

WORKING TO STOP HOMELESSNESS BEFORE IT STARTS

**Summary of
Simon Communities of Ireland
Pre-Budget Submission 2021**



SEPTEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

While the numbers of adults and children in emergency accommodation fell in the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, homelessness remains at a crisis level in Ireland.

Measures taken during the Covid-19 emergency demonstrated that we can reduce the number of individuals and families forced to enter emergency accommodation and we can increase capacity to support people experiencing homelessness. If we can do it during an emergency, we can do it long-term.

The collaboration between local authorities, HSE and services like the Simon Communities during the early phase of the pandemic ensured that those experiencing homelessness were largely protected from Covid-19. Homelessness services were also able to continue to support individuals and families to move on from homelessness. This, combined with the government's highly effective prevention measures, namely the moratoria on evictions and rent increases, saw the number of people in homelessness fall 14% from 10,148 in February 2020 to 8,728 in July 2020.

Many of the provisions of the moratoria were lifted in August. There has been no significant improvement in private rental market affordability nationwide. The added economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis is resulting in the number of people in homelessness

beginning to grow again, particularly among single adults.

Budget 2021 must provide the detail and funding to support the ambition laid out in the Programme for Government to tackle the homelessness crisis. The Programme for Government commits to funding homelessness services, expanding Housing First and funding homelessness prevention actions.

This Budget, must urgently focus on supporting effective measures that prevent homelessness, stem the tide of people entering into homelessness, and allow the space to address the needs of those currently experiencing homelessness.

The Programme for government also commits to dedicated funding for health, mental health and addiction services for people experiencing homelessness. This Budget must meet these commitments through dedicated and expanded funding streams. These services are more critical than ever given the additional stressors that the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered for many experiencing homelessness.

This new government must use the opportunity of its first budget to put in place the homelessness prevention measures that stop homelessness before it starts.

PRIORITY PREVENTION MEASURES

The Simon Communities of Ireland are calling on the government to fund and support the following priority prevention measures, to stop homelessness before it starts;

Invest in and Support Homeless Prevention

Measures: A designated funding line for prevention work is required under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988. In particular, support is needed to expand prevention services and ensure additional 'support teams' are in place in each local authority to engage with cases at immediate risk of homelessness. Initiatives that reach out to communities should also be included; for example, through schools and doctors'

surgeries, to provide timely advice and information where the pressures that can lead to homelessness may be detected. Youth homelessness should form a designated focus of this work, particularly for young people who engage with care services, and those leaving the care system.

Increase Rent Supplement and HAP rates:

As committed to in the Programme for Government, Budget 2021 should ensure that Rent Supplement and Housing Assistant Payments rates reflect the reality of market rates for private rental accommodation. Crucially, our analysis of the market shows that where increases in supply of private rental accommodation

has become available as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, costs for new supply generally remain high above the standard rate of Housing Assistant Payment. The 50% additional Homeless HAP rate should be available to local authorities across the country, to prevent individuals and families entering homelessness.

Covid-19 Reforms of Rent Supplement: As a key homelessness prevention measure, the amendments to and flexibility in the rules to qualify for rent supplement made during the Covid-19 crisis need to be retained on a permanent basis. Those in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and eligible for rent supplement during the Covid-19 crisis, but who were unaware of their eligibility, should be notified of their eligibility, and enabled to retrospectively claim rent supplement, particularly given the risk of rent arrears accruing during the pandemic period. Those in arrears who have returned to employment (and therefore no longer eligible for rent supplement) should be facilitated to apply for and receive an emergency needs payment in respect of arrears.

Funding the Residential Tenancies Board: Enforcement of tenant's rights is a key homelessness prevention measure. The RTB should be expanded

in order to more effectively act as regulator of the private rental market, with an emphasis on funding positions for spot-checks and inspections of tenancy arrangements, akin to the Health and Safety Authority.

Benchmark social welfare against liveable income: The social infrastructure necessary to end homelessness requires 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. Welfare rates should be at a liveable standard for those under age 26 also.

Research Hidden Homelessness: Preventing homelessness requires that we understand the scale of those experiencing hidden homelessness or in precarious living arrangements across the country. The Government should commission research to identify the levels of housing exclusion and hidden homelessness in Ireland, examine pathways into hidden homelessness and recommend appropriate data metrics for the monitoring of progress.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

In addition to the key homelessness prevention measures, the Simon Communities of Ireland are calling for the enhancement of supports for those experiencing homelessness, particularly in the areas of Covid-19 public health requirements, healthcare, addiction and mental health supports.

Increase emergency accommodation funding to meet public health requirements, single room occupancy and potential increase in demand: Budget 2021 must reflect the Programme for government commitment to increase funding for emergency accommodation services. Adequate funding must be available to ensure that those

accessing services have a support plan and staff resource in place for care and case management. We must ensure that all Covid-19 related measures, including social distancing and appropriate sanitation facilities, are available in emergency accommodation services. This will require maintaining the enhanced capacity of emergency accommodation, including the policy of single room occupancy. Budget 2020 committed €166 million to homelessness services. This will need to be revised upwards in Budget 2021 to reflect the increased costs associated with public health measures and single room occupancy.

Expedite the expansion of homelessness-specific healthcare: This budget should ensure that the dedicated resources and funding are in place to deliver the necessary health and mental health supports required to assist homeless people with complex needs, as committed to in the Programme for Government. This should include a dedicated funding line within Department of Health and identified as homelessness healthcare funding.

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 continue to: fund homeless-specific alcohol detoxification, Rapid Access Stabilisation, Respite, Step-Up Step-Down Intermediate care facilities, day and out-of-hours counselling services, and recovery beds.

MOVING ON FROM HOMELESSNESS

The national policy focus must not shift away from recognising homelessness as a crisis in Ireland. The same resolve shown in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic must be demonstrated through policy commitments to ending the homelessness crisis in Ireland. In particular, increased provision of affordable housing must be prioritised. Capital expenditure on affordable, social and cost rental housing must not be diverted to meet new expenditure associated with Covid-19, as occurred in the previous financial crisis of 2008 onwards.

Housing First: The budget must make provision to expand Housing First across the country, a model proven to work to end long-term homelessness for people with more complex needs, and a commitment in the Programme for Government.

Social Housing: Capital expenditure to build affordable, social and cost rental homes must be protected as it represents the best long-term solution to the current homelessness crisis. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) estimate that we require 30-35,000 homes delivered each year. The yearly assessment of social housing needs shows that we need 15,000 of these to be public homes 50% of which should be one and two bed units. This will provide important social infrastructure needed if we are to address the homeless and housing crisis.

Cost Rental Housing: As a commitment in the Programme for Government, Budget 2021 must expedite the development of a cost-rental model of affordable homes.

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