

Simon Communities in Ireland



Submission to the Department of Social Protection
to inform the
Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

August 2016

Introduction	3
Review of Statement of Strategy 2015-2017	3
Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness	4
Rent Supplement and HAP Scheme	5
<i>Rent Supplement and HAP limits</i>	5
<i>Discretionary Uplifts</i>	5
<i>HAP nationwide rollout and seamless transfer of tenancies from RS</i>	6
<i>Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol/Tenancy Protection Scheme</i>	6
<i>Access to RS for vulnerable groups</i>	6
Social Welfare Payments and Supports	7
<i>Index Linked Adequate Social Protection Supports</i>	7
<i>Reversing Age Related Social Welfare Cuts</i>	7
<i>Support for People Exiting Homelessness</i>	7
Social Welfare Appeals Processes	8
Simon Communities Critical Priorities for the Duration of the Statement of Strategy	8
Homelessness – a nationwide crisis	8
A just and fair society with access to affordable, safe and secure housing for all	8
Right to housing	9
Housing First	10
Cabinet and cross departmental commitment to address the crisis urgently	10
Conclusion	11
About Simon Communities	12
Appendix 1: Housing and Homelessness Crisis in numbers	13

Introduction

The Simon Communities in Ireland welcome the opportunity to make this Submission to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) 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 too. The number of people trapped in emergency accommodation has continued to grow in the first seven months of 2016. During one week in June 2016 (latest available figures), there were 6,358 men, women and children in emergency accommodation across the country; a 32 % increase from the same week in June 2015. This included 2,695 adults with no dependents in their care and 1,078 families made up of 1,457 adults and 2,206 children.¹

In light of these increasing figures, the Simon Communities welcome the recently published *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* (the *Action Plan*), the coordinated approach contained therein to tackle the complexity of the housing and homelessness crisis and the broad commitment of relevant government departments to its implementation. In addition, we welcome the recent increase in rent supplement limits. 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 Rental Sector to be delivered by the end of the year as committed to in the *Action Plan*.

The DSP has a central role in the implementation of key actions contained in the *Action Plan* in addition to the continued administration and delivery of vital supports for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The critical role Rent Supplement (RS) and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) play in preventing vulnerable people and families from becoming homeless must be acknowledged and factored into decision making. People must be supported to make a smooth transition from emergency accommodation to independent living as quickly as possible and must then be supported to maintain their tenancies and remain in their homes. For this to become a reality requires income adequacy, adequate Rent Supplement/Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) and health and social care supports. Integrated Cabinet and cross-departmental support as outlined above will be needed for these to work effectively. Key departments include Housing, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, Social Protection, An Taoiseach and Health/HSE. They all have a vital role to play in ensuring the resourcing of and access to affordable housing, to social protection supports and to the critical support services that offer the most effective means of preventing people from becoming homeless.

Review of Statement of Strategy 2015-2017

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

- We encourage the Department to maintain and develop its client centred approach to the delivery of its operations as recognised in the ‘overall objective’ of the previous Statement of Strategy. The further

¹ DECLG Emergency Accommodation Figures June 2016 http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_june_2016.pdf

Submission to the Department of Social Protection to inform the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

inclusion of this client centred approach in 'Objective 1' is equally welcomed and we encourage its retention.

- Given the worsening national housing and homelessness crisis, we encourage the Minister to use his forward to the Statement of Strategy to recognise the role the Department of Social Protection must play in alleviating homelessness and the risk of homelessness. Although central to the Departments remit, the previous Ministerial Foreword focused exclusively on the promotion of 'working culture', 'sustained participation in society', 'supporting economic growth and promoting employability'.
- We encourage the inclusion of the following strategic objective in the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019: 'Improving society and the living standards of all citizens'. Key outcomes and indicators of this objective would include the following:
 - Raising social welfare rates to close the gap between current rates and the recognised poverty line.
 - Benchmarking social welfare payments to eliminate poverty amongst recipients.
 - Introduce the living wage to reduce inequality and to ensure that low paid workers receive an adequate income.
- Although we welcome the commitment to provide 'speedy access to accurate decisions, payments and reviews for all schemes and services' we remain highly concerned that delays in processing rent supplement applications are causing undue hardship to people transitioning from emergency accommodation and homelessness services to rental accommodation, in addition to those at risk of homelessness.
- We welcome the commitment to '[W]ork with other Departments/Offices, agencies, employers and stakeholders in providing client centred services' and 'to address cross-cutting issues for the benefit of all stakeholders'. In light of the many cross-departmental action points contained in the *Action Plan* cabinet, inter agency and departmental cooperation is vital in tackling the housing and homelessness crisis.
- Cost effectiveness objectives should not impact on the services provided by the Department or the rates associated with individual support payments.

Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness

The *Action Plan* contains a number of Action points and key deliverables in which the Department of Social Protection is listed as 'Owner'. We believe the Statement of Strategy should reflect the Department's ownership of these key action points and should outline an implementation plan for their delivery where appropriate.

Recommendations:

- The Statement of Strategy should specifically commit additional Departmental human and financial resources to this initiative across the specific schemes and services provided by the Department. This should be broadened to include all people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to assist them to stay in their homes and to ensure the full range of appropriate support services are provided if this cannot be achieved.
- The rapid assessment and processing of necessary applications should be the central priority of the assessment centres. Action Point 1.3 commits to provide "one-stop-shop' assessment centres . . . for families presenting as homeless . . . to ensure every effort is made to keep them in their current homes or to ensure appropriate homeless and other support services are provided".
- Prioritise the pre-release assessment and interdepartmental and interagency protocols for people leaving prisons, hospitals, long term care facilities including welfare needs. Action point 1.10 commits to enhanced inter-agency arrangements to ensure that accommodation, welfare and health supports for

Submission to the Department of Social Protection to inform the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

prisoners are in place prior to their release. Prisoners being released into homelessness is unacceptable yet it continues to happen.

- Utilise the Department's broad geographical spread to facilitate this initiative to reach as many affected people and households as possible. We encourage the Minister to use the Statement of Strategy to publish specific targets for the extension of the Tenancy Protection Service, as committed to in Action 1.17, and to ensure that this is nationwide. Action point 1.17 also commits to the roll out of a national awareness campaign targeted at families and individuals worried about or at risk of losing their home.
- Outline in the Statement of Strategy the detailed role the Department of Social Protection will play in this initiative. Action 1.18 commits to providing access to independent expert legal and financial advice for people who are insolvent, and are in serious mortgage arrears on their home.
- Reopen and fully reinstate the Mortgage Interest Supplement Scheme as a means of providing financial relief to people experiencing short term income difficulties and who are struggling to meet mortgage interest repayments.
- Given the HAP scheme will be administered by the DHPCLG, the Statement of Strategy should outline a concise Inter-Departmental plan for the further transfer of DSP Rent Supplement recipients to the HAP scheme as seamlessly as possible to avoid any break in payment and to avoid rent arrears. Action Point 2.3 commits to the nationwide rollout of the HAP scheme.

Rent Supplement and HAP Scheme

Rent Supplement and HAP limits

The critical role Rent Supplement (RS) and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) play in preventing vulnerable people and families from becoming homeless must be acknowledged in the Statement of Strategy for 2016-2019. Recent increases in these limits announced in June 2016 are welcome but they must be monitored and adjusted on an ongoing basis to ensure these payments are aligned with market rents. Rents continue to climb and for the first time have exceeded the peak of 2008.²

Recommendation:

- Monitor and review Rent Supplement and HAP limits and adjust on a biannual basis (every 6 months) to reflect private market rents.

Discretionary Uplifts

It is essential that discretionary uplifts can be provided for in both schemes quickly as and when needed. This is supported in the *Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness* (2016). Flexible and discretionary powers must be made available to the Department of Social Protection's Community Welfare Service and local authorities as a vital means of effective implementation of the HAP scheme particularly in the context of its nationwide rollout. The Dublin City Council homeless HAP pilot scheme has proved successful. Of those people moving on from a situation of homelessness in Dublin City in Q1 2016, 39% have done so through this scheme.³ The scheme must be extended nationally as it provides facilities for the payment of deposits and the negotiation of rents which are in excess of HAP limits.

Recommendations:

- Clear guidelines must be given to CWOs to provide financial support to tenants transferring from Rent Supplement to HAP to ensure payment gaps do not lead to rent arrears.
- Ensure flexible and discretionary powers for Community Welfare Officers to make discretionary uplifts.
- Publish targets and extend the successful Homeless HAP Pilot Scheme nationwide.

² <http://www.daft.ie/report/q2-2016-daft-report-rental.pdf>

³ Performance Report Q1 2016 relating to the Protocol Governing Delegation of Section 10 Funding for Homeless Services to Dublin City Council. http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/performance_report_-_qtr_1_2016_-_dublin_region.pdf

HAP nationwide rollout and seamless transfer of tenancies from RS

HAP needs to be extended to the rest of the country at a much faster pace and more tenancies need to be transferred from RS to HAP. At present only one-third of HAP tenancies are transferring from Rent Supplement⁴. The national targets for HAP are one third short of the intended 2015 target. The transfer of tenants from RS to HAP must be seamless to prevent any break in payment and to avoid rent arrears.

Recommendation:

- Given the HAP scheme will be administered by the DHPCLG, the Statement of Strategy should publish a concise Inter-Departmental plan for the further transfer of DSP Rent Supplement recipients to the HAP scheme as seamlessly as possible to avoid any break in payment resulting in rent arrears. This should as a priority include clear guidelines for CWOs to provide financial support to tenants to cover any gap in payment accrued when transferring from Rent Supplement to HAP.

Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol/Tenancy Protection Scheme

Prevention initiatives such as the Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol (ITSP)/Tenancy Protection Service (TPS) need to be extended nationally to all people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Evidence from the UK suggests that resourcing homelessness prevention measures is more cost effective than the relative cost associated with a person experiencing homelessness over a 12 month period. In this particular example resourcing prevention measures was ten times less expensive than the associated costs of homelessness.⁵

Recommendation:

- Use the Statement of Strategy to publish specific targets for the roll out of the TPS nationwide as committed to in the aforementioned *Action Plan*.

Access to RS for vulnerable groups

People who are homeless are among the most vulnerable in society and face specific barriers in accessing good quality, affordable housing. For someone who is homeless to qualify for Rent Supplement, they need to be deemed homeless for at least six months (183 days) over the previous 12 months, therefore one has to be long term homeless to be eligible. Any time spent rough sleeping, staying with friends or in hospital is not counted. People who are homeless leaving drug and alcohol treatment services should not be discharged back into homelessness and should automatically qualify for rent supplement and not be subject to the 6 month long term homelessness criteria.

Recommendations:

- Introduce a high degree of flexibility (discretion) in the operation of Rent Supplement for vulnerable people based on an assessment of need. Qualification criteria for people who are homeless must be relaxed.
- Access to accommodation for people, including drug free accommodation, once discharged from treatment or rehabilitation is vital therefore it is essential to tackle the barriers to RS for this group.

⁴ C&V Housing Pillar Bi-lateral meeting with DECLG 4th May 2016

⁵ Pleace N, 2015, 'At what cost? An estimation of the financial costs of single homelessness in the UK', Crisis and the Centre of Housing Policy, University of York.

Social Welfare Payments and Supports

Index Linked Adequate Social Protection Supports

Recommendations:

- Living Wage should be introduced to reduce inequality and to ensure that low paid workers receive an adequate income.⁶
- Social welfare payments should be benchmarked to eliminate poverty amongst recipients. We welcome the intentions of Minister Varadkar to link social welfare payments to the cost of living or to average earnings.⁷ We recommend the first step in such a process is, at a minimum, to bring welfare payments above the poverty line⁸ to the poverty line rate of €209.39 per week.⁹
- Index link social welfare rates to inflation as proposed by Minister for Social Protection Leo Varadkar, TD to ensure payment rates meet rising costs of living.¹⁰
- The 12 month period that a person is on Jobseeker's Benefit before being means tested for Jobseekers Allowance must be restored so that people have the time needed to look for employment.
- Realign Supplementary welfare rates with basic social welfare rates.

Reversing Age Related Social Welfare Cuts

Recommendations:

- The cuts to social welfare payments for young people under 25 years of age must be reversed as a matter of urgency. There should be equity of social welfare rates.
- Community Welfare Officers (CWO's) must be flexible to provide for situations where young people are unable to rely on family or stay in the family home.

Support for People Exiting Homelessness

Engagement in employment, education and training offers people a means of generating independent income, opportunities for developing social networks, and a way to enhance skills and self-esteem, among other benefits. This is particularly important for people who are long-term unemployed, a category that applies to many people who are homeless. The innovative Community Employment and Engagement pilot scheme funded by the Department of Social Protection and implemented by Dublin Simon Community is demonstrating positive results after year one.

Recommendations:

- The Social Protection System must ensure supports for people exiting homelessness include measures aimed at assisting them to access education, employment and training opportunities such as replication of the Community Employment and Engagement scheme targeted for people who are homeless on a national scale. It is essential to introduce homelessness specific education, employment and training opportunity supports.
- Existing *Back to Work* and *Education and Training Programmes* must work more effectively to include people who have experienced homelessness. Secure and quality employment must be available once study or training programmes are completed.

⁶ According to Social Justice Ireland, a living wage is, in principle, intended to establish an hourly wage rate that should provide employees with sufficient income to achieve an agreed acceptable minimum standard of living. In that sense it is an income floor, representing a figure which allows employees to afford the essentials of life. Ibid 1, P. 5.

⁷ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/social-welfare-to-be-linked-to-inflation-under-varadkar-plan-1.2729649>

⁸ Currently the single person rate is €30 a week below the poverty line

⁹ According to Social Justice Ireland, most European studies [including those carried out by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Ireland] suggest a [poverty] line which is at 60% of median income, adjusted to take account of family size and composition. The median income is the income of the middle person in society's income distribution. In other words it is the middle income in society. According to the 2014 Survey on Income and Living Conditions the most recent median income measured in Ireland stands at €349.98. Applying the above formula of 60% of median income the current poverty line in Ireland stands at €209.39 per week. Social Justice Ireland *Policy Briefing: Poverty, Deprivation and Inequality*, July 2016, P.2. <https://www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/attach/publication/4471/2016-07-04-sjipolicybriefingpoverty2016final2.pdf>.

¹⁰ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/social-welfare-to-be-linked-to-inflation-under-varadkar-plan-1.2729649>

Submission to the Department of Social Protection to inform the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

- Cuts to education and training allowances in recent budgets, such as book grants, need to be reversed so that people can take up opportunities.

Social Welfare Appeals Processes

Progress on the efficiencies within the Social Welfare Appeals Office as documented in the Social Welfare Appeals Office Annual Report 2015 are welcome.¹¹ Average processing times are down from 24.2 weeks to 20.9 weeks in 2015. This still represents a considerable waiting time in the lived experience of someone reliant on a social welfare payment particularly Rent Supplement and Supplementary Welfare Allowance. We express grave concern at the average processing time of 18 weeks for Supplementary Welfare Allowance appeals. The number of initial decisions which are being overturned on appeal is also cause for concern given the above mentioned appeals processing times. The high level of appeals granted suggests initial decision making processes need to be reviewed as a matter of priority. We urge the Minister to use the Statement of Strategy as an opportunity to action a wholesale review of the social welfare appeals process.

Recommendation:

- Conduct a wholesale review of Social Welfare appeals processes.

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 with 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 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 people 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 that when people run into housing and financial difficulties, they can remain in their communities, often these are the 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 commitment contained in the *Action Plan* to the expansion of Housing First around the country is particularly welcome, acknowledging that housing with support is required to solve the homeless crisis. It

¹¹ <http://www.socialwelfareappeals.ie/uploads/annrep15.pdf>

Submission to the Department of Social Protection to inform the Statement of Strategy 2016-2019

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 look forward to contributing 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 delivery 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 this quarter and were an average of 9.3% higher than the same period in 2015. The number of properties available to rent nationwide continued to fall in Q2 2016 and are at their lowest level in a decade. As of 1st May 2016, there were 3,082 properties to rent nationwide, this is a 28% decrease since May 2015. This is in a context where rents have increased nationally by 32.3% and the number of properties available to rent have reduced by approximately 77% since 2012. At the end of December 2015 there were 23,344 buy-to-let properties in arrears of more than 90 days. There were 668 buy-to-let properties in lenders possession.

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.

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 administration and delivery of vital supports and payments for people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and leaving homelessness. The proposed timeframe for the delivery of the Department's strategic objectives represents a critical period for people who are homeless and experiencing housing instability. The continued delivery of housing supports and payments will be vital to implementing the *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*. The transfer of tenancies from Rent Supplement to the HAP scheme must be done in a seamless fashion to prevent any undue hardship to the people who rely so heavily on these supports. The continued monitoring and review of these payments is equally vital. Housing support payments can only be effective when they are reflective of private rented sector rates. The continued delivery of income and social supports is equally critical to keeping people in their homes and assisting people who are homeless to transition to independent living. Putting clients at the centre of the Department's operations will require increased understanding of the human impact of unnecessary delays in processing vital welfare and housing support applications in addition to the requirement for expedited review and decision making processes.

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 cross departmental support and resourcing from key Departments including Social Protection, Housing, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform 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.

For further information please contact:

Niamh Randall

Head of Policy and Communications

E: niamh@simoncommunity.com

Ph: 085 8588 384

Appendix 1: Housing and Homelessness Crisis in numbers

- During one week in June 2016 (latest available figures), there were 6,358 men, women and children in emergency accommodation across the country; a 32 % increase from the same week in June 2015. This included 2,695 adults with no dependents in their care and 1,078 families made up of 1,457 adults and 2,206 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 bottoming out in 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 end of December 2015, 23,344 or 17% of buy-to-let mortgages, were in arrears of more than 90 days. (Central Bank of Ireland, 2016).
- 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*).