

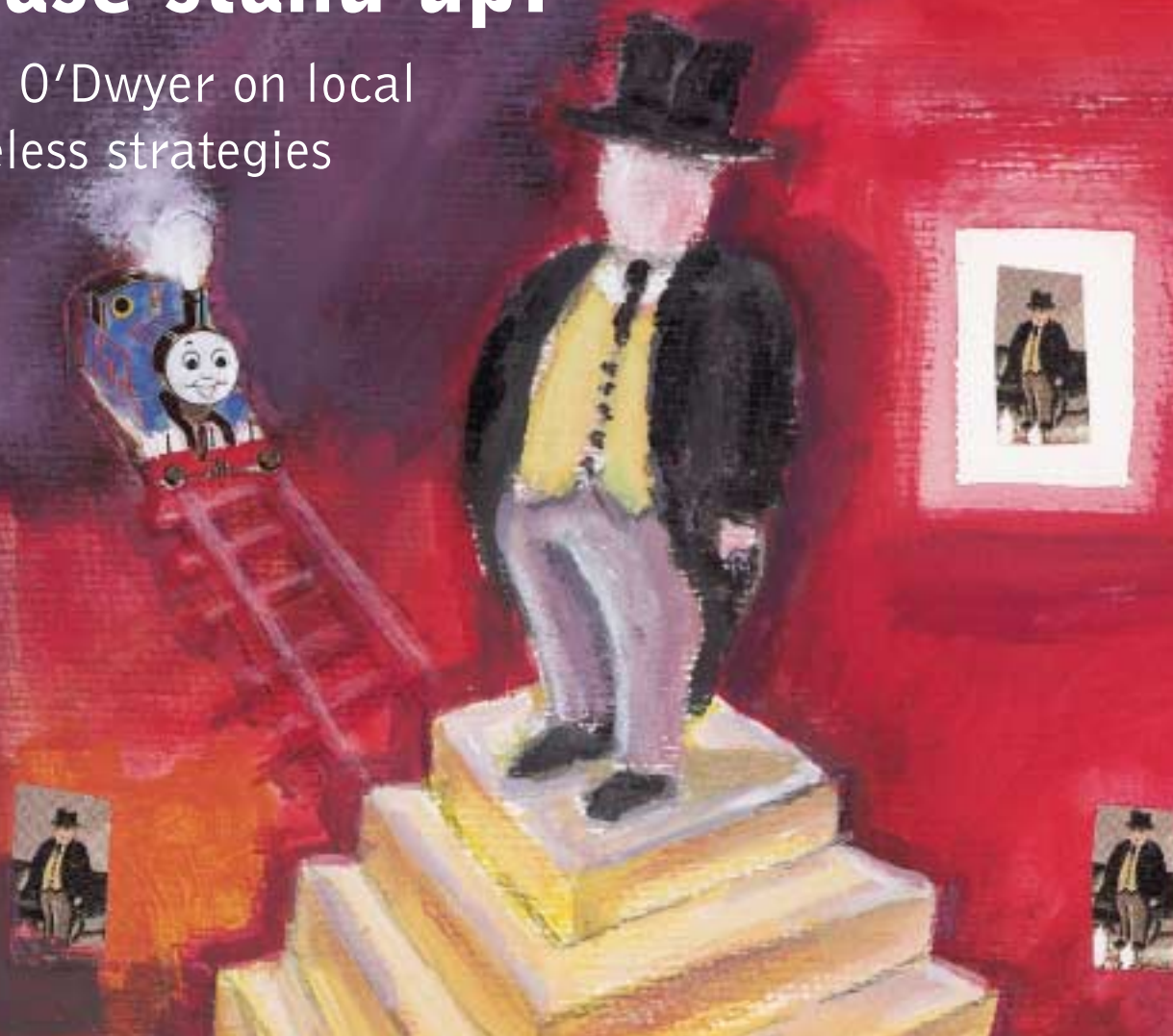
CornerStone

ISSUE NO.8 MAY 2001

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

Would the Fat Controller please stand up!

Liam O'Dwyer on local
homeless strategies



Launch of the
Homeless Agency

Maureen Gaffney
responds to **Dáithí Downey**

What future for
private renting



The Homeless Agency is a new governmental body that has taken over many of the functions of the Homeless Initiative, which no longer exists. The Homeless Agency is responsible for the planning, co-ordination and delivery of quality services to people who are homeless in the Dublin area.

Its Director is Mary Higgins, who leads a staff team which operates under the direction of a Board, and is advised by a Consultative Forum. It involves a range of voluntary and statutory agencies working in partnership on agreed plans to deliver integrated services to people who are homeless and assisting them to move rapidly to appropriate long term housing and independence. A major task will be co-ordinating the three year action plan **Shaping the Future**, produced on foot of the government report, **Homelessness — An Integrated Strategy**.

The Homeless Agency will co-ordinate all homeless services in the Dublin area; deliver some direct services; provide training and other supports; monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of services; carry out research; and administer funding to homeless services.

For more information see the leaflet enclosed in this issue of CornerStone. If you do not have a leaflet, or would like more, please contact the Homeless Agency.

Publications referred to in this issue of CornerStone:

Focussing on B&Bs: The Unacceptable Growth of Emergency B&B Placement in Dublin

F.T. Houghton and C. Hickey

Published by Focus Ireland. Available from Focus Ireland, 14a Eustace Street, Dublin 2.

Tel (01) 671 2555 Fax (01) 679 6843

Email focusirl@indigo.ie

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Rent Assessment, Collection, Accounting and Arrears Control

Published by The Housing Unit. Available from The Housing Unit 57–61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4.

Tel 668 6233. Free to local authorities, housing associations, tenants' and residents groups, voluntary sector. £10 €12.70 to everyone else.

Shaping the Future: An Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2001–2003

Published by the Homeless Agency. Available from the Homeless Agency, 6 St Andrews Street, Dublin 2.

Email homeless@indigo.ie Free. For those who do not require full detail, a 40 page summary is also available.

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**2 News**

Homeless Agency launched, Private Rented Reform, U-turn on landlord taxes, B&B report, National Strategy on Youth Homelessness, Social Housing in 2000, National Household Survey, Housing Unit Good Practice Guide, Forthcoming events

**6 Would the Fat Controller please stand up!****Liam O'Dwyer**

Delivery of homeless services is disparate and unco-ordinated. What is needed is quick delivery of all homeless strategies; co-ordination and leadership; and the government must make the delivery of homeless strategies a priority.

8 More challenging than you might think?**Maureen Gaffney**

Despite criticism of 'unachievable' targets, NESF believes that it is necessary to be ambitious. A National Housing Authority could provide many supports that are currently lacking, and offer a more strategic approach to housing policy development.

10 What future for private renting?**Tony McCashin**

The analysis of the Commission on the Private Rented Sector will go some way towards meeting the future needs of the sector, but its analysis falls a long way short of dealing with the most fundamental problem — financial poverty among tenants.

**13 Portrait of a Project**

Dublin Corporation's Settlement Service is one year old. Team members talk about their work with rough sleepers and people in B&B.

**16 Oireachtas Oratory**

Irish homeless in London, Private rented legislation, Seanad row.

17 News

Continued.

18 From the Roof Tops

A hostel resident speaks out.

Homeless Agency launched

The atmosphere in the Guinness Storehouse at the launch of the Homeless Agency matched the brilliant early May sunshine outside. For once, this was not another hard-working seminar, or another consultation meeting about the action plan; this was a celebration.

Because the event was not just the launch of the new Homeless Agency; it was the publication of its action plan, *Shaping the Future: An Action Plan on Homelessness in Dublin 2001–2003*.

The Homeless Agency was formally launched by Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who in a powerful speech, began by offering a concise and devastating history of past failures: 'I fully recognise the special responsibility of Government on homelessness. In the past, it is clear that the State failed to live up to its responsibilities on a wide range of fronts. ... Past policy on homelessness was driven by short-term measures, an overwhelming emphasis on emergency accommodation and an over reliance on insecure and inadequate funding. It also failed to recognise that we cannot afford the wasted opportunity of different groups



Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern T.D. Photo by Lorna Fitzsimons.



Mary Higgins, Director of the Homeless Agency. Photo by Lorna Fitzsimons.

working to achieve the same objective but never working together.'

He then summed up succinctly the new policy direction. 'In order to provide a better response, the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion, which I chair, set up a cross-departmental team to draw up an integrated strategy on homelessness. ... It marked a decisive shift in policy with the core idea that every department, every agency and every voluntary organisation must co-ordinate their activity and they must do so throughout the country.'

The Homeless Agency's Director, Mary Higgins announced — to many quiet sighs of relief — that she wasn't going to talk about the content of the action plan. Instead she posed two questions: What is so special about this plan, and will it work?

The reason it is special, she said, '...is that there has never been an overall plan before. Furthermore, the process that produced it involved many people from statutory and

voluntary organisations. Its vision and content draw directly on the experience of those who work with homeless people and indirectly from homeless people themselves.'

Answering the second question, she asserted that it will work because it is based in reality; and because a partnership structure — the Homeless Agency — has been established to drive it. She paid

tribute to those who had been involved, 'Even though the action plan means that many service providers will have to change, they have still bought in to the process, and the importance of that cannot be over-estimated.' Finally, she said, there is a wider context, 'The political will is there at all levels, and the resources are available. The time is right.'

'Thank God it's over,' said one person who had been heavily involved in the production of the plan, as he sipped his light refreshment.

But of course it isn't over. It's only just beginning. ■

'The political will is there at all levels, and the resources are available. The time is right.'

Private rented reform

Whilst the rest of us were finishing off our Christmas cake, the Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal was putting the finishing touches to his response to the Commission on the Private Rented Sector which reported in July last year (see *CornerStone* No 7). He announced his proposals on Friday 5th January 2001.

The good news is that the Minister has broadly accepted the recommendations of the Commission; the bad news is that recommendations favouring landlords are to be implemented immediately, whilst tenants will have to wait two years before they benefit from recommendations that specifically favour them.

The following reforms are proposed:

- Setting up a Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) which will deal mainly with landlord/tenant disputes;
- Bringing in legislation within two years to:



Robert Molloy, Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal

- Put the PRTB on a statutory basis
- Improve security of tenure for tenants
- Ensure rents are not higher than a market rent and are generally reviewed no more often than once a year;

- Introducing a range of tax and supply incentives for landlords;
- When the PRTB is on a statutory footing, transferring the registration of landlords from local authorities to the PRTB.

Announcing these proposals, the Minister said, 'I am confident that the package of reforms will when they are brought to fruition, go a long way towards achieving a better managed and more professional sector with improved security of tenure for tenants and greater certainty for both landlords and tenants.'

Threshold welcomed the proposals as a 'first step to achieving a much-needed reform of the private rented residential sector', but expressed dismay at the two year wait for improvements in tenants' rights. 'By proposing a two year time frame the Government are prepared to leave tenants in the sector in limbo until 2003 before seeing any improvements in their situation,' said Threshold's Director Kieran Murphy. ■

U-turn on landlord taxes

Finance Minister Charlie McCreevy, has reduced stamp duty for investors buying new homes and abandoned his proposed anti-speculative tax.

Speaking at the second stage of the Finance Bill he announced that stamp duty for investors buying new homes, i.e. people buying new homes they intend to rent out, would be reduced from a flat rate of 9% to a sliding scale from 3% to 9%. The flat rate of 9% will remain for second-hand properties.

He claimed that, 'in the light of developments in the housing market since last summer', it was not necessary to go ahead with the anti-speculative tax. In doing this, he acted so quickly that the tax has been abolished before a penny has been collected. ■



Charlie McCreevy, Minister for Finance

‘Unacceptable, unhealthy and expensive’

So states Focus Ireland’s recent research on the use of bed and breakfast for homeless people. *Focusing on B&Bs: The Unacceptable Growth of Emergency B&B Placement in Dublin* reports that more people than ever are being placed in bed and breakfast and they are staying for longer periods before moving on.

Housing Minister Bobby Molloy launched the report in the River Club in Temple Bar. Also speaking at the launch was Focus Ireland President Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, which prompted the Minister to remark that it was a long time since he’d been to a night club with a nun.

Sr Stanislaus emphasised that the research was a joint venture with the co-operation of the Eastern Regional Health Authority and Dublin Corporation.

Indeed the very fact of this co-operation is itself an indication of just how far things have moved in the past few years.

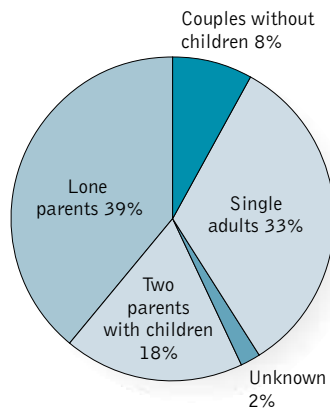
In 1990, the Eastern Health Board placed 5 households in bed and breakfast at a total cost of £520. By 1999 this had increased to 1,202 households at a total cost of £4.7 million.

The reasons for this spectacular increase include:

- the increase in homelessness
- the shortage of long-term affordable housing
- the increase in the cost of private renting

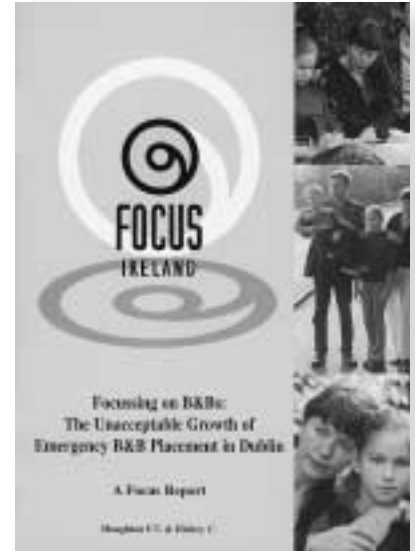
- the shortage of emergency accommodation, especially for single women and adults with children.

The chart shows that whilst a majority (57%) are lone parent or two parent families, a third (33%) are single adults. There is a preponderance of young people: a third of each category of household was under 26.



Generally bed and breakfast conditions have improved since Focus Ireland’s last research on bed and breakfast in 1994, which reported that most people had to be out of their B&B during the day and most people did not have access to a kettle.

Nine years on, 800 out of 975 beds had 24 hour access, and 522 beds had either sole or shared access to a kitchen. In addition the very label ‘bed and breakfast’ is misleading, as Dublin Corporation is endeavouring to phase out the use of bed and breakfast and



replace it with apartments. In October 2000 there were twice as many apartments as ‘true’ bed and breakfast places being used.

However, welcome as these improvements are, approximately 300 units of ‘true’ bed and breakfast remain in use, and as the Homeless Agency’s action plan points out, it is unlikely this can be phased out in the short term.

Focusing on B&Bs recommends long-term investment in social housing; the use of private sector leasing whereby Dublin Corporation would manage the accommodation in place of the private landlord; a greater variety of emergency and temporary accommodation with a range of support levels; and more support services. ■

National Strategy on Youth Homelessness

In April 2000 Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Mary Hanafin said, ‘...the National Strategy on Youth Homelessness ... is being prepared and will be finalised later this year,’ and she went on to claim, ‘The Strategy will provide a more strategic and planned approach to youth homelessness.’

Three months later, on 7th July 2000 she said it would be published ‘later this year’. Minister for Health and Children Micheál Martin speaking 10 days later was more specific: ‘...the National Strategy on Youth Homelessness ... is being prepared and will be launched in September 2000’, he declared.

By October 2000 Minister Hanafin was restricting herself to a more cautious ‘later this year.’

And since then whenever *CornerStone* has asked the Department of Health and Children, they have offered no more than a terse ‘shortly’.

Interestingly voluntary organisations which might have expected to have been consulted about such a strategy have heard nothing of it. ■

Social housing in 2000

Local authority and housing association building programme figures for 2000 released by the Department of the Environment and Local Government are a mixed bag.

Local authorities performance last year was disappointing, although there are signs of a significant increase this year; whilst housing associations have hugely increased their output.

Speaking in the Dail in April 2000, Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Noel Dempsey set out his targets for that year. *'I expect that local authorities will commence the construction of, or acquire, in excess of 5,500 houses this year and that the level of house completions, including acquisitions, will be in excess of 4,000 units.'*

The actual number of completions and acquisitions (i.e. houses either built by local authorities or bought by them) came in at 3207, compared with the target of 4000. This is a particularly disappointing figure; you have to go back to 1994 to find a lower output.

However, the actual total of housing starts and acquisitions was 5079, over 90% of the target. The number of starts at 4076, was the highest for over ten years, as was the number of houses in progress at the end of the year, suggesting that the

curve should really start to move upwards this year.

The housing association building programme was up a massive 64% on 1999, and very nearly double the output of 1998. A total of 951 dwellings were completed, approximately half of which were special needs housing. This brings the total housing association building programme to nearly half the total building programme for local authorities and cements their position as substantial providers of social housing.

Affordable housing

The affordable housing scheme which was introduced in March 1999 aims to help lower income households buy their own homes. The scheme envisages local authorities building houses which are sold at cost price to households who satisfy an income test.

The National Development Plan has set an ambitious target of 7000 units of affordable housing to be provided between 2000 and 2006. However in 2000 only 86 affordable houses were completed, suggesting that this target may be optimistic. Some local authorities are reported to be pinning their hopes on using the 20% of development land which will

Rough justice?

A century and three-quarters ago, they had their own ways of dealing with the undeserving poor. There were at this time organisations in Ireland called corporations, which were established for the relief of the poor and for punishing 'vagabonds' and 'sturdy beggars'. In 1828 the House of Commons ordered that these corporations should provide a report on their work.

The report from Dundalk stated: 'All sturdy Beggars strolling are turned out upon their entering; and a constable is kept by the Corporation for that purpose and is called a *Bang Beggar*.' ■

be set aside under the Planning and Development Act (see *CornerStone* No 7), but since this is completely unknown territory, this may be a risky strategy. ■

More good practice

The second in the Housing Unit's Good Practice Guidelines in housing management was launched at the end of January by Housing Minister Bobby Molloy. *Rent Assessment, Collection, Accounting and Arrears Control* reminds the reader that '...more than any other aspect of the housing service, the determination and collection of rents has direct implications for the welfare of local authority tenants.'

The Guidelines cover four areas:

- Good practice in the assessment and collection of rents and in receipts accounting

- Strategies for preventing rent arrears
- Options available for recovery of rent arrears
- Recommendations relating to customer care and effective staff management.

In line with the recent extension of the remit of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy to include local authorities, emphasis is placed on 'poverty proofing', that is, ensuring that services do not create or perpetuate inequality and that they contribute to achieving a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities.

See inside the front cover for how to get a copy. ■





ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY CRAVEN

Would the **Fat Controller**

The Government's integrated strategy on homelessness requires every city and county council to produce an action plan for the delivery of homeless services. **Liam O'Dwyer** examines progress so far.

As I read Thomas the Tank Engine to my three-year-old recently I remember being impressed by the benign dictatorial manner in which the Fat Controller (station manager to the uninitiated) conducted his business. This rotund contented man was eating toast with jam and drinking coffee from a china cup at 8am but by 9am was robustly ensuring that a quality service was delivered by his staff and engines to the local population. His ability to rebuke, cajole and support, delivered service, his omnipresence was a comfort and challenge.

In what is one of the key priorities facing both our Government and Irish society — the provision of integrated and adequate services to those who find themselves homeless — one is left with a strong impression that the delivery is disparate and uncoordinated. Who is the enabler of our integrated homeless strategy? Who facilitates the local authorities and health boards around the country to develop their strategies in consultation with the community and voluntary sector? Who is accountable for the local delivery, and crucially who is accountable nationally? Officials of the Department of the Environment with their limited resources seek the information but who can demand it? Would the Fat Controller please stand up!

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has 16 hostels in Ireland so our members are in touch regionally with what is happening on the ground. The reaction to date is mixed. Although the vast majority of local authorities are indeed co-ordinating the development of a strategy to provide integrated homeless services, there are in our experience some areas where little or no progress has been made. There are others who have begun the process but who find it difficult to deliver a result. The concern of the Society is that there is no support structure to ensure delivery. Local authority housing officers are being asked to produce integrated homeless strategies, housing strategies and Traveller accommodation strategies. The planning, co-ordinating, facilitating and technical skills necessary to deliver on all of these, is work that needs specialist skills which most organisations have to buy in. One of the most difficult tasks is to enable consultation to take place with all parties represented, let alone the analysis of all available information, agreeing effective strategies and setting achievable targets.

Delivering on the targets is the next agenda. Who for instance will deliver the 1,500 units targeted by the Dublin integrated strategy? Who prioritises between these 1,500 units and the other 25,000 housing units needed in Dublin over the next 6 years, over the roads, sewage, transport infrastructure, over the National Sports Stadium, the countless private sector new builds and the commercial sector builds? All of these conflicting interests are competing for priority — not financially — the money is there, but for resources, for builders, developers, contractors. As the recent annual report on the construction industry by Patterson Kempster and Shorthall suggested the Minister should put a banner on his wall — 'Its Resources stupid'.

Someone has to set the priorities; in our view they begin with those who are homeless.

please stand up!

Our strong economy and our rising standards are demanding infrastructure, recreation, arts, culture, sports facilities. Someone has to set the priorities; in our view they begin with those who are homeless.

Our sector's experience of the delivery of social housing units, accommodation for homeless people and Traveller accommodation strategies is that efforts are being made locally to produce integrated agreed strategies, but they are way behind schedule and the content of some of the strategies is weak with limited or no targets being set. The targets for social housing set in the National Development Plan are not being met while new builds in the private home buyers market are ahead by 7%. Some of the log jams are being identified, Planners are being recruited, human resource planning is taking place in the construction industry with new apprenticeship schemes planned. Local authorities now realise that their five year budgets for social housing projects can be front loaded to attract in the bigger developers, they recognise that more human resources are needed internally. But who is championing this, who is co-ordinating it, and with particular reference to homelessness: who is the Fat Controller?

The view of the Society is that three things are needed immediately: first, ensure the delivery of all homeless strategies. The complexity of consultation and co-ordination should not be underestimated, so we need identified staff who are trained and supported. The Housing Unit has an important role in enabling this to happen and should be briefed to ensure delivery to the satisfaction of both the local authority and the unit itself.

Secondly, co-ordination together with authority is needed for a timely delivery of the strategies. For the first time we have the financial resources, but we

need a support structure for the human and project resources. Without a Fat Controller our delivery will continue to be patchy and late. The interest and commitment of both Minister Dempsey and Molloy or their officials is not in question, but there is no one floating between the political decision-making domain and those who deliver locally i.e. the local authorities, health boards and the community and voluntary sector. It is incumbent on government to facilitate and insist on delivery. Our view is that unless a unit is set up and mandated to act, we will be waiting until the next National Development Plan to deliver integrated services to people who are homeless. The Homeless Agency in Dublin may well be a good model in respect of enabling co-ordination but does it have the authority and resources to deliver? Local authorities' Directors of Services will also help in this regard, but their answerability to County Managers who in turn answer to the Department is too long a chain of accountability.

Thirdly, Government must set down that the delivery on targets set by the homeless strategies, Traveller accommodation strategies and social housing units are the number one priority. The National Stadium, the Abbey Theatre and other enriching projects should be moved off the drawing board until the targets for the real priorities have been met. There is also a cost benefit in this for Government because the more projects that come on stream at the same time, the less competition there is in the tendering process. This has been reflected in the tendering increases evident during the past two years. Unless bold political decisions are made at cabinet level, we will have a wonderful new National Stadium that will engender national pride while homeless people beg outside for the price of a bed. ■

The National Stadium, the Abbey Theatre and other enriching projects should be moved off the drawing board until the targets for the real priorities have been met.

Dr Maureen Gaffney, Chairperson of the National Economic and Social Forum, reflects on some of the issues raised in **Dáithí Downey's** article in the December 2000 edition of CornerStone on the Forum's recent social housing report.

PHOTO BY LENS MEN

More challenging
than you
might think?

Dáithí Downey's article in the last edition of *CornerStone* (December 2000) raised some very interesting issues concerning the Forum's recently published Report, *Social and Affordable Housing: Building the Future*. His overall assessment of the Report would seem to be that, while it makes a positive contribution to the debate about social housing, it has received a mixed reaction.

This assessment is to be welcomed, in many respects. The aim of the Forum, which is the broadest of the national social partnership organisations in Ireland, is to stimulate debate and to try to move towards a consensus on major economic and social policy issues. If a Forum report doesn't receive critical analysis and raise the level of debate, then we are not doing our job as well as we might!

But let's stop and reflect on where there is consensus in relation to housing policy and practice. There is a consensus that social housing as an issue was in need of the Forum's attention as an independent Government advisory body. There is consensus that current policies are not working as well as they should. Increased waiting lists for social housing, lack of confidence in social housing provision, increased homelessness, dysfunctions in the private rental and for-sale sectors, a slump in voluntary sector outputs, etc. are all examples of how policy responses are not working as well as they might. There is also consensus that action is needed on a number of housing fronts.

The question then is what should be done? The Forum's focus is on those who are most marginalized and when we started looking at the issues of social and affordable housing the first thing that struck us was that insufficient attention has been paid to those most excluded in relation to their accommodation needs. That's why we recommended that greater priority be paid to those with greatest housing needs. Our objective here is not to residualise social housing, but quite the opposite, to bring it into the mainstream of attention and action.

Mr Downey reports that most of the local authority housing officers he spoke to thought that the targets the Forum recommended to reduce and eliminated housing waiting list targets were 'unachievable'. The key question here of course is why do housing officers think these targets are unachievable? It would have been helpful if Mr Downey included data on this point in his article. How long should an eligible person reasonably expect to be on a waiting list? When the Forum recommended targets to end long-term unemployment, and when targets were set to reduce poverty under the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, similar scepticisms were voiced. But look what happened since then. These targets have helped to focus attention on these

problems and real advances have been made. The same could be true of housing. Setting ambitious targets is a first and necessary step.

The recommendation to establish a National Housing Authority is a key one in the Report. The idea is supported by the Social Partners. Indeed at the Forum's Plenary to discuss the report, there was almost unanimous support for this recommendation — even those who had reservations about it were open to it being examined further. The strategic focus that a Housing Authority brings is badly needed in the Irish situation. We lack adequate data to develop policies, we lack a stream of systematic and on-going evaluation of housing initiatives, we lack documentation of best practice, local authorities lack sufficient support to deliver and manage social housing programmes, and the voluntary sector likewise needs more support. A Housing Authority could provide these supports. It could also identify potential problems and start working out solutions well before they get out of control. Crucially, a Housing Authority would be well positioned to devise innovative ways of joint funding and joint ways of working, supporting partnership arrangements with trade unions, churches, pensions funds, voluntary housing associations and private landlords and builders.

Mr Downey concludes his piece by expressing disappointment that the Forum's report is 'under-socialised'. The Report, however, does identify considerable treatment of this area. Two sections of the Report deal specifically with it — *Recognising the Social Aspects of Housing Provision* and *Promoting Integration and Reducing Social Segregation*. Also, the Forum made far-reaching and challenging recommendations in this regard, for example, that social housing provision should, as a general principle, promote social inclusion; and that the National Spatial Strategy should be designed with equality and social inclusion measures to the fore and that new housing developments should be linked to and planned in parallel with infra-structural investments such as transport, sanitary services, schools. We may not use the same terms as Mr Downey to describe what needs to be achieved, but we are broadly in agreement.

Waiting lists and house prices continue to grow. The problems identified by the Forum last year have not gone away, nor are they likely to in the near future. What's lacking is a dedicated body to offer a more strategic approach to housing policy development, and one that can monitor policy implementation more closely. The NESF believes that the Housing Authority is the best way forward. ■

There is consensus that current policies are not working as well as they should.

The NESF believes that the Housing Authority is the best way forward.

The government claims that its recent proposals made on foot of the Commission on the Private Rented Sector 'will result in a major step forward for the private rented sector.' However **Tony McCashin** questions whether people on low incomes can expect a better deal.



PHOTO BY STONE

What future for PRIVATE RENTING?

Introduction

It is quite striking to the outside observer how fragmented policy debate is in Irish housing policy. Each tenure is discussed separately from all of the others and the 'problems' of one part of the housing system are deemed to be unrelated to the other parts; this tendency not to see the housing system as a *system* is found not only in popular discussion but also in formal studies and inquiries. Arguably, this problem also affected the *Report of the Commission on the Private Rented Residential Sector*. In this article I want to make some general observations on the Commission's analysis and on what I see as its failure to adopt a sufficiently systemic approach. For readers of this magazine, the

most critical point about the report is its lack of attention to the problem of low income. If — as we know to be the case — a substantial number of tenants in private rented housing have a low income, what role, if any, can private rented housing play in meeting their housing needs, and what policies in other tenures as well as in private rented housing, will help to sustain that role?

Background

Thanks largely to the research efforts of *Threshold*, we know enough about the private rented sector to be able to summarily sketch the background. Over an extended period of time the sector was in decline,

both absolutely and proportionately, and playing a residual role in the housing system. The sector was essentially inhabited by students, single people and households at the earliest phases of the life cycle, as well as the continually declining rent-controlled sector. Owner-occupation has been the main tenure for a long period of time for most households, with local authority housing increasingly acting as the tenure of the poorest groups and as an indirect route to owner occupation. There was nothing natural or inevitable about the roles of the different tenures: they can be attributed in large measure to public policy. Owner occupation has benefited from a wide range of subsidies, local authority housing has been earmarked as the housing of those unable to afford to buy, and private rented housing was by and large allowed to wither on the vine. While the persistence of a crude form of rent control undoubtedly exacerbated the decline of the rented sector in Ireland as it did in other countries, it is the larger structure of the housing system and the overall pattern of tenure subsidisation that consigned the rented sector to a modest and diminishing role in the housing system.

From the early eighties to the early nineties the private rented sector and the context in which it operated changed. Rent control was finally abolished, leading to a limited and ad hoc change in provisions with the introduction of the special rent allowance for tenants in the decontrolled properties; a tax allowance for older private rented tenants was also introduced and later extended. In the late eighties when the local authority house building programme was emasculated in the public expenditure cuts of the time, the rented sector began to take on a greater role in housing the low income population. This increase in demand was greatly accentuated by the continual rise in unemployment and, in particular, the growth of a large of welfare-dependent population. This new

There was nothing natural or inevitable about the roles of the different tenures: they can be attributed in large measure to public policy.

demand for private rented accommodation was increasingly underpinned by the discretionary rent allowances paid by health boards. The supply of affordable, rented accommodation did not rise, notwithstanding the widespread emergence of the new 'Section 23', apartment style accommodation: on the contrary, the absolute size of the sector and its

share of the housing stock fell during the inter-censal period 1981–1991. In 1992, the long campaign for a modicum of regulation in the sector finally bore fruit with the passage of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, conferring on tenants the right to rent books and minimal notice to quit, and requiring landlords to register their properties and to adhere to minimum standards of accommodation.

The Commission

The Commission was established in 1999 against a background of some growth in the absolute size of the sector. This reflected general population trends, rising demand because of the affordability crisis in the owner-occupied sector and the continued increase in the subsidisation of the sector by the Health Boards. The policy problems giving rise to the commission were a mixture of old and new. Despite the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992 which provided a modicum of regulation, there was still concern at the quality of accommodation at the lower end of the market, the relatively weak position of the tenants in the market, and the difficulty of generating new, affordable rented accommodation. To these long-standing issues were added the new problems of enforcement of the 1992 Act's provisions and a series of issues related to the prominent role being played by the health boards' rent allowance. The cost of these allowances rose rapidly during the 1990s, they were confined to welfare recipients, they may have been artificially inflating demand and rents in some areas, and they offered distinctly different subsidies to those offered to local authority tenants, rent controlled tenants and owner-occupiers.

The first point to note about the Commission is the ludicrously short period of time it had for its work: it reported, as required by the Minister, in about one year, having had to cope with a serious dearth of the most basic data — what the commission politely referred to as 'the paucity of information available on the size, composition, and characteristics of the private rented sector in Ireland'. The Commission's key recommendations are:

- The establishment of a Residential Tenancies Board with a wide range of functions spanning registration, rent reviews, dispute resolution and so on;
- Improved security of tenure, allowing tenants a further 3½ years tenure after the satisfactory completion of a six month tenancy;
- Application of rents 'no greater than market rents' and rent reviews to be permitted no more than once per year;
- Consideration of the use of tax credits for tenants with affordability problems, and;
- Specific changes in the tax treatment of rented housing based broadly on the principle that income from this source should be treated as business income, and geared to sustaining incentives to invest and to inducing new corporate investment.

Could it be that such a sector is inherently unsuitable to meet the needs of low-income tenants and that only an extension of the roles of other tenures can meet these needs?

...the most critical point about the report is its lack of attention to the problem of low income.

This bias in our housing system has been criticised by such revolutionary organisations as NESC, the ESRI, the Central Bank and the OECD...

The recommendations taken as a whole are plausible and, in particular, the security of tenure and RTB framework offer the prospect of a better functioning sector. But taken as a whole the Commission's work does not really address the problems areas of links with other tenures and the critical issue of affordability. In relation to affordability, the Commission ignored the central point that in Ireland the *incomes* of many tenants (as social welfare recipients or employees) are, in fact, subject to a form of control through the now well-established system of national partnerships.

There may be a fundamental incompatibility between allowing market determination of rents (the single most important element in many households' budgets) and central determination of many tenants' incomes. Even if it were clear from the Commission's analysis what *the* market rent is for a tenancy the Commission had very little to say about how to deal with affordability problems in market style arrangements. The discussion of 'refundable tax credits' is limited. Tax credits or allowances might work for *employees*, but what about the large number of social welfare recipients among the low-income tenant population? Any serious consideration of affordability issues would have to include an analysis of the SWA rent allowances (and the other affordability supports) and address such questions as; should there be a national, statutory system of support with housing costs; if so, should this be an income maintenance function and therefore part of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' system of welfare payments; should support with housing costs be confined to social welfare recipients or be more comprehensive?; should the overall system of supports with housing costs attempt to be somewhat more neutral across the tenures or should each tenure function entirely separately?.

Aside from the intricacies of how to design a subsidy to deal with housing costs, there is the fundamental question of the appropriate roles of private rented accommodation and local authority accommodation for low-income tenants. The Commission advocated a market driven system for rents without spelling out how to support low-income tenants. Could it be that such a sector is inherently unsuitable to meet the needs of low-income tenants and that only an extension of the roles of *other* tenures can meet these needs? For example, is it not likely that many of the low-income people who became tenants in the eighties and nineties did so because of the increasing shortage of local authority accommodation? In other words, a pre-requisite for a well functioning private rented sector is a well-developed, responsive local authority sector. In turn, this might entail some form of 'levelling' in

the treatment afforded public sector and private sector tenants: local authority tenants have security of tenure, rents graduated according to income, a differential rents system which does not exclude tenants in work, and the right to buy. Arguably, sustaining demand for private rented accommodation will require tenants in the sector to be treated no less favourably than their local authority counterparts.

This absence of a system wide perspective is even clearer in relation to owner-occupation. The Commission devoted two pages to a discussion of the links between renting and owner occupation, but largely confined this to a review of the Bacon reports and the impact of the Bacon recommendations on the rented sector. However, the key long-term issue here is the way that over-subsidisation of owner-occupation squeezes much of the natural demand for private rented accommodation by giving very strong incentives to buy rather than to rent. Private owner-occupation is subsidised by: mortgage interest tax relief; non taxation of imputed income from ownership; non-taxation of capital gains from sales; and, cash grants for first-time buyers. This bias in our housing system has been criticised by such revolutionary organisations as NESC, the ESRI, the Central Bank and the OECD, on the grounds that the mix of subsidies is both unfair and inequitable! The very least the Commission should have done was to re-state these critiques and to emphasise the central point that sustaining the rented sector means a fundamental review of the *relative* treatment of the rented and owner occupied sectors.

A similar point can be made about the potential role of the slowly growing voluntary housing sector in Ireland. The Commission's preference for a market driven system should also have led it to consider the role of *non/profit* housing. There are serious and extensive affordability problems in the rented sector. Developing an improved system of rent allowances or tax credits is one type of response to affordability problems, and constructing a non-profit sector is another. In passing, it is more than a coincidence that countries that have sustained larger and better quality rented sectors have used non-profit or social housing to deal with problems of affordability and to find mechanisms for investment and supply.

Conclusion

The Commission's recommendations will go some way towards meeting the future needs of the private rented sector, and the fact that the Government is committed to implementing its recommendations (as per the DoELG statement of 5th January 2001) is indicative of a new seriousness on the part of the Government about rented housing. However, the Commission's analysis falls a long way short of what is required to deal with the most fundamental problem of all in the sector — the problem of financial poverty among many tenants. ■

Dublin Corporation Settlement staff made their first contact with clients in February last year. One year to the day later, team members spoke to **Simon Brooke** about their work.

ONE YEAR OLD

Dublin Corporation Settlement Service

The four team members are: Niamh Ní Cholmain and Kathryn O’Sullivan, who work with rough sleepers; and Catherina O’Rourke and Anthony Gleeson, who work with people in B&B.

SETTLING ROUGH SLEEPERS

NIAMH The settlement team started work in January last year when Kathryn and I were employed to work with rough sleepers and to facilitate them to settle. We knew from our experience that rough sleepers need a lot of support so we decided to work with a limited number, initially twenty.

Our vision of settlement is that it is about facilitating people to access accommodation which they would consider appropriate, and to hang onto that accommodation. Also to access whatever supports they need in order to be as independent as possible.

KATHRYN Within two months we had a full case load. Our clients are mainly men, aged from 21 to 50, who are either sleeping rough or in one-night-only accommodation. The criteria are quite flexible but people must be motivated to settle. Our service operates Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm and we offer crisis phone support outside those hours.

NIAMH After we’ve accepted a referral we start the process of assessment. We assess needs in terms of housing history, mental and physical health needs,

Addiction and mental health are the main issues for us, and learning difficulties too.



Niamh Ní Cholmain

work, education, ability to manage money, history of institutionalisation, addiction, and we do a risk assessment. We then have some idea of the desired outcome in terms of the person's accommodation. We set up a plan for each person which is goal-directed so that they are working towards specific goals.

We would find that a lot of people are moving in steps towards resettlement: from the street maybe to a hostel, and then to transitional housing for example. Although we have housed people directly from the street, people who were very clear that was what they wanted.

KATHRYN One person we worked with was 15 years on the street and he went straight into a flat. Another

was two years on the street before moving into his own accommodation.

Addiction and mental health are the main issues for us, and learning difficulties too. In terms of drug use we would have the aim as part of settlement to look at their drug use, so we would link them in with say a drugs outreach worker. For some of them transitional housing is an opportunity to look at that.

We have also dealt with people who have long-term drinking problems for whom that may be their continuing experience. We will help put in place systems like directly debited rent so that even if they are drinking they won't lose their flat.

NIAMH A lot of our clients have multiple needs in terms of addiction issues and mental health issues, and they need a very complex support system. Linking them into appropriate services is very difficult if they're sleeping rough. We find that people with a long history of homelessness are heavily reliant on homeless services so it may take a long time for them to move away from that. Once they're in a flat we try really hard to link them into services in the local community.

SETTLING PEOPLE FROM B&B

CATHERINA Anthony and I started in July with a remit to work with families in B&B accommodation. We couldn't work with all of them so we decided to start by taking on people who had been homeless for one year or longer and who were reasonably motivated to settlement.

We hoped at the start that we would get referrals from the Allocations section in the Corporation and the Homeless Persons' Unit at Charles Street but that hasn't happened so far because of the volume of work they have at the moment. There are two new CWOs who are going out into the B&B s on the north side so we'll make contact with them, and they can refer to us.

ANTHONY We've come across people who are quite capable but have become demotivated, literally just sitting in the B&B not feeling that they could move on. And since we've made contact, they've made massive strides and some people's lives have changed quite dramatically in the four months since we started making contact.

The assessments we carry out are very similar to Niamh and Kathryn's except that we might also look at child care issues and domestic violence. But we meet people with addiction problems too. We will work with people who are on methadone; if they're currently actively using we wouldn't work with them at this time, because part of our aim is to work with families who have a really good chance of getting through. But if they're on a methadone programme

and have a history of stability on that then we're quite happy to engage with them, and a couple of families have been rehoused in that situation.

CATHERINA We all believe that settlement is a process and that people are at different stages of settlement, so all the time we're matching our response to their needs. In terms of accommodation it might be the case that we decide, along with the person, that perhaps they're not ready for independent living. So we might explore other options such as transitional housing. But the majority of the people we have met and assessed so far have been ready for independent living.

ANTHONY For some families there are issues of self-esteem or just the need to rebuild self confidence. We all provide support but we're not specialists so we try to find an appropriate service we can refer people to. My feeling is that having someone to discuss things with initially is quite a major support for people.

There's an initial euphoria generally when people get their place, and then there's a slump because of the responsibility



Anthony Gleeson

We can't guarantee accommodation but we can offer hope, and I think that's vital. We can show them that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

that goes with it, which can be quite daunting for some people. The extended family of one of my clients are saying to her, 'Right, you've got your house, so what's your problem?'. They haven't acknowledged that it's quite a stressful time. Our philosophy is to give them the space to talk about those worries because some of them may have contributed to previous problems in not sustaining housing, so it's important to discuss them.

CATHERINA When a family leaves a B&B they leave a network behind them. They're moving from a place where they have a sense of security, of familiarity perhaps, to an area where they know nobody. It can be a complete sense of isolation. Sometimes I think it brings them back to when they first became homeless. They're experiencing the exact same feelings, and it's a very traumatic time. Often that period is marked by a change of support workers. I feel it's important to have continuity at that particular time because it's the most vital period.

ANTHONY Even when having people under their feet all day has been getting on their nerves in shared

temporary accommodation, going to their own place without other people can be scary, even though it's what they want and are really aiming for. Part of what we do is to reassure people that it's normal to be nervous and scared.

NIAMH There are lots of similarities between Catherina and Anthony's work, and our work with rough sleepers. What we do consistently with people is offer them hope. We can't guarantee accommodation but we can offer hope, and I think that's vital. We can show them that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

CATHERINA ...and it may not come in the form of a house. That's the other reality. It may come in some other form, like an issue which has been nagging at them for years. All of a sudden they might linked into a service through which that issue is resolved. So sometimes the house is not the answer to their problems. Looking at other things may often be the solution. It may be something they haven't addressed before or haven't been able to address before and now they are able to because they feel safe.



Catherina O'Rourke

ON TENANTS' COMMITTEES, LIFE AFTER THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR, AND OTHER MATTERS...



Kathryn O'Sullivan

NIAMH We often go with people to local tenants' committees and introduce ourselves

KATHRYN ... and talk about our role. The committees vary a lot...

NIAMH ...some are really approachable, and some once they hear the word 'homeless', well they've had a bad experience of that.

KATHRYN Generally speaking

our relationship with tenants committees has been very positive. I think a lot of Tenants' Committees have felt that it's good that someone has support.

NIAMH Once people are informed and reassured then there's no problem.

ANTHONY I think it also goes back to the point of resettling people. I think in the past people were just put in a vacant flat whether it was appropriate or not, whether it was doing them a favour or not, and quite often it wasn't. I think that's where a lot of local people built up negative experience of people resettling in their area.

CATHERINA Working for the Corporation isn't very different from the voluntary sector. In a way it doesn't really matter who you're actually working for. It's the nature of the work and the group you're working with. Whether it's a voluntary organisation or a statutory organisation there will always be politics. The important thing for all of us is the work on the ground and the contact with clients, and that's all I suppose that matters at the end of the day.

ANTHONY Within the department we have a lot of flexibility, which has been set from the word go. In terms of what we're doing, the fact that we are part of Dublin Corporation makes it easier to work with the Allocations Section and Estate Management.

NIAMH So there isn't a difference really. If anything it's like having extra tools in your tool box because you suddenly understand more about how local authorities work.

CATHERINA We have had a good response from within the Corporation. A lot of people have said it's a service that is really needed.

KATHRYN We don't work in isolation any more. We've all done settlement work before and most of us worked alone. Now there's a team of us and that helps. ■

Generally speaking our relationship with tenants committees has been very positive.



DÁIL

Most readers will be familiar with the annual homelessness media hype at Christmas, which serves to reinforce the notion that homelessness doesn't matter during the rest of the year. But you may not have known that it's a feature of the Dáil too. In December 2000, the Dáil sat for seven days, and in that time, the word 'homeless' was uttered or used in written questions on **114** occasions. In the first seven days during which the Dáil sat in 2001, the word 'homeless' occurs ...guess how many times? **Three!**

Irish homeless in London

Early in December, **Enda Kenny** (FG) made a rather strange request: he asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he had made any efforts to trace and name homeless people in London who are of Irish extraction, and what assistance he

intended offering them. Minister for Foreign Affairs **Brian Cowan** (FF) explained that the government and voluntary organisations were doing what they could to ensure that migrants were properly prepared. He went on: *'Out of respect for their privacy it would not be appropriate to ask voluntary or official bodies to reveal the identities of homeless Irish people they assist. The Irish Government is committed to taking further steps to address the problem of homelessness among recently arrived Irish immigrants in Britain, especially in London. Through the DÍON Committee, based at the Embassy in London, the Irish Government has this year given grants amounting to £1,015,000. ... The special social and health problems of Irish people in Britain are currently receiving special attention from the interdepartmental committee on emigration. Irish and British officials are considering the possibility of special action,*

in the context of combating social exclusion, to address those problems, including homelessness.' (5th December 2000)

Promised private rented legislation

Joe Higgins (Socialist Party) reminded the Taoiseach that recent rent rises had placed tenants at the mercy of landlords, *'to an extent that, the great Michael Davitt, the champion of tenants would find absolutely appalling,'* and he urged the Taoiseach to bring forward the introduction of promised legislation *'... as expeditiously as the Government yesterday approved massive pay rises for Ministers, himself, politicians and high flyers in the public service.'* **The Taoiseach** replied that the legislation is urgent but also very complex. He assured that House that the work would proceed as quickly as possible. *'This,'* he said, *'is priority legislation.'* (31st January 2001)

SEANAD

The Seanad too took homelessness to its heart at Christmas, spending much of the final pre-Christmas session on a discussion of this issue. Minister of State at the Department of Health **Dr Moffat** kicked off with an upbeat assessment of government action, maintaining, *'The Government has put a clear strategy in place to address homelessness in a comprehensive way and it is supported by the necessary funding and resources.'*

Responding, **Thérèse Ridge** (FG) reminded the House that homelessness was getting worse. She poured scorn on 'winter hostels': *'There appears to be a presumption that from the end of April to the beginning of November there are six months of glorious sunshine and no need to provide shelter. That is both laughable and scandalous.'* She went on to lambast the government for its inactivity. *'...the major stain on its record will be the lack of care for those who, for varied and multiple reasons, are unable to provide for what is the basic need of all human beings, namely, shelter.'*

Next to speak was **Willie Farrell** (FF) who got straight into a furious attack on alcohol, claiming it to be the major cause of homelessness. He was critical of local authorities, health boards, and the voluntary sector. *'None of the organisations mentioned has the courage to say to the drinks industry that it is responsible for the problem.'* He called on voluntary organisations, *'...instead of looking for more money, to initiate a grassroots campaign to highlight what alcohol abuse is doing to this country and its children'* He was also critical of the Pioneers for failing to draw attention to this cause of homelessness.

He waxed lyrical about dance halls and their strict anti-drink policies, and spoke at great length on this and other issues until An Leas-Chathaoirleach gently reminded him that whilst there was no time limit, others were waiting to speak.

At this **Mary Henry** (Ind), launched a ferocious assault on Willie Farrell's claim that alcohol is the major cause of homelessness. *'I am furious that he should*

come into the House without having researched the matter properly.' She went on to point out that, *'psychiatric illness is one of the most serious causes of homelessness'* and spoke with passion on the issue: *'we cannot paint sick people as drunks lying on the street when they are not drunks and are homeless because of our failures.'* She went on, *'I am sorry for getting so cross about this matter, but it breaks my heart to see ill people denigrated as drunks and, worse still, those trying to deal with them described as fools.'*

Labhrás Ó Murchú (FF) called for homelessness to be entirely removed from the political arena, and **Joe Costello** (Lab) called for more expenditure and the establishment of a task force on homelessness.

Finally **Willie Farrell** came back and said, *'If I have stirred up opinions and got people talking, and if I have annoyed some people, I have done a good job coming up to Christmas.'* And at that the house adjourned for the Christmas hols. (15th December 2000).

National Household Survey

In 1971 the average household contained 4 people. By 1998, this had reduced by a whopping 25% to just over 3 people, and nearly half of all households comprised only 1 or 2 people. With the fall in the average size of household, houses have become less overcrowded. In 1971 there were 0.86 persons per room; by 1998 this had fallen to 0.58 persons per room.

These figures come from the third Quarterly National Household Survey held in 1998 which contained questions about housing and was published at the end of last year. The survey also revealed:

- About 13% of households had at least one problem such as damp, inadequate heating, etc which they considered serious or very serious. But less than 5% said they were not satisfied overall with their accommodation. Not surprisingly

people in rented accommodation were more likely to be unsatisfied than owner-occupiers.

- 70% of all the country's bedsits and apartments are in Dublin. Outside Dublin, bedsits and apartments, which are the accommodation most likely to be sought by single people and childless couples, account for only 3% of housing.

- 60% of Dublin's housing has been built since 1961, showing that the country's housing stock is relatively young. In London, less than half of this, 25% has been built since 1964.

- 15.7% of households in Dublin said they were affected by noise compared with 10% country-wide. Traffic was the source of complaint for most, followed by neighbours or animals and industrial noise.

The survey also claims that about 5% of householders, mainly tenants,

did *not* know when their house was built. CornerStone is astonished that as many as 95% *did* know. ■



Forthcoming events

The Irish Social Policy Association

will be hosting a conference at Trinity College Dublin on 26th and 27th July entitled *Development, Regeneration and Social Policy*. Speakers will include: David Donnison, (University of Glasgow), Seamus O'Connneide (NUI Maynooth) and Anne Power (London School of Economics — to be confirmed). For more information contact Martina Reidy, Dept of Social Policy and Social Work, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4. Tel 01 706 8198, Fax 01 706 1197, Email Martina.reidy@ucd.ie.

Clúid Housing Association (formerly St Pancras Housing Association) will be hosting a seminar entitled *Housing associations Growing the Movement* on 25th May at All Hallows, Dublin. Speakers will include: Tony McCashin (Trinity College Dublin); Simon

Brooke (independent researcher); Mary Lee Rhodes (Trinity College Dublin); Michelle Norris (Housing Unit); Brian O'Gorman (Chief Executive Clúid Housing Association); Mary Corcoran (Maynooth College). For more information contact Elena Townsend, Clúid Housing Association, 01 857 3088.

The Irish Association of Homeless Service Workers

will hold its first Annual General Meeting in Dublin in the new future. The association's draft constitution states that it aims to, 'affirm, advance and develop the role of frontline workers with the homeless.' The AGM will elect an Executive Committee and adopt a constitution. A steering committee chaired by Mary Kenny has produced the draft constitution and is organising the AGM. For more

information, contact Michael Dredge, Faightú 01 679 0044.

'**Working Towards Inclusion**' is the report of a feasibility study commissioned by Merchant's Quay Project and Dublin Simon Community which recommends the establishment of an open access hostel that would cater to the emergency needs of homeless drug users.

The report will be launched at a seminar on Wednesday 6th June in the Writers Museum, Dublin. Speakers will include the report's authors, Derval Howley and Lisa Costello, and speakers from the UK and The Netherlands have also been invited.

For more information contact Niamh Randall at Merchants Quay, Tel 01 679 0044 or Sean Megahey, Dublin Simon Community, 01 872 0188. ■

FROM THE Roof Tops

A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT

David

(not his real name)

who is currently living in a Dublin
hostel, talked to **Simon Brooke**

'You're meant to be helping me up not holding me down'

'I'll tell you what
it is, it's like a
modern version of
what mental
health institutions
used to do:
break you down to
build you up'.

When you've been on the streets, all you want is something stable like a bed, constant meals, pure simple basic necessities. That's the first step that you want. Maybe you're withdrawing from the alcohol or something because you've made up your mind: this is it, I don't want this any more, I hate this, I really hate myself, now I want to get in and I want to get fixed up. And your nervous system's in tatters, you're shaking and shivering; and the last thing you need at that moment in time is, 'We'll sort you out next week', or 'Come and see us tomorrow'. When you're that anxious and asking for help, you really need it then.

Some of the hostels, they make rules with no thought about what you've just come through. What you don't need is staff that want to impose their will on top of you. They might be there winding you up and you're thinking, 'Will you leave my head alone, I'm trying to sort myself out. Why do you

think I came here in the first place? I didn't come here to mess around, I came here to fix myself up, because I realise the damage I'm doing to myself.'

There's a member of staff in one hostel, he comes across as: 'I am the law. You will do as you're told.' You're looking at him, and there he is in his wee power pose, hands on hips, I'm the boss around here, you'll do as you're told or you're out on the street.

It's like they're taking their low self-esteem out on you. And you're saying, well my self-esteem is at its lowest point in its fucking life and I don't need you holding me down. You're meant to be helping me up not holding me down.

I'll tell you what it is, it's like a modern version of what mental health institutions used to do: break you down to build you up. You don't need that if you're coming in off the street. You're already broken down. You don't need somebody who every time you're trying to get up a bit, is kicking you down, just because he's on a power trip. ■