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# CornerStone

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

ISSUE 24  
JULY 2005



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Better services for homeless drug users

## note from the editor



This issue of CornerStone contains only one article about the NESC report, in contrast to the last issue which contained not much else. We thought that NESC director Rory O'Donnell should have an opportunity to reply to his critics, an offer he accepted with alacrity and did with gusto.

Elsewhere Derval Howley summarises the recently published report *Drug Use Among the Homeless Population in Ireland* and manages to condense a 200

page report into three pages as well as outlining the policy implications;

Fran Cassidy explores some of the issues thrown up by low threshold projects; and our Australian correspondent Christine Dibelius reports from the quaintly named Victorian Office of Housing in Melbourne.

Portrait of a Project features an interview with Michelle Norris, who after five years as director of the Housing Unit is leaving to become a lecturer in social policy at UCD. In CornerStone's long experience of attempting to translate the wholly ungrammatical utterances of interviewees into some sort of English, Michelle stands out as a model of clarity, whose pearls of wisdom flowed directly from the tape onto the page. All we had to do was to delete her wickedly slanderous asides and figure out how to reduce 7,000 words of insight into an article of 1800 words. Not only does her interview tell you what the Housing Unit actually does, it also reveals the name of the only other country on the globe that operates a differential rent scheme.

Sharp-eyed readers will have spotted that whilst Homeless Agency Update appears in its usual place, there is no news section. This is for the simple reason that at the time of writing, there isn't any to speak of. Even old reliables such as the Housing Statistics Bulletin appeared too late for this issue. However, the next issue, due out in October, should satisfy the appetites of the most news-hungry readers. As well as the Housing Statistics Bulletin for 2004, there'll be the results of the 2005 assessment of housing need, including the third version of *Counted In*, the Dublin assessment of homelessness. If that isn't enough, the review of the homeless strategy being carried out by Fitzpatrick Associates should also have been published by then. On top of all that, a report of the very successful seminar on definitions of homelessness will have been published, and around that time, the Homeless Agency will be publishing a raft of research and evaluation reports.

So if its news you want, catch us in October; and in the meantime enjoy the summer.

### Simon Brooke

Editor of CornerStone · Housing and Social Policy Consultant

The Homeless Agency is a governmental body launched in May 2001 which is responsible for the planning, co-ordination and delivery of quality services to people who are homeless in the Dublin area. The staff team, is advised by a consultative forum, and reports to a board of management comprising representatives from the statutory and voluntary sector. The agency brings together a range of voluntary and statutory agencies that are working in partnership to implement agreed plans on the delivery of services

to people who are homeless, assisting them to move rapidly to appropriate long term housing and independence. A major task is the implementation of the second three year plan *Making it home* covering the period 2004–2006. The Homeless Agency co-ordinates all homeless services in the Dublin area; delivers some direct services; provides training and other supports; monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of services; carries out research; and administers funding to homeless services.



# CornerStone

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The views expressed in CornerStone do not necessarily represent the views of the Homeless Agency, its management board, or consultative forum

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feature article

## Getting it together: better services for homeless drug users

**Derval Howley** summarises *Drug Use Among the Homeless Population in Ireland* and outlines the policy implications

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# Health Service Executive approves €17.9m for Homeless Services Funding in 2005

The Health Service Executive has approved €17.855 million in homeless services funding for 2005. This allocation is for existing services in Dublin and includes a provision of 3.5% for inflation, as well as expansions of some existing services.

This brings the total funding allocation for homeless services to €37.177 million in 2005.

The Homeless Agency is now writing to all service providers to inform them of their allocations, and to forward service level agreements to finalise funding for services in 2005. ■

Homeless Services Funding	2004	2005	Increase
Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government	€18,879,843	€19,255,916	€376,073 (+2%)
Health Service Executive	€16,090,938	€17,921,925	€1,830,987 (+11%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>€34,970,781</b>	<b>€37,177,841</b>	<b>€2,207,060 (+6%)</b>

For those of you who might have missed one of our many events recently, a snapshot is included to give you a flavour of recent developments in tenancy sustainment, definitions of homelessness, and our learning and performance program.

## Opening the door for tenancy sustainment in Dublin

In response to demand from the sector to explore and inform the idea of tenancy sustainment prior to issuing a tender for its development, the Homeless Agency arranged a one day workshop on 3rd June 2005.

More than 80 people attended, in a great example of the sector's increasing focus and commitment in moving from crisis intervention to pro-active planning to support people who have or are experiencing homelessness.

The presentations commenced with Kathryn O'Sullivan, Dublin City Council who delivered a presentation entitled 'Setting the Scene with Tenancy Sustainment: The Situation in Dublin.' From an initial pilot with a small number of rough sleepers in 2000, Dublin City Council's services now comprise a team of nine full and part-time resettlement officers who focus the provision of services towards rough sleepers and people accommodated within hostels and other emergency accommodation.

Prevention was seen as at the core of all the work carried out under tenancy sustainment.

Liz Clifford, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council also spoke and described tenancy sustainment as a multi-stage and multi agency support service requiring community support, education, and co-ordination of specialised services to follow up on the individual's progress.

Speaking on behalf of the Homeless Network, Lisa Cuthbert, PACE, presented 'Tenancy Sustainment: The Homeless Network Services.' Tenancy sustainment was outlined as encompassing three elements; supporting a person or family in settling into their new home, ongoing support to manage and maintain tenancy and intervening to prevent loss of home

when tenancy is under threat. Prevention was seen as at the core of all the work carried out under tenancy sustainment.

Catherine Jamieson, Homeless Partnership and Alice Docherty, Greater Glasgow NHS, Homeless Partnership then jointly presented 'Moving on and Staying Put' which focused on the development of services in Glasgow, and the three elements of tenancy sustainment: prevention; effective re-settlement and improving knowledge on the cause and effect of homelessness, information and advice to mainstream services.

Stephen Ebbitt and Marion McFadyen, then presented on the Tenancy Sustainment service within the Glasgow Simon Community, describing how it was developed to provide the initial supports to the service user to enable them to live an independent and settled way of live. To achieve this, the service focuses heavily on expanding the links with other specialist services – partnerships and protocol development was critical. ■

## Debating a definition of homelessness

*"A person shall be regarded by a housing authority as being homeless for the purpose of this Act if:*

*(a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority he, together with any other person who normally resides with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or*

*(b) he is living in a hospital; county home, night shelter or other such institution and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a)*

*and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources."*

**(Housing Act 1988, Section 2)**

A clear understanding of the nature and extent of homelessness in Ireland is critical to ensuring that policy and funding responses are appropriate, effective, and efficient. This requires a consistently understood and applied

definition. So the Homeless Agency hosted a seminar which aimed to explore definitions of homelessness that might be applied in Ireland.

Rather than commission new research, the Homeless Agency profited from work already being undertaken on this topic by leading Irish and European academics and researchers, in addition to the expertise and experience of 'workers on the ground' throughout Ireland, who were invited to attend.

Bill Edgar, research co-ordinator for the European Observatory on Homelessness delivered the opening presentation and introduced a European typology on homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) developed by FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless.

Eoin O'Sullivan, lecturer in social policy in the Department of Social Studies, at Trinity College Dublin, and the Irish correspondent to the European Observatory on Homelessness followed with a presentation titled *'Applying the Ethos Model to*

*Ireland: Facing the challenges'*. He showed that existing data sources will need strengthening if the ETHOS model is to be used successfully in Ireland.

The third presentation was made by Emmet Bergin, a social researcher currently working on a research study on the implementation of the Housing Act 1988 commissioned by the Simon Communities of Ireland. Emmet assessed the effectiveness of the existing definition of homelessness (see above), and examined different interpretations of this definition made by local authorities.

This was very much the first stage in the process of opening a debate on the definition of homelessness. The information gathered from the delegates in the workshop sessions – their own experiences and views on the issues – have been compiled and the Homeless Agency will submit this document into the European work currently being undertaken. Copies of the documents from the seminar are available on request from the Homeless Agency on 703 6100. Watch this space for an update later this year! ■

## Meeting the needs of homeless people by building a quality workforce

**O**n June 21st Housing Minister Noel Ahern officially launched a new Learning and Performance Strategy for employees in the homeless services sector in Dublin.

The launch was well attended, with around 50 guests celebrating the Homeless Agency's latest developments in its well regarded Learning and Performance Program. In addition to the Minister, speakers included Derval Howley, director of the Homeless Agency, and Tony Duffin, head of operations, DePaul Trust (speaking on behalf of the Homeless Agency's Learning and Performance Network).

The Learning and Performance Strategy builds upon the Homeless Agency's existing Learning and Performance Program, focusing on partnership and the development of sectoral competency frameworks; induction and leadership programmes; transfer of learning; service user participation; and a sector-wide

learning and performance programme. It also includes an Online Learning Pathways Information Service, and was developed by The Homeless Agency, in conjunction with Liz Lennon of Focused Solutions, and the Homeless Agency's Learning and Performance Network.

The innovative Learning and Performance Strategy expands the existing program to support the Homeless Agency's work in tackling homelessness – by building a quality workforce in the homeless services sector.

The Homeless Agency believes that every homeless person has the right to expect that all staff and managers they come in contact with will have the skills and capacity to do their job well. As such, we have provided quality learning and performance programmes to employees delivering services to homeless people for the past five years. This launch demonstrates our continuing commitment to providing significant

development opportunities for workers in the homeless services sector.

Commenting on the launch, Minister Noel Ahern said, 'I notice that the Strategy mentions that Learning and Performance is bigger than "training" and I would have to agree with that. It is about building a quality workforce that can respond effectively and efficiently to what is undoubtedly the most extreme personal crisis of being out of home. It is about creating suitable and appropriate interventions to each and every individual case.'

The Homeless Agency's Learning and Performance Strategy is available now, and can be accessed online at [www.homelessagency.ie/research/publications.asp](http://www.homelessagency.ie/research/publications.asp)

Bookings for courses in areas including practical skills and solutions (such as case management and communication), and issues such as mental illness and mental health, drugs, alcohol, HIV/AIDS, and life trauma can also be made online. ■

# GETTING IT TOGETHER

## BETTER SERVICES FOR HOMELESS DRUG USERS



The first comprehensive study of drug use among the homeless population in Ireland has highlighted the need for greater co-ordination, cross working and joint planning across homeless and addiction services. **Derval Howley**, who was a member of the study's advisory group, explains.



Derval Howley is director of the Homeless Agency

In April 2005 the National Advisory Committee on Drugs launched its report *Drug Use Among the Homeless Population in Ireland*. The research was commissioned in 2002 as part of the implementation of National Drugs Strategy 2001–2008<sup>1</sup> and undertaken by Maria Lawless and Caroline Corr of the Research Unit in Merchants Quay Ireland. I had a particular interest in this study having worked in both the homeless and addiction sectors. As a member of the National Advisory Committee on Drugs, I was offered, and eagerly took up, a place on the research advisory group.

Prior to developing a tender for the piece, Dr Aileen O Gorman, research officer with the NACD undertook some preliminary work to look at what

information and research could be gleaned from studies already undertaken in the field. It was accepted at the time that a number of research pieces had been undertaken into homelessness generally and health and homelessness in particular, however none fully examined the prevalence of drug misuse amongst the homeless population. Aileen developed a paper *An Overview of Research on Drug Misuse Among the Homeless in Ireland* which acted as a base on which to draw up the tender specifications.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning it was felt that undertaking this research would be no simple task, with the collection and analysis of data from interviews and focus groups with 355 homeless persons, and 64 homeless and drug service providers.

<sup>1</sup> Action 98 of the National Drugs Strategy

<sup>2</sup> This is available on the NACD website [www.nacd.ie](http://www.nacd.ie)

A sampling frame was developed using the Homeless Agency/ESRI's 'Counted In' survey of homelessness to maximise the representativeness of the homeless sample surveyed. The majority of the sample (69%) were male. The average age of males was 29 years, and 24 years for females.

A literature review was undertaken and once the questionnaire was developed it was implemented using specially trained peer and project workers. Interviews and focus groups were also carried out with homeless people, homeless service providers and drug treatment service providers.

Drug misuse aside, the report found very low levels of educational achievement – only half of the participants had reached lower second level education, whilst one quarter had only a primary education. Upper secondary education was attained by 15%, whilst 6% had reached third level. The remaining 4% had been involved in other education such as FÁS training and apprenticeships.

Similarly, as would be expected given the barriers to employment for people without a stable address, levels of employment were low. Two thirds of participants were unemployed. Another 24% were unable to work, with the remaining 10% either working, retired, on training course or raising children.

Over half of the study population reported having experience of imprisonment. Male respondents were significantly more likely to report having being in prison than their female counterparts. The correlation between a period in prison and homelessness fits with the Homeless Person's Unit (HPU) reported increase in the number of people presenting to them directly from the Prison Service (See table 1). A pilot Inreach Service has been developed by the HPU, in partnership with the Prisons and the Probation and Welfare Services. The increase in presentations from the Inreach Service means that individuals have already engaged with, and been supported by, the HPU prior to being released from prison.

Reasons for becoming and remaining homeless included family conflict, drug and/or alcohol use, relationship breakdown, money problems, domestic violence and/or mental illness. Family conflict was the primary reason given for becoming homeless in the first instance. This may or may not have related to the drug use of the individual who became homeless, which was the second highest cause given. The main reason for remaining homeless was cited as lack of housing/no accommodation found, and secondly personal drug use.

In the context of NACD research on Family Support Services it is clear that early family interventions, such as family mediation and support services, have a critical role to play in preventing irreconcilable relationships breakdown within the family. It is also clear that closer working between agencies and support networks at an early stage could prevent the deterioration of a drug problem, improve overall care and prevent homelessness.

Eleven per cent reported first becoming homeless at 15 years of age or less. Over a third became

**TABLE 1**  
Presentations to HPU Assessment Centres from Institutions

Source of Referral	2001 *	2002	2003	2004
Ex Prison	80	225	197	181
Prison In-reach	0	22	99	212
* Ex Hospital	21	59	53	46
Ex Treatment	1	3	2	40 *
Ex Care	6	2	3	5
Ex Mother & Baby Home	0	5	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>312</b>

\* 2001 Database introduced – figures are not for a full year

homeless by 19 years of age. Sixty four per cent first became homeless before the age of 25.

Given that drug use was one of primary reasons which people gave for people homeless, it was not surprising that the prevalence of drug use within the homeless population was high. However, what was surprising was just how great the differences in the prevalence of drug use were when compared to the general population. Lifetime, recent and current use rates are all substantially higher than those found in the general population (See table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
Prevalence of any illegal drug use by Homeless and General Population

	Homeless Population (2003/4)	General Population (2002/03)
Lifetime (ever used)	74%	19%
Recent (last year)	64%	6%
Current (last month)	52%	3%

Rates of current use for all illicit drugs was high [cannabis (43%); heroin (22%); cocaine powder (17%); crack cocaine (3%)] as were current rates of use of prescription drugs [sedatives (26%); anti-depressants (19%); tranquillisers (16%)].

The study found that 36% of the homeless population surveyed were problematic drug users. In addition, they were more likely to be poly drug users and younger on average than the rest of the sample (28 vs 33 years). This group first experienced homelessness at a younger age, were more likely to be sleeping rough (21% vs 16%), and to have been imprisoned in the past. They were also more likely to be in housed in B&B accommodation (28% vs 19%).

What is of concern is that three quarters of respondents reported changes in their drug use patterns after becoming homeless, such as initiation into drug use, frequency of use, and routes of administration. These changes in pattern of use indicate an increasing risk to the health and wellbeing of the individual and also an increased public health risk for the spread of infectious disease. Over half of problematic drug users (51%) reported a positive Hepatitis C status, although only 11% were receiving treatment. However, it should be noted that this is a much lower rate of Hepatitis C reporting than that

What is of concern is that three quarters of respondents reported changes in their drug use patterns after becoming homeless...



...it is imperative that organisations work together for the benefit of people who are homeless and misusing drugs.

found in other studies of drug misusers. Similar to other studies on health and homelessness, problematic drug users also reported higher rates for the majority of physical health complaints than was found in the total study population.

In relation to harm reduction, nineteen per cent of respondents reported injecting heroin in the last month and 35% in their lifetime (46% of Dublin sample).

Of these, 54% were injecting in public places; 53% shared injecting paraphernalia in the last month, 46% reported that they usually injected alone, 32% reported abscesses and/or infections at injection site, and 20% reported accidental overdose in the last three months.

This year the Health Services Executive is allocating additional resources toward the further development of harm reduction services. The addiction services have begun needle exchanges within some emergency hostel accommodation, but there is an increased need for the sector as a whole to work together and become more responsive to the provision of harm reduction measures. Given that HIV figures for 2004 have increased by 43% among injecting drugs users – the largest increase in several years – it is imperative that organisations work together for the benefit of people who are homeless and misusing drugs.

Mental health issues were prevalent within the group, with 30% of the homeless population surveyed having been diagnosed with a psychiatric illness. Of these, 70% were currently receiving treatment. Problematic drug users were more likely to report psychiatric health concerns than non-problematic drug users (50% vs 40%), and only slightly more likely to be diagnosed (34%) with a psychiatric illness (of which only 60% were receiving treatment).

One of the key findings of the report is the need for greater co-ordination, cross working and joint planning across homeless and addiction services. A specific recommendation was made in relation to the need for cross-representation across both groups. Last year the Homeless Agency expanded its Consultative Forum to include the Director of the National Drug Strategy Team, and the Local Drug Task Forces have begun to seek representation on the Local Homeless Fora.

It was recommended that commitment to, and support of, the professional development of staff within both sectors must be maintained at a high and prioritised level. The Homeless Agency has established a Learning and Performance Strategy which provides training for front line staff in the core areas relating to drug misuse. A Learning and Performance Pathway service has been developed for staff who wish to devise their own learning path.<sup>3</sup>

For drug service providers, the main challenge reported was trying to meet the multiple needs of drug users. According to service providers, the quality of services offered to homeless drug users were often under-resourced and short-staffed. This may be due to

the manner in which the addiction services developed. It was initiated on a catchment basis whereby in most cases local communities and other stakeholders agreed and supported the development of services within their area on the basis that the service would be provided for people residing in that area. The benefits to this form of development has enabled services which otherwise could or would not have been set up are now well established and serve the community in which they are based. However, as services were established for people within communities, by the very nature of this form of agreement, it has meant that people who are homeless in many cases fall outside of catchment based services as they migrate to centralised homeless services and out of their former community.

Where addiction and homeless services do not already have such policies in place, policies should be developed that aim to positively include homeless drug users in their services. An example of where this type of initiative works is within the Drug Treatment Centre Board whereby each month individuals who are homeless and misusing drugs are prioritised on the waiting list for treatment. When I worked for Simon in 1999 few services had drug policies in place and those that had were usually aimed at excluding active drug misusers. Now, we are moving towards ensuring that policies are inclusive to those individuals who are in greatest need of our services. The opening of the Clancy Night Shelter has begun to create a change towards lower threshold, more accessible services.

The NACD recommended the key worker model supporting a continuum of care, as outlined in the National Drug Strategy, be fully implemented. The Homeless Agency has piloted and will be rolling out a care and case management model of working, whereby the holistic needs of an individual are met through a co-ordinated interagency approach to the provision of services. However, case management will only work where there are services in place or where services can be adapted within mainstream service provision to meet the identified needs of individuals.

Access to an adequate supply of appropriate accommodation was seen as critical particularly for people who completed treatment and/or a transitional programme. Tenancy support services such as that being developed by the homeless sector should have a positive impact on support individuals to maintain their tenancies.

It is clear that the needs of people who are homeless and misusing drugs continues to pose a challenge to a number of government departments and agencies providing or funding services in the areas of housing, family support, mental health, public health, drug and alcohol treatment. This report is timely and welcomed as government completes the process of reviewing its National Homeless Strategies.

Further information and copies of the report are available from the National Advisory Committee on Drugs via telephone on 01 667 0869 or website: [www.nacd.ie](http://www.nacd.ie) ■

<sup>3</sup> This is a web based service accessible through the Homeless Agency's website: [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie)

# DIARY FROM DOWN UNDER



Earlier this year, **Christine Dibelius** left her job as policy officer with a housing association, and headed to Australia for a year where she lost no time getting a job in the Victorian Office of Housing.

**CornerStone** has recruited her as its first foreign correspondent and during her stay she will report regularly on housing and homelessness in Oz.



Christine Dibelius works for the Victorian Office of Housing in Melbourne

## January

**A** sad goodbye from Clúid Housing Association, an even sadder farewell to my friends – 24 hours in the air – and voila, I am in Melbourne, at the other side of the world. Jetlagged indeed, but pretty excited. First task – to find a house for my fiancé and me. Not so easy, given that 99% of private rented properties in Melbourne are unfurnished. Looks like I should have brought more than just heaps of pretty shoes...

The choice of housing gets even more limited if, like us sun-starved emigrants from Stoneybatter, you really, really fancy a swimming pool. Admittedly, a slightly more privileged worry than those our forefathers would have had on arrival as Australia's early settlers! But this is 2005 – we got our pool and we love it!

I am thoroughly impressed by the services of our estate agent. Both agent and tenants are required to complete a detailed, five-page condition report,

allowing no ambiguity at a later stage over what was or wasn't damaged at the start of the tenancy.

Furthermore, our deposit is paid to a third party, the statutory Residential Tenancies Bond Authority, again making me feel rather confident that it will be returned (or retained) in a fair and accountable manner at the end of our stay. Certainly a far cry from my experiences in Dublin. Even our complaints are responded to quickly and efficiently. The plumbers arrive 5 minutes early! Is it just because we are lucky to find ourselves at the corporate end of the market? I wonder about the experiences of low income households in the private rented sector here. Dependence on private rented accommodation by more disadvantaged groups must certainly be high, given that social housing only amounts to 4% of the total housing stock in Victoria – compared to 18% private rented accommodation. Make mental note to investigate as soon as I can drag myself away from the pool!



## February

**M**elbourne is starting to prepare itself for the Commonwealth Games that are due to be held here in 2006. The design of the Athletes' Village, and its potential use for social housing after the event, are subject of much debate. And now the opposition leader in Victoria appears to think this is a good time to call for a crackdown on begging. He fears Melbourne would be seen as a beggars' city by visitors to the Games and is quite serious about his wish to 'sweep all vagrants off the streets' in the lead up to the games. Thankfully, nobody else paid much attention and the story died.

In fact, to my eyes, neither begging nor sleeping rough are at a scale in Melbourne that is noticeable. This is confirmed by homelessness service providers who are quite pleased to say that actual rough sleeping has been reduced a lot over the last years. An average of 9% of homeless Victorians are believed to sleep rough, a good bit less than the national average of 14% of homeless persons. In an unusual case of agreement between voluntary sector and government, all are convinced that Victoria has the best homelessness service system in Australia. This would appear to be borne out by the overall statistics: Victoria's rate of 43.6 homeless persons per 10,000 population is certainly lower than the national average of 53 per 10,000.

I sneak into a meeting for workers in the homelessness sector and hear that the Victorian government proposes to amend the state's equal opportunities legislation to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of 'homelessness' status. This proposal receives strong support from the homelessness services sector. Its representative body, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), welcomes it on the basis that there is clear evidence of homeless persons being excluded from private rental housing. This particularly applies to certain groups within the homeless population, such as people with a disability, sole parent families, new immigrants, and people of Aboriginal origin. According to the CHP, discrimination can consist of direct denial of access to accommodation as well as variations in the terms and conditions of tenancy agreements that are unfavourable for the tenant. Obviously, the inclusion of homelessness as a prohibited ground for discrimination is also intended to impact on other areas of discrimination, such as in relation to employment or participation in social activities.

While welcoming the proposal wholeheartedly, the CHP, however, also warns that a change in the legislation alone will be ineffective without adequate advocacy services to support people in following through with complaints. Issues such as illiteracy and previous negative experiences with the legal system could otherwise negate any right to lodge a complaint. Models of suitable advocacy services, including a programme based on peer education and support, are already in place in Melbourne and could thus be extended for the purposes of this. Among these is the Homelessness Advocacy Service that

provides independent advice to clients of homelessness agencies, supporting them with complaints relating to these agencies. The recognition underlying this Advocacy Service, i.e. that homeless agencies *including* those in the voluntary sector are not necessarily benign, helpful and fair to all clients, I find worth noting!

## March

**T**he Council to Homeless Persons, together with the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, has been leading a campaign on voting rights for homeless persons. Their research showed that 75% of eligible homeless people did not vote in recent polls – the same figure applying for state elections as well as federal elections. They found the low participation rates to be based on widespread perceptions that a fixed address is required to enrol – which it is indeed for standard enrolment.

Yet, the electoral laws in Australia entitle persons with no 'real place of living' to enrol as Itinerant Electors. Until recently this excluded people who had lived in the same area for a month or longer which affected many people in crisis accommodation or transitional accommodation and indeed people who slept under a particular bridge for longer than one month. These people could not enrol as Itinerant Electors, but nor could they satisfy the criterion of a fixed address for standard enrolment.

The Victorian government has now amended the legislation to state clearly that the Itinerant Elector provisions apply to homeless people, using a very comprehensive definition of homelessness, which will allow significantly greater numbers of homeless persons to enrol. The addresses of Itinerant Electors are not automatically shown on the electoral roll, which is some comfort to the 29% of homeless people who report an immediate history of domestic or family violence and who want to maintain their anonymity.

The homelessness sector is as a result, once more, fairly pleased with the Victorian government, but is continuing its campaign to achieve similar amendments at federal level. It is trying to highlight the focus by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights on the proportion of poor and homeless people going to the polls – if only governments were always that concerned about complying with their human rights obligations!

## April

**W**ent to another seminar, spoke to a man with an impressive moustache. Turns out he's very important in the Victorian Office of Housing – and before I know it, I've got a job working on social housing from INSIDE government. Oooops. What was the name of the Housing Minister again? Eehhm, Housing (Housing Agencies) Act 2004? Where on earth are the Grampians?? Urgent catching up on Victorian housing affairs to be done – no more time for the pool. Happy coincidence that we're into autumn and the water is getting cold. ■

In an unusual case of agreement between voluntary sector and government, all are convinced that Victoria has the best homelessness service system in Australia.

Without a low threshold and harm reduction alternative they would have no option but to live and die on the streets.

## LOWERING THE BAR

Running low threshold projects presents many challenges: great demands are made of staff; move-on accommodation is in extremely short supply; deaths are inevitable, as is often unwelcome publicity. **Fran Cassidy**, who has worked in a number of low threshold projects, including Depaul Trust's wet shelter in Aungier Street, explores some of these issues and offers a personal perspective.

I was privileged to be involved in setting up the 'wet shelter' on Aungier Street, a project that aimed to accommodate rough sleeping street drinkers through a model of harm reduction. In essence this concept means accepting that some people are unwilling or unable to stop drinking, and so focusing the intervention on reducing or minimising the negative effects of drinking. Readers who want to

know more should read Shane Butler's article, *Looking at 'wetter' options* in CornerStone Issue 16 July 2003.

This target group were demonstrably incapable of controlling their drinking and were consequently barred from Dublin's other shelters. Without a low threshold and harm reduction alternative they would have no option but to live and die on the streets. The Homeless Agency recognised this and funded the

Fran Cassidy is a writer and researcher currently working at the Ana Liffey Drug Project

It is certainly upsetting to watch people drink self-destructively but those who argued against the provision of wet shelters offered no viable alternative.

Depaul Trust to set up a suitable service, which opened at Christmas 2002.

Wet shelters are a recognised approach of engaging with this client group in England and other parts of Europe but there was some resistance to the concept in Ireland. Critics argued that it was ethically wrong, a form of enabling, to allow alcoholics to drink in shelters. It is certainly upsetting to watch people drink self-destructively but those who argued against the provision of wet shelters offered no viable alternative. The traditional approach whereby people were denied accommodation until they conformed to societal expectations was well meaning but had ultimately resulted in these very vulnerable people remaining homeless.

Wet accommodation under the model of harm reduction doesn't mean condoning self-destructive behaviour, but involves grappling with peoples' lives as they are, rather than as people might like them to be. This is ambiguous and often uncomfortable territory but it at least engages with the social reality.

Even with the support of the Homeless Agency and the majority of the homeless sector, there was an array of difficult issues to be dealt with before the shelter opened. The most serious was the fact that the only building available for the Depaul Trust project in Aungier Street was far from ideal. This remains a huge problem today. Neighbouring businesses and other homeless services already operating in the area had legitimate concerns. Thankfully they displayed generosity of spirit in ultimately accepting the project. Then there was the need to find and induct a project team who would be willing and able to work in an extremely challenging environment. Here we were fortunate in that we managed to assemble a superb group whose enthusiasm made up for any lack of experience (it was Dublin first such project). In the rush to be ready for Christmas they set aside misgivings about the building and assisted the builders in completing the shelter.

After I left the shelter in summer 2003 I had no direct contact with it until this spring, when I was invited to an extremely moving memorial service organised by some project workers for the family and friends of a recently deceased resident.

Chatting afterwards I discovered that recent media coverage had upset many in Aungier Street. Specifically they felt that headlines referring to deaths

in the shelter might be seen as implying that there had been something untoward about these.

Their concerns seemed justified to me. For better or worse the national press fixes public perceptions, and insensitive articles are demotivating for project workers who might feel that their peers and others in the sector are being given the wrong impression of the work they do. Furthermore such articles greatly increase the temptation to raise the threshold of a service. If you fear being criticised every time somebody dies in a shelter there is a temptation not to accept people whose very poor health and risky lifestyles place them at greatest risk. Such an approach is very easy to justify on general health and safety grounds, but it leaves those most in need of care out in the cold. Most people in the sector realise this and unconstructive criticism of the shelter has thankfully been rare.

I don my Cornerstone hat to ask Depaul Trust's director Pat Doherty about this. 'There's no doubt that some press coverage has been perceived as unfair and has upset people. But particularly when deaths are concerned we have to be respectful of families and of the deceased. I can't use detailed information available to me simply to defend the organisation to the press. It would be unethical.

'Our shelters were groundbreaking, innovative ventures. We'll never please all of the people all of the time and there is no perfect formula for operating a low threshold environment. When you take risks you have to accept the dangers. It has been a steep learning curve and there are lessons we can learn.'

But you would defend your ethos and approach?

'Absolutely. If we ever jeopardise the human touch the project is sterile, people in Aungier Street are looking for human recognition, for room for growth and development. We could have set up a project that just parked people away but we should never give up on a person's capacity to make a break from where they are at. I can never believe that people don't wish or dream that they could have a better life. We must have hope and optimism for people; keep a vision alive for them.

'The reality is that everyone knew from the beginning that deaths were inevitable in such projects.'

I nod. This last point cannot I feel be overstated. If a low threshold wet shelter is to deal with its targeted client group then the stark reality is that deaths are inevitable. As Tony Duffin pointed out in an earlier Cornerstone, 'Our client group is by definition very vulnerable and many are living very dangerous lifestyles ... [deaths are] going to happen ... It is likely that people will die in this project, no matter how much we try and prevent it.'<sup>1</sup>

Recognising this reality doesn't make it easier to deal with. My experience is that the period around a death is one in which workers feel absolutely drained and extremely sensitive. Cultivating an emotional detachment is important, but the nature of this work

<sup>1</sup> Cornerstone issue 16 July 2003 p.11

demands that workers invest a lot of emotional energy in building up relationships with residents. The visceral shock that occurs when someone you care for dies, is not something that is easily shaken off at the end of a shift. It can also be hard going into to work in an environment where the grief among the other residents is still raw. As Tony commented "It [is] incredibly traumatic ... The mixture of grief and alcohol is quite a concoction ... part of the bereavement process is anger ... Alcohol and anger are a bad mix."<sup>2</sup>

In my own experience there tends to be empathy and support available from within the sector when a death occurs. What I found less predictable, but extremely gratifying was the reaction of the families that I met. In their own grief, which of course was deeper than ours, many took time to express appreciation for the work of the shelter. They were aware of the deceased's problems in life, and more than one family articulated relief that their loved ones had spent their final days cared for within a shelter rather than by the canal or on the street.

Pat suggests I visit Aungier Street and talk to the manager, Diarmuid Breatnach.

I ask if it's hard to keep the threshold low.

'My job is to manage with what I have. I've to balance low threshold and harm reduction with client/staff safety, staff workload and the amount of emotional drain that clients and staff can handle at any time. If you're going to provide such a service you need to resource it properly - inadequate resources lead to burnout. We don't have the ideal building, bedrooms are shared and are located on the second and third floors there is no lift, thus it is very important to have processes in place that some might feel bureaucratic in order to ensure everyone's safety. Due to the extreme vulnerability of the client group and the danger to clients and staff from people who are unknown, we need procedures from the referral process right the way through.'

And deaths are an inevitable part of low threshold projects?

'I look at some clients here who are near the end of the road and wonder will it be this week or next week. After a death it is a therapeutic process to go back through the records and reassuring to see that there was no more we could have done and that we have intervened in a caring way on many occasions. But yes they are unfortunately part of the work.'

**P**erhaps the biggest soluble problem facing Aungier Street is the lack of move-on options for residents. As Diarmuid points out, the shelter is a 'hybrid' of short and long term accommodation: an emergency shelter in which some of the residents have lived for two years. This silting up of services has huge consequences for the shelter, its workers and most importantly the residents.

'There are people here ready to move on to the next step up, some two steps up, and they risk losing

progress if they can't. But there are very limited options. I'd have to commend Dublin Simon as one of the few places willing to work with this group. There is a great need for suitable wet long-term accommodation and for respite and hospice places. We could also do with sideways options because people can be stuck in behaviour patterns because they're physically stuck in the same environment. And more capable residents could have their own homes with support.'

It is the day of the project team meeting and Diarmuid suggests that I drop in on it. We have a short but stimulating discussion about the problems inherent in striking a balance between the humanity and sensitivity to power issues needed when working in what is effectively peoples' home, and the requirements of operational efficiency. What strikes me overall is the high level of analysis and insight that the project workers have about both their own roles and about the wider issue of combating homelessness.



Like many who work or have worked in the wet shelter I find it hard not to respect the humanity and resilience of the residents in the face of their difficult lives, and impossible not to feel a huge affection for them.

Before leaving the shelter I have the pleasure of meeting some of the residents again. In the sitting room there are a few I know well who are drinking, playing cards and chatting above the sounds of a presumably well-worn *Dubliners* CD. Like many who work or have worked in the wet shelter I find it hard not to respect the humanity and resilience of the residents in the face of their difficult lives, and impossible not to feel a huge affection for them.

Spending even a short period back in Aungier Street reminds me that this is a project that provides a great service dealing with the harshest of social realities in often exceptionally difficult conditions. ■

<sup>2</sup> Cornerstone issue 16 July 2003 p.11

# NESC BOUNCES BACK

It is probably fair to say that the reviews in the last issue of *CornerStone* of the NESC report on housing could be described as mixed. But is NESC director **Rory O'Donnell** dismayed? Is he downcast? Not a bit of it, as you will see when you read his response.



Rory O'Donnell is director of the National Economic and Social Council

**T**he editor of *CornerStone* is to be congratulated on gathering a wide range of responses to the NESC report 112, *Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy*. Here the Secretariat of NESC reply to some of the criticisms.

We begin by discussing the longer articles on the overall housing system and then address some of the issues raised in the shorter commentaries.

Both Aideen Hayden and Eoin O'Sullivan focus on the NESC approach to the overall housing system, particularly the place of social rented housing within it. Both question whether NESC's recommendation for a significant increase in the supply of social housing is adequate, and can be effective, in the absence of a more radical transition from a dualist to a unitary rental system. These are valid and important questions which need to be discussed.

Aideen Hayden sees the Council's recommendation for 73,000 net additional social housing units as the 'highlight of the NESC report' and asks 'Is this enough?' Given the underlying dynamic of the Irish economy and

Irish society it is entirely possible that 73,000 net new units is not enough. However, in both political and analytical terms, the issue is not so much whether more than 73,000 additional units are required, but whether social rented housing will have any significant future in the Irish system. There is significant resistance to social housing in Irish society and political life—as noted in Mary Murphy's *Cornerstone* comment on the NESC report. This has to be reckoned with by anyone advocating increased provision.

**N**ESC goes to considerable lengths to build the case that social and affordable housing must be seen as permanent and inescapable features of Irish housing policy. Donal McManus, of the Irish Council for Social Housing, says 'NESC does indeed produce a more thorough understanding of social housing'. It identifies the shifting relationship between the quality and quantity of local authority housing. It argues that the loss of belief in social housing arose more from the earlier poor quality of

neighbourhoods and social infrastructure, and the huge crisis of unemployment in the 1980s, than from inherent features of social rental housing. It identifies the core features of housing markets, land markets and labour markets that imply that the market alone will not meet housing needs. It assesses the likely future development of 'low-skilled' employment, earning dispersion and inequality which warrant a renewed commitment to social housing. It argues that we now have the possibility of a new positive cycle between improved quality and increased quantity. The success of that case cannot be taken for granted. It surely warrants strong affirmation in the first instance? Even if the proposed scale of provision is then argued to be inadequate.

Turning to the wider housing system, Aileen Hayden says 'A major report likely to guide housing policy should have at its core the need for cohesion and seamlessness within the system. The current housing system must be equity proofed and distinctions between tenures eliminated'. In many respects, the Council would share that aspiration. But seamlessness is extremely difficult to achieve. This is so for a variety of reasons, including social stratification, land ownership, planning and land supply, and the inherent tendency of subsidies and social transfers, however justified, to create poverty traps and unemployment traps. Some of the measures which promote seamlessness of a kind, such as subsidised tenant purchase, are themselves problematic in equity terms.

The issue of a unitary or dualist rental system is also taken up by Eoin O'Sullivan. He argues that the Council's recommendations jar with the understanding of the public and private rental system outlined in NESC's Background Paper No. 2. In that paper, NESC outlines Kemeny's analysis of the dynamics of rental systems. The Council draws considerable attention to that analysis, in both the Background Paper and the main report, because it undoubtedly provides some powerful insights into the Irish experience.

In using Kemeny's ideas it is important to distinguish between (a) the underlying economic dynamic of 'maturation', (b) the way in which policy responses to it shape the dynamic of unitary and dualist housing systems and (c) his analysis of the possibility of a strategic shift from a dualist to a unitary system.

The process of maturation, as analysed by Kemeny, tends to create a strong and increasing advantage to those who own their housing, since maturation accrues to landlords rather than tenants in private rental accommodation. The creation of a larger private rental sector has been advocated in many Irish reports, including the 1988 NESC Housing Report, but with limited success. This is sometimes attributed to an Irish cultural preference for property ownership. Maturation provides a better, and more rational, explanation. It suggests that a significant extension of rental accommodation, and its emergence as a long-term option, may require policies to facilitate cost rental, and NESC follows

**NESC goes to considerable lengths to build the case that social and affordable housing must be seen as permanent and inescapable features of Irish housing policy.**

this in suggesting that the legal, financial and institutional supports for cost rental be explored.

The second part of Kemeny's analysis provides an uncanny prediction of the sequence of policy initiatives to encourage home ownership that arise in a dualist system, such as Ireland. However, it does not follow that part (c) of Kemeny's analysis, the transition from a dualist to a unitary system, can be easily implemented. Kemeny suggests that the indispensable first steps are stopping all tenant purchase, transferring stock from local authorities and a move from differential to cost covering rents (on average). These and other measures must bring the cost rental sector to a scale where it provides significant competition for the profit rental sector, thereby disciplining rents overall.

On balance, NESC judged that the social, economic and institutional realities of Ireland mean that a transition to a unitary system is not feasible at this time. Central among these realities is the continuing degree of social and economic marginalisation and high level of earning dispersion. While this and other realities seem to prevent a strategic transition to a unitary system at present, they underline the continuing importance of stronger policies for social and affordable housing, as summarised above.

On the issue of cost rental, Dáithí Downey seems closer to the mark when he says 'importantly, the NESC begins the argument for cost rental options on a medium to long-term basis for households with an intermediate housing need'. Although he shares with Aileen Hayden and Eoin O'Sullivan a strong belief in a unitary rental system, his conclusion is that 'However, NESC has importantly framed terms of debate and analysis of the Irish housing system that—while somewhat incomplete—is a large advance on current thinking and offers us all the opportunity of a new perspective on Irish housing policy that can meet the challenges of housing contemporary Ireland'. Indeed, the Council finishes its discussion of social housing by identifying a set of questions that require further debate: public rental policy, the transfer of stock from local authorities to other entities and a personal housing subsidy, to which might be added the issue of tenant purchase.

Two contributors to *Cornerstone*, Declan Redmond of UCD and Michael Punch of TCD, comment on the issue of land. Both seem to misunderstand NESC's argument, perhaps because they are both comfortable in the belief that the 1973 Kenny Report said all that is necessary on this difficult subject.

**...NESC judged that the social, economic and institutional realities of Ireland mean that a transition to a unitary system is not feasible at this time.**



Declan Redmond is simply incorrect in saying that the NESC report 'takes the fairly standard view...that land price is a residual element in price determination'.

Declan Redmond is simply incorrect in saying that the NESC report 'takes the fairly standard view...that land price is a residual element in price determination'. The Council states clearly that 'the "residual" view cannot be regarded as a universal explanation of house prices' (NESC, 2005, p. 23).

He endorses the proposals of the Kenny report and says that, in contrast, 'the NESC report is fairly vague on this matter, suggesting merely that it should be examined—something of a cop out'. In fact, the NESC report and background papers suggest an analysis of the land issue which raises important questions about the Kenny proposal.

These concern the feasibility of widespread price control and the question of what public agency would be capable of managing a large land portfolio. While Declan Redmond sees this as a cop out, it is, in fact, based on an analysis which suggests that active land management can work without price control. It is no coincidence that this is the same analysis that qualifies the 'residual' view of land prices. It is necessary to see these subtle analytical shifts in order to grasp the Council's recommendations on active land management.

NESC is able to go beyond the open confrontation with what Redmond describes as 'vested interests and political power', advocated by almost all critics of Irish housing policy since Kenny. On the basis of an analytical view that differs slightly from that of Kenny, NESC is able to build the case for active land management on the basis of both economic and institutional analysis and Irish government and local authorities' *experience* of active land management. The experience of earlier decades highlights the advantage of local authorities being considerable players in a local land market; the experience of recent years shows that public land holding—by a local authority, development agency or other public body—is a critical starting point for integrated social and affordable housing projects, developed in collaboration with the private sector. NESC draws attention to the existing elements of active land management and

argues that they should be enhanced. This could include local authorities acquiring land before it is zoned for residential development.

Likewise, Michael Punch argues that the NESC report 'doesn't really tackle the land question head on'. He says 'at the very least, the land question—and in particular the creation of vast windfall profits for lucky landowners in return for no productive activity whatsoever—needs to be resolved as a first practical step towards creating an expanded, flexible, vibrant and diverse non-profit system (whether geared towards needs or operating within a social rental market)'. The trouble is that, in many situations, policies to capture the 'vast windfall profits of lucky landowners' will not necessarily ensure an expanded, vibrant and diverse system. But Micheal Punch is correct in picking up on NESC's reference to the alternative tradition of public land banking.

A number of other comments should be addressed. Noleen Hartigan of the Simon Community has a point when she criticises the NESC report for its lack of discussion of homelessness; but elsewhere the Council has done considerable work on social and economic rights and their relation to quality public services. Annette Hughes of DKM attributes to the Council a statement on affordability that NESC listed merely as one of the issues and anxieties voiced in Irish society. Finally, it is striking that among all the responses, only Tony Fahey of ESRI and Daithí Downey, of Focus Ireland, identify the significance of NESC's emphasis on planning, urban design, social infrastructure and transport, and seem to share the Council's view that these are critical to all aspects of Irish housing.

The NESC Council and Secretariat strongly welcome the active debate on Irish housing prompted by publication of its report and facilitated by *Cornerstone*. It is important that this debate continues, not only in specialised housing journals, but also in Irish political life. First, the important initiatives that are immediately necessary—on integration of housing and transport, sustainable neighbourhood designs and social and affordable housing—are contentious. They can only succeed if the case for them is persuasively put and the fears of those who oppose them are fully addressed. Second, these urgent necessities pose major policy and organisational challenges to all involved in Irish housing—particularly government, local authorities and the voluntary and cooperative sector—and these need to be teased out. Third, beyond these urgent needs, there are many further issues that should be discussed, most of which have been identified by the expert contributors to the *Cornerstone* edition on the recent NESC report. ■

Noleen Hartigan of the Simon Community has a point when she criticises the NESC report for its lack of discussion of homelessness...

# Blossoming forth...

## The Housing Unit

In its seven year life the Housing Unit has greatly expanded its areas of work. The unit's director **Michelle Norris** told **Fran Cassidy** and **Simon Brooke** why this happened, and why she believes small is beautiful.

**T**he unit was set up in 1998 with a mandate to improve the quality of public housing management by local authorities. In order to achieve that we have published a series of Good Practice Guidelines for local authorities on various aspects of housing management and we also run quite an extensive programme of training and seminars for people working in the housing field – about 2000 people a year attend these. In the past three years we have broadened our work further to include research on housing issues; the concept of our research programme is that it informs the development of good practice guidelines or policy reform by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG). We also do some policy analysis work for the DoEHLG, so last year we published a review of housing policy developments in Ireland and we're currently working on various small scale pieces of policy analysis work for the DoEHLG in particular looking at the implementation of the NESC report.'

### What have been the greatest achievements of the unit in recent years?

'I think that our Good Practice Guidelines series has had a big impact on the field. Feedback indicates that more and more local authorities are now putting in place written policies and procedure guidelines in relation to all their functions, and are implementing some parts of the guidelines, which is a big step forward. We also facilitate networks of local authority housing practitioners: even through it's a very simple intervention they have actually had a major impact, certainly in relation to improving middle management standards within the local authority sector and I think they have really helped bed down the new structures that we've put in place in local authorities since the recent reform of local government by the DoEHLG. I also think that our research series has inspired more interest in the local authority sector in relation to researching their services and there certainly has been much more research carried out by local authorities in the last five years and I think

we've contributed to that. I should add that none of these achievements would have been possible without the very strong staff team we have here at the Housing Unit.'

**And what would you have liked to have seen happen, that hasn't?**

'I would have liked to have seen quite a detailed and fundamental review of housing policies at the centre from the DoEHLG. I think even though the NESC report conducted a very useful and valuable review of how the housing system operates it didn't go into detail as to how the suite of housing policies we have at the moment operate and their impact on each other and their impact on different tenures. We've seen very rapid housing policy development since the mid 1990s – since the boom in private sector house prices started – but there's been very little review of how they've been implemented on the ground. We know that policies have been introduced that have had unintended side effects. For example policies have been introduced to address problems in housing affordability in the owner occupied sector that have had unintended negative impacts on private sector rents. I think that at this stage it's appropriate that the whole suite of policies is reviewed in the form of a white paper, and any overlap in existing policies, any contradictions be ironed out.

**“We've seen very rapid housing policy development since the mid 1990s – since the boom in private sector house prices started – but there's been very little review of how they've been implemented on the ground.”**

'I would also liked to have seen more devolution of housing policy implementation powers to local authorities. In theory local authorities are responsible for implementing housing policy of course, but in reality most of the details of how they should be implemented are decided at a central level by the DoEHLG and the local authorities are responsible for administering the programmes on the ground and this has created lots of problems. I would favour moving towards a system where the DoEHLG makes funding available for measures in relation to addressing housing problems and individual local authorities or groups of local authorities, maybe on a regional basis,

come forward with proposals regarding policies that could be devised and implemented at a local level to reflect local issues in order to address those problems.'

**Do you think there are too many social landlords for a country with a population of 4 million?**

'No I don't. We have 102 local authority social landlords, of which 88 are housing authorities, in other words they are responsible for the implementation of housing legislation. And of course there are many more housing associations. In relation to social housing management, if you actually look at the figures, the small landlords, the town councils, are extremely efficient managers. On average, across all local authorities, income from tenants from rents and other charges covers only about 60% of management and maintenance expenditure, but in the town councils it's well over 100%.

'So, yes, I suppose you have great difficulties for the management of the system from the centre because we've so many local authorities, but on the other hand small landlords seem to be effective on the ground and can often provide a more personalised service. So I don't necessarily feel that huge organisational reform is necessary except in relation to local authorities' operational boundaries, which are a problem because they don't reflect the realities of the cities and towns they manage.

My view in general is that where there are problems in the system, the organisation is rarely the problem even though the organisational structure is often changed. Normally it is the individuals working within the organisation who create the problems because of lack of skills, lack of support and lack of proper management. So I suppose I'm one of the few people in the field who believes we shouldn't abolish some smaller local authorities.'

**Ireland is unique in operating a differential rent system, where rent is based entirely on tenants' income...**

'No it isn't! I've just finished reading a book about asset management in the social housing sector and Latvia has a differential rent system too!'

**OK, nearly unique then. Should it be changed or replaced with another rent system?**

'I like to describe the rent system as a colourful tapestry. At the moment there are approximately 70 separate differential rent schemes in operation in the local authority sector round the country. In some areas town councils have the same scheme as their county council; but in others there may be many schemes. For example, I think there are 15 separate schemes in operation in Cork city and county for a stock of approximately 7,000 dwellings. This system creates a number of problems in the sense that for instance there are obviously anomalies in the treatment of

different households in different parts of the country. But I certainly don't support the introduction of a national differential rent system because I think local authorities should have flexibility to reflect local issues. However I do think some of the anomalies in the system need to be ironed out. There are some problems in relation to the progressivity of individual differential rent schemes. For instance the treatment of subsidiary earners can be inequitable in some local authorities – often subsidiary earners pay a very low contribution to rent, so it effectively discriminates against single income households.

'But broadly speaking the differential rents system is much more progressive than the system, for instance, of subsidising private rented tenants using rent allowance which effectively irons out the difference between social welfare benefits. And also it doesn't have the poverty traps inherent because you still keep paying an income related rent when you go back to work.

'However the key problem in relation to differential rents is the fact that it doesn't generate adequate income for management and maintenance. That requires a change in the system for financing social housing – most of it comes from central government – to make more money available in a more flexible format to fund management and maintenance, in particular cyclical and long-term maintenance and upgrading. At the moment, central government ends up funding cyclical maintenance through what are called estate regeneration schemes which is not what they were designed for.'

### Looking ahead, what do you think are the main challenges facing the DoEHLG in relation to social housing?

'One of the main policy challenges is increasing the supply of social rented housing. I agree with NESCC that the stock of social rented dwelling needs to be at minimum doubled, because throughout the 1990s we put in place a plethora of schemes to try to enable low income households to access homeownership instead of accessing social housing. And I think in reality home ownership can only be pushed so far down the income level if it's to be sustainable, in other words if these dwellings aren't to be repossessed by a lender. I think we've probably reached that stage. I also have concerns about the new supports for low-income homeowners such as affordable housing. These new supports have some disadvantages because they may push families into homeownership when they may be in the early stages of their careers, their children are young and their income may be quite low. Whereas the advantage of the traditional route, the tenant purchase scheme, was that households could continue renting on a differential

rent for a long period and then buy when they could afford to – when their children have left home, or when they get promoted in their job, or whatever. So I've concerns as to whether in reality it's sustainable to be pushing households that low down the income scale, and at a young stage in



their housing career, into home ownership. I think some of those households would be better sited in the social housing sector. Maybe not forever but for a period until they're household income status improves. So I think the stock at a minimum needs to be doubled, and certainly implementing that will create problems.

'Another challenge is in relation to the governance of the sector. I think there is a problem in relation to the monitoring of social landlords. There have been strides made in relation to the monitoring of local authorities and they probably need to be extended but if the housing association sector is going to play a big role in expanding social housing output, I think there is a need to put in place some system of monitoring the performance of housing associations. These systems are necessary to protect the rights of tenants of course, as well as to protect the tax payer so that's certainly an issue.

'I think there is a need to look at other more flexible options for the delivery of social housing. That's why I support the new rental accommodation scheme, where local authorities will lease accommodation for as long as they need it and maybe give it back to landlords when they don't need it. This is potentially a very valuable tool.

'I also think that there is an argument for the development of affordable rented accommodation as well as affordable home ownership in the Dublin area at least, and probably in Cork and Galway. I just don't think, particularly with house prices in Dublin, it's appropriate to be pushing families into homeownership when they can't afford it at that stage in their lives.' ■



# CornerStone Questionnaire

Brendan Kenny

Assistant city manager for housing, social and community services,  
Dublin City Council

“...what matters most for homelessness is an integrated and holistic approach by all the agencies involved, both statutory and voluntary.”

**When and why did you first get involved in the area of homelessness?**

As a staff officer in the Housing Department of Dublin Corporation, I was assigned to the job of homeless officer in 1986, which involved me dealing directly with homeless persons. I was in this job for three years.

**Has your understanding of homelessness changed since then?**

Yes, homelessness is a complex issue and housing (roof over heads) is only one part of the solution.

**What one policy initiative would make the most difference to homelessness?**

A policy initiative to eliminate the ‘grey areas’ as to whether homelessness is a housing issue or a health issue, particularly in relation to funding.

**What have you learnt from homeless people you have met?**

That they come from all walks of life and backgrounds.

**Do you think poverty and homelessness will always be with us?**

Yes, I think there will always be some poverty and homelessness but we have a very strong responsibility to keep it at a minimum.

**Can you think of anything we can learn from another country about tackling homelessness?**

Yes, I think day facilities for persons with addictive problems are better in some European cities.

**What’s the difference between NGOs and the statutory sector?**

Some NGOs adopt a highly political agenda, which the statutory sector cannot, and there are some

accountability, value for money and governance issues that some NGOs neglect which the statutory sector absolutely cannot.

**What matters most, charity or political change?**

Neither, what matters most for homelessness is an integrated and holistic approach by all the agencies involved, both statutory and voluntary.

**What would you do if the homeless problem was solved and you were no longer needed?**

There are and would be a lot of other issues to be dealt with in the City housing remit, which I currently hold.

**Do you give money to people who are begging?**

Yes. ■

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