



# Policy Submission

**Submission to the  
Cross-Departmental Team  
on Homelessness**

**March 1999**

## 1. Introduction

This submission responds to the invitation from the Cross-department team on homelessness, to make proposals for a more integrated response to the issue of homelessness and the needs of homeless people. The submission format is as follows:

- The role of the Combat Poverty Agency
- The National Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Poverty and homelessness
- Housing and homelessness
- Housing as a social right
- Defining homelessness
- The extent of homelessness
- Developing integrated responses
- Finding solutions
- Conclusion.

## 2. The role of the Combat Poverty Agency

The statutory role of the Combat Poverty Agency is, in summary, to advise and make recommendations to the Minister for Social, Community & Family Affairs on all aspects of economic and social policy in relation to poverty in the state; to initiate and support measures aimed at overcoming poverty; to examine the nature, causes and extent of poverty and to promote greater public understanding of poverty.

The aim of the Agency is to promote a more just and inclusive society by working for the prevention and elimination of poverty and social exclusion.

## 3. The National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)

The Agency 's considers that policy to combat poverty and social exclusion must be set in the context of key social, economic, political and policy developments that may be anticipated over the next number of years.

Foremost of these is the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), *Sharing in Progress* (1997), which has been adopted by the government. The strategy analyses poverty, sets down a number of key targets for the reduction of poverty and devises a set of mechanisms to ensure that the strategy is translated into practical effect. The strategy is supported at the highest possible level, being led by a Cabinet sub-committee on social inclusion, chaired by An Taoiseach.

One of the most critical developments since the establishment of the Strategy has been the approval by the Irish government's Cabinet in July 1998 of poverty-proofing. This is a very important initiative for bringing the needs of the poor and the socially excluded to the heart of the policy-making process. Poverty-proofing is understood as:

the process by which government departments, local authorities and state agencies assess policies and programmes at design and review stages in relation to the likely impact that they will have or have had on poverty and on inequalities which are likely to lead to poverty, with a view to poverty reduction"<sup>1</sup>.

It involves government departments responding to the following questions regarding a particular policy or programme:

- Does it help to prevent people falling into poverty?
- Does it contribute to the achievement of the NAPS targets?
- If the proposal has no effect on the level of poverty, what options might be identified to produce a positive effect?

Poverty-proofing is currently in an initial one-year pilot phase with a commitment to review. It has considerable potential to ensure that over the next number of years all policies have positive outcomes for those living in poverty and inequality and that unintended negative outcomes are avoided. The poverty-proofing mechanism should critically inform and influence the final proposals of the Cross-Department Team on Homelessness to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Social Inclusion.

Housing and homelessness do not feature at all as theme areas in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. However the Strategy cuts across all government departments. Policy areas without named targets and actions in the Strategy are not precluded and in fact are required to identify these as part of their work planning under the civil service's Strategic Management Initiative and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

#### **4. Poverty and homelessness<sup>2</sup>**

Poverty may cause homelessness and homelessness leads to poverty and social exclusion. Homelessness is a manifestation of material, social and cultural deprivation. National poverty surveys, because they are based on households, are unable to identify either the numbers or experiences of people out-of-home. Nonetheless, people who are out-of-home self-evidently experience poverty as defined in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy :<sup>3</sup>

People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate

<sup>1</sup> Lacey, B. (1998). 'Putting Policies to the Poverty Test'. In *Poverty Today*. September/October 1998. No. 41. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency. p16

<sup>2</sup> The term 'people who are out-of-home' is now also used.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Ireland. (1997). *Sharing in Progress, National Anti-Poverty Strategy*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society (p.3).

While this understanding of poverty is termed relative poverty (relative to social living standards), homeless people may also experience absolute poverty. This refers to outright destitution, not having the basic necessities of food, water, clothing or shelter

Housing, the absence of housing or the lack of decent housing are key influences in the day-to-day quality of people's lives and their social integration or exclusion from full participation in society. While a basic necessity in itself, housing or the lack of housing determines access to other material, social and cultural resources.

Not only are the roofless deprived of the means to improve their lot - an address holds the key to employment, credit, goods, support and other services.<sup>4</sup>

An adequate income and standard of living, educational opportunities, the law, adequate health care<sup>5</sup> are examples of resources not easily accessible to people that are homeless.

## 5. Housing and homelessness

Homelessness and housing are inextricably linked. The cornerstones of a good housing policy have been identified<sup>6</sup> as:

- Sufficient supply of housing
- Adequate quality and size of available dwellings
- Sufficient supply of affordable housing and
- High degree of housing security.

Irish housing policy has consistently favoured owner-occupation as a preferred form of tenure and this has contributed to a diminution of other forms of tenure. Local authority housing stock has decreased in absolute figures and unfurnished private rental sector has almost disappeared from the housing market. The furnished private rental sector houses the majority of private tenants and is increasingly housing people who are unemployed as evidenced by payments made to private landlords under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme. The amount spent on rent supplements has increased from £5m in 1989 to an estimated £98m in 1998<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. (1998). *Re-Righting the Constitution. The Case for New Social and Economic Rights: Housing, Health, Nutrition, Adequate Standard of Living*. Dublin: Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. p. 40

<sup>5</sup> References in the footnotes to this submission provide useful overviews to this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Avramov, D. (1996). *The Invisible Hand of the Housing Market*. Brussels: Feantsa

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, K. (1998). 'Soaring prices only part of wider housing crisis'. In *Poverty Today*. June/July 1998. No. 40. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency. p.6

In a public policy climate that privileges home ownership and in a context where secure and decently paid employment may be difficult to access, the long-term financial commitment required to maintain this tenure type is extremely difficult and rarely an option for people who are homeless. Therefore persons and groups on low income are unable to compete in the housing market for this form of tenure. This is particularly true for those who are unemployed, those who are mobile and for young people forming new households. The recent public and policy concern regarding the unaffordability, inaccessibility and supply of privately-owned housing highlight the exclusionary effects of housing market performance for people on low incomes.

## **6. Housing as a social right**

Shelter and adequate accommodation are well-established social rights in a number of international human rights instruments ratified by Ireland. The UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, states the “the States Parties.... recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living standards”. Similarly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1996, supports the right to housing. In January 1999, presenting its observations on Ireland’s performance under the Convention, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child said it was “particularly concerned about the incidence of child poverty and homeless children”.

The Expert Group Meeting on the Human Right to Adequate Housing convened by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the United Nations Centre for Human Rights in 1996 concluded that these and other international treaties establish "binding legal obligations, of a continuing nature" for states in relation to the right to housing<sup>8</sup>.

Several European countries have, in recent years, adopted the right to shelter and or housing in their statute or constitutional law (Portugal 1976; Spain 1978; Netherlands 1982; Belgium 1995; Finland 1995). By contrast, homeless people in Ireland have minimum legal protection. The applications of the European examples of rights to housing and shelter in Irish law could ensure that the housing authorities respond to homelessness in a more appropriate manner and enable homeless people to have access to shelter, housing and settlement services. Such a right will not of itself solve homelessness but will lead to policies to rehouse the homeless, speedy allocation of resources to address the problem and give homeless people legal recourse in the event of a non-response by the authorities<sup>9</sup>.

## **7. Defining homelessness**

There are many definitions and understanding of homelessness. The Agency favours a definition that embraces people who are living in inadequate housing (and therefore threatened with homelessness) as well people who

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<sup>8</sup> Avramov, D. (1996) op.cit

<sup>9</sup> Combat Poverty Agency. (1999). New Programme for Law Reform, Submission to the Law Reform Commission. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency. p.17

are unhoused. Voluntary agencies working with homeless people have argued that the definition of homelessness in the Housing Act 1988 is too narrow and it does not include people threatened with homelessness.

The homeless population is not a static group. Identifying persons and groups at risk of homelessness attempts to capture the dynamics of homelessness by taking account of flows into and out of homelessness as well as persons or groups who are homelessness (the stock of homelessness). The following categories provide a useful framework<sup>10</sup>.

- *the visible homeless* - people who are without shelter or living in shelters
- *the hidden homeless* - people who are housed but whose living arrangements are transient or inadequate e.g. people in substandard housing conditions; illegally squatting or doubling up with family and friends
- *those at risk of homelessness* - people likely to become homeless because of high rents or health difficulties.

A second definition of homelessness is also offered as it captures two issues: access to housing (material resources) and access to care and support so that individuals and families can maintain their personal housing. This definition is:

Homelessness is the absence of a personal, permanent and adequate dwelling. Homeless people are those who are unable to access a personal, permanent and adequate dwelling and to maintain such a dwelling due to financial constraints and other social barriers, and those people who are unable to access and maintain such a dwelling because they are unable to lead a fully independent life need care and support but not institutionalisation.<sup>11</sup>

This definition provides for the inter-relationship of structures and processes that give rise to or are an outcome of a lack of money, social isolation, and inaccess to social institutions.

Structural processes and personal factors combine to cause homelessness. The key structural processes have been identified as:<sup>12</sup>

- lack of affordable housing
- lack of adequate social protection

<sup>10</sup> O'Sullivan, E. (1996). *Homelessness and Social Policy in the Republic of Ireland*. Occasional Paper Series No. 5. Dublin: Trinity College. Department of Social Studies.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Avramov, D. (1998). *Youth Homelessness in the European Union*. Brussels: Feantsa.

<sup>12</sup> Avramov, D. op. cit p. 20.

- lack of community-based assistance and care for individuals with mental disability, personality disorders or substance abuse
- juridical and social segregation of particular individuals or classes of individuals.

## 8. The extent of homelessness

It is not the intention here to describe the extent of homelessness in Ireland. This is documented on an ongoing basis by statutory and voluntary groups working with homeless people. While local authorities have a duty to conduct regular assessments of homelessness concern has been expressed by voluntary agencies of the methodologies employed in the assessments and consequently the findings they give rise to which are considered to be underestimates.

Evidence suggests that homelessness in Ireland shares common features with European homelessness<sup>13</sup>. These include:

- an increase in homelessness numbers
- a fall in mean age of homeless people
- the feminisation of the homeless population
- the social isolation, poor educational qualifications and irregular work records of homeless people.

In addition the Irish homeless have a shared experience with European homeless people of family fragmentation and high levels of unemployment with a sub-set of people who are long-term unemployed. Other work<sup>14</sup> identifies the particularly high vulnerability to street homelessness of young Irish people leaving care.

## 9. Developing integrated responses

The Agency strongly supports the Cross-department team's emphasis on developing integrated responses to homelessness. The Agency understands integration to bring together sectors and providers of education, social services, housing, welfare, health, justice, among other, to develop new collaborative structures at policy development and programme management and service levels. In the context of homelessness, the advantages of this approach include:

- developing a holistic understanding of homelessness and the needs of homeless people through understanding the inter-related causes of their economic, social and environmental surroundings;
- potential development of new and inter-related policy, programme and service delivery responses;

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<sup>13</sup> Harvey, B. (1998). *Homelessness and Mental Health, Policies and Services in an Irish and European Context*. Dublin: Homelessness and Mental Health Action Group.

<sup>14</sup> Kelleher P and C. Kelleher. (1998). *Out on Their Own, Young People Leaving Care in Ireland*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

- improved co-ordination of services delivery and resources allocation and the development of services that are complementary;
- improved communication across sectors concerned with homelessness.

Developing an integrated response to homelessness acknowledges the inter-relatedness of the implications of policy decisions on employment, education, social protection, housing and the urban environment for homeless people. It provides an opportunity to focus on addressing the structural causes of homelessness as well as alleviating the current problem.

## **10. Finding solutions**

A number of actions are proposed below to address homelessness. Short term and longer-term actions are identified.

### **10.1 IMMEDIATE PRIORITY ACTION**

10.1.1 An overall principle and action recommended to the Cross-departmental team on homelessness is:

the inclusion in the decision-making process regarding the development, implementation and monitoring of responses to homelessness of homeless people and of organisations working with them in a variety of contexts e.g. housing providers, health care, social services, welfare services, education and training, day centres and providers of basic necessities such as food.

The benefits of such an approach include:

- fostering an integrated and holistic approach through focussing on the range of needs at any one time of people who are homeless;
- the planning and policy development process being informed by the direct experience of homelessness;
- enhancing the potential for interaction and partnership between statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector working with homeless people.

The Agency strongly recommends the adoption of this principle. It is very much in accord with the principles of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, *Sharing in Progress* (1997); aspirations set out in the Green Paper, *Supporting Voluntary Activity, A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its Relationship with the State* (1997) and developments at a national level where the community and voluntary sector are now among the social partners who negotiate and monitor the national agreement Partnership 2000.

10.1.2 In accordance with an Irish government Cabinet decision in July 1998, poverty-proofing, as described in section 3 above, should be adopted



with regard to any policies and programmes to tackle homelessness and related issues.

## **10.2 SHORT-TERM ACTIONS**

### 10.2.1 The development of baseline data through:

- adopting a holistic approach, commissioning an assessment of Irish housing policy with a particular emphasis on how to meet the housing needs of low-income groups and individuals;
- an assessment of government departmental work plans under the National Anti-Poverty for actions related to tackling homelessness, particularly identifying areas or issues that might be enhanced through integrated approaches;
- monitoring the performance of a new pilot methodology by the Eastern Health Board to assess the extent of homelessness and reviewing its relevance for national data collection;
- a comparative review with EU member states of Irish social spending on housing and related areas that benefits people who are homeless or people living in poverty.<sup>15</sup>

Such data could be used to establish new targets in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy for reducing and perhaps eliminating homelessness by 2007.

### 10.2.2 Legislative review of the definition of homeless in the Housing Act 1988.

### 10.2.3 Legislative reform to define statutory obligations to the homeless and the incorporation of a right to housing and shelter in Irish law.

### 10.2.4 The development of a unified aftercare policy for young people leaving residential care which would address the financial, employment, training and education, accommodation, health and counselling needs of young people.

### 10.2.5 State funding and support for inter-agency co-operation on policies and services development to tackle homelessness.

## **10.3 MEDIUM TO LONG-TERM ACTIONS**

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<sup>15</sup> The Combat Poverty Agency in its current Strategic Plan is committed to establishing a target % of GNP on social spending with particular reference to housing and health as they relate to low income groups and individuals.

- 10.3.1 The development of a long-term housing strategy targeted at the needs of homeless people.
- 10.3.2 A commitment to provide adequate funding and support to the range of groups in the community and voluntary sector working with homeless people in a variety of contexts. Core funding should take account of the resources needed to become develop work planning and evaluation, to fund the core work of organisations, to be good employers and to provide training and development opportunities for paid staff and voluntary workers.
- 10.3.3 The expansion of a social housing programme that takes account of the expressed needs of homeless people and the heterogeneity of the homeless population. Social housing should provide for flexibility in tenure types and household unit size as well as developing housing options to accommodate the mobility of the homeless population. Such flexibility should meet the needs of homeless people who are single people, children and young people, older people, women, couples, families, people with mental health problems, drug users, gays and lesbians, Travellers, minority ethnic groups, people leaving residential care, people leaving institutional care and people with disabilities.
- 10.3.4 Increased support for the development of holistic responses to the social integration needs of homeless people such as support for the expansion of programmes to enhance self-confidence, personal independence, social skills, independent living and access to counselling and advice.
- 10.3.5 Increasing income maximisation opportunities for homeless people through the development of individualised and adequately supported education and training plans leading towards appropriate and decently paid employment.
- 10.3.6 Ensuring that income protection measures are adequate for people who are homeless or threatened by homelessness and that they are accompanied by a comprehensive system of housing supply, housing subsidies, benefits and allowances. It is important that income transfers are at a level to enable people to maintain a home.
- 10.3.7 The expansion of support services for people leaving residential and institutional care.
- 10.3.8 The expansion of a range of housing options from emergency direct access hostels, to short, medium and long-term stays with adequate referral, settlement and support services.

## **11. Conclusion**

The Agency particularly welcomes this initiative by the Cross-department team on homelessness, under the auspices of the National Anti-Poverty

Strategy and the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion. This consultation provides a new opportunity for the development of integrated responses to homelessness in Ireland, to tackle its root causes and to work for the eradication of homelessness.