
CONSULTATION ON THE IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY COMMISSION STRATEGY STATEMENT 2025-2027

CONTEXT FOR THE COMMISSION'S WORK OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS

What is going well for you (and/or your community/constituency you represent)?

The housing and homelessness crisis is undoubtedly affecting every community in Ireland. Simon Communities of Ireland support those at the sharpest end of the crisis – those at risk and those experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, we continue to see record levels of homelessness across the country. According to the latest figures published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, there are 13,531 men, women and children living in emergency accommodation in Ireland. This is an increase of 15% (1,777) since this time last year.

Despite the challenges, there are some glimmers of hope. The tenant-in-situ scheme has proven effective in preventing homelessness for those who are eligible. This scheme supports local authorities to purchase homes from a landlord selling up, keeping the individual or family in their home and thus preventing homelessness. The Housing First programme has also proved its effectiveness at reducing long-term homelessness for those with complex needs. Housing First offers those who are often termed as 'hard to reach' access to a home of their own, in addition to person-centred, wraparound health and social care supports.

What are the challenges and barriers that you (and/or your community/constituency) face?

Unfortunately, this housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland continues to intensify. More and more people are entering homelessness, and there is a chronic shortage of pathways out of homelessness. In addition, the demographics of the homelessness population have changed significantly in the last number of years and now include large numbers of women and children, young people and employed people. Housing costs have grown exponentially. In the ten years since 2014, the cost of renting has increased by 100%. Households are therefore spending much larger portions of their income on housing than they were a decade ago. In addition,

Ireland has seen a significant growth in population since then, which has not been met with an uptick in the supply of housing. Supply has become more constrained, pushing prices up further. We have also experienced a cost-of-living crisis, which saw the price of food and energy increase significantly. Thankfully, we are seeing this situation slowly improve in recent months.

All the while, homelessness and housing exclusion has continued to grow. Since the end of 2014, homelessness has increased by a staggering 373% (10,673). It is important to note that many individuals and families are spending long periods of time living in emergency accommodation, despite the well-known negative effects. At the end of 2023, 3,236 adults (40%) had been residing in emergency accommodation for over six months, in addition to 1,292 families (36%). Simon Communities of Ireland continue to advocate that every effort must be made to stop homelessness before it starts. If homelessness does occur, it should be addressed as a crisis and the time spent in emergency accommodation limited.

The chronic shortage of social housing is the most significant barrier to tackling homelessness in Ireland. The private rental sector is no longer a viable option to those on low incomes, especially given the inadequacy of HAP rates which is continuously evidenced in Simon Communities of Ireland's quarterly Locked Out of the Market report. Therefore, it is now more important than ever that the supply of social homes is significantly increased to prevent further homelessness and housing exclusion. As we build up that stock the allocation of social housing to those experiencing homelessness must be prioritised.

What do you (and your community/constituency) need to thrive – to have your human rights and equality protected?

The right to adequate housing is a key element of international human rights agreements that Ireland has signed up to. The record level of homelessness in this country highlights how this right is being violated. Simon Communities of Ireland have long advocated for a referendum on the insertion of the right to housing into the Constitution. Currently, the Constitution is fundamentally imbalanced towards private property rights. This means that the starting point of Government policy and every legal analysis in respect of the regulation of land and property begins from the perspective of a property owner's right. While this right may be restricted in the interests of the common good, the starting point for analysis remains the private interest, with the common good only relevant as a secondary and subjective thought.

The imbalanced Constitutional structure has proven repeatedly to fail people in need of housing. It perpetuates high levels of vacancy and dereliction across the country, it allows for land hoarding, and it has contributed to our national housing crisis.

Including a Right to Housing in the Constitution has an enormous potential to be a catalyst for change. Including a Right to Housing in our Constitution places an onus on the State to develop and implement policy and practice that will meet the right to adequate housing of individuals and families in Ireland, and safeguard against future housing crisis’.

A right to housing in our Constitution would provide every level of Government with a guiding principle and a commitment to ensuring there are sufficient homes for all. In practical terms, this means refusing to accept endemic housing crisis in our society. It means a new level of respect for the levels of affordable housing and social housing needed.

PERFORMANCE OF THE IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY COMMISSION

What do you think our impact has been over the past three years? What do you think were the successes? Were there gaps?

Simon Communities of Ireland commend the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission for their outstanding work over the past three years. We note that our comments are located within the framework of housing and homelessness. The Commissions work on welfare indexation, the right to housing and the promotion of economic, social, and cultural rights and UN reporting on housing is particularly welcome. Simon Communities of Ireland would also like to commend IHREC on the information provided on their website in relation to housing assistance discrimination. In addition, we welcome the Human Rights and Equality Grant Scheme 2022-2023. This funding has produced very useful pieces of research in relation to housing and homelessness, and we hope to see these funding opportunities continue.

We note that in IHREC’s previous programmes of work there has been substantive pieces of work done on housing assistance and discrimination, in addition to the Monitoring Adequate Housing report in 2021. This same level of research and agenda setting in relation to these issues has not been maintained since. This is not to diminish the great work by IHREC in the past three years. However, given the huge number of people affected by housing exclusion and homelessness, we hope to see this issue prioritised and developed further in IHREC’s new strategy.

ACHIEVING CHANGE

What issues should we continue to address as a priority and build upon in our next Strategy of Statement 2025-2027 and programme of work?

Simon Communities of Ireland emphasise the concerning lack of progress in the areas of housing and homelessness. The crisis effects every aspect of Irish society and continues to intensify. Therefore, we express the importance that IHREC's work in this area continue as a matter of priority. The chronic undersupply of social housing is hindering people's right to an adequate standard of living. Current housing targets are inadequate given recent changes in population and future demographic projections. Future targets must also take into account the current unmet need. As mentioned previously, Simon Communities of Ireland continue to advocate and campaign for a referendum on the right to housing, acting as a catalyst for the changes needed to adopt radical solutions and solve our housing and homelessness crisis. We continue to see a suite of reactive and emergency measures to address the crisis. However long-term solutions (EG. Adequate social housing provision, addressing vacancy and dereliction, housing first) and preventative measures (EG. Tenant-in-situ, tenancy sustainment) are needed.

What emerging or other issues should we begin to address in our new Strategy Statement 2025-2027 and programme of work as a priority?

A live and concerning issue that Simon Communities of Ireland would like to highlight is the issue of unaccommodated international protection applicants, many of whom are sleeping rough outside the International Protection Office in Mount Street in Dublin City Centre. Nobody should be left with no other option but to sleep rough in this country. It is a breach of human rights, and it is a breach of both Irish and European law to not provide reception conditions to protection applicants. We commend IHREC for its recent work in this area and highlight the need for such work to continue.

How can we work with and support the further development of civil society as key actors in addressing discrimination and human rights infringements?

The further development of grants and opportunities for collaboration with IHREC would continue to assist civil society as key actors in addressing discrimination and human rights

infringements. Research and knowledge sharing are key to empowering this group to continue to advocate for the realisation of human rights and fight against discrimination.

What impact would you like to have seen from us by 2027?

As mentioned previously in this submission, Simon Communities of Ireland would like to see the issues of housing and homelessness prioritised in IHREC’s new strategy. We would like to take this opportunity to commend IHREC their work over the last few years, particularly in relation to housing discrimination, economic, social, and cultural rights, the right to housing, homelessness international protection applicants and UN reporting. We hope to see this work further developed in the coming years, so that people’s right to an adequate standard of living is realised, and homelessness is tackled in Ireland.