



Opening Statement

Joint Oireachtas Committee Housing, Local Government and Heritage

30th May 2023

1. Introduction

The Simon Communities of Ireland would like to thank the committee for the invitation to present to you today. In drawing together our statement, it has been sobering to reflect that we were last invited to the Committee in February 2022. In opening, we would highlight the fact that the number of people known to be in homeless emergency accommodation has increased by 38% (3109 people)¹ in the intervening period.

The most recent homeless figures continue to see the number of people in homelessness emergency accommodation increase. While acknowledging that members of the committee are aware of the ongoing increases, we would reiterate that the homelessness crisis is being driven by failures in the housing system which mean the needs of people in insecure housing situations in Ireland are not being met.

We have to add to this the fact that homelessness is a traumatic experience. When homelessness is not prevented, households effected by homelessness will be in need of specialist support to deal with the trauma of homelessness. This is particularly the case when homelessness is exacerbated by other factors such as challenges with addiction or mental health.

The topic of today's meeting is by its nature very broad. We are eager to engage with any questions that the committee might have but are also conscious that the committee is regularly briefed on a wide range of issue that impact on homelessness.

Considering this, we will highlight recent developments and ongoing critical issues for your consideration. We are also committing to follow up with a submission to the committee on any specific issues that might arise in the deliberations.

¹ Official Figures for January 2022 and April 2023



1. Prevention

In the context of the current housing crisis the notion of prevention can sometimes be seen to be a fruitless endeavour. However – as our colleagues from Threshold will no doubt outline and as the experience of the frontline prevention services of the Simon Communities in Ireland can attest to – it may be more difficult but it is still possible to support those at risk of homelessness to retain their current home or to secure another and thereby prevent homelessness. We encourage the committee to do all they can to ensure that a focus on prevention is retained and further innovation in this area is supported. Innovation in this area developed or in development within the Simon Communities include:

- Simon Homeless Prevention Bill,
- Cork Simon: Rehab to Home,
- Mid-West Simon: Shared living arrangements,
- Galway Simon: Homeless Prevention Service (mentoring)
- Cork Simon: Pilot diversion project

2. Most recent homeless figures and increases in family homelessness

The most recent figures saw a striking growth in family homelessness. It is the first time family homelessness has increased by more than 90 families since February 2019. A difference in 2019 was that the increase then had followed two months of falling family homelessness over the Christmas and New Year period.

While it is important to be cautious of a single month of figures, this growth in family homelessness can likely be attributed to the lifting of the moratorium on no fault evictions. The roll out of the tenant in situ scheme has the potential to slow or even arrest this trend. However, at this moment the Simon Communities across Ireland continue to see families contacting services due to having a notice to quit, and unsure for their future.

In considering to this, we also have to note that an ongoing issue here is the shortfall in supply of homes to support individuals and families out of homelessness and divert them away from homelessness in the first instance.

One way of addressing some of this shortfall is an increased allocation of local authority housing to those in homelessness particularly those who are experiencing long-term homelessness².

² It is well documented in the US where Housing First was developed that – 11% of homeless service users occupy 50% of homeless beds, using emergency/shelter accommodation for years or even decades. This can be referred to as the 80:20 rule: 20% of service users are episodic or chronic, while the vast majority pass through homeless services very briefly



3. Private rental market

The Simon Communities of Ireland continues to publish our Locked out of the Market quarterly reports.³ These reports continue to reflect a lack of supply and absence of affordability in the private rental market that the committee will be acutely aware of. What is less commented upon is that unsurprisingly the total number of HAP tenancies is falling. In a better functioning housing system we should expect the State to reduce its reliance on the private rental market to meet public housing needs, but in the context of the current crisis it is another worrying development. We note again, as we have before, that there is a need for a review of HAP rates to ensure that it better meets the cost of the private rental market and at a minimum there is sufficient flexibility in the system to ensure that those in a HAP tenancy are not forced into arrears. This pressure on HAP tenants is becoming more acute in the context of the cost of living crisis.

4. Provision of Emergency Accommodation

During the COVID period there was a recognised need for single room occupancy in the provision of homeless emergency accommodation. This has in the context of the increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness been reversed and in some instances services have moved beyond previous capacity. This is a critical backward step in the provision of support to those experiencing homelessness.

It is more so in those services that we see some service users caught in addiction. A growing trend is the use of crack cocaine. Now we see across the country that this drug can contribute to more aggressive and even violent behaviour. To those experiencing homelessness in the current crisis this is an additional risk.

This should not be seen as a call for more emergency accommodation, though that may be inevitable in some areas, but it is a call for the retention of a housing led focus in the solutions to homelessness and the provision of own room emergency accommodation. In fact in our submission to government on the guidelines for the provision of emergency accommodation we set out that we believed that this should be a requirement in the guidelines.

5. Employment.

The acute crisis is also manifested in the growing number of people who are in employment in homelessness. Mid-West Simon reported that in one service had 25% of the residents were in employment but it is a growing phenomenon across the Communities. This is important to highlight both in the context of highlighting how broken the housing system is but also in the fact that if we can provide the homes there is a significant cohort of people who will exit quickly, without or with a minimum of support.

³ *Locked Out of the Market*, March 2023, Available at: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/locked-out-of-the-market-march-2023/>



6. Resourcing

The Committee will be aware that there is a vocational drive in those who work for organisations like the Simon Communities in Ireland. However frontline staff are not immune to the cost of living and housing crisis. Funding of services needs to reflect the need for equitable terms and conditions for staff, in line with the experience and talent that is expended daily to meet the needs of this sometimes very vulnerable group. To this end across the NGO sector there have been calls on the government to ensure that Section 39 and Section 10 pay should be equivalent to that of workers in state sector.

As outlined in section 4 there is a going complexity of needs and this will require ongoing and increased levels of support and engagement with the HSE.

The Cost of Living Crisis has also had an impact of the capacity of services to meet need and there is a need for ongoing monitoring and support in this area.

7. Youth Homelessness

The last 2 years has seen very significant increases in the number of 18-24 year olds in homeless emergency accommodation. The launch of the Youth Homelessness strategy has been very welcome and there is very positive work ongoing in this area. However the strategy and with all strategies will have to be judged on results of the collaborative cross agency work that is to be developed under the strategy.

8. Conclusion

We would like to thank the Committee for your time. The above is far from an exhaustive list of topics. More time could be taken to discuss the impact of homelessness on individuals, families and children and as an extension of this the importance of trauma informed care. More time could again be given to the proposed solutions. These include:

- a. Increasing allocation of social housing to those experiencing homelessness.
- b. Further develop and incentives and initiatives to address vacancy.
- c. Continue support of innovation to support prevention and move-on.
- d. Implementation of the Simon Homeless Prevention Bill.
- e. Innovations and best practice in Prevention