Change*<sup>15</sup>.
- The *Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness* commits to providing a dedicated Community Mental Health Nurse in each ISA<sup>16</sup> area to support the needs of people who are or at risk of homelessness. This must be actioned.

##### Community Integration

- Engagement in employment, education and training offers people a means of generating independent income, opportunities for developing social networks, and a way to enhance skills and self-esteem, among other benefits.
- The Social Protection System must make sure supports for people exiting homelessness include measures aimed at assisting access to education, employment and training opportunities.
- Existing Back to Work and Education and Training Programmes must work harder to include people who have experienced homelessness.
- Cuts to education and training in recent budgets need to be reversed to ensure that people can take up opportunities and not be penalised financially for doing so.

<sup>15</sup> A Vision for Change is the strategy document which sets out the direction for mental health services in Ireland.

<sup>16</sup> ISA – Integrated Service Areas are Community based health services outside acute hospitals for people with low-medium level of need in primary care, social care, mental health and health & wellbeing.

## Conclusion

The advent of a new Government in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Dail represents an opportunity to ensure that there will be an end to long term homelessness and rough sleeping by resourcing and implementing a Housing First approach. Currently the number of people trapped in emergency accommodation continues to grow highlighting the extent of the crisis and the vulnerability of many people to homelessness. Limited access to housing and support services is both increasing the risk of homelessness and is preventing people from moving out of homelessness. The increase in the number of men, women and children in emergency accommodation needs to be addressed urgently by the new Government and short, medium and long term plans put into place. We can't keep offering people short term solutions with little attention paid to their longer term needs. Over 5,000 people are trapped in emergency accommodation right now. Families are living in one room trying to go about their lives; cooking, playing, sleeping and doing homework all in the one room. Adults are sleeping in dormitory style accommodation with 20 plus others with no privacy and nowhere to go during the day. These are people that the State are failing who have no option of a home anytime soon. People are entitled to better.

The solutions to this crisis are preventing people from becoming homeless and providing access to affordable, permanent housing with support. We know this approach works and we know that it can transform the lives of people who are living in hostels, hotels and B&Bs. Short and long term investment in Housing First solutions are required to ensure the necessary housing and supports are in place before any funding is withdrawn from emergency accommodation, which is currently the vital measure in place to address homelessness. It is also essential that there is adequate funding available to each department and that each department takes responsibility for this cross cutting issue, working together to guarantee full implementation. The new Government must act immediately and prioritise homelessness and housing. They must ensure that the commitment set out in the *Homelessness Policy Statement* of 2013 of ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping using a Housing First approach becomes a reality, providing people with permanent homes with support.

## About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities in Ireland are a network of eight regionally based independent Simon Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East that share common values and ethos in tackling all forms of homelessness throughout Ireland, supported by a National Office. The Simon Communities have been providing services in Ireland for over 40 years. The Simon Communities deliver support and service to over 7,000 individuals and families throughout Ireland who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness every year. Whatever the issue, for as long as we are needed, Simon's door is always open. For more information please log on to [www.simon.ie](http://www.simon.ie).

### 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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**Appendix 1: The housing and homelessness crisis**

- There were 5324 in emergency homeless accommodation nationally in November 2015. This included 3,615 adults and 813 families with 1,709 children. (DECLG, 2015).
- During one night in November 2015, there were 152 people without a safe place to sleep in Dublin City. This included 91 people sleeping rough and 61 people sheltering at the Nite Café.
- Unfortunately, Dublin is the only area where an official rough sleeper count takes place, making it difficult to get a countrywide rough sleeping picture. (DRHE 2015).
- Figures from Cork Simon Community indicate that rough sleeping in Cork City increased seven-fold in three years (2011-2014).
- Homelessness and housing insecurity are more acute and visible in our cities but the Simon Communities are working at capacity countrywide – in urban and rural areas.
- In December 2015, the Simon Communities reported a 20% increase in the numbers of individuals and families around the country turning to our services in the year. (Simon Communities of Ireland, 2015).
- There are at least 90,000 people on the social housing waiting list. (Housing Agency, 2014).
- Social housing commitments will take two years to begin to deliver housing. This is far too long for the people we work with and those at risk of homelessness. Social housing output for 2015, reached 1,030 new builds and acquisitions. As of the end of Q3 2015 Local Authority new builds only accounted for 28 of these units. This is below the Social Housing Strategy target of 18,000 new units for the period 2015-2017.
- Rents increased by 32.3% since April 2012 and the number of properties available to rent has reduced by approximately 83% since mid-2009 (Daft.ie).
- Rent Supplement and Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) limits are too low, pushing people into homelessness and preventing people from leaving homelessness.
- New Central Bank mortgage rules will put even greater pressure on the private rented sector.
- 40.4% of all accounts in mortgage arrears are in arrears of over two years. (Central Bank of Ireland, 2015).
- At the end of September 2015, 24,890 or 18% of buy-to-let mortgages, were in arrears of more than 90 days. (Central Bank of Ireland, 2015).

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