



**Presentation to the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs
from the Simon Communities of Ireland**

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Delegation

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Introduction

Simon Communities of Ireland very much welcomes the opportunity to meet with this Committee today and we thank you for taking time from your busy schedule.

The Simon Communities throughout Ireland provide the best possible care, accommodation and support for people experiencing homelessness and those at risk. Together, with people who are homeless, we tackle the root causes, promote innovative responses and urge the government to fulfil their commitments.

Simon delivers support and services to almost 5,000 people who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness every year.

The *Simon Communities of Ireland* is an affiliation of local Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East. In addition, the National Office performs a coordinating role in terms of campaigning in the areas of housing/homeless policy and the wider poverty and social inclusion agenda; best practice in service delivery and working with people who are homeless; and in the area of full time volunteering promoting excellence and providing accredited training.

Simon tackles homelessness in the following ways:

- The Simon Communities around Ireland offer support and accommodation to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- We challenge society to take responsibility for addressing the causes of homelessness and to work with us in providing the solutions.
- We work closely with the government, decision makers and policy makers to highlight the scale of homelessness in Ireland, as well as the causes and solutions. We campaign to have those solutions reflected in government policy on homelessness and related fields.
- Simon also campaigns for better policies, services and for effective Governmental responses to the causes of homelessness so that fewer people will become homeless in the future.

Current Context

We appreciate the remit of this Committee and will focus on those issues which the Committee can influence however, initially we would like to give you a quick update on the current context in which we are working. We are acutely aware of the pressures associated with the current fiscal crisis and the fact that difficult decisions must be made. However, we wish to highlight a number of issues based on our knowledge and experience in working with people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness across Ireland for almost four decades:

- The Government has pledged to end the need to sleep rough and long-term homelessness by 2010.
- *The Way Home – A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland* with the *Homeless Strategy National Implementation Plan* - offers a blueprint to facilitate the realisation of these key commitments.
- The Government is cutting funding from essential services working towards these goals. Simon Communities are under increasing pressure around the country in terms of funding with reductions in statutory funding across a range of budget lines and uncertainty in terms of voluntary donations. In addition, they are responding to increased demands and bracing themselves for an increase in those turning to their services for support in the coming months.
- The recession means more people are at risk of homelessness, more people will become homeless and more people will turn to the Simon Communities for support.
- Housing is important, but homelessness is about more than housing; it is also about physical and mental health, it is about drug and alcohol use and it is often about complex needs.
- The long-term accommodation and support needs of people who are homeless are not currently being met. The 2010 commitments cannot be met until accommodation and health and social care needs are addressed.

(For more information on the current context see appendix 1 page 7)

Department of Social and Family Affairs and Vulnerable and ‘At Risk’ Groups

The Department of Social and Family Affairs plays an essential role both in preventing people from becoming homeless and in facilitating people to move out of homelessness through welfare and family support services. It is critical that vulnerable groups are not impacted any further with changes in Budget 2010.

Of particular concern are recent changes to the Rent Supplement Scheme and the Habitual Residence Condition.

Rent Supplement Scheme

This is a supplementary allowance available to those who cannot cover the cost of rental accommodation from their own finances. In general, households qualify for rent supplement if their only income is a social welfare or Health Services Executive (HSE) payment and they satisfy a number of other rules¹. Rent Supplement Payments are intended to prevent household incomes from falling below the relative income poverty line² after payment of rent.

¹ In broad terms applications for rent supplement are restricted to households that have been private rented sector tenants or resident in ‘homeless accommodation’ for a period of 183 days within the 12 months preceding of the date of application for rent supplement (i.e. for

Rent Supplement offers a safety net for people at a time of real crisis preventing them from becoming homeless or indeed returning to homelessness. However, there are a number of difficulties associated with this scheme – it can be difficult to access and landlords are not always willing to accept Rent Supplement payments. Sometimes the Rent Supplement amount is not enough to meet the full cost of renting and many landlords also require tenants to pay an additional (illegal) ‘top-up’ to their personal contribution often from their own limited resources. This often results in people doing without basic necessities such as food to avoid the risk of eviction.

There are currently 90, 825 households in receipt of rent supplement in the state - an increase of 52% since the end of 2007 (Oct 2009).

Recent Changes to the Rent Supplement Scheme

Changes in the operation of this scheme as part of Budget 2009 and the Supplementary Budget 2009 have put increased financial pressure on people and families on low incomes, increasing their risk of becoming homeless.

Recent Rent Supplement Changes
<p>Budget 2009 Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minimum contribution of households in receipt of Rent Supplement was increased from €13 per week to €18 per week.
<p>Supplementary Budget 2009 Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entitlement to Rent Supplement was restricted to households who were living in rented accommodation or in accommodation for homeless people for at least 6 months in the previous 12 months or who were on a local authority housing list following a full housing assessment. • The minimum household contribution was further increased from €18 to €24. • The maximum rent limits were reduced by between 6% and 10%, depending on geographical area and household size. • Rent Supplement payments currently being made to tenants were reduced by 8%, in order to encourage landlords of existing Rent Supplement tenants to reduce their rents.

a cumulative period of 6 months or longer) or who were are on local authority housing list following a full housing assessment (Circular N09/09 Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government)

² **Relative Income Poverty** also known as *relative poverty*, *income poverty* or *risk of poverty* is measured in Ireland by calculating the median income - the mid-point on the scale of all incomes in the State from the highest to the lowest - and setting the line at 60% of the median. People whose incomes fall below this line are said to be *at risk of poverty* (Combat Poverty Agency).

Other sources include the MakeRoom Pre Budget Submission 2009 focusing on the Rent Supplement Scheme. MakeRoom is the campaign alliance of Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities of Ireland, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Threshold. Download the Pre Budget Submission at www.makeroom.ie

The reductions in Rent Supplement were argued on the basis of a decline in rental markets. However, while rent reductions are undoubtedly being experienced at the higher end of the market these are not necessarily being felt at the lower end of the market where the majority of people who are poor and vulnerable are renting. Evidence produced by Threshold suggests that in high demand areas, particularly at the lower end of the rental market, rents are not falling as fast as elsewhere, if at all. Thus, many people who are already living in poverty are not benefiting from such rent reductions yet they are being penalised by reductions in state support.

(For information on the impact of recent changes on the weekly income of Rent Supplement claimants see Appendix 2 page 9)

Impact of changes

- These changes put more individuals and families at increased risk of homelessness and will continue to do so. The combined increase in the tenants' contribution from €13 per week to €24 per week represents an increase of 85%³.
- We also fear that these changes will pressurise already vulnerable tenants to increase their 'personal contribution further ('topping up') thus diminishing their limited resources and increasing their vulnerability and risk of homelessness.
- In addition, a central tenet of the National Homeless Strategy is prevention however recent changes may mean some households become homeless as they do not meet the tighter eligibility criteria i.e. they are not living in private rented accommodation or in accommodation for people who are homeless for 6 months of the previous 12 months or they have not have had a full Housing Needs Assessment (HNA)- there are waiting lists for HNA. Thus some households clearly at risk may fall through this vital safety net for administrative reasons.

Habitual Residence Condition

This additional criterion for qualifying for certain social assistance payments was introduced in May 2004. Since its introduction there have been changes in relation to family payments for those from the European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) member states which we welcome. However, this condition continues to have very real implications particularly for those from EU/EEA member states with no work history and non- EU/EEA nationals.

The HRC is having a particular impact of the following groups of people:

- Those with limited or inconsistent work history.
- Those who were employed and assumed their employer had filed appropriate documentation on their behalf and once they have become unemployed they discover that this is not in fact the case.
- People who came to Ireland in pursuit of a better life and things may not have worked out.
- Those who met the HRC criteria but the guidelines are being misinterpreted.

³ Source: MakeRoom Pre Budget Submission 2010

Evidence

EU10 Study

A study undertaken in Dublin (O'Sullivan and the Homeless Agency, 2006) in one week in Dec 2006 identified 283 EU10 migrants were using homeless services, of those 170⁴ agreed to participate in a survey. This survey looked a range of factors including housing status and found high levels of housing instability, homelessness risk and homelessness.

<i>Housing Status (n=170)</i>	
20%	Living in private rented accommodation
18%	Living with friends and relatives
14%	Living in tourist accommodation
12%	Living in a squat
11%	Sleeping rough
13%	Staying in homeless accommodation
18%	Reported sleeping rough or living in a squat for longer then 1 month
36%	Reported that they had applied for state assistance but were rejected

NB: This study only focuses on EU10 nationals and is limited to homeless services in Dublin

Counted In 2008 - Rough Sleeper⁵ Findings (Survey Method)

The Counted In 2008 survey identified 110 people who were sleeping rough in the Dublin area (this is down from 185 in 2005). However, there was a large increase in the number of non-Irish nationals who reported sleeping rough - from one in ten people sleeping rough (9%) in 2005 to two out every five people (37.6%) who reported sleeping rough in 2008.

NB: This study was limited to Dublin

⁴ Of the survey respondents, the majority were Polish (65%), with significant numbers from Lithuania (10%) and the Czech Republic (9%). Men accounted for 83% of respondents. The majority (55%) were in the 26-39 years age group (Counted In, 2008- A report on the extent of homelessness in Dublin. Homeless Agency 2008).

⁵ The Homeless Agency has agreed a definition of 'rough sleeping' (or 'sleeping rough') as people sleeping, or bedded down, in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters); and people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats or stations).

Implications

- The HRC is putting people at risk of homelessness and is causing homelessness.
- This is increasing pressure on already stretched homeless services.
- There is inconsistency in the interpretation of the rules and guidelines surrounding the HRC.
- There is no reference to the Habitual Residence Condition and its implications for homeless services in the National Homeless Strategy and Implementation Plan.
- This issue is not being addressed in any meaningful way at a policy level.

Case Studies relating to Rent Supplement and the HRC

Conclusion

We would like to once again thank the committee for inviting us to address you.

We would ask for your support in particular to ensure that:

- The 'poor and vulnerable' whom this government has repeatedly pledged to protect are indeed protected from further cuts in Budget 2010.
- There are no further cuts to the Rent Supplement Scheme as part of Budget 2010.
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs, in conjunction with the social partners, conduct an impact assessment of the Budget 2009 and Supplementary Budget 2009 changes to the Rent Supplement on claimants before any further changes to the benefit are considered.
- The Habitual Residence Condition and its impact in terms of homelessness and increasing the pressure on homeless services is addressed at a policy level.
- Acknowledging the cross cutting nature of the Habitual Residence Condition that the Department of Social and Family Affairs in conjunction with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the social partners, conduct an impact assessment of the HRC in relation to increasing homelessness and the risk of same.

We also hope that you will continue to remind the government of its commitments to end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough by 2010 and to monitor the implementation of the National Homelessness Strategy and Implementation Plan. We would appreciate the opportunity to return to you in the future to report on the Simon Communities of Ireland's perspective and experiences of the issues of homeless around the country at this critical time.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Current Context in which the Simon Communities are Operating (more detail)

Government Commitments to end rough sleeping and long term homeless by 2010.

The Government has pledged to end the need to sleep rough and long-term homelessness by 2010.

- Ending long-term homelessness (the occupation of emergency accommodation for longer than 6 months). This commitment was included in the Towards 2016 Social Partnership Agreement and is restated in the Government's Homeless Strategy '*The Way Home*' published Aug 2008. This commitment was recently confirmed in the renegotiated *Programme for Government* (Oct 2009).
- Eliminating the need to sleep rough. This commitment is clearly articulated in the Homeless Strategy '*The Way Home*'.

This Government has consistently repeated its commitment to protect people who are 'poor and vulnerable'.

The Way Home – A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland - offers a blueprint to facilitate the realisation of these key commitments.

The Homeless Strategy with the *Homeless Strategy National Implementation Plan* is a blueprint to achieving the Government's key commitments. This blueprint includes a range of other commitments, including prevention, meeting the long term housing needs of people progressing out of homelessness, ensuring effective service provision and improving funding arrangements. The National Implementation Plan must be updated on an annual basis, tracking activity to date and assigning timelines and departmental/agency responsibility for the delivery of the remaining actions. This process should include all key players, including the voluntary sector. The next version is due in January 2010 and it is essential that this process begin without delay. To date we have no update on this.

The recession means more people are at risk of homelessness, more people will become homeless and more people will turn to the Simon Communities for support.

Homelessness was a serious issue in Ireland before the economic downturn but the current recession is exacerbating this issue. Recession is an immediate crisis for people and for societal systems and structures; it makes people more vulnerable with pressure in terms of jobs, housing and increasing levels of poverty. The link between homelessness, poverty and social exclusion is widely acknowledged nationally and indeed internationally. Homelessness impacts most on people who are on the margins with fewer resources in the first place, people who may have experienced homelessness in that past, people on low incomes, and people with little job or housing security who quickly run out of options.

Housing is important, but homelessness is about more than housing; it is also about physical and mental health, it is about drug and alcohol use and it is often about complex needs.

There are many different reasons why a person becomes homeless generally the explanation lies in a combination of structural factors (such as poverty or unemployment) and personal factors (such as family breakdown or health issues). What is clear is that once a person becomes homeless, the deterioration in their physical and mental health is both rapid and debilitating. People who have experienced homelessness die at a younger age. Problematic drug and alcohol use amongst people

who are homeless is high. In addition, some people who are homeless have a range of complex (multiple) needs - imagine somebody who is rough sleeping with chronic physical health needs, a mental health issue and also drinks alcohol heavily on a regular basis. Such needs are often interconnected; therefore holistic responses are critical to respond to all these needs simultaneously. It is this group of people – some of whom need high levels of round-the-clock care – that have nowhere else to turn but Simon.

Responding to the needs of this particularly marginalised and vulnerable group of people requires appropriate accommodation, requires high levels of health and social care, requires time and patience. Everyday Simon sees the positive results; people getting back hope, getting back their lives, getting back to their communities. The Government's Homeless Strategy acknowledges that homelessness is a cross cutting issue and that solutions are dependent on coordinated action and intervention across a range of Government departments and agencies.

The Government is cutting funding from essential services working towards these goals. Simon Communities are under increasing pressure around the country.

We are acutely aware of the pressures associated with the current fiscal crisis and the fact that difficult decisions must be made. However, we wish to highlight a number of issues based on our knowledge and experience in working with people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness across Ireland for almost four decades. We see first hand the devastating impact the current crisis is having on people who were already marginalised and vulnerable. People turning to Simon often have nowhere else to go, they have run out of options; they are sick and isolated, lonely and excluded, many have experienced great trauma in their lives. Their only option is Simon. The recession means more people are at risk of homelessness, more people will become homeless and more people will turn to the Simon Communities for support. In the current climate the Simon Communities around Ireland are under increasing pressure in terms of funding with reductions in statutory funding across a range of budget lines and uncertainty in terms of voluntary donations. The Simon Communities around Ireland are operating services which are at capacity - responding to increased demands and pressures - bracing themselves for an increase in those turning to their services for support in the coming months.

The long-term accommodation and support needs of people who are homeless are not currently being met. The 2010 commitments cannot be met until accommodation and health and social care needs are addressed.

Ideally, emergency accommodation would only ever be used in case of emergency but this is often not the case. Due to a lack of suitable long-term accommodation options, people often spend long periods in emergency accommodation. Fortunately current government policy is seeking to change this. Once a person is ready to move on from an emergency hostel or B&B (private emergency), it is important that there is a suitable and appropriate place for him/her to go and that appropriate support is available. Plans are underway to respond to those who have low to medium support needs both in terms of accommodation and support. However, many of the people who are long term homeless have high levels of need – mental health, physical health, problem drug and alcohol use, fractured family relations, education and training needs – how their long term accommodation and support needs will be addressed remains unclear. Addressing long-term accommodation needs will in turn help to address rough sleeping. The 2010 commitments will not be met until long-term needs and those of people with complex needs are specifically targeted.

Appendix 2: Impact of Recent Changes on the Weekly Income of Rent Supplement Claimants

The impact of these changes to the weekly income of rent supplement claimants is detailed below.

Payment	Single person	Couple	Lone parent family with 1 child	Family with 2 children
Basic payment minus tenants rent contribution (€18) pre budget	€186.30	€321.90	€212.30	€373.90
Basic payment minus tenants rent contribution (€24) post budget	€180.30	€315.90	€206.30	€367.90
Basic payment minus additional 8% where landlord does not reduce weekly rent	€171.82 (where 8% = €8.48)	€301.82 (where 8% = €14.08)	€188.22 (where 8% = €18.08)	€345.82 (where 8% = €22.08)
Combined percentage reduction in basic rate of weekly income	8%	7%	12%	8%

Source: MakeRoom Pre Budget Submission (Oct 2009) www.makeroom.ie

Appendix 3: Other Options to Rent Supplement

Rental Accommodation Scheme

Latest figures from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government indicate that to date, local authorities have transferred almost 12,000 rent supplement cases to the Rental Accommodation Scheme units. This scheme is an alternative to Rent Supplement generally catering for the accommodation needs of people in receipt of rent supplement, normally for more than 18 months and who are assessed as having a long-term housing need. It involves local authorities sourcing accommodation for these households from private and voluntary sector sources. The roll out of this scheme has been very slow. We anxiously await the promised review of this scheme particularly the RAS pilots targeting people who have experienced homelessness. We would also be anxious to participate in any such evaluation process.

Social Housing

In addition, housing authorities have also transferred over 10,400 recipients to other social housing options, a total of over 22,400 transfers since 2005. Almost 7,000 recipients were transferred in 2008. The impact of the recent policy shift towards long term leasing on Social Housing Provision remains to be seen. It is essential that the Government provides the number of social houses it has promised and that all local authorities around the country ensure that a portion of their housing stock, whether owned or leased, are available to people who are moving out of homelessness. As yet it is unclear what the fate of people whose homes are leased by local authorities will be once a lease ends. Security of tenure for all living in any form of social housing is critical to the quality of life of individuals, families and communities

Despite both of the transfers outlined above the numbers in receipt of Rent Supplement continue to grow to the current level of 90, 825.