

ENDING THE HOMELESS & HOUSING CRISIS

**Simon Communities of Ireland's
Ambition for
Programme for Government 2020**



MARCH 2020

INTRODUCTION

Resolving the housing and homeless crisis must be a key priority for the next government.

The unprecedented times we find ourselves in with the impact of COVID-19 serves to heighten the plight of over 10,000 people experiencing homelessness. A home is more than four walls and a roof, it is our safe space, our grounding, and is crucial to our health.

The incoming government must implement an ambitious and innovative plan to deliver affordable housing across tenure types. This will work to create a housing system that recognises that the home is a fundamental building block in our social and economic lives, and critical to our health. A balanced system that respects the right of each person to have access to a secure, affordable home has the potential to end homelessness in Ireland and ensure that we do not see a return of such a homelessness crisis again.

To achieve this, priority has to be given to homeless and housing policies that will deliver affordable, secure homes and keep those most at risk of homelessness from losing their homes in the first place.

With that infrastructure in place the continued investment in the evolving collaboration between frontline services, local authorities and government departments can end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough.

To get there the programme for government must set out:

- 1.** How the government will provide the housing infrastructure that we need.
- 2.** How the government will increase access to housing for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
- 3.** How the government will work to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.
- 4.** How the government are going to ensure that those who are experiencing homelessness are supported.

Below we set out 13 points of action under these four headings that we believe are required to meet the public demand for the homeless and housing crisis to be addressed.

A housing system that recognises that the home is a fundamental building block in our social and economic lives.

1. PROVIDE THE REQUIRED HOUSING INFRASTRUCTURE



1.1 Hold a referendum to enshrine the Right to Housing in the Irish Constitution.

The next government must offer the people of Ireland the opportunity to rebalance the Constitution in order to protect the right to decent, affordable and secure housing for all. This would ensure that the Oireachtas is not restricted in its capacity to address the current homeless and housing crisis and enable us to pass the necessary legislative framework to guard against another crisis. The Simon Communities of Ireland are a member of Home for Good¹.

1.2 Build social housing and roll out a programme of affordable cost rental accommodation.

All political parties committed to an increase in social and affordable housing during the election. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimate that we require 30-35,000 homes delivered each year. The construction, make up and access to this housing stock will be critical. In 2019 Social Housing Needs Assessment figures showed that 14,000 households were added to the list in that year. This suggests that the incoming government will have to provide 15,000-20,000 units of social and affordable housing a year.

This will require Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to be directed and supported to build at scale. As single people make up almost half of the 69,000 households now on local authority housing lists, a particular focus on one and two-bed homes is needed.

A cost rental programme that delivers affordable rental accommodation as seen throughout Europe will be a part of the answer. To facilitate this the housing policy and finance infrastructure in Ireland should be brought together to provide a building and funding model that will sustainably guarantee cost rental accommodation

at affordable rates. The ESRI has completed important work in the area of household incomes that suggests that the median household should be paying in the region of €950 in rent. Where households do not have the means to meet this a supplement such as the housing assistance payment could be utilised to reduce our reliance on rent supplements such as the Housing Assistance Payment.

1.3 A commission on the private rental sector to report to the Oireachtas.

The private rental sector in Ireland is undergoing a period of transformation and the proposals to increase access to social and affordable housing if implemented could see that sector change again. A rental commission should undertake a route and branch evaluation of the direction of our private rental sector, involving all stakeholders with the guiding principle that our rental system should sustainably provide long-term homes. The terms of reference should include but not be limited to:

1. The role of the private rental market in both the medium and long term.
2. Security of tenure.
3. Sector funding and taxation.

We acknowledge that there have been progressive changes in the regulation of the private rental market, with a focus on tightening regulations to reduce, detect and prosecute unlawful behaviour of some landlords. However, we know that the majority of households entering homelessness are coming from the private rental sector. Addressing this will have implications for the private rental sector and those making their home there and this should be thought through.

¹ www.homeforgood.ie

2. INCREASE ACCESS TO HOUSING FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

2.1 Extend and resource Housing First & Housing Led Schemes.

Additional resources and focus on Housing First and housing focused solutions is critical to single people and families moving on from emergency accommodation. We know that in a relatively short period of time, an individual or family can become entrenched in homelessness. This must be addressed through the provision of a home, with the required support to maintain that home. The scale of the increase in long-term homelessness suggests that if we are to see an end to its devastating impact, we have to ensure that Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies are flexible in their housing allocation processes for those experiencing long-term homelessness.

2.2 Increase the availability and allocation of one-bedroom social housing units.

There is a particular requirement for one and two-bedroom units at a level that meets the yearly assessment of housing need and reduce the levels of long-term homelessness. To achieve the level of one and two-bedroom units required, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies have to be supported to transition away from 'turnkey' procurement and proactively develop one and two-bedroom homes. As set out in 2.1, traditional social housing is required and should continue to be rolled out as quickly as possible and allocated progressively if we are to address the homelessness crisis.

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3. PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

3.1 Invest in and support homeless prevention measures.

A designated funding line for prevention work should be developed under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988. In particular, support should be provided to initiatives that reach out to communities; for example, through schools and doctors' surgeries, to provide timely advice and information where the pressures that can lead to homelessness may be detected. This would ensure that any available homeless prevention supports are applied at the earliest possible point. Youth homelessness should form a designated focus of this work, particularly for young people who engage with care services.

3.2 Increase Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) funding in response to the market rates.

To remain an effective preventative measure and meet the needs of those who are eligible to receive this support to exit homelessness, HAP must remain linked to the cost of rental in the relevant area. There are over 50,000 households in the State currently supported through HAP to meet the cost of providing a home. While the actions set out in section 1 will in time see a reduction in the need for such a heavy reliance on this payment, in the medium term it will remain a significant intervention.

3.3 Benchmark social welfare against liveable income.

The social infrastructure necessary to end homelessness necessitates having a social protection system that meets the requirements of those who need it. Therefore, the next government must commit to ensuring that the level of basic social welfare is benchmarked against a robust calculation of a liveable income, such as the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) developed by the Vincentian Partnership.

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4. PROVIDE SUPPORT TO THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH ACCESS TO TREATMENT, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SERVICES

4.1 Expedite the funding and implementation of the mental health strategy 'A Vision for Change' and National Drugs Strategy 2017 – 2025, 'Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery'.

While the increase in homelessness has been driven by the housing crisis, we must also acknowledge that those who become entrenched in homelessness will usually have experienced a number of traumas in their life. This can often lead to addiction or mental health issues that become increasingly pronounced in homelessness. To address these needs, we require tailored low threshold alcohol and drugs services, including treatment, detoxification, rehabilitation and aftercare services. Previous commitments and strategies in place need focus and resources in order to deliver on critical services and wrap-around supports.

4.2 Increase funding and access to treatment and mental health services for people experiencing homelessness.

Funding allocated to homeless specific treatment and mental health services is required to keep pace with the increases in homelessness. Specifically, the next government must continue to fund Step Up Step Down intermediate care centres, providing specialised healthcare for those experiencing homeless.

People who are experiencing homelessness underutilise primary healthcare services and have a higher mortality rate. They experience multiple social barriers when trying to access healthcare. Based on Parliamentary Questions² the HSE estimated the number of community and adolescent based residential detoxifications beds required in February 2016 as 135 beds. In July 2018 it rose by 8% to 146 beds.

The Simon Communities have been working hard with the HSE and Department of Housing to play our part in meeting the need for this lifesaving infrastructure. As an example, with support from government Dublin Simon are in the process of building a facility that will see the development of a significant treatment and recovery facility. To see this service active, the next government must commit to ensure that funding for the professional staff required to make this project a success.

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4.3 Deliver 24/7 crisis mental health services tailored to vulnerable groups.

Mental health budget should move towards 10% of the overall health budget with additional support and resources tailored at vulnerable homeless and necessity for 24/7 mental health services.

The physical and mental health needs of people who are rough sleeping, homeless, in emergency accommodation are well documented. Homeless people have far poorer health than the general population. While they experience many of the same health conditions as the general population, these difficulties are experienced more often and with greater severity.³ Mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder are also more prevalent.⁴

Successive governments have committed to the roll out of 7 days per week mental health services for adults and children and while progress has been made, many areas still do not have these in place.

4.4 Create a Trauma Informed Care Strategy/ Programme in homeless services.

A National Trauma Informed Care strategy for homeless services is required in the life time of the Government. Research conducted for Cork Simon Community on childhood trauma found a high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among the clients of their services. Of the 50 people surveyed, 77% had experienced 4+ ACEs⁵. To put this into context, a seminal study quoted in the report noted that those with 4+ ACEs were 1220% more likely to die by suicide.

4.5 Resource child care support to ensure every child experiencing homeless has access to a child care worker, should they require one.

One of the most devastating consequences of the housing crisis has been the enormous rise in family homelessness and within it, the increase in children experiencing homelessness. The impact for these children has been captured in a number of reports⁶. The primary policy response as outlined elsewhere in this document should be to work with families in crisis to prevent homelessness in the first instance and to support families to move on from homelessness as quickly as possible.

However, entering homelessness in the first instance can be a traumatic experience for a child. To meet their needs, each child should have access to a child care worker should they require one. There have also been instances of children who have special needs entering homelessness and there should be a needs based discretionary fund to meet their requirements.

3 Bagget, T. P. et al. (2010), The unmet healthcare needs of homeless adults: a national study, *American Journal of Public Health*, Volume 100, pp. 1326-1333.

4 Eynan, R. et al (2002), The association between homelessness and suicidal ideation and behaviours: results of a cross-sectional survey, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*, Issue 32, pp. 418-427.

5 <http://www.corksion.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ACEs-AT-CORK-SIMON.pdf>

6 <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>

ABOUT SIMON COMMUNITIES

The Simon Communities support over 16,700 men, women and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research and communications. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level. Whatever the issue, **Simon's door is always open for as long as we are needed.**

Services include:

- Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction.
- Housing with support and Housing First services.
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports).
- Personal development, education, training and employment services.
- Food banks, drop-in centres and soup runs.

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