



# WHICH WAY HOME?

## THE EXPERIENCES OF THE SIMON COMMUNITIES INTRODUCING HOUSING LED SERVICES

This paper summarises the key findings of the study **Which Way Home? – The Experiences of the Simon Communities Introducing Housing-led Services** and outlines the Simon Communities recommendations on moving forward with a housing led approach.



## BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

As a follow up to our Finding the Way Home research and in light of the Government's commitment to end long term homelessness by implementing a housing-led approach, the Simon Communities in Ireland commissioned a piece of research to explore the experiences of the Simon Communities introducing housing-led services. The research was undertaken by Mark Bevan with Nicholas Pleace of the Centre for Housing Policy in York University and was designed to help inform and critically assess the use of housing-led services as a response to homelessness at both a national and local level.

The key aims of the research were:

- Explore the development of housing-led services by the eight Simon Communities;
- Examine the context in which the rolling out of housing-led services is occurring and look specifically at the ways in which contextual factors may be influencing how housing-led services are being developed;
- Look at how the Communities are developing good practice to address some of the barriers and challenges that relate to using housing-led approaches and;
- Compare and contrast the experience of the Simon Communities in introducing and rolling out housing-led services with experiences in other countries.

### **The research included:**

- Discussions with senior managers, other staff and service users, and staff at the National Office.
- Visits to three Simon Communities: Dublin, Cork, and Midlands.
- Interviews with respondents from the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government; Health Service Executive, and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive.
- A literature review of the experience of utilising housing-led approaches in other countries.

Respondents discussed their experiences and views on introducing housing-led services in relation to the operational principles of the Pathways Housing First approach:

- Housing as a human right
- Respect, warmth, and compassion for all clients
- A commitment to working with clients for as long as they need
- Scattered-site housing; independent apartments
- Separation of housing and services
- Consumer choice and self-determination
- A recovery orientation
- Harm reduction.

Respondents also discussed operational issues and some of the barriers and challenges in relation to rolling out a housing-led approach.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS AND SIMON COMMUNITIES RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reinforces the message of the efficacy of housing led approaches once the core elements of harm reduction, the separation of housing and support and the provision of intensive, open ended support are available. There are a number of key challenges and barriers identified including how to phase the shift away from emergency provision towards investing in housing led options given current demand for emergency accommodation and the lack of affordable and adequate housing for move on. In addition, the challenge for Communities in relation to adapting existing buildings due to financial constraints, physical layouts, ownership etc. Based on the research findings the Simon Communities in Ireland make a number of core recommendations while some are internal to the Simon Communities in Ireland some are more applicable to the wider political, policy and service environment.

## 1. Resources

One of the findings of this research is that adopting a housing led approach in the context of cut backs may mean there are risks that housing led approaches become diluted and do not offer the depth and range of services necessary for people who are homeless to meet their housing and support needs. In addition, there is the danger the effectiveness of such approaches could be questioned when in fact the issues in fact lie with the resources that underpin the addressing of homelessness at present in Ireland as opposed to the overall approach.

### We Recommend

- Government makes clear commitments regarding funding across all key departments with responsibility for addressing homelessness until 2016. This was identified in the first report of the Homeless Oversight Group. This will require more than holding funding at 2013 levels to meet growing demand.
- Government reappraises the upfront investment required to generate the flow of accommodation that along with adequate support would enable people who have been homeless to take up sustainable housing options.

## 2. Adequate and Affordable Housing Supply

The supply of adequate, affordable housing remains the key challenge in adopting a housing led approach

*'...the implications of the limited supply of housing in taking forwards a housing led approach into the future are highly significant' (p38)*

### We recommend

- The recommencement of private and social housing construction on a realistic scale to meet growing demand. There must be ring-fencing within any such schemes for people moving out of homelessness.
- The development of mechanisms 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, removal of barriers to accessing finance through the Housing Finance Agency and the protection of the Capital Assistance Scheme for special needs groups including people who are homeless. The Housing Policy Statement (2011) recognised that the not for profit housing sector has a significant role to play in social housing supply.
- The delivery by NAMA on their much promised commitments in relation to social housing.

- The introduction of rent control in the Private Rented Sector is a critical development to help keep rents affordable.
- The preparation by all lead local authorities of a full inventory of voids in their regions some of this stock should then be made available to Approved Housing Bodies and NGO's by way of transfer or annual lease for a minimum of ten years. The Government released €15m as part of Budget 2014 in funding to bring approximately 500 'voids' back to use. In the immediate term there needs to be ring-fencing of a portion of these voids for people to move out of homeless emergency accommodation. In May 2014, it was announced that an additional €50 million of capital funding to the housing budget. €20 million will be allocated to the bringing back to use vacant Local Authority units, €20 million for the construction of social housing units and €10 million allocated for construction and refurbishment of units specifically for people who are homeless.
- The establishment of a National Social Rental Agency (SRA) which have proven very successful in other jurisdictions. This SRA would rent properties from the private rented sector (at market rates) and sub-let them to people who are long term homeless with significant support needs. This model has the advantage of providing people who are homeless with complex needs with a social landlord and removes perceived risks for the superior landlord related to fears of non-payment rent, anti-social behaviour and so on.
- The extension of funding available under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to provide for the critical role of Prevention and Early Intervention.
- The roll out of a national scheme as already exists within the Rent Supplement Initiative operating in Dublin. This would ensure that higher rent payments are made under the HAP and rent allowance schemes nationally where necessary to quickly secure accommodation for people who are long term homeless or at risk of long term homelessness.
- The provision of an adequate supply of accommodation, to be accompanied by a rebalancing of the range of housing options available. Communal accommodation will still be required for people whose needs are so high means they require 24 hour support and are unable to live independently. This needs to be planned for and resourced.

### 3. Open Ended Support

There were clear concerns expressed throughout this study about the resourcing of supports of the appropriate level and duration to help sustain people with a diverse range of needs in their homes. These can be supports:

- To enable someone to move onto a home of their own.
- To address mental health or drug and/or alcohol issues.
- To assist with anxiety and confidence building.
- To address boredom and isolation.

Open ended and ongoing support is critical to ensure a housing-led approach works effectively. It was evident in the research that ongoing support was needed and that it must be flexible and recognise fluctuations in the level of support that people may need.

#### *We recommend*

- That Government ensures that adequate support services are in place for housing led approaches to work effectively.
- Enhanced interagency work to build the necessary 'packages of support' identified in this research. This support must be opened and flexible.
- That plans for the provision of support services take account of the intensity of support required to meet the diverse needs of service users and the timescale that support may be needed for.

- That plans take account of the need for reconfiguration regarding staffing levels and case-loads in the transition towards a housing-led approach.
- That access to support to general and specialist services be improved upon. Cuts to frontline staff in statutory bodies are making it more difficult for people to access these services due to longer waiting times for appointments and longer waiting lists.

#### 4. National and Local structures

The research found that there were some structures at both national and local level that required attention and needed improving upon.

*We recommend*

- That there is urgent action on the recommendations of the Homeless Oversight Group<sup>1</sup> who were appointed by the Minister in Feb 2013 and produced their first report in December 2013. The following are the most critical at present.
  - There is a need for full Cabinet commitment to the implementation of the recommendations of the Homeless Oversight Group Report (December 2013).
  - A structured Implementation Plan must be developed by the Homelessness Policy Implementation Team with input from the voluntary and statutory sector service providers to facilitate the transition from an emergency led approach to a more sustainable housing- led approach to achieve the 2016 target. The plan should outline adequate and measurable interim goals with sufficient resources, timelines and departmental and Local Authority responsibilities. This plan should include regular written progress reports to the NHCC/CDT.
  - There is a need for a shared and agreed understanding between service providers and funders on the parameters and operating of housing led services. This may necessitate some training, including training of frontline staff, on the issue locally and nationally.

#### 5. Joint Working

Effective joint working (inter-agency, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary) is essential for a housing-led approach to be successful.

*We recommend*

- Maintenance and expansion of inter-agency working between Simon Communities and statutory services at local level. The development of integrated approaches ensures people have access to the most appropriate services and support. This in turn will ensure early intervention and prevention and improve outcomes.

#### 6. Internal to the Simon Communities

Very positively this research found a convergence between the ethos of the Simon Communities and the key principles of housing led approaches. Therefore, what is required is not necessarily seismic change but nonetheless the research did identify some shifts required.

- The Simon Communities need to more pro-actively pursue cultural and attitudinal change amongst both staff and service users so that housing led approaches become the expectation and the norm.
- The Simon Communities need to work to achieve a formal separation of housing and support and to enhance harm reduction services and wellness programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> When the Government's Homelessness Policy Statement was published the Minister established a high-level three-person oversight group for the purpose of reviewing the approach being advocated in the Statement, identifying obstacles and proposing solutions.

### Simon Communities in Ireland

Simon Communities in Ireland are made up of a network of eight regionally based independent communities. Each Community is a separate legal entity, individually governed and managed and are all funded separately. All eight Simon Communities work collectively through a National Office to conduct valuable research and to inform and influence national policy.

This structure is one of the key strengths of Simon – it enables us to respond most effectively to the issues of homelessness that are particular to each region; mobilising local support, responding to local issues using local expertise and local resources.

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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