



Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Simon Communities in Ireland

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Simon Communities in Ireland welcome the opportunity to make this invited submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills focusing on the barriers to education facing vulnerable groups. People experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society. Far from a uniform demographic, people experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group. They are a diverse group of people that include women, young people, families, those with complex mental and physical health needs and people with problematic drug and alcohol use. According to the most recent figures published by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG), in January 2018 there were 9,104 people currently trapped in Emergency Accommodation including 1,517 families, 3,627 children and 3,715 adults without dependents in their care.¹ This is in addition to the many thousands of households living precariously in hidden homeless situations or unstable tenancies experiencing ongoing housing instability that remain beyond the reach of official data collection.

1.2 People experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to the full realisation of a host of economic and social rights. Without access to stable and quality housing it can be difficult, if not impossible, to realise the right to education, employment and health amongst other rights. Low educational attainment, restricted access to quality employment and poor physical and mental health can in turn be significant barriers to exiting homelessness in a housing system marked by spiralling housing costs and a dearth of social and affordable housing supply across tenures. This submission will examine some of the barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness. Commonalities with other vulnerable and marginalised socio-economic groups will become apparent throughout. Firstly this submission will provide a statistical picture of the links between poor educational attainment and experiences of homelessness. Thereafter Government commitments with regard to education and those experiencing homelessness will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of specific barriers to education for people who are homeless as highlighted in recent research. A brief introduction to Housing First will be then be offered, highlighting the beneficial impact of housing without preconditions combined with tailored supports for people exiting homelessness. This submission will conclude with a series of recommendations aimed at breaking down the barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness.

2 Homelessness and Educational Attainment – A Statistical Analysis

2.1 According to Census 2016 data, a total of 6,909 people were enumerated as homeless on Census night.²³ Of this number, 4,198 people had ceased full time education. A significant number, 1,606 did not have an educational qualification beyond lower secondary, accounting for 38% of this cohort. Of these, 581 persons (36%) were educated to primary level only, 193 (12%) indicated they had no formal education, 955 people were educated to upper secondary level, while 422 persons

¹ DHPLG, Homelessness Report, January 2018, http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_january_2018.pdf.

² Census of Population 2016, Profile 5 Homeless Persons in Ireland, August 2017, http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p_cp5hpi/cp5hpi/.

³ Unlike Census 2011 this figure does not include those people living in Long Term Accommodation (LTA) which amounted to an additional 1,772 people on Census night 2016.

were educated to third level. Twenty-nine percent of those identified as homeless did not provide any data on their educational attainment compared to only 6% of the general population.

2.2 Cross referencing this data with the 2016 CSO *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* shows the impact of low educational attainment on a number of income and poverty indices which are known structural causes of homelessness.⁴ Individuals with the highest level of educational attainment of ‘third level degree or higher’ had the highest median disposable income in the eight income categories analysed. Descending from this point, individuals with lower levels of educational attainment had progressively lower incomes across the eight income categories analysed. Not unsurprisingly, individuals with lower levels of educational attainment ranked highest in terms of the three primary poverty indices including the at-risk of poverty rate, the deprivation rate and consistent poverty rate. Furthermore, a significant percentage gap exists within these indices between those who have attained a third level qualification and others who have attained post leaving cert educational attainment and below. The impact and benefit of the full spectrum of educational attainment could not be starker.

2.3 A society based on the values of fairness and equal access to opportunities for all must prioritise the delivery of educational supports to vulnerable groups and historically marginalised demographics. At the time of writing, complete data was not available on the number of people experiencing homelessness in receipt of back-to-education allowance. In April 2015, the partnership for Health Equity published its *Homelessness: An Unhealthy State Report*.⁵ The study involved a cross-sectional survey of people experiencing homelessness in Dublin City and Limerick City. In addition to highlighting worrying health trends across the participant population, the study provided a unique insight into employment and welfare supports availed of by participants. Of the 570 participants that responded to survey questions relating to employment and social welfare, only 1% were in receipt of the back-to-education allowance (BTEA) payment.⁶ This is largely due to the conflict between eligible welfare payments under the BTEA and the range of welfare payments people experiencing homelessness rely on when trapped in Emergency Accommodation.⁷ In 2005, the *Report by the Working Group on the Review of the BTEA Scheme* recommended the extension of eligibility of the scheme to all people who were homeless on the basis that this extension would address inequalities which might lead to poverty.⁸ It is so important to provide financial support for those who apply for back-to-education programmes throughout. The Trinity Access Programme is a successful example that should be replicated where possible.⁹

⁴ CSO 2016 Survey on Income and Living Conditions, December 2017,

http://pdf.cso.ie/www/pdf/20171221091911_Survey_on_Income_and_Living_Conditions_2016_full.pdf.

⁵ Partnership for Health Equity, ‘Homelessness: An Unhealthy State – Health Status, Risk Behaviours and Service Utilisation Among Homeless People in Two Irish Cities’, http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf.

⁶ Ibid, at 25.

⁷ Homeless single mother refused education allowance after securing place in Trinity, August 2016, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/news/homeless-single-mother-refused-education-allowance-after-securing-place-in-trinity-34942009.html>.

⁸ Report of the Working group on the Review of the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme, July 2005, P. 118, <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Expenditure-Review-of-Back-to-Education-Allowance-Scheme.pdf>.

⁹ Trinity Access Programme, <https://www.tcd.ie/trinityaccess/about/>.

2.4 A 2012 study, *Working it Out – A Report on the Barriers to Employment Faced by people who are Homeless*, further highlights the impact of experiences of homelessness on educational attainment.¹⁰ The study involved a survey of 91 Cork Simon Community residents and builds a picture of the nature and extent of some of the barriers to employment and education faced by respondents whilst navigating the complexity of homelessness. Sixty-five percent of respondents had left school before completing the leaving certificate – more than twice the rate of early school leavers in the general population. Forty-three percent left school without any State qualifications – almost four times the rate of the general population. Thirteen percent of respondents attained only primary education or below with 3% of this group having never attended school. The average age of the early school-leaver cohort was 14 years of age. Thirty-five percent of participants indicated they had low literacy levels, needing help to fill-in forms or write letters always or most of the time. Eighty-seven percent of this cohort were early school leavers with 59% leaving before their junior/inter cert. The barriers associated with these low levels of educational attainment and early school leaving will be discussed further in section 4.

2.5 A 2014 study, *‘Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion’*, offers an important insight into the educational pathways and experiences of young people who are experiencing homelessness.¹¹ From a statistical point of view, the study showed that 31 of the 40 study participants had left school prior to completing their secondary education with 15 leaving before the age of 16 years and would as a result be classified as early school leavers. Of the 36 participants that were not engaged in education, 10 had left school without any formal educational qualifications. Twenty-one young people had reached junior certificate level before leaving school with only 5 going on to complete their leaving certificate. The barriers encountered by this study group will be discussed in Section 4 including a cross analysis of persistent barriers identified in the follow up study in 2016.¹²

3 Government Commitments – Education and Homelessness

3.1 In 2014, the Government published the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*.¹³ Section 6 of the strategy on ‘Active Inclusion’ provides the underlying principle of enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job.¹⁴ The strategy also includes the promotion and support of lifelong learning for all who engage with FET.¹⁵ Despite these aspirations, the strategy does not explicitly include people experiencing homelessness as a named target group requiring specific supports to engage in FET and lifelong learning. Worryingly, a 2017 report on the barriers to FET for vulnerable people in Ireland did not consider homelessness as a structural barrier, instead preferring to make passing reference to an

¹⁰ Cork Simon Community, *‘Working it Out – A Report on the Barriers to Employment Faced by people who are Homeless’*, October 2012, <http://www.corksiron.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Working-It-Out-A-report-on-the-barriers-to-employment-faced-by-people-who-are-homeless-October-2012.pdf>.

¹¹ Mayock et al, *‘Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion’*, 2014, P.56, <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mayock-Parker-and-Murphy-2014-Young-People-Homelessness-and-Housing-Exclusion-FULL-BOOK.pdf>.

¹² Mayock P. and Parker S., *‘Living in Limbo’*, 2017, <https://www.tcd.ie/tricc/assets/pdfs/Mayock-and-Parker-2017-Living-in-Limbo-Homeless-Young-Peoples-Paths-to-Housing-FINAL-BOOK.pdf>.

¹³ DOE, *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*, <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, at P. 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, at P. 19.

Australian report that considered homelessness a dispositional or individual barrier to FET.¹⁶ This perception denies the severe structural barriers which cause homelessness in the first place, including poverty, unemployment, lack of affordable housing and inadequate social protection supports. These are insurmountable barriers to a person experiencing long-term homelessness seeking to (re)engage in further education, training and lifelong learning.

3.2 When the *Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (Rebuilding Ireland)* was published in July 2016 there were 2,348 children trapped in emergency accommodation. The most recent figures from the DHPLG for January 2018 show there are 3,627 children in emergency accommodation representing a 54% increase in the intervening period. *Rebuilding Ireland* contains a number of commitments and actions relating to the educational needs of children living in emergency accommodation, including access to early-years services, school completion programmes, access to free public transport for family travel and for school journeys.¹⁷ The *Rebuilding Ireland 2017 Status Report* shows that progress has been made in delivering on some of these commitments.¹⁸ However, given the escalating number of children living in and entering emergency accommodation on a monthly basis, questions must be raised regarding the availability and staffing of these vital support services and the ongoing focus on an emergency-led response to homelessness. The 54% increase in childhood homelessness mentioned above is likely to have stretched already thin staff resources, diminishing the impact and benefit of educational and school support services for children, and acting as a further barrier to their education. Of equal concern is the complete lack of *Rebuilding Ireland* commitments and actions in relation to educational supports for young people between 18 and 24 years of age who are experiencing homelessness.

3.3 In March 2014, the Government published the national policy framework for children and young people, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF)*.¹⁹ Through BOBF, the Government recognises the lifelong negative consequences for a child if his or her family is homeless or is in substandard or unstable accommodation. BOBF contains further recognition that learning starts from birth and that engagement in education is a significant protective factor against negative outcomes. Despite this, BOBF contains little in the way of specific goals and outcomes aimed at reducing the impact of homelessness on children' and young peoples' education. BOBF does however contain broad recognition of the challenges facing early school-leavers, a cohort that is over represented in the homeless population as outlined above. This recognition is matched with appropriate commitments but does not name young people experiencing homelessness as a named target-group in this regard. It is clear that the two primary Government strategies concerning young people and people experiencing homelessness are together inadequate in tackling the known and perceived barriers to education facing this vulnerable cohort.

¹⁶ Robert Mooney and Claire O'Rourke, 'Barriers to Further Education and Training with Particular Reference to Long Term Unemployed Persons and Other Vulnerable Individuals', July 2017,

<http://www.solas.ie/SolasPdfLibrary/Barriers%20to%20FET%20Final%20June%202017.pdf>.

¹⁷ DHPLG, 'Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness', July 2016, P. 87,

<http://rebuildingireland.ie/Rebuilding%20Ireland%20Action%20Plan.pdf>.

¹⁸ DHPLG, 'Rebuilding Ireland 2017 Status Report', Action 1.05, January 2018, <http://rebuildingireland.ie/news/rebuilding-ireland-2017-status-report/>.

¹⁹ DCYA, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures – The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*, March 2014, https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomesBetterFutureReport.pdf.

3.4 Access to education provides multifaceted protection - preventing housing instability and homelessness whilst being an important element in supporting people to leave homelessness and housing instability behind. Importantly, participants in the *Living in Limbo* report acknowledged the importance of educational attainment as a means of leaving homelessness behind. Education was seen as one of many transitions or constituent parts of this process.²⁰ The majority of participants believed that attaining educational qualifications and engaging with educational services was crucial for the accrual of essential life skills, the establishment of a sense of structure and a daily routine that would allow them to address low self-esteem, depression, social isolation and boredom. Ultimately, educational attainment was seen as a necessary pathway to transition to employment, financial independence and housing security.²¹

4 Barriers to Education

4.1 The barriers to education for people experiencing homelessness are numerous. This section will explore the full spectrum of barriers beginning with poor educational attainment and moving to broader structural barriers. This exercise will rely on the key findings of the research studies mentioned above. Of utmost concern, the barriers identified in the *Living in Limbo* report negatively impacted on young people's self-worth reinforcing their socio-economic marginalisation.²²

4.2 Some barriers highlighted in the aforementioned research include:

- Learning difficulties, limited basic literacy and numeracy skills.²³
- High rates of early school-leaving and low levels of qualifications. These barriers often influenced and compounded each other. Early school leaving was seen as the primary barrier because of its ripple effect; contributing and exacerbating other barriers such as low literacy, low confidence and low levels of qualifications. Of all participants in the *Working it Out* study, those between 18-26 years of age were most affected by these barriers, illustrating the impact of early school leaving.
- The lack of active mentoring for FET individuals during and after the completion of FET programmes as a means of addressing cultural barriers and the lack of social mobility.²⁴
- Having to abandon educational goals to receive better financial and welfare supports leading to poverty and unemployment traps.
- The lack of affordable childcare services for parents was also identified as a significant barrier to engaging with full or part-time training courses.²⁵
- Participants in the *Living in Limbo* study also cited that having no fixed address or stable accommodation at various times, including unstable returns to the family home, diminished their ability to (re)engage with education and training programmes.²⁶
- The chaotic, unsettling and transient nature of hostile environments.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid 11, at P.15.

²¹ Ibid 11, at P.84.

²² Ibid 11, at P.7.

²³ Ibid 9, at P. 2.

²⁴ Ibid 16, at P. 55.

²⁵ Ibid 11, at P.85.

²⁶ Ibid 11, at P.86.

²⁷ Ibid 11, at P.85.

5 Housing First – Support in Housing

5.1 The 2013 Homelessness Policy Statement marked the Government’s first policy commitment to pursue a ‘Housing-led’ approach to solving long term homelessness. Housing First/Housing-Led offers housing without preconditions and includes a range of supports focussed on harm minimisation and supporting recovery and empowerment through Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams. 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 people exiting homelessness. There are two key aspects to the Housing First/Housing Led approach - immediate provision of housing without pre-conditions or any requirement of housing ‘readiness’ and the provision of support in housing at the level required, for as long as necessary. Supports in this regard include those aimed at increasing access to educational attainment and access to employment. With Housing First the goal is to move people out of homelessness as quickly as possible into permanent housing where a tailored support package is more effective. These approaches, once properly resourced and implemented, improve the outcomes and quality of life for people who are homeless, or at risk in Ireland.

6 Recommendations

6.1 This section will offer a number of recommendations aimed at breaking down the barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness.

- Fully resource and expand housing first targets nationwide with person-centred education and employment supports that are cognisant of the recognised barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness.
- Reassess *Rebuilding Ireland* educational and school supports and targets aimed at children and families in Emergency Accommodation. The 54% increase in childhood homelessness since the publication of *Rebuilding Ireland* should form the basis for the delivery of greater financial and staffing resources to ensure service delivery and effectiveness is not impacted.
- Put in place educational supports for young people between the ages of 18 to 26 who are experiencing homelessness given the impact of early school leaving on this cohort.
- Extend the Back to Education Allowance Scheme to all adults experiencing homelessness.
- Parents seeking to return to education should be offered financial support to ensure childcare is affordable.
- Existing Back to Work and Education and Training Programmes must work more effectively to include people who have experienced homelessness. Ring-fenced funding and placements on these schemes must be made available to ensure greater participation by people who have experienced homelessness. The Homeless Community Employment Schemes within the Community Services Programme is a prime example of where this approach can be delivered given people experiencing homelessness are named as a programme target group.
- Secure and quality employment must be available once study or training programmes are completed.

- Adequately resource homeless prevention services to include educational components focussing on further education, training and lifelong learning. Where necessary additional mentoring supports should be available to those engaging with and on completion of FET.

7 Conclusion

7.1 People experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to educational attainment. These barriers are borne out in the statistics and research findings presented above and effect all people experiencing homelessness at all stages of life. These structural barriers serve to compound the experience of homelessness preventing access to a vital pathway and transition out of homelessness. Recent commitments and recognition of barriers to education across multiple Government strategies are welcome but must be reassessed in light of the increasing number of people trapped in emergency accommodation. Unfettered access to tailored educational supports combined with access to affordable and secure housing is needed to assist households to leave homelessness behind in addition to preventing and reducing the number of households presenting to emergency accommodation.

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 45 years. The Simon Communities deliver support and service to over 11,000 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

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 January 2017 (latest available figures), there were 9,104 people living in emergency accommodation, including 3,715 adults without dependents in their care and 1,517 families composed of 2,122 adults and 3,267 children. (DHPLG, January 2017).
- On the night of 7th November 2017, there were 184 people without a place to sleep in Dublin City. 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 2017).
- According to Census 2016, a total of 6,909 people were enumerated as homeless on Census night 2016. Unlike Census 2011 this figure does not include those people living in Long Term Accommodation (LTA) which amounted to 1,772 people on Census night 2016. Including those living in LTA a direct comparison with Census 2011 reveals a 127.9% increase in homelessness in the intervening period between Census 2011 and Census 2016, representing a total of 8.678 people.
- 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 86,799 households on the social housing waiting list. Sixty-four percent of households on the list were living in the private rented sector and 17% living with parents, relatives or friends. 4,765 households (5.8%) had at least one member considered to be homeless, a proportion which has doubled since 2013 (DHPLG, 2017).
- 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. In 2017, 1,857 Local Authority and Approved Housing Body new social housing units were built.
- Average national rent now stands at €1,227. (Daft.ie Rental Report Q4 2017).
- *Locked Out of the Market X* (March 2018 Simon Communities) found that 93% of rental properties are beyond the reach for those in receipt of state housing support.
- Over 70,000 principle dwelling mortgage accounts are in arrears. 41% of all mortgage arrears are in arrears of over 720 days (Central Bank of Ireland, March 2018).
- At the end of December 2017, 18,257 or 15% of buy-to-let mortgages, were in arrears of more than 90 days. (Central Bank of Ireland, March 2018).
- 395,000 people are living in consistent poverty in Ireland. (CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), 2016).
- 785,000 people are at-risk of poverty in Ireland. (CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), 2016).
- In 2016, 21% of the population experienced two or more types of enforced deprivation. (CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), 2016).
- According to Census 2016, there are 183,312 vacant houses nationwide.