



Simon Communities in Ireland Pre-Budget Submission 2013

This budget must not push people over the edge

Context

The prolonged economic crisis means more people are at risk of homelessness, more people are becoming homeless and more people than ever are turning to the Simon Communities for support. For many, the social welfare safety net is the only thing standing between them and homelessness. Cutbacks to funding for housing support, for health services, probation and welfare services, education and training services etc, 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.

CSO figures released in September 2012 indicated that 3,808 people were either counted in accommodation providing shelter for people who are homeless or sleeping rough on Census Night April 11th 2011, of those 1,648 or 43% were in emergency accommodation. This is a minimum figure and things have deteriorated significantly since April 2011. The Simon Communities in Ireland work with between 4,500 and 5,000 people annually who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness across the country.

The Simon Pledge

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. The pledge states the following:

We pledge that if elected to Government we will ensure that tackling homelessness will be one of our top priorities. We believe in people and pledge to work with all organizations to ensure that housing, healthcare and other supports are available to everyone at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Programme for Government & Housing Policy Statement

Reflecting this pre election commitment, homelessness was identified as a priority in the *Programme for Government*. 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”.

Simon's Critical Priorities for Budget 2013 - Summary

Preventing homelessness and protecting those on low incomes

Simon works with some of the most vulnerable people in our society, many of whom are dependent on Social Welfare payments. 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.

- Rent supplement limits must be reviewed upwards to reflect the current market value of rents which have continued to increase since 2011¹.
- The onus needs to be taken away from the tenant to renegotiate their rent with landlords.
- Cuts to basic Social Welfare payments need to be spared in Budget 2013. The cost of essential goods and services have continued to increase over the past 12 months while at the same time there were reductions in some vital allowances e.g. fuel allowance.
- Jobseekers Benefit/Allowance for those under 25 need to be revised upwards especially for vulnerable people. This age group are more at risk of becoming homeless as they are on such a low income and are struggling to pay for basic necessities along with rent.

Access to housing for people who are homeless

The 'Housing-Led Approach' which the government are committed to implementing to help end long term homelessness is dependent on the availability of suitable housing with support. This remains a very real challenge in the current economic climate.

- It is critical that the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government maintains its budget for homeless services at 2012 levels. In addition, we would ask that a portion of Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) *special needs* funding is also ring fenced for homelessness.
- Funding under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 should remain at 2012 levels, at a minimum.
- The Government announced the transfer of Rent Supplement from the Department of Social Protection to the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in the form of a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) to be rolled out from 2013. This needs to happen sooner rather than later particularly in light of the difficulties outlined with Rent Supplement payments.
- Tighter legislation needs to be ensured to protect those who depend on the Private Rented Sector for a home.
- The NAMA properties announced for social housing need to be realised immediately and more concerted efforts made in 2013 for the release of more units. Simon proposes that 20% of these units should be ring fenced for people moving out of homelessness. The units must be of adequate quality in areas where other supports are readily available to ensure an effective 'housing-led approach'.
- The current Social Housing Leasing Initiative (SHLI) offer of 80% of market rent is too low making it unattractive to property owners resulting in the low take-up of the scheme. The Government need to look at ways of making it more attractive.

¹ Quarterly Daft.ie Rental Reports, which the Government have used as a method of determining market value of rents, have shown that rent has continued to increase, especially in the major cities since beginning of 2011.

- A range of other housing options must be explored in greater depth to meet long term housing need amongst people who are homeless including Capital Advanced Loan Facility and social housing allocations and prioritisation.

Vital funding and essential support

Cuts to funding 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. Demands for our services continue to rise; we are well beyond the point of being able to do more with less.

- Department of Health and Children/Health Service Executive budgets must, at the very least, be maintained at 2012 levels. It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment, and that further cuts to services are avoided.
- The development of Community Mental Health Services needs to be continued. We support Mental Health Reform in their submission to ensure that the annual €35 million budget ring fenced for Community Mental Health services continues in 2013².
- Current education and training programmes for people who are vulnerable need to be maintained and improved upon. At present, many people who are homeless have been supported to gain qualifications and consequently secure jobs and housing.

² <http://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/resources/pre-budget-submission-2012>

Simon's Critical Priorities for Budget 2013

Preventing homelessness and protecting those on low incomes

Simon works with some of the most vulnerable members of our society, many of whom are dependent on Social Welfare payments. 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. It is vital that current Social Welfare levels are maintained.

Resources must not be diverted away from people who are 'poor and vulnerable', whom this government has pledged to protect; people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness fall into this category.

Rent Supplement

The new Rent Supplement limits that were introduced in January 2012 were not intended to cause any undue hardship or cause homelessness. As experienced by the Simon Communities, many of the people that we are supporting *are* in fact experiencing undue hardship as a result of these new limits and are finding it very difficult to find accommodation within these new limits. In addition, it has been left up to the tenant to renegotiate rent with their landlords or look for accommodation within the new limits. However, many of the people in receipt of rent supplement are vulnerable and may not be in a strong position to negotiate. The changes to these thresholds are pushing people into homelessness and preventing people from leaving homelessness. This has led to a situation where many of the emergency shelters are full and the numbers sleeping rough are increasing. In desperation, some people are forgoing basic necessities in order to 'top up' on their rent supplement. In light of this we propose that:

- Rent supplement limits must be reviewed upwards to reflect the current market value of rents which have continued to increase since 2011³.
- The onus needs to be taken away from the tenant to renegotiate their rent with landlords.

Basic Social Welfare Payments

- Cuts to basic Social Welfare payments need to be spared in Budget 2013. The cost of essential goods and services have continued to increase over the past 12 months while at the same time there were reductions in some vital allowances e.g. fuel allowance. This means people are barely surviving on their SW payments.
- Jobseekers Benefit/Allowance for those under 25 need to be revised upwards especially for vulnerable people. This age group are more at risk of becoming homeless as they are on such a low income and are struggling to pay for basic necessities along with rent.

³ Quarterly Daft.ie Rental Reports, which the Government have used as a method of determining market value of rents, have shown that rent has continued to increase, especially in the major cities since beginning of 2011.

Access to housing for people who are homeless

This Government is committed to a 'Housing-Led Approach' to help end long term homelessness, however this is dependent on the availability of suitable housing with support. This remains a very real challenge in the current economic climate. However, it requires more than just housing, those with higher support needs must have the option of accessing appropriate support as necessary including housing support and health and social care support based on need.

Department of Environment, Community and Local Government

- It is critical that the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government maintains its budget for homeless services at 2012 levels. In addition, we would ask that a portion of Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) *special needs* funding is also ring fenced for homelessness.
- Funding under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 should remain at 2012 levels, at a minimum.

Private Rental Sector

The Private Rental Sector (PRS) has become the only housing option for many; however availability has decreased over the past 12 months especially in major towns and cities. Poor quality housing can negatively impact on people's mental and physical health making them more vulnerable to homelessness. In the *Housing Policy Statement 2011*, there are commitments to making the rented sector a stable and attractive housing option for all.

- The Government announced the transfer of Rent Supplement from the Department of Social Protection to the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government in the form of a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) to be rolled out from 2013. However, recent Dáil Debates indicate that the pilot testing of HAP arrangements only will commence during the second half of 2013 with general roll out and commencement of transfers from January 2014⁴. This needs to happen sooner rather than later particularly in light of the difficulties outlined with Rent Supplement payments.
- 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.

NAMA Property

- The Government announced in March 2012, the release of 2,000 NAMA property units for social housing. These need to be realised immediately and more concerted efforts made in 2013 for the release of more units.
- Simon proposes that 20% of these units should be ring fenced for people moving out of homelessness. The units must be of adequate quality in areas where other supports are readily available to ensure an effective 'housing-led approach'.

⁴ Oireachtas Parliamentary Question on 16th October 2012 www.oireachtas.ie/Paymentshttp://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2012101600054?opendocument/#RentSupplementSchemePayments

RAS and Long-Term Leasing

This Government outlined the important role RAS and leasing would play in the provision of social housing in their *Housing Policy Statement 2011*. However, the rollout and uptake of these schemes is very low. Attention to these schemes differs across Local Authorities for a variety of reasons including staff shortages. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, launched the Social Housing Leasing Initiative (SHLI) in 2009. This initiative was welcomed by the Simon Communities as it offers a real opportunity to access housing for people who are homeless.

- However, the current SHLI offer of 80% of market rent is too low making it unattractive to property owners resulting in the low take-up of the scheme. If the Government see this as a housing option for the future, they need to look at ways of making it more attractive.

Other housing options

- A range of other housing options must be explored in greater depth to meet the long term housing need amongst people who are homeless including Capital Advanced Loan Facility and social housing allocations and prioritisation.

Vital funding and essential supports

Cuts to funding 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.

Department of Health and Children/Health Service Executive

Some people who are homeless experience health and mental health issues and/or drug and alcohol related problems. The HSE budgets allow for the associated health and social care supports for people who are homeless, particularly those with the most complex set of needs. Cuts to funding for these supports will cost the economy in the long-run as it will place extra pressure on the health system, particularly A&E services.

- Department of Health and Children/Health Service Executive budgets must, at the very least, be maintained at 2012 levels. It is vital that sufficient supports are in place aimed at reducing drug and alcohol related harm and offering pathways to treatment, and that further cuts to services are avoided. Ensuring the availability of adequate services can help people move out of homelessness and also prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.
- The development of Community Mental Health Services needs to be continued. We support MHR in their submission to ensure that the annual €35 million budget ring fenced for Community Mental Health services continues in 2013⁵.

Education and training programmes

- Current education and training programmes for people who are vulnerable need to be maintained and improved upon. At present, many people who are homeless have been supported to gain qualifications and consequently secure jobs and housing. This is very positive and such developments must continue.

⁵ <http://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/resources/pre-budget-submission-2012>

Simon Communities in Ireland

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 service to between 4,500 and 5,000 individuals and families throughout Ireland who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness. 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.

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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