

## Submission on Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights.

### Overview of Simon Communities of Ireland

The Simon Communities of Ireland represent a network of Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East, responding to local needs.

With 50 years of experience we are one of the leading providers of homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness in Ireland. In 2018 our services supported over 16,700 men, women and children.

The Simon Communities of Ireland are a member of FEANTSA, and currently hold the vice presidency of the organisation. Over many years we have engaged at European level independently and through FEANTSA to put homelessness on the European agenda.

### Introduction

The legacy of the 2008 financial and property crash in Ireland is still being felt in relation to homelessness. A dysfunctional property market and austerity cutbacks in capital spending on social housing created the conditions for record homelessness, with over 10,000 people living in emergency accommodation at its peak in late 2019, and thousands more living in inadequate, overcrowded, temporary and unsustainable accommodation.

Today in Ireland;

- 8,737 people are living in emergency accommodation, up from just over 3000 in 2014<sup>1</sup>
- 2,382 children live in emergency accommodation, up from just under 800 in 2014<sup>2</sup>
- 66,693 households have qualified for social housing support but are not having their needs met (2019)<sup>3</sup>
- 6,074 new social housing homes provided in 2019, far off the 15,000-20,000 needed annually to meet demand<sup>4</sup>

While rapid economic expansion began for the Irish economy from 2014, this has coincided with a period of rapid and unprecedented escalation of the homelessness crisis. National and European policy responses during the economic crisis of 2008 to 2014 failed to adequately consider how measures such as curtailment of capital expenditure would impact housing supply and conditions in the years ahead. A lack of investment during the financial crisis in housing meant that just 833 local authority homes were built from 2011 to 2015 inclusive.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/SHA-Summary-2019-DEC-2019-WEB.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/annual\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/annual_report_2019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/seven-councils-built-no-social-housing-from-2013-to-2015-1.2745459?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2Fseven-councils-built-no-social-housing-from-2013-to-2015-1.2745459>

The financial crisis of a decade ago has led to a homelessness crisis now. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Ireland, with an over threefold increase in people living in emergency accommodation in Ireland from 2013 to today.

While the causes of homelessness are structural and the long term response needs to address the structural issues. The crisis of homelessness requires targeted actions that support people out of homelessness.

In Ireland public spending on emergency accommodation has increased four-fold over the period outlined above, with the State relying heavily on privately run hotels and BnBs to meet the needs for emergency beds.

A positive development has been investment in Housing First projects in Ireland, which have a proven record of ending long-term homelessness in complex circumstances. In the Irish context it is clear that Housing First and Housing Led initiatives along with significant investment in supports that will prevent people from having to enter homelessness in the first instance are the keys to ending homelessness.

We are able to make this assertion in part because we have been able to learn and draw inspiration from engaging and understanding the work of colleagues across Europe through FEANTSA.

In June of this year Commissioner Schmit and the Portuguese Minister for Labour, Solidarity and Social Security wrote an opinion piece that set out that homelessness must become a priority for EU. Within that article they also proposed a European Collaboration Platform on Homelessness. We believe that such a platform could be a catalyst for change and improvement that could help us to address homelessness.

### **Principle 19 of European Pillar of Social Rights**

The justification for the collaboration platform is Principle 19 of the European Pillar of social rights. It sets out that access to housing of good quality shall be provided to those in need, vulnerable people have a right to assistance and protection from eviction and that adequate shelter and services be provided to people experiencing homelessness.

Working together member states can ensure that the principle can become a lived reality. It is in that context that the Simon Communities of Ireland wish to express our strong support for the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights' proposal for a European Collaboration Platform on Homelessness.

### **Key Actions for implementation of principle 19.**

The Simon Communities of Ireland believe that meeting the standards set out in Principle 19 will require key actions, including;

- The EU should engage with tackling homelessness with a high level of ambition. A target should be set for ending long-term homelessness across the Union.
- Mainstreaming the Pillar across EU policy-making- The Pillar should not sit solely within the remit of the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights. Processes should be

established to mainstream its standards across policy areas, particularly economic and fiscal policy.

- Social Rights Proofing- where regulations and budgets are being formulated, policies should be ‘proofed’ in terms of their impact on the social rights set out in the Pillar.
- Mobilise EU funds for social inclusion projects which fund homelessness specific supports. Such funding is particularly important given the overrepresentation of EU citizens amongst homelessness populations where they have exercised their rights to free movement.
- Commitment to Housing First- EU funds could have a particularly meaningful and long-term impact by funding Housing First projects across Europe. Housing First is proven, progressive and common-sense programme that has an outstanding track record of ending long-term homelessness. Housing First originates in North America, and has been first implemented successfully in Europe in Finland.
- Commitment to Housing Led and preventative initiatives that will see those who are being forced into homelessness for economic reasons or due to minimal support needs are supported to move on quickly from homelessness or prevented from having to enter homelessness in the first place.

### **Ambition for and European Collaborative Platform.**

The Simon Communities of Ireland is keen to work with all stakeholders, through FEANTSA and independently to see the ambition outlined by Commissioner Schmit and Minister Godino come to pass. To that end we fully endorse the proposals put forward by FEANTSA that include:

- An annual monitoring report on homelessness in each of the MS, published by the European Commission. The 2019 ESPN report provides a baseline for this exercise.
- An annual review of MS’ policies to address homelessness, accompanied by a programme of regular thematic Peer Reviews.
- Capacity-building and sharing of best practice to support Member States’ use the EU’s Structural and Investment Funds to tackle homelessness effectively.
- A multi-annual action plan to scale-up Housing First in the EU.
- European research to support the development of evidence-policies to tackle homelessness.
- A proposal for an EU Recommendation on Ending Homelessness by 2022.
- EU-level training and capacity building activities relating to key challenges and emerging issues in the field of homelessness policies.
- The possibility for Member States to request technical assistance on specific issues in relation to homelessness
- Strident measures to challenge the criminalisation of homelessness
- Ensuring that ongoing COVID19 response and recovery plans include measures to protect people experiencing and at risk of homelessness, notably by providing access to housing

Above all the Simon Communities of Ireland hope that the Pillar of Social Rights can be a catalyst for positive social change within the EU. This will require tangible outputs like those set out above.