

Simon Communities of Ireland Submission on the National Recovery and Resilience Plan Public Consultation

Introduction

The Simon Community of Ireland welcome the opportunity afforded by the department to take part in the consultation. While there have been some positive projections on the possibilities for a rebound in the Irish economy once we emerge from the COVID crisis, there will still be a great deal of harm done that will require a response.

The Simon Communities in Ireland support over 18,000 men, women and children. With 50 years of experience providing support to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. As such the focus of this submission will be on the need to utilise all available financial and policy levers to ensure we address the homeless and housing crisis that predated COVID but will undoubtedly postdate it as well.

In this context, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan presents an important opportunity for the Irish Government to strengthen efforts to address the homeless and housing crisis and to prevent a recurrence of the mistakes of the past.

Learning from the past

While 2008 saw the financial crash, it was not until 2014 that Jan O'Sullivan, then Minister for Housing called family homelessness a crisis. The growth in family homelessness in particular has been a marked consequence of the housing crisis that followed the financial crisis. That housing crisis was in part driven by decision make to bring in a number of tax and other incentives to drive demand, while not ensuring that there was a supply line that could temper housing inflation.

While there are some positive projections for a possible quick rebound¹ for the Irish economy, it is clear that the housing system has been severely impacted by the crisis and that recovering ground lost will take time.

If this was to be the case, a relatively quick and broad economic recovery, combined with a sluggish recovery in housing, could see a return rapid return to the record levels of homelessness seen in 2019. This risks more individuals and families falling through the cracks in our housing system.

The fall in the numbers of people in emergency accommodation from a high of over 10,000 in 2019 to approximately 8,500 in 2021 is very welcome. However, we are very concerned that the number of single people in homelessness remains stubbornly high, and has in fact increased throughout the Covid pandemic. Therefore, significant work must be undertaken.

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/makhlouf-sees-potential-surge-in-demand-once-restrictions-are-lifted-1.4467349>

That work could be supported by leveraging the Recovery Plan to deliver the measures necessary to ensure that the reduction in the number of people in homelessness over the last year could be retained and built upon to alleviate the ongoing crisis.

In doing so, the Government would be aligned with the Programme for Government commitments on homelessness, with the consensus across the political spectrum and with the demands of broader society to address the housing and homelessness crisis.

Investment in social housing and solutions to homelessness cuts right across the six pillars of the EU Regulation which underpins the Recovery Plan. Housing infrastructure engages the pillars of green transition, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, social cohesion, health, economic and social resilience.

This submission will outline the core principles which should underpin the allocation of the Resilience and Recovery Funding (RRF), the relevant areas of the Programme for Government, and our recommendations for investment funding.

Core EU Principles for allocating the Recovery Funding

The Recovery and Residence Facility (RRF) requires that State spending must take into account the country specific recommendations that the EU issued to that State during the 2019 and 2020 European Semester process. On the basis of the importance in prioritising housing infrastructure and solutions to homelessness in the Recovery Plan, we submit that the following Country Specific Recommendation is the most relevant and must be addressed in the Plan;

2019, recommendation 3; Focus investment-related economic policy on low carbon and energy transition, the reduction of greenhouse gas emission, sustainable transport, water, digital infrastructure and affordable and social housing, taking into account regional disparities.

In addition, RFF funding must be compliant with the commitments of Member States' commitments under the European Pillar of Social Rights. A key element of implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights relates to Housing and Assistance for the homeless. Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that;

- a. Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need.
- b. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.
- c. Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.

Recommendations for Investments

This Submission will make a number of specific recommendations that the Recovery Plan should prioritise in terms of allocating investment funds.

National Strategy on Ending Homelessness

Following the expiration of Rebuilding Ireland, a new, cross-departmental housing and homelessness strategy is in development by the Department of Housing. Investment commitments in the Recovery Plan should align with the process of developing the new housing strategy. The Department of Housing must play a role in development of the Recovery Plan.

The Department of Housing should take the opportunity presented by the Recovery Plan to increase and frontload the ambition of the Programme for Government in relation to social housing building, and utilise Recovery Plan funding in its new Strategy for Housing and Homelessness.

Social Housing and Housing Supply

The Programme for Government has committed to increasing the social housing stock by 50,000 units over the next 5 years. Budget 2021 committed to increasing housing stock in 2021 by 12,750 units, 9,500 of which would be newly constructed units. However, the Minister for Housing has indicated that the Third Wave lockdown will delay construction in 2021, and meeting the social housing new build target for 2021 will be very challenging.

The Social Housing Needs Assessment for 2019 found that there were 68,693 households qualifying for social housing. 14,000 households were added to the list in that year. 5.3% of those households needed social housing primarily as a result of overcrowding while 28% were living in accommodation deemed unsuitable. It is likely that large numbers of households on the social housing list are experiencing hidden homelessness. 21.5% of households listed their current tenure as “living with parents” while 8.9% described their current tenure as “living with relatives/friends”.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimate that the State requires 30-35,000 new homes delivered each year. The above data indicates that the government will have to provide 15,000-20,000 units of social and affordable housing a year. This is well above the Government target for 2021, a target which may not be met because of the delays associated with lockdown.

Clearly, in order to end homelessness, there is a need to escalate the level of ambition behind social housing building in Ireland. The Recovery Plan should dedicate a significant funding stream to supplementing the social housing building budget, in addition to the funding already committed to in Budget 2021.

As stated in the introduction, while there has been a welcome fall in family homelessness, single person homelessness has continued to rise to record levels throughout the pandemic period. Therefore, in leveraging Recovery Plan funding for social housing, a particular focus should be given to ensuring that the mix of units matches the evidence base for social

housing needs. This means ensuring that there are adequate one and two bedroom units for single people and small households.

Utilising Climate-Dedicated Funding for Social Housing Projects

37% of the Recovery Plan funding must relate to climate action measures. Investment in housing can still form a key part of this funding stream.

A proportion of this climate-related funding should be used as part of a programme of refurbishment and retrofitting of existing social housing stock. This funding may also be leveraged to subsidise the Department of Housing scheme to bring void and derelict properties back into use, by funding the home heating and energy elements of such work.

Home heating represents a very significant proportion of emissions in Ireland. Energy for heat accounted for 33% of CO₂ emissions in 2018, while home heating made up almost half of those heat related emissions.² The State should use the opportunity of this Recovery Funding to tackle two crises at once, by leveraging this investment to support retrofitting social housing and work that brings voids back into the social housing stock, while also contributing to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Housing First

Social Cohesion and Social Resilience are two of the pillars which underpin the allocation of RFF funding. Housing First is a tried and tested model, proven to work, for ending long-term homeless for people with complex needs. The Programme for Government has made a commitment to expand Housing First in Ireland.

As a social cohesion measure, Housing First is effective in integrating some of the most marginalised individuals in our society back in their communities. Allocating funding with the Recovery Plan to ramping up the expansion of Housing First would have a long-term impact on promoting social cohesion and greatly enhance the chances of the State achieving the goal of ending chronic homelessness. Expanding Housing First is particularly crucial given the ongoing rise in single person homelessness that has continued throughout the pandemic period.

² <https://www.seai.ie/news-and-media/emissions-report-2020/#:~:text=In%20the%20heat%20sector%2C%20fossil,8%25%20on%20the%20previous%20year.&text=Usi ng%20renewable%20energy%20for%20heat,of%20all%20homes%20in%20Ireland.>