

Simon Communities in Ireland



Submission to the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and
Local Government to inform the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

September 2016

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Introduction

The Simon Communities in Ireland welcome the opportunity to make this Submission to the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to inform the development of their Statement of Strategy from 2016 to 2019. The Simon Communities work with over 7,500 people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness each year. We are now over half way through 2016 and the numbers of people who are homeless continue to grow; with the numbers entering homelessness greater than the numbers exiting. This housing and homeless crisis is impacting every region and community around the country. It is a nationwide crisis, more acute in our urban centres but certainly present in our rural areas. The number of people trapped in emergency accommodation continued to grow in the first seven months of 2016. During one week in July 2016 (latest available figures), there were 6,525 men, women and children in emergency accommodation across the country; a 40% increase from July 2015. This included 2,667 adults with no dependents in their care and 1,130 families made up of 1,510 adults and 2,348 children¹. In light of these increasing figures, the Simon Communities welcome the recently published *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* (the *Action Plan*) and the coordinated approach contained therein to tackle the complexity of the current housing and homelessness crisis. It is however critical to agree targets and timelines for the delivery of key action points in the *Action Plan* particularly nationwide targets for the roll out of Housing First. The absence of rent certainty measures is also cause for concern and we encourage its inclusion as part of the new Strategy for the Private Rental Sector to be delivered by the end of the year as committed to in the *Action Plan*. We believe it can, and must, have a significant impact on people becoming homeless and those experiencing housing difficulties. The Plan represents the start of a process and it is essential to build on this momentum with the ongoing support of the Cabinet and members of Government.

Review of Statement of Strategy 2015-2017

A brief review of the previous statement of strategy 2015-2017 is a necessary starting point in developing the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019.

- The priority ‘Mission and Goals’ outlined in the previous Statement of Strategy did not address the housing and homelessness crisis. We believe ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping using a Housing First approach should be included in the Statement of Strategy as a core goal within the Department’s remit and central to the Department’s overarching mission. The values that inform the Department’s work as outlined in the previous Statement of Strategy are comprehensive.² We welcome their continued application and believe the new Statement of Strategy should include a new value outlining the Department’s commitment to ‘improving society and the living standards of all citizens.’
- The timeframe of the previous Statement of Strategy did not reflect the timeframe for the implementation of the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* published by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in November 2014. The duration of the Statement of Strategy should where possible mirror the core strategy undertaken by the Department. In light of the publication of the *Action Plan* and its centrality to the Department’s work, we believe the end date for the new Statement of Strategy should be extended from 2019 to 2021.
- We welcome the reference to the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* in the Minister’s foreword to the Statement of Strategy 2015-2017 given its then centrality to the work of the Department. We encourage the current Minister to use his foreword to the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019 to reiterate his support for the *Action Plan*. Furthermore, we encourage the Minister to use his foreword to recognise the continuing

¹ DHPCLG Emergency Accommodation Figures July 2016 http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_july_2016.pdf.

² Values that inform the Department’s work: Integrity and professionalism; Openness and transparency; Flexibility, responsiveness, innovation and learning; Consultation and partnership; Commitment to society and citizens; Pursuit of effectiveness, efficiency and value for money. P.6, [Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Statement of Strategy 2015-2017](#).

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homelessness crisis, a reference that was absent from the previous Minister's foreword in the 2015-2017 strategy.

- The inclusion of housing and homeless specific actions were a welcome inclusion in the 2015-2017 strategy. We encourage the Minister to include a new overarching goal in the new statement of strategy in relation to the prevention and ending of long term homelessness and rough sleeping using a Housing First approach.
- We welcome the introduction of the deposit protection scheme through the *Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2015*. We encourage the Minister to commence the Act as a matter of priority to provide greater financial security to those in the private rental sector.
- We welcome the publication of the General Scheme of the *Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Bill 2015* and look forward to further opportunities to contribute to its development.
- We encourage the Minister to clarify through the Statement of Strategy whether the relationship between the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* will now happen under the *Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness*. The Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan acknowledges that the packages of actions being delivered through the strategy have not been delivered at a pace to meet current pressures and pent up demand. Clarity is needed as to what departmental strategy will take precedence in relation to the delivery of social housing.
- We welcome the support given to the roll out of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme and encourage its continued support and resourcing as a means of reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion and equality during the implementation of the *Action Plan*.

Recommendations

General

- The DHPCLG Statement of Strategy (Statement of Strategy) should enshrine the overarching goal of delivering an affordable, safe and secure home for every man, woman and child in this State.
- Support an integrated approach to housing provision in Ireland acknowledging that home ownership, the private rented sector, social housing and homelessness are all interconnected, a change in one area in relation to housing provision and supply can have a knock-on effect on other areas.
- The strategy timeframe should mirror the timeframe for the implementation of the *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (Action Plan)*.
- The relationship, commonalities and interface between existing housing and homeless strategies and the *Action Plan* should be clarified. This should include the *Housing Policy Statement 2011*, *Homelessness Policy Statement 2013*, the *Implementation Plan on The State's Response to Homelessness*, the *20 Point Action Plan* and the *Social Housing Strategy 2020*.
- Actions where cross cabinet and departmental cooperation is required should be clearly identified. A detailed outline of the functions of the High Level Implementation Team on Homelessness; the National Homeless Consultative Committee and the Cross Departmental Team on Homelessness; the Housing Delivery Office and the Housing Procurement Unit within the DHPCLG is required.
- Recommendations in the *Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness 2016* should be reviewed and made actionable in the Statement of Strategy where possible.
- The DHPCLG should make clear recommendations to Cabinet and Government on proposed legislative changes as outlined in Appendix 3 of the *Action Plan*.³

³ Proposed legislative changes include:

- (1) Fast track planning approval procedure for large scale residential developments through direct applications to An Bord Pleanála;
- (2) Streamlining Local Authority own development (Part 8) processes;
- (3) Legislation on balanced arrangements for tenancy termination;

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- The Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government should bring deliberations in relation to enshrining the right to housing in the Constitution to a speedy conclusion by bringing a recommendation on the matter to Government.⁴

Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness

- Monitoring and implementation of the *Action Plan* should be the central component with provision to revise targets upwards as required.
- The Statement of Strategy should prioritise and ensure that the maximum available resources are committed to the immediate implementation of the *Action Plan*.
- The Statement of Strategy should action the national roll out of successful housing and homeless pilot programmes nationwide such as the Homeless HAP Scheme, the Affordable Rental Scheme, the Pilot Cost Rental Model, and the buy-to-let recommendations.

Social Housing

- The Statement of Strategy should support the delivery of the committed 47,000 social housing units including a mechanism to review and revise this target to meet growing housing need through a programme of acquisition, refurbishment and new build in conjunction with Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies.
- All possible sources of funding required to fulfil the commitment to provide new social housing units should be explored.
- The refurbishment of current social housing stock as the fastest method of increasing available social housing stock as outlined in the *Action Plan* should be prioritised.
- Necessary legislative priorities including the amendment of the National Asset Management Agency Act 2009 (S.2 and S.10) to allow NAMA to be an agent for the provision of social housing should be outlined.
- Planning law reform should be prioritised, particularly the requirement for 8 weeks consultation for social housing under Part 8 of the planning process.

Private Rented Sector

- The Statement of Strategy must allow for the rapid implementation of the comprehensive strategy for the private rented sector committed to in the *Action Plan* which is urgently needed to enhance stability and security for landlords and tenants.
- There should be a commitment to the introduction of full rent certainty measures. Rents must be brought into line with real market rates and index linked, for example to the Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- The Statement of Strategy should action the commencement of the *Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2015*.

Private Housing Supply

- Better use must be made of existing empty private housing units and vacant private housing must be brought back into use in a timely manner. Incentives and taxation measures could be used to achieve this in addition to the removal of regulatory barriers.

(4) Potential legislation on mortgage arrears.

Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness, Appendix 3, P.112.

http://rebuildingireland.ie/Rebuilding%20Ireland_Action%20Plan.pdf

⁴ Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness (2016), p. 138.

<http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/32housingandhomelessness/Final-Report-.pdf>

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- The Statement of Strategy should prioritise the review of *Part V* from 10% to 20 % given the urgent need for access to social housing.
- Introduction of the vacant site levy and the ‘use it or lose it’ system of planning permission for housing developments should be expedited given the urgent need for housing. These measures must be stringent enough to incentivise and speed up house building.

Homelessness

- The Statement of Strategy should include an overarching goal to end long term homelessness and rough sleeping using a Housing First approach.
- A commitment to develop a strategy to end homelessness and rough sleeping should be included drawing together the key elements from the *Action Plan, Homelessness Policy Statement, the Implementation Plan on The State’s Response to Homelessness, the 20 Point Plan* and the *Social Housing Strategy 2020*. The commitment to a proactive housing first approach should be central to the delivery of this strategy to end homelessness.
- Actionable targets for the roll out of Housing First across the country should be included.
- Commitments contained in the *Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* for enhanced supports for people who are homeless with mental health and drug and/or alcohol issues and increased funding for people with chronic and enduring health needs must be prioritised.
- Allocations policies must actively prioritise people who are homeless as having the greatest level of social housing need. Within this, priority must be given to those who are long term homeless and who have the most complex needs for housing as this is the most effective way of ending long term homelessness and reducing pressure on the emergency shelter system.
- Allocations processes within Local Authorities including methods to register people who are homeless and referral processes to the HAP scheme need to be reviewed and updated to ensure consistency.

Simon Communities Critical Priorities for the Duration of the Statement of Strategy

Homelessness – a nationwide crisis

People become homeless for a whole range of complex and overlapping reasons. Primary causes relate to poverty, inequality and lack of affordable housing, often coupled with systems failures and individual circumstance. The Simon Communities come across many reasons why people become homeless and we deal with them all. Many of the people we work with have been disadvantaged and isolated from a young age; they have been failed by the state time and time again. Homelessness is extremely traumatic and damaging having a serious impact on people's mental and physical health, as well as their overall wellbeing. When people think of homelessness, they often think of rough sleeping. However rough sleeping is the most extreme form of homelessness; it also includes people who are living in shelters and emergency accommodation, and other people who have no place of their own and therefore end up staying with family and friends, people who are living in inadequate housing or those at risk of homelessness who are living under threat of insecure tenancies or eviction.

Homelessness can happen as the result of a crisis or an accumulation of crises in a person's life. It can build up over time, sometimes years. With access to affordable housing and the right supports people can move out of homelessness quickly. Limited access to housing and support services is increasing the risk of homelessness and is preventing people moving out of homelessness. It is vital to ensure people can remain in their communities where they have family and support networks when they run into housing and financial difficulties, often times when these supports are most important. Therefore responses must be nationally driven but locally resourced and delivered.

A just and fair society with access to affordable, safe and secure housing for all

Ireland's approach to housing provision is disconnected - home ownership, the private rented sector, social housing and homelessness are approached in isolation when in fact they are all interconnected. A change in one area in relation to housing provision and supply can have a knock-on effect on other areas. The committed expansion of Housing First around the country contained in the *Action Plan* is particularly welcome, acknowledging that housing with support is required to solve the homeless crisis. It is essential that this commitment is backed up quickly with clear nationwide targets. We encourage the Minister to set and publish these targets in the Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2019. Commitment for a Private Rental Sector strategy by year end is positive; this strategy must address rent certainty and enhance security of tenure. Rent Supplement/HAP limits need to be increased on an ongoing basis in line with market rents; it is critical to keep people in their homes. We are supportive of plans to deliver 47,000 social housing units by 2021, to address vacant homes and to accelerate the Rapid Builds Programme to deliver 1,000 housing units directly to those trapped in emergency accommodation. Some areas of the *Action Plan* require more detail and we are happy to contribute to this process. We anticipate that the establishment of a Housing Delivery Office and Housing Procurement Unit will ensure targets and timelines are monitored and met.

The housing and homeless crisis can only be addressed effectively with integrated plans across all forms of housing provision. We must learn from past mistakes and change expectations - we need to expect that people will move on from homelessness quickly to a decent, affordable home of their own. Some may need support – visiting or on-site. This needs to be the expectation of people who are homeless, the expectation of staff and volunteers in homeless services and the expectation of our Government. We need to agree that every man, woman and child in this State is entitled to an affordable, safe and secure home.

Current building of social housing continues to be slow. There were just 75 houses built by local authorities in 2015. Prior to the publishing of the *Action Plan* this figure was well below the target set out in *Social*

Housing Strategy 2020, where 35,000 new social housing units are to be delivered during the lifetime of the strategy. Rents continued to increase nationally during quarter 2, 2016 by an average of 3.9% between April and June, matching the biggest three-month increase recorded since early 2007. In this period average national rents rose from €1,000 to €1,037. There were just 3,600 homes available to rent nationwide on August 1st, which amounts to 1,000 fewer than on the same date a year previously.⁵ This is in a context where rents have increased nationally by 39.7% and the number of properties available to rent have reduced by approximately 80% since 2012.⁶ At the start of the year there were 23,344 buy-to-let properties in arrears of more than 90 days and there were 668 buy-to-let properties in lenders possession. At the end of March 2016 there were 14,924 buy-to-let properties in arrears over 720 days. During quarter 1 2016 rent receivers were appointed to 751 buy-to-let properties. A total of 302 buy-to-let properties were taken into possession by lenders during quarter 1 2016, which represented a record high for the volume of repossessions in a quarter since the series began in 2012.⁷

Right to housing

Ireland has obligations under five international covenants that refer to the right to housing, all of which have the status of legally binding treaties. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of him [herself] and of his [her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services'. Adequate housing means more than just bricks and mortar; a number of conditions must be met before particular forms of shelter can be considered to constitute 'adequate housing'. These elements are as fundamental as the basic supply and availability of housing.

- Security of tenure: housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.
- Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure.
- Affordability: housing is not adequate if its cost threatens or compromises the occupant's enjoyment of other human rights.
- Habitability: housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space.

The absence of a rights based approach in Ireland has contributed to the ever growing numbers of people ending up homeless, and continues to do so.

Housing First

There is a strong and well documented association between the experience of long term homelessness and a range of complex health and related needs. Housing First programmes are internationally considered to represent best practice in housing people who are long term homeless with complex needs. Housing First offers housing without preconditions and offers a range of supports focussed on harm minimisation and supporting recovery and empowerment. The success of such initiatives depends not just on housing but also, crucially, on drug and/or alcohol, mental health, and community integration services being available to tenants who were formerly homeless. *Vision for Change – report of the expert group on mental health policy* highlights the lack of adequate housing and accommodation options for enabling people with mental health issues to move through the different stages of recovery and progress towards independent living. However, since 2010 the HSE budget for homelessness has been cut by 20% and the Drugs Initiative budget has seen cuts of up to 37% over the past six years. These cuts have had an adverse impact on people who are homeless and on access to treatment and one-to-one supports.

⁵ Daft.ie Rental Report Q2 2016 <http://www.daft.ie/report/q2-2016-daft-report-rental.pdf>

⁶ Daft.ie

⁷ Central Bank Residential Mortgage Arrears and Repossession Statistics Q1 2016. <https://www.centralbank.ie/press-area/press-releases/Pages/ResidentialMortgageArrearsandRepossessionsStatisticsQ12016.aspx>

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Emergency accommodation has formed the basis of Ireland's response to the homeless crisis. In some cases this has included hotel rooms and B&B's and in others additional shelter beds, often dormitory style, have been provided. As a strategy this fails to address homelessness effectively and in the long run can lead to additional problems of institutionalisation and dependency. A broad Housing First strategy, focused on people who are long term or repeatedly homeless, will substantially reduce the number of shelter beds needed and address rough sleeping and long term homelessness effectively. Analysis of shelter usage statistics in both Cork and Dublin show that a relatively small proportion of people who become homeless account for the majority of the emergency beds put in place to address the crisis. In Dublin, O'Donohue-Hynes (2015) found that from 2012 to 2014, of the 7,254 people that used emergency accommodation just 13% (924) could be considered long stay shelter residents. However this group accounted for 52% of emergency bed nights. Remarkably, Cork Simon's most recent data mirrors that finding - 12% of residents in its emergency shelter in 2015 met the government's definition of long term homelessness, and this group accounted for 51% of shelter bed nights. These statistics clearly suggest that a strong focus on housing people who are long term homeless will have the greatest impact on freeing up emergency bed-nights and thus eliminating rough sleeping. We welcome the commitment to triple Housing First tenancies in the Dublin area by 2017 and the expansion of Housing First to other urban areas by the end of 2016.

Cabinet and cross departmental commitment to address the crisis urgently

We welcome the appointment of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government. It is critical that Minister Coveney has the authority and resources to implement the many commitments contained in the *Action Plan* to address this crisis in a meaningful way. The publication of the *Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness* (2016) was also a welcome development. Addressing this issue requires Cabinet and cross departmental support from key Departments including Housing, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Social Protection, An Taoiseach and Health/HSE. This increased cross cabinet and departmental cooperation should be reflected in the actions contained in the Statement of Strategy 2016 - 2019. We welcome commitments to establishment the High Level Implementation Team on Homelessness and the high level Housing Delivery Office within the DHPCLG. We encourage the minister to further outline the function of both bodies in the Statement of Strategy 2016 – 2019.

Conclusion

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to inform the development of the Department's Statement of Strategy 2016-2019. We believe the Statement of Strategy can play a critical role in directing and coordinating the Department's considerable mandate, particularly with regard to the delivery of social housing to those who most need it and to end long term homelessness and rough sleeping. The proposed timeframe for the Department's Statement of Strategy represents a critical period for people who are homeless and experiencing housing instability. In combination with the *Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, the Statement of Strategy must focus the Department's commitment to ending long term homelessness and rough sleeping by resourcing and implementing a Housing First approach. Limited access to housing and support services is both increasing the risk of homelessness and is preventing people from moving out of homelessness. We cannot keep offering people short term solutions with little attention paid to their longer term needs. Over 6,500 people are trapped in emergency accommodation right now. Families are living in one room trying to go about their lives; cooking, playing, sleeping and doing homework all in the one room. Adults are sleeping in dormitory style accommodation with 20 plus others with no privacy and nowhere to go during the day. These are people that the State are failing who have no option of a home anytime soon. People are entitled to better.

The Government must urgently act on commitments contained in the *Programme for a Partnership Government* and the *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*. This requires Cabinet and

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cross departmental support and resourcing from key Departments including Housing, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Social Protection and Health/HSE. The solutions to this crisis involves preventing people from becoming homeless and providing access to affordable, permanent housing with support, as necessary (Housing First). We know this approach works and we know that it can transform the lives of people who are living in hostels, hotels and B&B. Critical to this is the belief that access to housing is a right and that every man, woman and child in Ireland is entitled to a safe, secure and affordable home.

About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities in Ireland are a network of eight regionally based independent Simon Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East that share common values and ethos in tackling all forms of homelessness throughout Ireland, supported by a National Office. The Simon Communities have been providing services in Ireland for over 40 years. The Simon Communities deliver support and service to over 7,500 individuals and families throughout Ireland who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness every year.

Whatever the issue, for as long as we are needed, Simon’s door is always open. For more information please visit www.simon.ie

Services include:

- 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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Appendix 1: Housing and Homelessness Crisis in numbers

- During one week in July 2016 (latest available figures), there were 6,525 men, women and children in emergency accommodation across the country; a 40% increase from July 2015. This included 2,667 adults with no dependents in their care and 1,130 families made up of 1,510 adults and 2,348 children. (DECLG, 2016).
- On Census Night, 24th April 2016, there were 171 people without a place to sleep in Dublin City. This included 102 people sleeping rough and 69 people sheltering at the Nite Café. Unfortunately, Dublin is the only area where an official rough sleeper count takes place, making it difficult to get a countrywide rough sleeping picture. (DRHE 2015).
- Figures from Cork Simon Community indicate that rough sleeping in Cork City increased nine-fold in four years (2011-2015) from 38 people sleeping rough in 2011 to 345 people sleeping rough in 2015.
- Homelessness and housing insecurity are more acute and visible in our cities but the Simon Communities are working at capacity countrywide – in urban and rural areas.
- There are at least 90,000 people on the social housing waiting list. (Housing Agency, 2014).
- Social housing commitments will take time to begin to deliver housing. This is far too long for the people we work with and those at risk of homelessness. Social housing output for 2015, reached 1,030 new builds and acquisitions, with new builds accounting for 75 units. (DECLG, 2016). This is below the Social Housing Strategy target of 18,000 new units for the period 2015-2017.
- The average rent nationwide has risen by over one third since 2011 and has surpassed its 2008 peak. The average national rent is now €1,037 (Daft.ie Rental Report Q2 2016).
- *Locked Out of the Market III* (Jan 2016 Simon Communities) found that 95% of rental properties are beyond the reach for those in receipt of state housing support. Of all the properties available to rent in the eleven regions studied, only one was available for a single person see <http://www.simon.ie/Publications/Research.aspx>
- 41.2% of all accounts in mortgage arrears are in arrears of over two years. (Central Bank of Ireland, 2016).
- At the start of the year there were 23,344 or 17% of buy-to-let properties in arrears of more than 90 days and there were 668 buy-to-let properties in lenders possession. At the end of March 2016 there were 14,924 buy-to-let properties in arrears over 720 days. During quarter 1 2016 rent receivers were appointed to 751 buy-to-let properties. A total of 302 buy-to-let properties were taken into possession by lenders during quarter 1 2016, which represented a record high for the volume of repossessions in a quarter since the series began in 2012
- 750,000 people are living in poverty in Ireland (*Poverty, Deprivation and Inequality* (July 2016) Social Justice Ireland Policy Briefing).
- Since 2007 the deprivation rate, which looks at the number of people forced to go without at least 2 of 11 basic necessities examined, in Ireland has doubled - 29% of the population or 1.3 million people are experiencing deprivation (Social Justice Ireland *ibid*).