

Policy Submission

Review of Homeless Strategy

**Submission to the
Department of Environment,
Heritage & Local Government**

February 2005



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1. Introduction

This submission responds to the invitation from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, to make submissions from organisations as part of the independent review of the Government's Homeless Strategy.

Combat Poverty is the sole national advisory agency with a remit to combat poverty in Ireland. Acting as a catalyst for change Combat Poverty seeks to influence public policy and elicit public support for action on poverty issues.

The submission format is as follows:

- A. Homelessness and Poverty
- B. Review of Homeless Strategies
 - Implementation of Homeless Action Plans
 - Preventative Strategies
- C. Other relevant issues
 - Right to Housing
 - Continuum of Care
 - Lack of Social Housing
 - Barriers to Accessing Private Rented Accommodation
 - Integrated Service Provision
 - Funding for Voluntary Organisations
 - Indicators of Homelessness and Data Collection

A. Homelessness and Poverty

The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government estimated that 5,581 individuals were homeless in Ireland during one week in March 2002. The majority of these were in Dublin. The assessment of homelessness in Dublin included persons registered as homeless with a local authority during a one-week period and those in contact with homeless services (Williams and O'Connor, 1999; Williams and Gorby, 2002). Of those who were estimated to be homeless in 2002, 4,060 were in Dublin. The 1999 assessment identified 2,900 adults who were homeless with the figure remaining almost static in 2002 at 2,920. The number of children in homeless families in Dublin increased from 1999 to 2002 by almost 15% from 990 in 1999 to 1,140 in 2002.

Homelessness is considered the most extreme form of social exclusion and is a clear manifestation of housing and accommodation poverty. Homelessness is generally caused by structural issues, such as poverty, unemployment and housing shortages. Other factors (both structural and biographic) also precipitate homelessness. Many of these factors are inter-related and include: poor educational achievement, poor quality jobs or unemployment, high cost of buying or renting a home, family breakdown, leaving institutional care, inadequate community support services, ill-health - including mental health, physical, sexual and mental abuse, disability, problematic drug and alcohol use, crime, and leaving prison. People sleeping rough, living on the streets or in shelters may experience absolute poverty. This means they are living without proper shelter, food, clothing or medical care. Often, people who are homeless have little or no support from family and friends (CPA, 2004; Corr, 2003a; Homeless Agency, 2001).

Combat Poverty considers that policy to combat homelessness in Ireland must be set in the context of *Building an Inclusive Society* – the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) and the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPS/incl)¹. Both these strategies recognise that poverty and homelessness are linked and set out goals to combating poverty in housing. One of the key objectives in NAPS is:

to enable households experiencing poverty and disadvantage to have available to them housing or accommodation, which is affordable, accessible, of good quality, suitable to their needs, culturally acceptable, located in a sustainable community and, as far as possible, in a secure tenure of their choice.

‘Housing and Accommodation’ has also been highlighted as one of the ten Special Initiatives in the latest social partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress* (2003). Similarly, the EU *Joint Report by the Commission and the Council on Social Inclusion* (2004) emphasised the need for Member States to put in place policies aimed at preventing and tackling homelessness. However, NAPS only sets out one key target in relation to homelessness and the commitment to develop a housing access target has not been fulfilled. Therefore, there is a need for NAPS targets to be expanded and strengthened in relation to homelessness and housing.

- 1. Combat Poverty recommends that NAPS sets meaningful targets in relation to reducing and eliminating homelessness and puts in place monitoring mechanisms to ensure that these targets are actually met.**
- 2. Combat Poverty has already proposed that targets should be set in order to halve the number of homeless people over the next 2 years, and eliminate homelessness by 2010 (CPA, 2003).**
- 3. Combat Poverty recommends that NAPS sets appropriate targets in relation to access to housing.**

B. Review of Homeless Strategies

In May, 2000 the Irish Government launched *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* (HAIS) which aimed at dealing with homelessness by bringing together the various statutory departments and voluntary agencies to provide a more coherent and integrated delivery of services to homeless people. The HAIS required fora to be set up in each county in Ireland with local authorities and health boards contributing three-year action plans to provide more accommodation, settlement and outreach programmes to help homeless people back into independent living. In February 2002, the Government launched the *Homeless Preventative Strategy* (HPS) which was developed by a number of key Government Departments. It contains measures to prevent homelessness among those leaving any type of state care.

Substantial progress has been made to date by the HAIS/HPS, in particular:

¹ The Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion was established as a result of the NAPS in 1997 and provides a strategic focus for tackling issues related to social exclusion and disadvantage. The Cross Department Team on Homelessness, who formulated the strategy *Homelessness – An Integrated Strategy* (2000), was established under the aegis of the Department of the Environment and Local Government, under the auspices of the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, The Department of Finance, Health and Children, Social, Community and Family Affairs, Justice Equality and Law Reform, Education and Science, Tourism, Sport and Recreation (FAS and Probation and Welfare Services were also represented on the Team).

- the bringing together of the various statutory and voluntary agencies;
 - the provision of a more coherent and integrated delivery of services to homeless people;
 - substantial improvement in the quality and quantity of services available for homeless people in Ireland;
 - a significant decrease in the number of rough sleepers (from 312 in Dublin in March 2002 to less than a hundred in 2005);²
 - a substantial increase in the number and quality of emergency beds available to homeless people;
 - substantial investment in dedicated health care services for homeless people;
 - new initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of homeless people with drug and alcohol problems;
 - facilitating people in prison on short sentences to maintain local authority tenancies, including prisoners on housing lists;
 - special accommodation provision for young people leaving care.
- (*Housing Access for All*, 2003)³

Implementation of the Homeless Action Plans

In 2002, four voluntary organisations carried out an analysis of the HAIS and its associated action plans (*Housing Access for All*, 2003). This research identified a number of key barriers preventing their implementation. These included:

- the local homeless action plans are not on a statutory basis (raising concerns regarding the priority afforded this issue)
- inadequate resources available at local level to research, develop, co-ordinate and implement the plans
- a failure to set targets or clear commitments in relation to the goals set out in the national strategies
- a tendency to plan for housing-led rather than integrated development.

4. Combat Poverty recommends that local authorities adopt a similar approach to the homeless action plans as to that which has been taken by the Traveller action plans.

5. Combat Poverty also recommends that each local authority fully integrates the homeless action plans into their Housing Strategies and other strategies.

6. There is also a need for consultation with voluntary service providers around monitoring the implementation of homeless action plans. This could be facilitated through the homeless fora.

² Combat Poverty welcomes the substantial decrease that has been made in relation to rough sleeping as this is congruent with the NAPS commitment that 'sufficient and appropriate emergency accommodation [is made] available to rough sleepers, in conjunction with appropriate outreach services to enable them to access it'.

³ The most up-to-date review of literature on homelessness in Ireland is contained in the forthcoming publication from the National Advisory Committee on Drugs (NACD) which has been submitted to the Review of the Government's Homeless Strategy (Lawless, M. and Corr, C. 2005. *Drug Use among the Homeless Population in Ireland*. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs).

- 7. Combat Poverty feels that it is essential that local authorities make sufficient financial and expertise resources available to each local homeless forum.***

Preventative Strategies

NAPS recognises that it is important to put in place policies, such as the HPS, to prevent life crises which lead to homelessness. The HPS has had little impact, despite the acknowledgement of a number of key groups who are at risk of homelessness (including early school leavers, those leaving prison and psychiatric institutions).

- 8. Combat Poverty welcomes the priority given to prevention, in particular in the new Dublin Action Plan, and recommends that any future national policy on homelessness includes a comprehensive preventative strategy.***
- 9. Combat Poverty recommends that the HPS sets specific targets in relation to preventing homelessness among a number of key groups.***

Issues related to homelessness are much broader than homeless policy as a range of policy areas can have implications for the prevention and elimination of homelessness. Therefore, it is imperative that decisions taken in other policy areas do not contribute to, or create, a greater risk of homelessness. For example, research has found that the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997 has contributed to the further marginalisation of those already excluded from society (through evictions for anti-social behaviour), resulting in an increase in homelessness, in particular of homeless drug users in Dublin (Lawless and Cox, 2003; Memery and Kerrins, 1999). Lawless and Cox (2003) argue that 'the discretionary provisions included within the current legislation can further increase the likelihood of homelessness for individuals who have previously received sanctions'. Similar concerns were raised by 13 organisations after cutbacks were made to Rent Supplement conditions under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme as part of the Government's Spending Estimates for 2004 as they felt that 'the restrictions [would] cause hardship and avoidable homelessness' (Jordan, 2004). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Habitual Residency Condition of the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004, is leading to an increase in people from the new EU Member States frequenting homeless services.

- 10. Combat Poverty recommends that any new policies or programmes that are implemented should be assessed to see how they might impact on homelessness and housing issues. This should be included in the poverty proofing mechanism established under NAPS.***
- 11. Combat Poverty recommends that best practice guidelines are adopted in dealing with anti-social behaviour (see Lawless and Cox, 2003). In particular, emphasis should be placed on coordinating preventative services at a local level (such as mediation services, nuisance clauses within tenancy agreements and outreach preventative services). Combat Poverty feels that it is important that the rights of tenants are protected, while simultaneously safeguarding the local community.***

C. Other Relevant Issues

Right to Housing

Homeless people in Ireland have minimum legal protection in relation to housing. 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 1994; Finland 1995), which, according to Harvey, has encouraged governments to respond to the problems of homelessness and poor housing in a more systematic and effective way (Harvey, 1999). Such a right does not solve homelessness but will lead to policies to re-house the homeless, will speed up allocation of resources to address the problem and will give homeless people legal recourse in the event of a non-response by the authorities (CPA, 1999).

12. Combat Poverty recommends that the right to housing and shelter is considered by Irish law to ensure that housing authorities respond to homelessness in a more appropriate manner and enable homeless people to have access to shelter, housing and settlement services.

Continuum of Care

The overall aim of the HAIS is to move homeless people through a continuum of care from emergency, temporary accommodation to permanent, stable and secure accommodation of appropriate standard. Targets in relation to rough sleeping are meaningless unless targets are also set for move-on accommodation for those currently accessing emergency accommodation. An analysis of the HAIS and its associated action plans concluded that the 'homeless action plans for the most part fail to deal adequately with the need for a continuum of housing options, such as sheltered, assisted and permanent accommodation' (*Housing Access for All*, 2003).

13. Combat Poverty recommends that the need for homeless people to remain in emergency accommodation for longer than six months should be eliminated by 2007.

14. Combat Poverty recommends that specific targets are set in relation to suitable transitional accommodation and long-term supported housing for those currently staying in emergency accommodation.

Lack of Social Housing

Another barrier to moving homeless people through a continuum of care is the lack of long-term housing solutions. One of the key targets of NAPS, reflecting the social housing investment in the National Development Plan, is 'to deliver 41,500 local authority housing unit starts (including acquisitions) between 2000 and 2006'. This target implies an average of 5,929 units annually, so by June 2004, 26,676 social housing units should have started. However, figures from the Housing Statistics show that the Government was 3,687 units behind on its target, as only 22,989 units had been started by June 2004. It is not surprising, therefore, that numbers on social housing waiting lists are increasing. The last assessment of social housing need found that the waiting list grew by 24% between March 1999 and March 2002 when 48,413 households were assessed in need of social housing. Furthermore, recent research shows that homeless people are spending a substantial amount of time on

local authority waiting lists and lack of access to local authority accommodation is one of the main reasons given for people remaining homeless.⁴

15. Combat Poverty proposes that, at the very minimum, the Government implements the recommendation made by NESF (2000: 7) in that ‘every Local Authority should set an immediate target, that 70% of households assessed as being in need of accommodation, are provided with suitable and adequate accommodation within two years of their acceptance on the waiting list; that this target be raised to 80 per cent of households in the medium-term; and a longer-term target should be fixed for the elimination of all waiting lists, within a reasonable timeframe’.

16. Combat Poverty also advises that the Government adopts NESC’s (2004) recommendation that 73,000 social housing units should be provided in the state between 2005 and 2012.

17. Specific targets for housing homeless people should also be set by Sustaining Progress’ Special Initiative on Housing and Accommodation and the five year Social and Affordable Housing Strategies.

The homeless population is not a homogenous group and therefore, as the NAPS states, it is important to ‘deliver an appropriate mix of social and affordable housing measures which meets the needs of different types of households’. Consequently, it is important that emphasis is not only placed on housing output but also on meeting a range of housing needs (e.g. homeless people who are single, in particular single men, families with children, young people, older people, women, couples, people with mental health issues, drug users, alcohol users, gays and lesbians, Travellers, minority ethnic groups, people leaving residential care, people leaving institutional care and people with disabilities).

18. Combat Poverty recommends the expansion of a social housing programme that takes account of the diverse needs of homeless people and the heterogeneity of the homeless population. Social housing should provide for flexibility in tenure types and household unit size.

Research has also found that the majority of homeless people experience homelessness on a number of different occasions (Corr, 2003a) which indicates that homeless people have difficulties sustaining independent living. It is imperative, therefore, that homeless people who acquire social tenancies (as well as private rented and transitional housing) receive the appropriate amount of support through settlement and tenancy sustainment services.

19. Combat Poverty recommends that there is an increase in funding and support for settlement and tenancy sustainment services.

⁴ Refers to data in the forthcoming publication from the NACD based on a quota sample of 355 homeless people in Ireland (Lawless, M. and Corr, C. 2005. *Drug Use among the Homeless Population in Ireland*. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs).

Barriers to Accessing Private Rented Accommodation

Homeless people can avail of private rented accommodation as an alternative to local authority accommodation. Organisations such as Threshold, have highlighted a number of barriers in accessing rented accommodation including the maximum allowable rent cap and the cutbacks in SWA rent supplement announced as part of the Government's Spending Estimates for 2004.⁵ The Government has taken action to reform and develop the private rented housing sector. On 7th July, 2004, the Government announced a new scheme, the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), whereby local authorities will progressively assume responsibility for meeting the long-term housing needs of households receiving rent supplement for 18 months or longer. Under these measures, the rent supplement scheme will be refocused on meeting short-term income maintenance needs, while local authorities will assume responsibility for meeting long-term housing needs. These arrangements will see an extension of the social housing role of local authorities through direct engagement with the private rented sector.

20. Combat Poverty recognises that the RAS has the potential to improve the long-term housing needs of homeless people. Therefore Combat Poverty recommends that the HAIS outlines how the Scheme could be used to house homeless people.

21. In the interim, Combat Poverty recommends that restrictions for rent supplement are reversed and that rent supplement levels are increased to reflect the real cost of renting.

Integrated Service Provision

The needs of the homeless population are multi-dimensional and need to be responded to in a holistic way. The homeless population presents with a range of needs such as poor physical health, mental illness, problematic alcohol and drug use, dual diagnosis⁶, previous experience of institutional care and low levels of life skills. The presence of multiple needs means that individuals are often vulnerable and require a multi-disciplinary approach to address their needs. Even though there has been a substantial move towards integrated services, research shows that there is still a lack of appropriate resources, training, co-ordination and overall integrated structures within homeless services and there are issues regarding joint working relationships not only between statutory and non-statutory services but also within the community and voluntary sector (Corr, 2003a). It is important that coordination between community and voluntary organisations working within the homeless sector is strengthened as service provision for the homeless in Ireland relies strongly on this sector (O'Sullivan, 1998). Furthermore integration and co-ordination between the statutory services and community and voluntary sector should also be developed as this is very much in accord with the principles of NAPS and the recommendations set out in the *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity* (2000).

⁵ Cutbacks were made to Rent Supplement conditions under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme, most notably the sixth month rule which denied an applicant assistance if s/he had not been renting for the previous 6 months unless they could prove that they were homeless or assessed in housing need. This rule has now been relaxed and currently applicants need to prove that they are currently renting but there is no time rule.

⁶ i.e. both a mental health and alcohol/drug problem.

22. *Combat Poverty recommends increased integration and co-ordination in the decision-making process regarding the development, implementation and monitoring of responses to homelessness among a wide range of statutory and voluntary organisations including housing providers, health care professionals, social services, welfare and probation services, education and training, day centres and drug and alcohol service providers. It is important that organisations involved in integrated service provision have the relevant expertise and also include many of the smaller agencies dealing with homeless people.*

23. *Combat Poverty recommends that community and voluntary organisations working in the homeless sector are encouraged to develop stronger links and working relationships with each other.*

24. *Combat Poverty also recommends that innovative services and responses are targeted at groups of homeless people with special needs.*

Funding for voluntary organisations

Despite the increase in government spending on homelessness, the lack of multi-annual funding to voluntary organisations makes it difficult for voluntary organisations to strategically plan their services and develop quality service provision appropriate to the needs of service users. However, the Government's *White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity* (2000) recommends that 'multi-annual funding [becomes] the norm for agreed priority services and community development activities. This will mean a major move away from [...] unsatisfactory and *ad hoc* funding schemes experienced by many Community and Voluntary groups'.

25. *Combat Poverty recommends that the Government provides 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 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. It is of paramount importance, therefore, that the Government commits to three-year funding for homeless services in the community and voluntary sector.*

Indicators of homelessness and data collection

One of the key areas of the homeless action plans is to improve the collection, collation and accuracy of information available on homelessness. However, it has been noted that the 'absence of reliable data on the homeless population represents one of the most significant data gaps in our knowledge and understanding of poverty' in Ireland (Corrigan *et al.*, 2002). Similarly NAPS recognises the need for more reliable data on the homeless population in Ireland in order 'to establish appropriate targets in relation to access to housing'. However, the cornerstone of data collection under the NAPS, the new EU-SILC survey (Survey on Income and Living Conditions), does not gather data on those not in households. Therefore, homeless people are excluded from national poverty statistics.

One of the main difficulties with collecting data on homelessness is defining the phenomenon and this is important as 'the size of the homeless population will depend on how we define or conceptualise homelessness and this in turn will determine the policy responses to the situation' (O'Sullivan, 1996). The official definition of homelessness in Ireland is given in the Housing Act, 1988. However, this definition excludes those at risk of homelessness which means that there is not an adequate description of the extent of housing need or enough information for preventive approaches or future service need.

26. Combat Poverty recommends that a statutory definition of homelessness is embraced which includes people who are 'at risk' of homelessness, as well people who are unhoused.

Every 3 years the number of homeless people in the state is counted in addition to the 3-year housing need assessments. The *Counted In* assessments in 1999 and 2002 were carried out by the ESRI on behalf of the Homeless Agency (Williams and O'Connor, 1999; Williams and Gorby, 2002). However the reliability and accuracy of the data have been questioned (see Corr, 2003b). For example:

- it is a point-in-time count so the figures reveal prevalence of homelessness during one specific week in Ireland but they do not represent the incidence of new cases of homelessness in a given year or the flow of people in and out of homelessness. Therefore, 'it remains a rather crude and sterile measure', (Houghton and Hickey, 2001: 8) which substantially underestimates the true extent of homelessness.
- the survey is based on homeless households who are in contact with a service for homeless people and/or accepted as homeless by a local authority – therefore it ignores the hidden homeless who are in contact with neither.
- the information collected may not always be reliable as it depends on accurate returns from local authorities, health boards and voluntary service providers.

There have been even further problems noted with the collection of data outside Dublin as 'there continues to be significant deficiencies in the accuracy and sophistication of the data available from local authorities' (*Housing Access for All*, 2003). For instance:

- many of the counts on homelessness are not consistent with the figures of the local Homeless Action Plans
- some local authorities have no homeless but they are counted in the Homeless Action Plans
- in some town councils the numbers of homeless people increased dramatically from 1999 to 2002.

27. Combat Poverty recommends that assessments of homelessness and housing needs should occur annually in order to take account of the flow of people in and out of homelessness, while a twice-yearly count of street homelessness (one conducted in summer and one in winter) should be undertaken.

28. There is no one method that will ever give a true picture of the number of homeless people. Therefore an effort should be made to compare several methods or combine different sources. Prevalence studies

should be commissioned using multiplier and network analysis techniques (as this would be an appropriate method in estimating numbers of hidden homeless). Furthermore, if the Homeless Agency succeeds in its target of enrolling all homeless people on waiting lists for local authorities the 'capture/re-capture' methods could be used to measure homelessness in the future.

29. *Longitudinal data collection provides a better insight into the causes and consequences of homelessness. The Homeless Agency should fulfil its commitment (made in May 2001) to carry out a 5 year longitudinal study.*

30. *All Homeless Action Plans should be revised after the March 2005 needs assessment and specific targets set in relation to housing need.*

31. *Combat Poverty proposes a national body be assigned tasks to carry out research and evaluation on homelessness in Ireland. In absence of a national housing authority this could be carried out through existing bodies, such as the Housing Unit, the Homeless Agency, or a combination of both.*

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