



## Submission to the Homeless Strategy Review

from the

Simon Communities in Ireland

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### *Introduction*

The Simon Communities welcome the opportunity to contribute to the review of the Homeless Strategy *The Way Home*. This submission focuses on the following areas:

- Availability of appropriate housing.
- Housing with supports and high support housing.
- Health and social care supports.
- Need for timelines and key performance indicators.
- Arrangements for monitoring and implementation.
- Annual nationwide 'Counted In'.
- Development of a new Homeless Strategy and National Implementation Plan.
- Role of the voluntary sector.

However, firstly some context is provided in relation to the experience of the Simon Communities around the country working with people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness in the current budgetary context.

**The economic crisis 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 fiscal and budgetary crisis is exacerbating this issue. Recession makes people more vulnerable with pressure in terms of jobs, housing and increasing levels of poverty. Homelessness impacts mostly on people who are on the margins with few resources in the first place, people who may have experienced homelessness in the past, people on low incomes, and with little job or housing security. In addition, there is a knock on effect of reductions in funding for health services, probation and welfare services, education and training services etc. This combination of factors can cause homelessness in the first place but can also prevent people from moving on and leaving homelessness behind.

**The Government is cutting funding from essential services tackling homelessness. Simon Communities are under increasing pressure around the country.** We are acutely aware that we are in a very challenging economic and budgetary context. However, we see firsthand 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, their only option is Simon. In the current climate the Simon Communities are under increasing pressure with reductions in statutory funding across a range of budget lines and uncertainty in terms of voluntary donations. Many services have been experiencing funding cuts since 2008 and are operating at capacity; they are finding it challenging to raise the shortfall between funding contributed by the State and the actual cost of providing homeless services.

**The long-term accommodation and support needs of people who are homeless are not being met.** Emergency accommodation should only ever be used in an ‘emergency’ but often this is not the case. The Government defines long term homelessness as the occupation of emergency accommodation for longer than 6 months. Due to a lack of suitable long-term housing options, people often spend long periods in emergency accommodation. We acknowledge that 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 critical that suitable and appropriate housing, with the necessary support is available. Plans are underway to respond to those who have low to medium support needs, providing housing with support. However, many of the people who are long term homeless have high levels of need – a combination of mental health, physical health, problem drug and alcohol use, fractured family relations, education and training needs – how their long term housing and support needs will be addressed remains unclear.

**Homelessness is about health as well as housing.** A recent National Health Snapshot Study (2010) undertaken by Simon demonstrates the many health and related needs experienced amongst people using Simon services around the country. Findings indicated that of the almost 800 participants that 56% of people are experiencing at least one diagnosed physical health condition, 52% experiencing at least one diagnosed mental health condition, 28% of people are experiencing both. People reported alcohol use (66%), drug use (38%), self harm (15%) and attempted suicide (23%). In short, people who are very sick and very vulnerable. We are currently analysing the results of our 2011 National Snapshot Study. Homelessness is about health as well as housing: access to appropriate healthcare is critical to ensure that people remain as healthy as possible and that they get the supports they need.

**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. Reflecting this, homelessness has been identified as a priority in the new Programme for Government. 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.*

### ***Key Areas for the Homeless Strategy Review***

The following are the key areas which need to be addressed to achieve the strategic objectives of the Homeless Strategy within its remaining lifespan, up to 2013.

**Availability of appropriate housing:** It is acknowledged that access to housing is a major block delaying the implementation of the Homeless Strategy. It is critical that social housing provision is reprioritised and that supply keeps pace with increasing demands and pressures. We welcome commitments to increase the supply of permanent new social housing contained in the *Housing Policy Statement* (June 2011). In addition, we welcome the ‘Housing First’ approach which is endorsed in the Programme for Government 2011 and reiterated in the above Statement. This ‘Housing First’ approach will work for some once the necessary supports are provided simultaneously. However, such an approach will not work for all people who are homeless therefore a range of appropriate housing options must be provided

through local authorities, voluntary and high support housing, private rented accommodation, the Rental Accommodation Scheme and the leasing scheme. A portion of the CAS Special Needs funding needs to be ringfenced for housing for people who have high support needs. In addition, the process between project application, approval and delivery must be expedited to meet needs as quickly as possible.

**Housing with supports and high support housing:** To tackle long term homelessness and to support people to move out of homelessness the provision of accommodation with appropriate housing support and health and social care support based on need is critical. In addition, high support housing for those who need more intensive, ongoing support must also be an option. The provision of both housing with supports and high support housing works and is working in Simon Communities all around the country.

**Health and social care supports:** As mentioned homelessness is about health as well housing: access to appropriate healthcare is critical to ensure that people remain as healthy as possible and that they get the supports they need. To support people to move out of homelessness appropriate housing, health and social care support must be provided, and high support housing must be provided for those who need more intensive, ongoing support. Given the high levels of health care needs amongst people who are homeless specialist services are required working in conjunction with, and complimenting, mainstream services to ensure the best possible health outcomes for this group of people. There are excellent models of such multi disciplinary working in some parts of the country which are making a real difference to the lives and health of people who are homeless. In particular, the following are required:

- *Maintain existing specialist services and expand them into areas where they are required:* Specialist services working in conjunction with mainstream services have proven to be effective when working with people who are homeless supporting them to manage and overcome their combination of health problems. Integrated approaches ensure people have access to the most appropriate healthcare, including mental health services and support therefore improving diagnosis, interventions and outcomes.
- *Alcohol and Drugs Services:* Alcohol and drug services across the spectrum of service provision must be expanded including harm reduction, access to substitution treatment<sup>1</sup>, detoxification, rehabilitation and aftercare all-around the country. These should be tailored and targeted to the needs of people who are homeless with alcohol and/or drug related problems, irrespective of location. It is timely to undertake research looking at drug and alcohol use amongst the homeless population. We recommend that the National Advisory Committee on Drugs (NACD) study (2005) is repeated and recommendations implemented as a matter of urgency. In addition, the imminent Substance Misuse Strategy must include specific actions in relation to people who are homeless and we actively engaged in consultation processes on the development of same.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the procedure of replacing a drug usually heroin with a medically prescribed substitute e.g. methadone or buprenorphine

**Timelines and Key Performance Indicators:** The current implementation process has reached a standstill. It is critical that there is ongoing commitment to end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough to ensure that the Strategy remains on target. The Strategy/National Implementation Plan must be updated including appropriate key performance indicators, new timelines and targets for the remaining lifespan of the strategy i.e. 2013. In addition, it is important that there are commitments to report on progress using said KPI's on a quarterly basis.

**Arrangements for monitoring and implementation:** The National Homelessness Consultative Committee (NHCC) and the Cross Departmental Team (CDT) are the current national structures for monitoring implementation of the Strategy. We recommend that the NHCC/CDT meetings take place on a quarterly basis and that reporting against KPI's happens on a quarterly basis circulated in advance of such meetings. At a regional and local level the experience of the Regional Fora has been chequered with some areas working very well and others not so well. It is essential that the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the CDT play a key role in terms of monitoring and evaluating progress in each area as clearly articulated in action 8.2.4 of the National Implementation Plan.

**Annual nationwide 'Counted In':** We recommend an annual, state-wide count using the 'Counted In' methodology to establish a robust figure for the number of people who are homeless in the state and to monitor progress towards ending long term homelessness.

**Development of a new Homeless Strategy and National Implementation Plan:** As the existing Strategy is due to end in 2013 it is critical that plans for the development and consultation process for new National Strategy and Implementation Plan are included in this review. This must include a final review of *The Way Home* clearly highlighting the gaps and barriers, the actions which have been achieved and the actions which remain outstanding, regional variations etc.

**Role of the Voluntary Sector:** The voluntary sector plays a key role as service providers and as advocates for and with people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness throughout Ireland. It is critical that the voluntary sector are included as partners in all local, regional and national processes and structures. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the added value that the voluntary sector brings in terms of expertise and experience, volunteers, and voluntary donations which supplement statutory funding.

## ***Conclusion***

The Simon Communities reiterate our support and commitment to working with all of our partners, both statutory and voluntary, the structures and all of key players in this Review of the Homeless Strategy and to ensure its full implementation as we work towards our shared goal of ending long term homelessness in Ireland. In addition, we welcome the opportunity to engage in the process of developing of a new Homeless Strategy and Implementation Plan.

### **For further information contact:**

Niamh Randall – National Research and Policy Manager

E: [niamh@simoncommunity.com](mailto:niamh@simoncommunity.com) Ph: 085 8588 384