

Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing in relation to Homelessness Prevention Measures, January 2021

Submission Summary

<p>What is Homelessness Prevention?</p>	<p>Homelessness prevention measures are those policies designed to stop homelessness from occurring.</p> <p>Prevention measures may operate to keep people in their current accommodation, or they may help people secure new accommodation where a move is necessitated, rather than face homelessness.</p>
<p>Does Homelessness Prevention Work?</p>	<p>During the first public health lockdown from March to June 2020, enhanced homelessness prevention measures successfully brought down the number of people in emergency accommodation.</p> <p>After consecutive years of increases, by February 2020 there were 10,148 people in emergency accommodation in Ireland. This fell to 8,876 by May 2020.</p>
<p>Benefits of Prevention</p>	<p>Avoids stress and trauma of homelessness for individuals and families.</p> <p>Cost saving associated with avoidance of emergency accommodation.</p> <p>Prevention creates the space to provide more intensive support to those in homelessness.</p>
<p>Key Prevention Measures</p>	<p>An integrated Homelessness Strategy where prevention works alongside increased social housing supply.</p> <p>Support teams to assist those at risk of homelessness (legal advice, tenancy mediation, sourcing new accommodation).</p> <p>Strengthening tenancy protections- rent freezes, eviction moratoriums.</p> <p>Stronger regulation of private rental market.</p> <p>Enhanced social welfare supports- ensuring housing assistance payments match private rental market costs.</p>

Introduction

Homelessness prevention is the term used to describe policy measures which help people avoid entering homelessness. Prevention measures range from broad structural measures, such as ensuring that there is adequate supply of housing to minimise the risk of homelessness, to emergency intervention measures, such as assisting a household at risk of eviction with maintaining their tenancy.

International evidence¹ shows that homelessness prevention measures must be a key part in an integrated strategy to tackle homelessness, working alongside homelessness services and rapid rehousing responses. Prevention measures are only truly effective in the context of a housing system which has adequate supply of housing to meet the needs of the whole population.

The Simon Communities of Ireland makes this submission in the context of the introduction of temporary homelessness prevention measures during the Covid-19 pandemic period in 2020, which led to a fall in the number of people and households entering emergency accommodation.

This submission will briefly outline what homelessness prevention is, why it works, the types of measures that a prevention strategy encompass and finally provide specific recommendations in the Irish context. First it will review the impact that the emergency measures introduced during the Covid-19 period have had to date.

Homelessness Prevention Measures in Ireland

In February 2020 there were 10,148 people in emergency accommodation in Ireland. This fell to 8,876 by May 2020, demonstrating that after consecutive years of increases in homelessness in Ireland, the measures introduced during the first lockdown appear to have reset the trajectory of homelessness in Ireland.

The fall in homelessness numbers can be attributed to;

- New homelessness prevention measures which stopped people becoming homeless in the first place. These included;
 - Moratorium on rent increases
 - Moratorium on evictions
 - Greater flexibility in relation to housing related social welfare payments
 - Enhanced outreach by local authority teams to prevent families becoming homeless by securing alternative accommodation
- Increased supply of units to support move on from homelessness services. Increase supply was achieved through;
 - Capturing short-term lets which had previously been used for tourism purposes entering the private rental market
 - Moving individuals from dormitory settings to single-occupancy rooms, including in hotels

During the first public health lockdown, enhanced homelessness prevention measures worked in tandem with increased housing supply to successfully bring down the number of people in emergency accommodation.

¹ Pleace, Nicholas. (2019). *Preventing Homelessness, A Review of the International Evidence*. Simon Communities of Ireland.

In the period, homelessness prevention measures were rapidly introduced. By their nature, the measures were temporary and a response to the public health emergency.

Prior to the pandemic period, successive Irish governments had recognised homelessness prevention should play a part in tackling homelessness.

In 2002, the Irish government published 'Homeless Preventative Strategy'² which had a particular focus on people leaving institutional care, such as the care system or criminal justice system, who were identified as being at high risk of entering homelessness. The strategy sought to take a holistic approach to preventing homelessness by focussing on health needs, education and training in addition to provision of housing for particularly vulnerable individuals.

Prevention measures were included in the 2014 'Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness' and 'Action Plan to Address Homelessness.' In particular, in response to the high and increasing rate of households entering homelessness from the private rental market, the government introduced the Tenancy Protection Service, provided by Threshold, funded under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988. This service is particularly dedicated to assisting people to sustain their tenancies.

In 2016, the 'Rebuilding Ireland- Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness'³ government policy included homelessness prevention policies around services for women at risk of domestic violence, young people leaving State care, and increasing rent supplement and Housing Assistance Payment for those at risk of homelessness.

At the same time that these positive developments were introduced, there was an increased reliance on the community and voluntary sector to pay a significant proportion of the operating costs of developing these services.

The 2020 prevention policies, i.e. the moratorium on evictions, rent freezes, enhanced outreach and greater flexibility in relation to welfare payments, have been part of a highly effective effort to reduce the numbers of people entering homelessness during the pandemic.

What is Homelessness Prevention?

Homelessness prevention measures are those policies designed to stop homelessness from occurring.⁴ Preventing homelessness stops people experiencing homelessness.

Prevention measures may operate to keep people in their current accommodation, or they may help people secure new accommodation where a move is necessitated, rather than face homelessness.

Examples of homelessness prevention measures which keep people in their current accommodation include;

- A process which prevents eviction (such as an appeal based on tenancy rights or a new, mediated agreement with a landlord),
- A moratorium on evictions more broadly,
- A moratorium on rent increases,

² https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/5588/1/DOHC_Homeless_preventive_strategy.pdf

³ https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rebuilding-Ireland_Action-Plan.pdf

⁴ Pleace, Nicholas. (2019). *Preventing Homelessness, A Review of the International Evidence*. Simon Communities of Ireland.

- A tenancy sustaining measure such as mediation, legal assistance or advice on a landlord/tenant dispute,
- Social welfare assistance to supplement rent and allow a person to meet their rental obligations,
- Education, training, health, mental health or welfare supports to assist a person or household to sustain their tenancy.

Examples of homelessness prevention measures which facilitate and make possible a move to new accommodation and avoid homelessness include;

- Adequate supply of housing, including social and affordable homes,
- Local authority/NGO assistance to help secure a new tenancy for a household,
- Flexibility with/ extensions to notice to quit periods in tenancy law to allow adequate time to secure new accommodation.

Simply put, homelessness prevention services either assist a household to remain in their home, or assist a household to find a new home, and avoid becoming homeless.

A robust homelessness prevention system must be key part of an effective integrated strategy of tackling homelessness. An effective strategy should also include a rapid rehousing system, so that where homelessness does occur it can be brought to an end quickly for that household.

An adequate supply of affordable housing is therefore a critical measure in both preventing homelessness when a household is forced to find new accommodation, and also a critical measure in quickly ending homelessness when it does occur. The adequate supply of housing is at the heart of an effective, integrated strategy to address homelessness.

Benefits of Prevention

The primary benefit of homelessness prevention measures is the potential to help an individual or household avoid the trauma, stress and damage that having an experience of homelessness can do to their lives. Prevention is a key way to avoid the serious human cost associated with homelessness. It is established that homelessness presents a risk to people's health, mental health and wellbeing. In children, homelessness has been shown to risk development and impact life chances.

For the State, homelessness prevention measures are also beneficial. The financial costs associated with homelessness are high. Homeless funding from the Department of Housing increased from €45 million in 2013 to €166 million in 2020. Cost effective prevention measures, such as enhanced tenancy protections or increased funding for local authority outreach teams, can have the effect of preserving State resources, by avoiding the need to fund expensive emergency accommodation, or source new, more expensive private rental accommodation for a household.

Effective Homelessness Prevention

In 2019, the Simon Communities of Ireland commissioned research by the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York to review the international evidence on preventing homelessness.⁵

The Pleace review found three essentials for effective homelessness prevention-

⁵ Pleace, Nicholas. (2019). *Preventing Homelessness, A Review of the International Evidence*. Simon Communities of Ireland.

1. Prevention must be part of an integrated homelessness strategy.
2. Effective prevention is both flexible and connected, adapting to peoples' needs by working effectively with other services.
3. Prevention requires a sufficient housing supply in order to work well.

The research indicates that for homelessness prevention to be effective, it needs to be part of a broader, integrated homelessness strategy. Other measures such as homelessness services, Housing First, rapid rehousing must also work in tandem with homelessness prevention to address homelessness.

Broader structural infrastructure, both physical and legal, are also needed for prevention policies to operation. On the legal side, strong tenants' rights and protections are necessary to provide a framework in which prevention supports, such as legal advice and assistance, can operate to secure a tenancy.

On the physical side, there simply must be an adequate supply of affordable housing available so that where a person is at risk of entering homelessness, an alternative accommodation option can be sourced.

Homelessness prevention will only be effective therefore in the context of a private rental system with adequate protections for renters, and a housing system with adequate supply to meet the housing needs of the population as a whole.

In the research the legislative provision that is being implemented in Wales was seen to be delivering results by underpinning the prevention 'paradigm shift' in policy with practical legislative impetus to deliver.

Types of Prevention Measures

This submission has outlined that homelessness prevention measures should either prevent a household leaving their current home, or find a new home for that household, and has given example of policies that address both those aims.

Prevention policies can also be categorised in terms of the nature of their intervention. The Pleace research⁶ indicates that prevention measures can be categorised as;

1. Structural prevention- such as increasing the supply of housing in the market and broader social welfare policies that reduce poverty and social exclusion.
2. Systems prevention- addressing barriers to support from systems and institutions that contribute to the risk of homelessness. This includes policies that seek to identify who may be at particular risk of homelessness, e.g. those leaving institutional care, those at risk of domestic violence etc.
3. Early intervention- policies that help people at actual risk of homelessness, including support services, or targeted welfare supports.
4. Evictions prevention- including legislation, legal aid, advice, mediation and other services.

⁶ Pleace, Nicholas. (2019). *Preventing Homelessness, A Review of the International Evidence*. Simon Communities of Ireland.

5. Housing Stability- such as rapidly rehousing those who become homeless, or who are at imminent risk of homelessness.

Key Recommendations for Prevention Measures

The Simon Communities of Ireland believe we must continue on the progress made in 2020 on reducing the numbers of people entering homelessness, by introducing the following policies in the area of homelessness prevention;

1. A comprehensive Homelessness Strategy

The Programme for Government states that preventing homelessness is a major priority for the Government. To meet this ambition, the Government should develop a new and comprehensive Homelessness Strategy, with prevention measures fully integrated. This strategy should be developed using the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) which is international best practice.⁷ With the expiration of Rebuilding Ireland, there is currently an absence of a strategy for tackling homelessness in Ireland.

The new Strategy should be formulated in consultation with homelessness services, Homeless Action Teams and engage government departments and agencies beyond those that are typically involved in provision of homelessness services.

The strategy should ensure that policy is informed by a full understanding of the scale of homelessness in Ireland, by tackling the causes of hidden homelessness and circumstances where people are living in precarious accommodation. A comprehensive Strategy must engage an all-of-government approach which identifies individuals or families who are currently experiencing hidden homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness. Preventing homelessness must be a priority across public services, for public servants in education, the care system, the welfare system and the health system, as well as those mostly directly involved in homelessness services in local authorities.

2. A legislative underpinning and a ring-fenced budget for homelessness prevention work in Local Authorities

A legal underpinning for local authorities to provide homelessness prevention support to individuals should be introduced. An examples of this legislative provision is the Welsh 2014 Homeless Act which sought to put a duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness where possible⁸. Such legislation would seek to formalise and extend and build upon the sound prevention work that local authorities already undertake in Ireland.

For example, the granting of the additional 50% homeless HAP uplift in Dublin is a prevention measure that Dublin local authorities can take where they deem a person to be at risk of homelessness. The latest data from the Department of Housing for Q3 2020⁹ show that of the 407 families who presented in the Dublin region in Q3, 50% were prevented from having to enter emergency accommodation by way of tenancy created. In the first 9 months of 2020 55% of families presenting in Dublin were prevented from entering emergency accommodation through tenancy

⁷ <https://www.feantsa.org/download/article-1-33278065727831823087.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.feantsaresearch.org/download/article-4592410342917616893.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/1a64d-homeless-quarterly-report-for-quarter-3-and-monthly-homeless-report-for-september-2020/>

creation. Without the assistance of their local authority, those families would likely have been forced to enter emergency homeless accommodation.

To build on this work homeless prevention services must be designed to meet diverse needs of different groups. For example, youth homelessness should form a designated focus of this work, particularly for young people who engage with care services, and those leaving the care system.

Prevention of homelessness means every local authority should have outreach teams to identify and support those at risk of homelessness. This work should be informed by the ETHOS definition of homelessness with a designated funding line. In practice these initiatives could include outreach to communities; for example, through schools and doctors' surgeries, to provide timely advice and information where the pressures that can lead to homelessness may be detected.

3. Increase the supply of affordable housing to meet the needs of the population, including an increase in the provision of one and two-bedroom properties

Prevention measures require an adequate supply of affordable housing in order to be effective. Capital expenditure to build affordable, social and cost rental homes must be protected as it represents the best long-term solution to the current homelessness crisis. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimate that we require 30-35,000 homes delivered each year. The construction, make up and access to this housing stock will be critical. In 2019, the Social Housing Needs Assessment figures showed that 14,000 households were added to the list in that year. This suggests we must make provision for 15,000- 20,000 units of social and affordable housing annually.

There is a particular requirement for one and two bedroom units at a level that meets the yearly assessment of housing need and reduce the levels of long-term homelessness. While family homelessness has fallen significantly over the past few months, single people in homelessness has not followed that trend, and instead has continued to rise. In November 2020 there were 4,536 single people in emergency accommodation in Ireland, an annual increase of over 6% on November 2019.

The chronic lack of affordable one and two-bedroom properties across the country is regularly demonstrated in our research series Locked Out of the Market.¹⁰ The most recent analysis of the private rental market by the Simon Community in September 2020 found that of the 2,543 properties available on daft.ie across study areas, just one property came within the standard HAP rates for a single person. Just 38 of those properties came within standard HAP rates for a couple.

To achieve the level of one and two-bedroom units required, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies have to be supported to transition away from 'turnkey' procurement and proactively develop one and two-bedroom homes. The Covid-19 economic stimulus has now presented an opportunity to release funds for social and affordable house building on a more ambitious scale.

4. Increase Rent Supplement and HAP rates

As demonstrated by Simon Community research through our Locked Out of the Market series, there is an ongoing chronic lack of supply of private rental accommodation within HAP rates across the country. This is particularly the case outside of Dublin, where the discretionary top-up on HAP is

¹⁰ <https://www.simon.ie/Publications/Research.aspx>

limited to 20% increase, rather than the 50% increase permissible in Dublin where an applicant is at risk of homelessness.

While we recognise that increases in housing support payments are a short-term measure to tackle homelessness, rent supplement and Housing Assistant Payments rates must be at a level that reflect the reality of market rates for private rental accommodation. Adequate HAP rates are an important measure in the short-term to allow people to find appropriate private rental accommodation, and prevent households entering emergency accommodation.

Crucially, our analysis of the market shows that where increases in supply of private rental accommodation has become available as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, costs for new supply generally remain high above the standard rate of Housing Assistant Payment. The 50% additional Homeless HAP rate should be available to local authorities across the country, to prevent individuals and families entering homelessness.

In relation to the current Covid-19 crisis, as a key homelessness prevention measure, the amendments to and flexibility in the rules to qualify for rent supplement made during the Covid-19 crisis need to be retained on a permanent basis. Those in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and eligible for rent supplement during the Covid-19 crisis, but who were unaware of their eligibility, should be notified of their eligibility, and enabled to retrospectively claim rent supplement, particularly given the risk of rent arrears accruing during the pandemic period. Those in arrears who have returned to employment (and therefore no longer eligible for rent supplement) should be facilitated to apply for and receive an emergency needs payment in respect of arrears.

5. Increase protection for renters to ensure that tenants cannot be evicted into homelessness.

Homelessness is a crisis in this country, and it is a crisis in each person's life who is experiencing homelessness. Evictions are a key driver of homelessness. The termination of tenancies leaves many individuals and families with no feasible housing option and in recent years many have consistently end up in emergency accommodation as a result, sometimes for extended periods.

The moratorium on evictions in 2020 had a clear impact in reducing family homelessness. In 2020, family homelessness has fallen significantly, falling 38% by November 2020 on to November 2019. Statistics from the Department of Housing¹¹ show that exits from homelessness in the first 9 months of 2020 were up 0.3% on same period in 2019, not a significant increase. Clearly therefore, the driver of the significant fall in family homelessness has been the prevention measures which avoided new families entering homelessness in 2020 to replace those exiting. This is borne out in the data in relation to family homeless presentations in Dublin. In the first nine months of 2020, family presentations were down 28% compared to the corresponding period in 2019.

The Simon Communities of Ireland believe that no individual or family should be evicted into homelessness. Tenancy law must be reformed so that a tenancy cannot be terminated if emergency accommodation is the only option available to that tenant. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that a moratorium on evictions is possible where there is a pressing public need on the basis of a crisis. The homelessness crisis is of equivalent magnitude in the lives of those impacted. A ban on evictions that leads to homelessness is both a necessary and desirable measure to stop homelessness before it starts.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/1a64d-homeless-quarterly-report-for-quarter-3-and-monthly-homeless-report-for-september-2020/>

About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities support over 18,000 men, women and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research, and communications. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level. Whatever the issue, Simon's door is always open for as long as we are needed. For more information, please visit www.simon.ie.

Services include:

- Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction.
- Housing with support and Housing First services.
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports).
- Personal development, education, training and employment services.
- Foodbanks, drop-in centres and soup runs.

For further information:

Contact Wayne Stanley
Head of Policy and Communications

E: wayne.stanley@simoncommunity.com

Ph: 087 799 3860

W: simon.ie