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CornerStone

The magazine of the Homeless Agency

ISSUE 29
DECEMBER 2006



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note from the editor



You will find two articles in this issue of CornerStone that carry my name. I apologise for this; it is not a misguided attempt to raise my profile, but is due to circumstances beyond my control.

In the news section we report on the ESRI's recommendation that spending on social housing should be cut. We suggest that many NGOs and local authorities will have been hoping that on this occasion the government won't take the ESRI's advice. Well, as we went to press, Finance Minister Brian Cowan announced that the government *has* ignored the ESRI; and spending on housing in 2007 will be nearly €1.5 billion – nearly 9% greater than in 2006. This may not be enough, but at least it's better than a cut and it's very welcome news for some of the thousands on housing waiting lists who would have had to wait even longer if the ESRI's opinion had held sway.

I feel at this point that I should make a confession. **CornerStone** does not generally provide a penetrating analysis of the Book of Estimates when it is published. In fact, **CornerStone** does not generally provide *any* analysis of the estimates, penetrating or otherwise. This is for the simple reason that I don't really understand them.

If I'm honest I'm not at all sure what the significance of a 9% increase is. This is partly because I don't know what is included in spending on housing and what is not included. Also, because local authority housing departments receive rent from their tenants and receipts from sales of houses to tenants, the expenditure in the Book of Estimates is far from being the whole story. And I can never make the capital element of the 'Local Authority and Social Housing Programmes' fit the number of houses it is claimed to pay for. And I'm told that housing association funding schemes are technically non-repayable loans so don't appear in the Book of Estimates, but I don't actually know whether that's true or a very nerdy urban myth. And what about the Remedial Works Scheme that pays for major cyclical repairs and costs a packet – where does that appear? And what about... well you get the drift.

Over the years I've asked loads of people and no-one seems to know the answer to these questions, which either means that housing finance is a really well-kept secret or I've been asking the wrong people.

A very well-respected researcher who has done a great deal of important work on housing told me recently that he'd gone to the Department of Environment some years ago to try and find out how housing finance worked, and he'd come out with a terrible headache and for some time considered a career in market gardening. So at least I'm not the only one.

Anyway for the season that's in it, and because I feel so much better having got this off my chest, I shall give a bottle of champagne to the author of the most convincing explanation of the significance of a 9% increase in housing in the Book of Estimates 2007. Your contribution must arrive in my Inbox by 12th January 2007; it must be less than 500 words long – I don't want anyone dusting off old university theses; and it must be comprehensible to a non-expert, so my 12 year old son will be the final judge.

In the meantime, whether or not you're going to rise to the challenge and spend your holiday struggling with Exchequer spending and syntax, I hope you have a very peaceful and relaxing break.

Simon Brooke simonbrooke@eircom.net

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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**HOME
LESS**
agency



feature article

The invisible child

Fergus Finlay calls for action

Whilst many people worry about their second homes, there are children in Ireland with nowhere to go and with no adult protection. **Fergus Finlay** calls for action

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Action Plan 2007-2010 'A Key to the Door'

The action plan 2007–2010 'A Key to the Door' is nearing completion. The local authorities and the Health Service Executive will formally adopt the action plan in December 2007 and it will be launched at the end of January 2007.

This is the third action plan on homelessness in Dublin, the plan is a result of ongoing partnership between the voluntary and statutory sector, working together to change the way homelessness is tackled in Dublin, working towards the vision of eliminating homelessness in Dublin and the need for people to sleep rough.

The four year action plan has three main aims: putting in place initiatives to prevent people from becoming homeless; ensuring that people who do experience homelessness are given high quality support to address their needs and to support them out of homelessness as soon as possible; and ensuring that there are appropriate housing options for people moving out of homelessness, including whatever specialist or mainstream support services they need to maintain their housing.

The action plan reinforces the commitment of the Homeless Agency partnership to prevent and resolve

homelessness. Much has been achieved in the last two action plans *Shaping the Future 2001–2003* and *Making it Home 2004–2006* in terms of the range and quality of homeless services available for individuals and families, however there are remaining challenges. The focus of the new action plan is to build on the work of the previous two action plans and to change the emphasis from providing services to people who are homeless to supporting people out of homelessness and into longterm housing, with whatever supports they require to maintain their homes.

This action plan has 10 core actions that represent the most important actions that need to be completed in order to achieve our vision.

The ten core actions are:

- 1 Identify people and households at risk of homelessness and intervene appropriately with a co-ordinated multi-agency approach.
- 2 Ensure access to mainstream health services and other services for people and households at risk of homelessness.
- 3 Implement an information and awareness strategy.

- 4 Implement the holistic needs assessment and the care and case management approach across the homeless services sector.
- 5 Continue the localisation of mainstream and specialist homeless services.
- 6 Increase service user participation.
- 7 Local authorities and housing associations to provide social rented housing
- 8 Identify and advocate for the removal of barriers preventing access to private rented accommodation
- 9 Maximise housing provision for people and households through the Rental Accommodation Scheme
- 10 Evaluate and review existing models of long-term housing supports and seek appropriate revenue funding streams for the implementation of best practice in this area for people who have been homeless

Completing these actions will be given top priority during the four years of the plan. There are also a number of additional actions, which will enhance the quality and structure of services provided to people at risk, experiencing or leaving homelessness.

The next issue of Cornerstone will provide a complete overview of the new action plan. ■

Review of the Learning and Performance Programme 2006

As outlined in the 2005–2006 Learning and Performance Strategy the aim of Learning and Performance is to ensure 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'

The Learning and Performance Programme is currently in its third cycle with over 50 modules and 10 Bite Size Learning information sessions having been completed to date. A review has been carried out which found that the first two cycles of the 2006 programme were

experienced as being very informative, clear and effective in creating a real learning experience for workers within the homeless sector while also keeping participants interest.

Assessment from participants indicated that they really gained from modules that were interactive, where they were actively involved, where the information was relevant and where examples of real life scenarios were used. Participants highlighted that using a mixture of delivery methods such as group work, role plays, presentations, discussion, case histories and real life

scenarios helped them in their learning processes. They also acknowledged that the material provided at the modules proved very useful after the training and acted as a reference tool for any questions that they may have had.

Details of the 2007 programme, which takes account of the review and participants' assessments are currently being finalised and a brochure will be available by mid December 2006. Anyone wishing to receive a copy of the brochure can email landpbookings@dublincity.ie stating that you wish to be included on the distribution list. ■

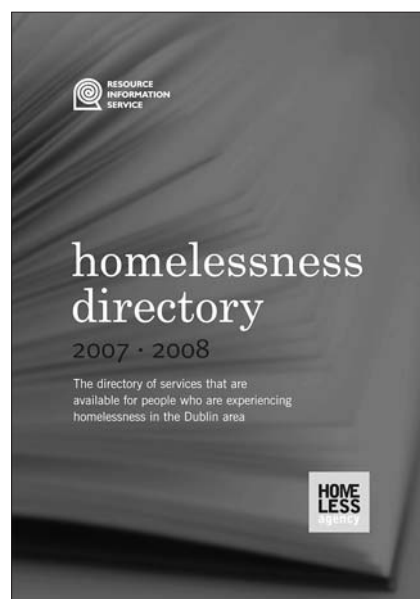
Homelessness Directory 2007/2008

The Homelessness Directory 2007/2008 is the fourth edition of the directory of services for people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin. The publication will be available in early December and will be distributed before the new year.

The Directory includes a comprehensive listing of all specialist homeless services, for adults, families and young people, as well as information on mainstream and general services, which provide support to people who are experiencing homelessness. Each entry

contains information on the service, the target group, facilities provided and other services. Travel information is also contained and maps are provided for emergency hostels.

Following the evaluation of emergency services this year, the Directory provides up to date information on the range of services available including details on access criteria, referral procedures, staffing and support services offered. It also provides information on the rights and entitlements of people including income maintenance, accommodation and other services. ■



Assessment tool and case management strategy 2006-2007

The Homeless Agency and the Health Service Executive have recently developed an assessment tool and associated care plan.

The aims of this plan are:

- To develop and manage a standardised needs assessment tool that is acceptable to service users and to those who work

throughout the homeless sector and will be used by staff in each of these services.

- To identify the current needs of the service users and begin to address those needs through services currently available.
- To identify gaps in current service provision and make recommendations

for future service development to meet these needs.

With these aims in mind, a 'Training for Training' course has been developed, to support the effective roll out of the assessment tool and associated care plan across homeless service providers. ■

An assessment of the number and profile of EU10 nationals using homeless services in Dublin

Day and food homeless services have recently been reporting an increase in the number of people from the EU10 countries accessing their services. In order to inform service planning within the homeless sector, a rapid needs assessment is being carried out throughout homeless services, which will provide an updated and more accurate figure of the number of people from EU10 countries presenting to homeless services. The assessment took place during the week beginning December 4th.

The key objectives of the project are:

- To carry out an updated and accurate count of the number of people from the EU10 countries presenting to homeless services in Dublin.
- To profile the study population's demographics, length of time in Ireland,

housing status, work status, use of homeless and other services.

- To carry out a needs assessment focusing on the core issues of physical and mental health status, and addiction.
- To examine participants language abilities, work and employment histories, sources of income, contacts with homeless services and health status.
- To review individual expectations against the reality of living and working in Ireland.
- To examine the reasons why people from the EU10 states are using homeless services.
- To examine the barriers experienced by service providers in the provision of services to this group.
- To outline the approaches to homelessness adopted by EU10 embassies.

■ To identify the number and profile of people from EU10 countries accessing social welfare payments.

- To detail the number of people from EU10 countries repatriated by the Reception and Integration Agency.

The project will involve a combination of three different approaches, which used together will provide an updated and accurate count of the number of EU10 nationals that are accessing homeless services in Dublin along with an identification of the key needs of this group. It will involve the use of:

- A survey of all homeless service providers
- A short questionnaire administered to all service users from EU10 countries
- Group interview sessions with a sample of people from EU10 countries using homeless services. ■

JAM TOMORROW (1)

ESRI says delay spending on social housing

In its mid-term evaluation of the previous National Development Plan the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) emphasised the importance of social housing in promoting social inclusion and went on to say, 'If, ... continuing extensive provision is made for this measure (social housing) then it is desirable that private sector demand is reduced through, for example, eliminating tax relief on mortgage interest payments'.

But in its latest report it's done a U-turn and said that social housing should be cut instead of reducing private sector housing output. In its evaluation of the investment priorities for the national development plan 2007–2013, the ESRI says that the construction sector is overheating, and that construction activity must be reduced if inflation is to be kept under control. It says there are two ways of doing this:

- 1 Use the tax system to reduce private sector demand and so reduce the private sector element of construction activity. This is described as 'the best approach'.
- 2 Reduce public sector construction activity by cutting back spending on social housing and delaying social housing projects.

Despite the fact that the first option is explicitly referred to as 'the best option', the ESRI recommends the second one.

Despite the fact that the first option is explicitly referred to as 'the best option', the ESRI recommends the second one. It argues that the benefits of delaying spending on

social housing would be better value for money in 'a year or two' and that this would outweigh the lost benefits of social housing. It seems to be making this recommendation with a regretful air since in a footnote which reads as though it were added later, the authors remind us 'if measures were taken to reduce private sector demand, then this cutback would

not be necessary and a better balance between public and social housing could be achieved'.

The impact of this recommendation is partially mitigated by a further recommendation that spending on housing associations should be maintained because housing associations focus on providing housing for people with special needs. But since housing association output is only approximately a quarter of total social housing output (local authorities and housing associations), that is a rather small comfort.

It's all very odd: why say option 1 is the best option but then, without any explanation, recommend option 2?

CornerStone suspects that there is more in this than meets the eye.

Many NGOs, (especially those running homeless services that are continually frustrated by a lack of social housing for their clients) and local authorities will be hoping that on this occasion, the government will not take the ESRI's advice. ■

STOP PRESS The government has ignored the ESRI – see *Note from the Editor* inside the front cover.

JAM TOMORROW (2)

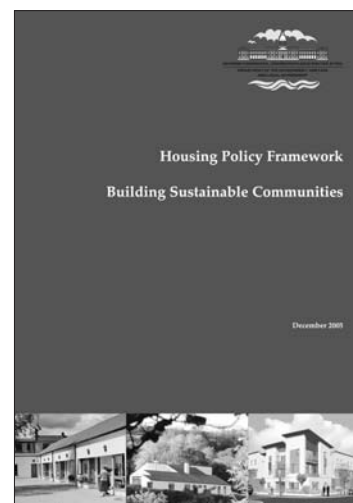
Building sustainable communities delayed again

In December last year, the DoEHLG published a leaflet, grandly entitled *Housing Policy Framework: Building Sustainable Communities*. It was a sort of flyer, advertising 'a new policy statement on housing', to be launched 'early in 2006'. The leaflet set out an ambitious wide-ranging agenda of issues that the policy statement would cover:

- Supporting an effective private housing market
- Expanding social housing provision
- Special Housing Needs
- Improving the quality of the social housing stock
- Reforming the social housing sector

- Paths to home ownership
- Tenant Purchase
- Affordable Housing

Unfortunately publication of this enticing menu was followed by – nothing. 'Sometime in the summer', said a civil servant in the spring. Then at the Centre for Housing Research's Housing Practitioner's Conference in late September, housing minister Noel Ahern said, '...to be launched in a few months', however assistant secretary Des Dowling was more circumspect: '...some material will be in the public domain towards the end of the year'. **CornerStone's** breath is not bated. ■

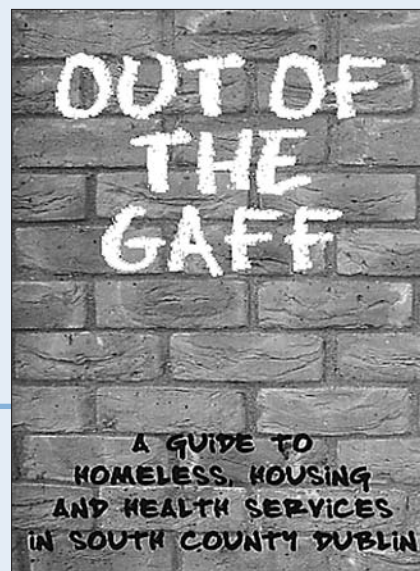


Out of the Gaff

Out of the Gaff is a new pocket-sized booklet aimed at people in the South Dublin County Council area who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. Published by Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit, it provides a directory of services, both local and in the

city centre; practical advice on housing and health options; and information on how to access services.

It's free and if you would like copies, contact Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit, 510 Main Street, Tallaght, Dublin 24. Phone 01 494 0224, email info@thau.ie ■



Seasonal squabbling

This cartoon, featuring the son of a very famous homeless family, was on the cover of the Simon Community's newsletter 25 years ago. It dates from a time long long ago, before the 1988 Housing Act, before the Homeless Agency or Homeless Initiative, before even the National Campaign for the Homeless got going, when there were two government departments: the Department of

Health and the Department of the Environment. Each said the other was responsible for homelessness; and so they spent as much time as they could passing the buck between them and as little time as possible actually doing anything about homelessness.

It is, if nothing else, a reminder that things have changed a great deal in the last quarter of a century – and mainly for the better. ■

Rent supplement and RAS

Supplementary Welfare Allowance, Rent Supplement: Implications for the Implementation of the Rental Accommodation Scheme by Dermot Coates and Michelle Norris, is published by the Centre for Housing Research.

It's available from Centre for Housing Research, Training and Administration Section, 57–61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4. Tel 01 240 3600; email chr@ipa.ie Single copies are free. You can also find a soft copy at www.chr.ie

The latest volume from the Centre for Housing Research stable is an extremely detailed piece of research that reviews the rent supplement scheme in order to assist the implementation of RAS. On the way it uncovers some extremely interesting facts about rent

supplement claimants, and it makes a load of recommendations that aim to make RAS work better.

First, here are 10 interesting facts about rent supplement. (Some of these are obvious but still worth reporting; others may come as a surprise.)

- 1 Rent supplement was introduced to provide 'short term' assistance in 1977.
- 2 At the end of December 2005 there were just over 60,000 rent supplement claimants. This is about half the total number of local authority and housing association tenants, so rent supplement plays a central role in assisting people on low incomes with their housing.
- 3 The number of people claiming rent supplement went up by 90% between 1995 and 2005. In 2001 and 2002 the number of claimants increased by more than 20% per annum, but the increase has been much less since then.

What is RAS?

RAS stands for Rental Accommodation Scheme. The aim of the scheme is to provide a new stream of affordable housing for people who are assessed as having long-term housing need. It works like this: local authorities enter into contractual arrangements with private landlords, housing associations, property owners,

estate and lettings agents. The local authority will guarantee to pay an agreed rent to the owner for the duration of the contract. The tenant pays the local authority a rent based on a differential rent (i.e. similar to the rent the tenant would pay if they were in local authority or housing association housing). People eligible for RAS are people who have been getting rent supplement for at least 18 months. The landlord doesn't have to collect rent or fill

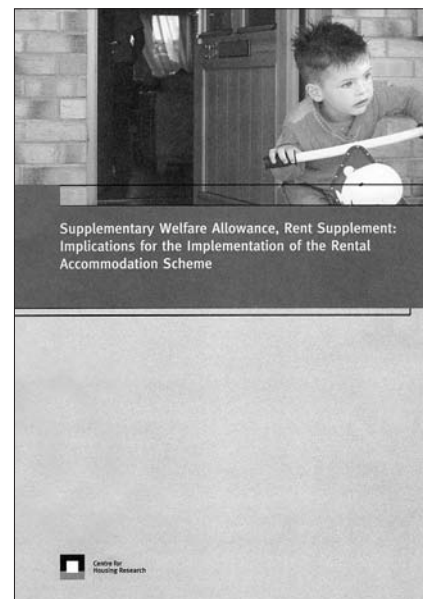
vacancies – the local authority does that. But the normal landlord and tenant relationship remains and the landlord will be responsible for insurances, routine repair and maintenance, and dealing with other tenant issues. The idea is that over time local authorities will build up a stock of accommodation in addition to their own housing, that will increase the housing options available to people in need of affordable housing.

- 4 Rent supplement currently costs about €400 million p.a.
- 5 People of 144 different nationalities claim rent supplement. People from African countries and European countries outside the EU account for 13% of claimants but only 1% of the population.
- 6 People claiming rent supplement are allowed to work a limited number of hours per week without losing the benefit. It appears that people who have been claiming rent supplement for less than 18 months are more likely to be doing this, but the research was not able to conclude definitively that there is a relationship between taking up part time work and exiting the rent supplement system.
- 7 Only 4% of rent supplement claimants were getting an old-age social welfare payment, compared with a third of all social welfare claimants that get a payment of this type.
- 8 In recent years the length of time people claim rent supplement has increased. In June last year, over half rent supplement claimants had been getting the benefit for more than 18 months, so just over half of all rent supplement claimants – about 30,000 are eligible for RAS.
- 9 More than 37% of all rent supplement claimants live in Dublin City Council, South Dublin County Council and Fingal County Council areas. That's because that's where the private rented sector is.

- 10 Nearly one third of people on housing waiting lists (14,000) are living in private rented accommodation and claiming rent supplement.

The research highlights a number of areas that the researchers say need looking at if RAS is going to work properly and makes 11 recommendations. If these were implemented, not only would RAS work better, but the rent supplement system would work better too. Here are the most interesting:

- The rent supplement system contains a poverty trap which means that a claimant might be worse off if she or he gets a full-time job. So the rules should be changed to get rid of the poverty trap which should result in more people moving into full-time work and away from rent supplement.
- There may be an incentive for some people to make sure they keep claiming rent supplement for at least 18 months, so that they become eligible for RAS. This needs to be addressed.
- Even when RAS is fully implemented, there will still be many people getting rent supplement, and the costs will be considerable. The researchers recommend thinking about a change in the rules so that instead of people paying a 'flat' amount on rent with rent supplement providing a top up, people would have to pay a proportion of the rent of their accommodation. This would provide an incentive for people to 'shop around' for the best value.



- When people move from rent supplement to RAS, the amount they pay in rent may increase (if you're wondering what's so great about RAS if your rent goes up, it's because once you're on RAS you stay there, so if you get a job, you will still only pay a differential rent which will in almost all cases be less than the market rent). The report recommends transitional arrangements to reduce the pain of this.
- In Dublin and other areas where there will be large numbers of people becoming eligible for RAS the local authorities should use the social housing sector including housing associations, and Public Private Partnership arrangements to maximise accommodation provided for RAS. ■

What is rent supplement?

Rent supplement is paid to people living in private rented housing who are getting a social welfare or HSE payment. The amount of rent supplement is calculated by the HSE's

community welfare officer, and ensures that the claimant's income after paying rent does not fall below a minimum level. It is generally only paid on rents below the 'rent cap', which depends

on the location and the household type (a single person or a family for example). However, community welfare officers have a discretionary power to exceed this. Currently single people find it very difficult to find decent accommodation below rent cap levels, although it's easier for families.

Ready for work

Ready for Work 

I loved that Friday feeling – walking home with the working people.’

So said David, a participant on the *Ready for Work* programme aims to break the cycle of no job – no home – no job.

Ready for Work is one of three social inclusion programmes run by Business in the Community Ireland, which in turn is a country-wide business-driven network specialising in corporate responsibility and community involvement.

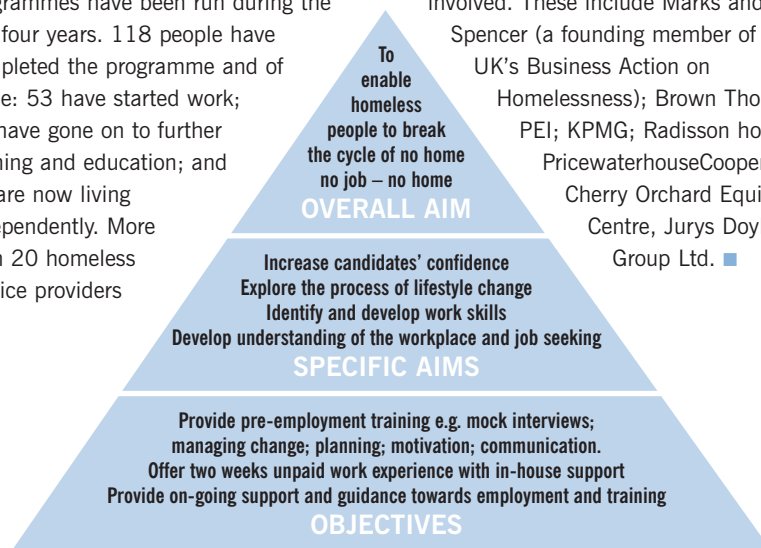
The programme provides work experience opportunities for homeless unemployed adults. It involves two days of training, two weeks unpaid work experience and follow up support from a training and employment officer and job coaches.

Ready for Work presents its aims and objectives in a triangle:

Its recently published review of 2002–2006 states that twelve programmes have been run during the last four years. 118 people have completed the programme and of these: 53 have started work; 44 have gone on to further training and education; and 19 are now living independently. More than 20 homeless service providers

are engaged with and support *Ready for Work* and 20 corporate sponsors are involved. These include Marks and

Spencer (a founding member of the UK’s Business Action on Homelessness); Brown Thomas; PEI; KPMG; Radisson hotels; PricewaterhouseCoopers; Cherry Orchard Equine Centre, Jurys Doyle Hotel Group Ltd. ■



makerroom

ending homelessness by 2010

In the last issue of **CornerStone** Caroline McGrath outlined the agenda of a new joint campaign run by Simon, SVP, Focus Ireland and Threshold. The **MakeRoom** campaign, which aims to end homelessness

by 2010 was launched in a very small room in a very big hotel at the end of October.

A comprehensive website – www.makeroom.ie – has been set up with loads of information about the

campaign. Website visitors are asked to sign a statement of support. **MakeRoom** will host an election hustings for political party leaders on homelessness in Dublin in December. ■

ERRATUM

Two errors crept into Michelle Norris's article on *Towards 2016* in the last issue. The current round of national agreements go back to 1987 not 1985, and the number of housing association homes built in 2002 was 1,360 not 1,981. ■

New appointments

CornerStone sends heart-felt congratulations to all those who have been successful in moving to new jobs recently. Whilst these sentiments are genuine, it must also be admitted that there is a selfish aspect to them, because every move provides copy for a news piece, and since every move creates a vacancy which in turn must be filled, material for another news piece is created, and so on, hopefully ad infinitum!

So, following **Jo Ahern's** departure from the Homeless Agency to the Refugee Information Service, **Dáithí Downey** has

been appointed to the post of head of policy and service delivery. Dáithí is leaving Focus Ireland, where he has been policy analyst for five years. Following his return to Ireland in the late 1990s Dáithí has worked in the areas of research and policy at Threshold, Combat Poverty, as a freelancer, and at Focus Ireland.

Irish Council for Social Housing's development director **Chris White** is taking up a new job as director of the Sue Ryder Foundation in Ireland. Two new development officers have been appointed: **Greg Nelson** and **Martina Rooney**. ■



Dáithí Downey

In Ireland today
it is far too
easy for a child to
simply disappear.

THE INVISIBLE CHILD



Fergus Finlay is chief executive of Barnardos

Whilst the main topic of conversation for many is second homes, there are children in Ireland with nowhere to go and with no adult protection. **Fergus Finlay** calls for action.

It's the second home nowadays that people are talking about. The little place in Spain, or the weekend retreat down the country. We can't turn on the radio without being bombarded with adverts encouraging us to invest in the latest housing nirvana in Budapest or Crete or Turkey, each with its own spa and golf course designed by some Ryder Cup hero or other.

As it always has in Ireland, possession of property continues to be a symbol of security, maturity and success. Those who have a home or, in some

instances, numerous houses, are indeed the lucky ones. Those who don't, and who are categorised as 'homeless', acutely feel the stigma.

Today 43,684 households sit on housing waiting lists nationally and, according to the 2005 figures, 2399 households are homeless. This homelessness is attributable to a number of factors, amongst them inflated rent costs and out of control house prices. Other factors that can result in homelessness are domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and alcohol or drug addiction.

Largely forgotten in the midst of this crisis are the children. The latest figures from 2005 don't give a breakdown on the number of children who are homeless, but the 2002 figures showed that 1,400 children in Ireland were homeless with their parents. Over half of these children were under the age of five.

Shockingly there is another, even more vulnerable, group whose ranks are increasing in number. These silent children are those who are homeless and who are not being cared for by any family member. The latest figures from the Health Service Executive are for 2004, and they show that the number of children that have come to the attention of the authorities, living on our streets and finding shelter in doorways, has risen on the previous year. In an economy that has been described as the envy of Europe, almost 500 children were officially described as homeless in Ireland in 2004 with no adult protection. 22 were under the age of 12.

In Barnardos, we come across children who have been through the care system and who are sleeping on the street, or whose families are moving from one emergency accommodation to another. They are exposed to the type of horrors that every parent wants to protect their child from. Drugs, sexual exploitation, prostitution, alcohol abuse and assaults form part of these youngster's daily battles. They are surviving brutalised lives and the day to day facilities that most of us take for granted, such as access to a washing machine, adequate cooking facilities, a guaranteed bed at the end of a long day, are denied them.

I recently met with a mother of three young children – all under the age of seven. Her home was a centre of fear and intimidation and she was forced to leave for the protection of herself and her children. She is now housed in state emergency accommodation. Whilst she is grateful for the respite and feels safer than she has in some time, she is laden with fears for her children's futures and already the strain of four people, including an infant, living in one room is taking its toll. Maria (not her real name) doesn't have a fridge so preparing fresh bottles for her baby is a real issue for her. The children left most of their toys behind them, and the few they have with them clutter the room. There is no play space. Maria spends as much time as possible with them out of doors, going to parks or simply walking around town until it's close to bedtime, though she told me she is at a loss as to how to how she will keep the children occupied when the winter settles. In our conversation, I noted that the winter is as far as Marie is willing to let her mind wander. Returning to what she left is simply not an option, but what lies ahead is equally daunting.

I tried to imagine what it must be like to be a child caught in such a scenario and it's a frightening and confusing prospect. The children who are homeless in Ireland have, in the majority of cases, moved from a crisis situation. Lack of control over their lives is the one thing these young people tell me they resent the most. They appear burdened by the stigma of not having a home and they alienate

themselves from friends as they are embarrassed by their situation and feel that they are not in a position to return invitations, such as visits to friend's houses or birthday parties. The sort of normal day to day interaction that most children in Ireland rightly take for granted is beyond their reach.

Largely forgotten in the midst of this crisis are the children ... 2002 figures showed that 1,400 children in Ireland were homeless with their parents. Over half of these children were under the age of five.

Research shows that the health and safety impact of homelessness on children is extreme. Countless studies over the past decade have found that homeless children present with acute and chronic illness such as respiratory and gastrointestinal conditions, hearing and vision problems, and skin conditions. These children often have incomplete or delayed immunisations; they suffer accidental injuries and burns and are often underweight and smaller than other children of their age. These same children, when compared with children living in stable accommodation, have higher rates of development delay and behavioural and emotional problems. They suffer from aggression, depression and high levels of anxiety. Little wonder.

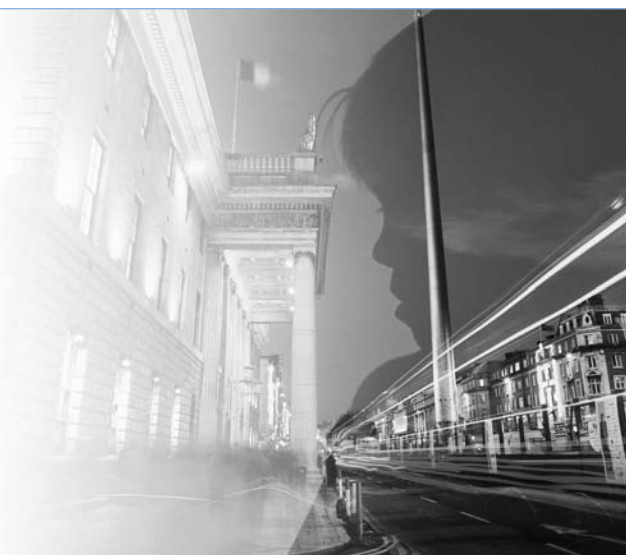
In a pilot study conducted by Focus Ireland, it emerged that more than a third of the children involved in the study had mental health problems of sufficient severity to merit referral for treatment. Children who are homeless often display symptoms of depression, anxiety, lack of confidence and aggressive behavioural problems. The cramped conditions in emergency accommodation, the instability of moving from one site to another and on-going exposure to danger all compound to deteriorate the child's well-being.

And this is just the start. If the symptoms are not treated they can escalate, condemning a child to a life-time cycle of homelessness, alienation, ill-health and mental instability. Access to treatment at an early stage remains the single most important restorative measure for children living in extreme crisis situations. Professionals stress that it is imperative that developmental delay and mental health concerns are countered early to ensure that they do not spiral. However this intervention is extremely difficult to access. Speech and language therapy waiting lists, for example, stretch as long as two years and the state of homelessness compounds the problem due to its transitory condition. When a child is sleeping rough or moving from one temporary base to another it is extremely difficult to track his or her health development and maintain consistent medical records.

Frequent school changes and the loss of contact with friends and teachers is yet another side effect of homelessness. Having a clean uniform to put on in the morning, a place to prepare breakfast and a space to do homework in the evenings is oftentimes simply not available to them. Getting to school once they



Having a clean uniform to put on in the morning, a place to prepare breakfast and a space to do homework in the evenings is oftentimes simply not available to them.



have 'moved on' and are no longer living in their community can be near impossible.

Some children have spoken of their sense of complete alienation because they have no reference that matches the experiences of the other children in their class. Others spoke of the loss of a teacher whom they had begun to trust when they had to move yet again. Research commissioned by the Homeless Agency in 2002 asked parents who were living in temporary accommodation how often their children went to school. Out of a total 40 children, 15 attended all of the time, 19 over 50% of the time, 3 less than 50% of the time and three had left school altogether.

In Ireland today it is far too easy for a child to simply disappear. Ironically, the greater the need the greater the likelihood that they will simply fall off the radar. Every year we know for certain that 1,000 children do not make the transition between primary and secondary school. What we do not know is where these children have gone because, in the age of the split atom, we have not managed in Ireland to put in place an adequate educational tracking system that will monitor these children who are at a crucial stage in their lives and provide them with the support that they need to make the move to secondary school and access their right to an education.

Education remains the key component in breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness that we see in Ireland today. Notwithstanding the difficulties of maintaining regular school attendance, the stability that a structured school environment offers a child who is homeless is crucial. On one level, it's somewhere they can be a child and it's a respite from the very real danger that they are exposed to when living in a hostel, on the street or in temporary lodging. Achieving an education is also a key factor in supporting a child to realise their potential and build a better future.

To tackle the issue of children living in homeless conditions, we must address the root cause. Every professional working with children at risk will tell you

that early intervention and the provision of support to families before a problem reaches crisis point are key remedies. There is an immediate need for more community based family support services to help families to cope better and to access critical services – such as addiction support.

In Barnardos we have a mantra, and it is that 'No child gets left behind'. Children and young people who have been identified as homeless need a dedicated care response. A number of these children have been in state care, though current available figures do not tell us how many. The failure to fully implement the Children's Act 2001 means that accountability for the care of children in the state system is a grey area. For example, there is no accountability for the twelve year old child in care who has not attended school for over six months; nor is there an obligation on the HSE to attend a court session to assist the thirteen year old who has been sleeping in a car for the last six weeks. The part of the Act that was to allow the District Courts to direct that the HSE become involved still only sits on the statute books.

The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child claims that children have inalienable rights. Basic decency demands that all children in Ireland are entitled to security, to a home, to protection, to an education. However children who are homeless in Ireland are over-looked to the extent that they are wholly deprived of their human rights.

Little wonder that ownership of property remains a fundamental part of the Irish psyche, because those who do not have a home are marginalised in our society and the children caught in this situation are bereft of control over their lives, their opportunities are depleted and their childhood eroded. They are the forgotten, the invisible.

For all the talk about Ireland being a growth economy, for all the talk of housing demand being a symptom of prosperity, for all the talk of income growth and affordable housing schemes, nothing ever gets said about the children in Ireland who don't have a home. And there are too many. ■

In Barnardos we have a mantra, and it is that 'No child gets left behind'.



Many commentators say that Part V has failed to produce the goods. But according to **Simon Brooke**, the best is yet to come. And what is this 'Part V' that everyone's going on about anyway?

Part V building for inclusion

There's probably been more discussion about Part V than any other topical housing policy issue. The fuss has mainly arisen because the passing of the original legislation was controversial, then subsequent amendments to the legislation poured fuel on the fire, and because to date much less housing has been produced under Part V than was planned.

I carried out a small research project for Focus Ireland which looked at the implementation of Part V and what could be done to make it work better. Based on this research, I believe Part V will work; I believe that in particular, a lot of good quality social housing will be built under Part V.

Part V has, in my view, two hugely positive features:

- It tackles head-on one of the biggest difficulties with social housing – residualisation. This ghastly word – which can only have been thought up by a deranged sociologist, but is widely used – means a high concentration of people on low incomes and experiencing other deprivations. It is agreed by many that this is bad for them and for society as a

Building for Inclusion: housing output and Part V of the Irish planning and development system by Simon Brooke is published by Focus Ireland. It's available for download at www.focusireland.ie



Simon Brooke is a housing and social policy consultant

whole, but it is a feature of social housing the world over. The implementation of Part V means the creation of estates inhabited by owner-occupiers, social rented tenants, people buying affordable housing and also private renters too. There is a whole bundle of research that shows this is a good thing. And it's important to remember that this doesn't mean that everybody has to live in each other's pockets and be friends for life; it simply means that everyone, regardless of their housing tenure, has access to the same local infrastructure and services, and people are not disadvantaged by having an address which labels them as a failure.

- Some local authorities are running very short of land. Part V will ensure that as long as there is land for private development there will be land for social and affordable housing.

What is 'Part V'?

The proper name for Part V is 'Part V of the Planning and Development Acts 2000–2004'.

Part V says that for most new housing developments, up to 20% of the land must be reserved for social housing or affordable housing. (In case you've forgotten, social housing means rented housing from a local authority or housing association; affordable housing means housing sold at less than the market price to people whose income is too high to qualify for social housing but too low for them to buy on the open market.)

The local authority decides whether it wants all the 20% it is entitled to, and how this should be divided between social and affordable housing.

There are a number of different ways in which the developer can comply with Part V. These include:

- The developer transfers the ownership of 20% of the land to the local authority for it to use for social and affordable housing. The local authority pays the developer compensation for this, which is equivalent to the value of the land *if no development were allowed*. In most cases this means the value of the land as if it were not zoned for residential development. So usually the local authority pays considerably less than the actual market value of the land.
- The developer builds the social and affordable housing and transfers the ownership of these homes to

the local authority or housing association. The local authority pays compensation as above, plus an agreed amount for building the houses or apartments. (This is the most commonly used option).

- The developer provides the equivalent amount of land on another site. The local authority pays compensation to the developer as above.
- Instead of 20% of the land being reserved for social housing, the developer pays a sum of money to the local authority which is equivalent to the market value of 20% of the land in question. (This, not surprisingly, is the most favoured option by most developers who generally do not favour mixed tenure estates.)
- (There are other options too, but they are rarely used.)

The most important thing to remember is that if the developer and local authority cannot agree which option should apply, then the default option is the first bullet point – the transfer of 20% of the land to the local authority for it or a housing association to build social and affordable housing. In other words the developer can offer to pay money instead of giving over the land until he's blue in the face, but if the local authority wants the land it can insist on this.

The social and affordable housing doesn't have to be provided by the local authority. It can, if the local authority agrees, be provided by a housing association (sometimes called the voluntary housing sector).

But if Part V is so wonderful, why doesn't everyone love it; and why have the results thus far been so disappointing?

Take the first question first. Part V is popular with local authorities and housing associations, but it is not popular with all developers for two reasons: firstly they generally prefer not to have social housing on the estates they build. Sometimes this is because they think local authorities are difficult to deal with; and sometimes it's because they take the view that the presence of social housing lowers the price of market owner-occupied housing on the estate, especially nearby.

It must be accepted that not all Irish local authorities are paragons of efficiency, (although in my view the main reason for this is that local authorities are not adequately resourced). And it's probably true that the proximity of social rented housing does have an impact on the price of market housing nearby. However, this is limited to houses close to social rented housing and in any event the price differential is small. And if profit margins are so tight as to be significantly affected by this, then developers should take account of it when working out how much they are prepared to pay for the land.

The second reason why developers don't like Part V is that they say it puts up the price of housing because they have to sell off 20% of the land at much less than market value. But the Irish Home Builders Association and the Construction Industry Federation made a submission to the Joint Committee on the Constitution in 2003, which was then looking at house prices. They argued strongly, (amongst other things) that the price of a house was determined

But if Part V is so wonderful, why doesn't everyone love it; and why have the results thus far been so disappointing?

Now to the second question; the big one. Why if it's so wonderful, has Part V not delivered the goods?

exclusively by supply and demand; in other words, land prices do not push up the price of houses built on them! (See CornerStone Issue 17 October 2003, p4.) However, many others argue that house prices are strongly influenced by land prices, and this is an area where almost the only thing everyone agrees on is that no-one agrees with anyone else, and an in-depth investigation is way outside the scope of this article.

However, regardless of arguments about land economics, the reality surely is that if developers have to sell off 20% of their land at less than existing market value, then that should in turn reduce the market value of the land itself. And don't forget that the only reason the land is worth such a lot is because the local authority zoned it for residential use, i.e. for the benefit of the community as a whole, not just the land owner. And few people would complain about a reduction in land values. But even if developers are right, and it's a big if, that the introduction of Part V is one of many factors in pushing up house prices, perhaps that is a price worth paying for the benefits of mixed tenure estates.

Now to the second question; the big one. Why if it's so wonderful, has Part V not delivered the goods?

The answer is very simple, although a bit complicated to explain if you know what I mean, but bear with me. In essence I'm arguing that the effect of the amended legislation was to delay the implementation of Part V, so that whilst up to now results have been far worse than planned, it should start to kick in properly very soon.

Under the original legislation, any planning permissions granted after the legislation was passed but before the local authority in question had finished a housing strategy (a new kind of local housing plan established by the same legislation) would not have to comply with Part V. But these planning permissions would only last for two years instead of the normal five. This was called the 'withering' rule. This meant that even if the developers had got masses of planning permissions during this 'window' that would not have to comply with Part V, (i.e. they would not have to give 20% of the land over to social and affordable housing) they would have to build on all of them within two years otherwise the planning permission would 'wither' and they'd have to reapply for planning permission, at which time Part V *would* apply.

But the problem was, that it became clear that lots of planning permissions weren't going to be used within the two year time frame, and so lots of them were going to 'wither'. But then the government came to the developer's rescue. When the legislation was amended in 2002, this withering rule was changed so

that all these planning permissions would last for five years instead of 'withering' after two. So suddenly there was a huge increase in the number of planning permissions that were current and did not have to comply with Part V. It has been estimated that the effect of this was to delay the implementation of Part V by perhaps two years.

That's one reason, and I reckon it's probably the main one. And it'll be easy enough to see whether I'm right or not. If the output under Part V starts to increase significantly this year and continues to increase, then I'm probably right, and if it doesn't, I'm wrong.

But there are other reasons why Part V hasn't performed as well as hoped. One of these is that more and more commentators are questioning whether there is a significant demand for affordable housing outside a relatively small number of urban areas. If these commentators are right, then it may well be necessary to revise the affordable housing targets downward. But most local authorities have a very good understanding of the nature and extent of the demand for social housing in their area and few would dispute that there is a need for more social housing nearly everywhere.

Another reason why Part V has been a slow starter is that Part V is complicated. And the guidance from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government was probably not as detailed as it might have been. The learning curve has been steep and local authorities and developers have had to learn how to work together to make it work. Related to this is the fact that local authorities and developers have different and sometimes conflicting priorities and constraints. Developers are used to dealing with local authority planning departments but not used to dealing with housing departments; and local authority housing departments are not used to dealing with the private sector. Developers expect local authorities to make decisions quickly; some local authorities fear they will be outmanoeuvred by sharp-witted developers.

Most of the developers I interviewed did not like Part V. But they are pragmatists. They don't think it's going to go away, and if it's going to stay on the statute book, they, as much as anyone else, want to make it work.

As I said at the beginning, I'm positive about Part V. I think it can work and I think it will work. And I think that in the future many tenants and affordable housing owners will live better lives as a consequence. ■





Housing and disability progress reported

A year ago **Eithne Fitzgerald** reported on consultation about plans for disability. A year later, the plans have been adopted. So what do they mean for housing? **Simon Brooke** explains.

A new mechanism to focus key government departments to address disability issues was incorporated in the Disability Act 2005. Six government departments, including Environment and Health, had to table what are called sectoral plans to the Oireachtas by last July. These plans detail the departments' services and future proposals in relation to disability. In October, both Houses of the Oireachtas adopted the six sectoral plans. Under the Disability Act, housing was one of the topics which had to be included. So what are the proposals on housing?

Develop a National Housing Strategy for Disability

The plan recognises that people with a disability often have fewer choices in terms of providing for their housing and accommodation needs. The key commitment is to develop a National Housing

Strategy for people with disabilities. This strategy will address the provision of tailored housing and housing supports to people with disabilities, including in particular adults with significant disabilities and people who experience mental illness. A national group representing the relevant stakeholders including the HSE and disability interests under the aegis of the Housing Forum will work to develop the new Strategy. One of the intentions is to ensure that local authorities' future social and affordable housing action plans address special housing needs in a more strategic manner.

Co-ordinate housing and care supports

New protocols are to be established for inter-agency co-operation for all special housing needs, so that a combined approach to the accommodation, care and support dimensions is taken. In particular, there is an undertaking in the sectoral plan that in

The sectoral plan endorses the principle of building homes which can adapt to people's changing needs over their lifetimes...

the short-term a new protocol will be developed to deal with the costs of an ongoing care/support dimension in social housing projects for people with disabilities where required.

Review of Building Regulations and planning guidelines

Part M of the Building Regulations requires newly-built homes to meet certain accessibility requirements. These include a level entrance at the hall door, and provision of a WC at the livingroom level. The focus of the current requirements is to facilitate disabled people to visit. However, a report from the National Disability Authority published in late 2005 drew attention to the shortcomings in the current building regulations and the standards they set. The sectoral plan undertakes that new draft regulations and technical guidance will be put out for consultation in early 2007. The sectoral plan also points to the Building Control Bill which provides that new apartment blocks must secure a Disability Access Certificate before they can be occupied. As accessibility issues which arise outside the building itself come under the planning rather than the building control regime, the sectoral plan promises new site development and planning guidelines to deal with this. The sectoral plan endorses the principle of building homes which can adapt to people's changing needs over their lifetimes, and undertakes to issue best practice advice in this area.

Review of Disabled Persons Housing Grants

Making sure new housing which meets the needs of disabled people is important, but so is adapting the current housing stock. The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government has conducted a review of the disabled persons housing grant and the essential repairs grant schemes, and the sectoral plan promises that new proposals are to be published shortly.

Assessment of need and letting priorities

The Government's *Housing Policy Framework – Building Sustainable Communities* proposes to change the way housing need is currently assessed, and to review letting priority arrangements. The sectoral plan acknowledges the need for better strategic identification of housing needs of people with disabilities, as well as greater co-operation between the HSE and local authorities in dealing with individuals. A new system of statutory HSE Needs Assessment for people with disabilities gets underway

from June 2007 (for under-5s) and is due to complete roll-out to all age groups by 2011. People who have housing needs must be referred to their local authority, and protocols between the local authorities and HSE on this are to be developed.

The proposal to develop a National Housing Strategy for people with disabilities is potentially a far-reaching one.

Conclusion

The proposal to develop a National Housing Strategy for people with disabilities is potentially a far-reaching one. Such a strategy should ensure that mainstream housing policy is disability-friendly, as well as catering for special needs. For example, private and social housing providers need to think about accessibility and plan for lifetime accessible housing as an intrinsic part of a design brief.

It is good to see some action promised on the thorny issue of funding care supports alongside the capital assistance package. This issue is likely to grow in importance in the coming years as accommodation needs of people with long-term disabilities are catered for in the housing rather than the health sectors, as policies such as the *Vision for Change* mental health strategy are implemented.

The content of these plans will resonate with people who have been thinking on similar lines in relation to homelessness. Indeed the issues discussed above mirror some of the recommendations in the Fitzpatrick report (*Review of the Implementation of the Government's Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies*). The proposals in relation to the integration of housing and care supports are extremely welcome since such a model could very easily be adapted to ensure that *all* people with particular needs, including disabled people, are able to receive a housing and care/support package that is appropriate to their needs. ■

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Tenant purchase time for a review



Aideen Hayden is Chair of Threshold and a former visiting research fellow at the Policy Institute Trinity College

Tenant purchase arouses strong feelings, with many adherents and many critics. But for such an important issue, it attracts little public debate. **Aideen Hayden** aims to put that right and calls for a systematic and critical review of the policy.

There is no doubt that tenant purchase by local authority or 'council' tenants has contributed greatly to extending the base of home ownership in Ireland. By 1988, 25% of all home owners had come through this route.

Since its foundation, approximately 330,000 dwellings have been built by the State, of which fully two thirds have been sold through the various tenant purchase schemes. This is very different in fact from the situation in the UK, where only 30% of council houses have been sold off. Even though the UK

policy has been applied far less comprehensively, its impact has been systematically researched and evaluated and significant changes have been made to the policy in response. In Ireland, no such systematic evaluation has been carried out, and the only changes to the policy have been ones designed to increase its impact, and indeed cost.

Is this a dead issue by this stage? Many commentators note that the rate of sale to tenants has slowed dramatically over most of the last decade. This reflects the fact that the best Council housing has largely

How tenant purchase works

- Anyone who has been a local authority tenant for a combined period of one year can apply to buy their home. They do not need to have lived in their present accommodation for a year to qualify, so long as they have been a local authority tenant for a year.
- Some types of housing, for example senior citizens housing, is excluded from the scheme. Currently people living in apartments do not qualify for tenant purchase, but Dublin City Council will soon be including apartments in the tenant purchase scheme.
- The local authority decides the market value of the house. But the actual amount a tenant will pay is the market value less 3% of the market value of the house for each year of tenancy subject to a maximum deduction of 30%, plus €3,800. Also any increase in market value due to the tenant's own improvement works are disregarded. The tenant purchaser does not have to pay stamp duty.
- There is no claw back, that is, if a tenant purchaser sells their property, they can keep any profit made. But the tenant purchaser has to have written permission from the local authority if she or he sells within 20 years.

already been sold off, and what is left is increasingly concentrated in poorer areas, with the remaining tenants being overwhelmingly those on the lowest incomes. But in recent years the trend has been upwards again. The number of sales of local council houses nationally has increased by nearly 50% since 2002, and has more than doubled in Dublin City. Furthermore, the number of approvals for sales indicates a likelihood that the national number will double once again. In addition to this, the recent announcement by the Department of the Environment that it intends to introduce a scheme for the sale of flats – which were not previously sold – promises to give renewed prominence to the policy.

With many advocates, much political support, but little public debate, the objectives and outcomes of the policy have gone largely unchallenged. What criticism there has been has been largely ignored – for example the NESC has twice now come out strongly against tenant purchase policy and recommended its abolition. These are among the reasons why I undertook research as a Fellow of the TCD Policy Institute into the issue. The findings are due to be published as a Blue Paper by the Institute.

Those most firmly in support of tenant purchase policy are officials from within Dublin City Council itself, with close to unanimous support. Local authority officials and indeed local politicians see tenants' right to buy as a given. The opportunity to buy, whether exercised or not, is seen as a stabilising measure in the community and an excellent tool in managing the Council's housing stock. Tenant purchase policy is widely seen within this group as a social inclusion measure and single-handedly responsible for the settling down of some difficult estates.

When asked whether the policy prevented the council in fulfilling its obligations to those on the

What criticism there has been has been largely ignored – for example the NESC has twice now come out strongly against tenant purchase policy and recommended its abolition.

housing waiting list the view was firmly that 'good stock doesn't come back in any case'. The main reason cited for this is the policy of allowing 'successor tenancies'. This is the arrangement whereby the relatives of a deceased tenant, who have lived for a period with the tenant in the house, are entitled on the death of the tenant to become the new tenants. The difficulty of sourcing alternative housing stock was acknowledged and there is a general pessimism about the future of housing provision. Part V of the Planning Act of 2005, which set the objective of earmarking 20% of all major new housing developments for social and affordable housing, has simply not delivered new housing stock on a significant scale relative to need.

As a result, reliance on the recovery of previously purchased stock forms a very large part of the strategy to provide for those on the waiting list, either through buy-backs or through the financial contribution scheme. However even this strategy has been running into limits, as price rises in the value of the sold stock now increasingly place it outside the reach of the Council.

Objectors to tenant purchase policy were mainly from those in academic or comparable institutions engaged in housing policy and among those in the voluntary and community sector. Reasons advanced against the policy were that while it may have achieved the objectives set by Government to extend the base of home ownership, it has led to an unacceptable



Low market values and rapid re-sales have led to significant windfall gains by re-sellers, the profit margin sometimes representing double the price originally paid to buy the property.

It seems clear therefore, that a systematic and critical review of tenant purchase policy is well overdue.

depletion of the housing stock. Old stock has not been replaced by new stock and this has led to an inability to meet demand from those in housing need.

Moreover the policy has provided unjustifiable windfall gains to some purchasers, representing bad value for the state. This is not simply due to the normal workings of the market, but the large level of discount offered to purchasers on sale of the houses, coupled in many cases with generously high valuations put on the same houses when buying them back from tenants later.

The policy has led to the residualisation of the social housing sector, leading to increased prejudice against it among the wider community. Those who cannot afford to buy are excluded and in any event there are other routes now to home ownership, which were not there in the past, to help those who want to buy onto the first rung of the ladder. These routes include shared ownership and the other affordable schemes. From a maintenance point of view, the loss of the better off tenants leads to dispersal of the remaining tenancies, making maintenance more difficult and reducing the available monies. Policy makers and influencers I interviewed for my research felt strongly felt that social housing should be for the benefit of the community and not just the individual.

From a detailed look at council house sales data, one can see that the findings from the UK research, which led to limits being placed on the policy there, are being replicated in large measure in Ireland. In the more desirable neighbourhoods – Drimnagh, Crumlin and Walkinstown – most purchasers were over 50 years of age. Therefore tenant purchasers in the main were already stable members of their communities and could be said to have purchased because of community stability, rather than being the cause of it.

Over the past twenty years there has clearly been a major shift in pattern, with fewer tenant purchasers remaining for a long time in their own communities after buying their houses. In the majority of cases of sales in more recent times, the purchasers have left Dublin altogether, to take advantage of lower house prices elsewhere.

Recent sales and re-sales have concentrated in the low demand areas of Darndale and Cherry Orchard and to a lesser extent Belcamp, as house price rises

are extending demand to these areas. Low market values and rapid re-sales have led to significant windfall gains by re-sellers, the profit margin sometimes representing double the price originally paid to buy the property.

The sale of flats in the UK and indeed in other European countries has caused significant problems. Firstly, there are complications in providing for the management of flat complexes, the ongoing issues regarding the cost of repair to older blocks, and the inability of many tenant purchasers to afford these costs. Most seriously of all, the capacity of Dublin City Council to further regenerate its own social housing stock (and as a consequence some of the poorer areas of the capital City) will be seriously impaired if these sales go ahead. In its own housing plan, it relies on 700 housing units becoming available through casual vacancies – in the great majority of cases these will occur in flats. No one seems to have considered how sales of flats to tenants (presumably at dramatic discounts, given the operation of the policy to date, and the views expressed by those responsible for the policy) will affect the Council's ability to provide housing for those most in need.

It seems clear therefore, that a systematic and critical review of tenant purchase policy is well overdue. The assertion that this policy has helped to settle communities is not necessarily supported by the evidence, and there are clearly instances where the policy is having the opposite effect. What cannot be disputed is that the operation of the policy has led to a dramatic loss of social housing stock, while the extent of housing need in a market of rapidly rising prices has certainly not diminished.

Issues that must be considered for review in relation to tenant purchase include:

- the level of discounts offered to purchasers and the prices at which the same houses are frequently bought back;
- the extent of application of 'successor rights' to tenancies, given that these are cited as a reason why social housing might as well be sold off as it will not come back;
- the possibility of limiting the percentage of housing stock that can be sold off in any one area, in order to preserve tenure mix;
- the issue of whether tenants of local authorities and tenants of voluntary housing associations can or should be accorded different sets of rights to tenant purchase;
- the possibility of extending alternative routes to obtaining equity in one's home, such as equity schemes;
- the feasibility and appropriateness of selling off flats.

Such a review must be take place before any further extension of tenant purchase policy, not just to protect the stock but to ensure that any future policy is equity proofed and the interests of one group of tenants does not override all other considerations. ■

Dublin City Council's Housing Welfare Section

Dublin City Council's Housing Welfare Section was founded in 1948 to ameliorate the situation of tenants in the city's tenements; and 58 years later it is still running strong.

Fran Cassidy and **Simon Brooke** talked to Chief Welfare Officer **Terry Madden** to find out what the section does now.

For more on this topic read *Social Inclusion and Local Government* by Terry Madden, in **Local Government in Ireland: Inside Out** Edited by Mark Callanan and Justin Keohan. Published in 2003 by the Institute of Public Administration.

Terry Madden, the current Chief Welfare Officer, has been working in the section for over thirty years. When she considers the proposed extension of the retirement age she jokingly wonders if she might still be *in situ* at the age of seventy 'zooming around on a jet propelled Zimmer frame', but she explains that fortunately 'it's a job in which you learn something new everyday' and she is clearly proud of the service that her team of twenty five professionally qualified social workers and five clerical staff provide.

'Our brief, as the Social Work Agency of Dublin City Council, is to deliver a social work service to the tenants, prospective tenants, tenant purchasers, individuals, families; the elderly and homeless persons who access our service. We provide a case – work service, counselling, and intervention where possible and necessary. Information regarding various services will also be given. The social workers in the Housing Welfare Section operate a daily duty social work service. We have a specific team that works with the members of the Travelling Community. Members of



Fran Cassidy is a writer and researcher

other ethnic minorities also access our service. If these non-nationals are given legal status and cannot provide for their own accommodation, they are entitled to make a housing application to Dublin City Council's Housing List. Not all of these people need a social work service but the ones who do end up in here.

'Everybody knows that there is a welfare section here, particularly the tenants and there would be a certain amount of self-referring. Basically anybody that drops in here will be seen by a social worker if possible. We operate a five-day service from 9am to 12pm and then an emergency one in the afternoon from 2.15pm to 3.15pm. After that anyone who phones in will be referred back to the duty welfare officer or to his or her relevant welfare officer.

'People can also be referred by social workers from other agencies; some will be referred to us from the Allocations Section or the Rent Arrears Section. Other referrals are made through the Area Offices and Housing Estate Management. We try to avoid an eviction at all costs because it puts people back into the system, back to the HSE. Eventually they will come back on the housing list. We will try to negotiate an agreement with the Rent Section to enable tenants to start chipping away at their arrears, although once evicted,

people can't be re-housed until their debt is cleared.

'As well as the drop-in duty services, the Welfare Officers will make appointments to see particular clients. Some clients are of long standing and come in for counselling or support thorough difficult periods of their lives – perhaps a couple of times a year. Others come in just the once. Some people just need somebody here to listen to them as adults and human beings and make a few suggestions. We might not offer an immediate solution but we can give people a nudge and facilitate them to problem solve.'

And what are the issues that are dealt with?

'Clients usually present to the service with housing issues but underlying these there could be many different problems such as domestic violence, family difficulties, alcohol or substance abuse issues, juvenile behavioural problems, mental health

difficulties, intimidation and harassment issues, and problems concerning the elderly. Despite the upturn in the economy and the greater wealth that is supposed to exist, there is still a huge chasm between the haves and the have-nots. No matter what people say, there's an awful lot of poverty out there, an awful lot of people not eating properly and a lot of children

neglected. If you look at single parent's income you have to question how they are actually feeding themselves, clothing themselves, paying for extras for schooling. The pressures from television advertising are huge, especially on children and young people to keep up with the latest trends.

'We can deal with many of the cases that present, but sometimes we have to involve other agencies and we have a good network established. For example we might do a certain amount of counselling initially and then refer to a specific alcohol programme such as Stanhope Street or if it were a mental health issue we would look for a GP's assessment and then refer on. MABs provide a good budgeting service, although moneylenders are still active out there.

'If it's an issue of child welfare we would refer to the HSE who are primarily concerned with

child protection. We are not a statutory body so we don't have responsibility or power under the Children's Act, but we engage in case conferences with HSE Social Workers and will do joint visits where necessary.

'Nine of our social workers are trained mediators and we offer a mediation service on neighbour's disputes. Mediation brings people together and allows them to work out their own solutions. It could be a disagreement over a fence, a lawn, a little piece of a back garden that one party has appropriated but the neighbour thinks is theirs, or a dispute over a washing line. Children also cause a lot of rows between adults – the children are still friends but the adults are fighting. People sometimes come to an agreement with the mediator present or go away and resolve it themselves.'



Some people just need somebody here to listen to them as adults and human beings and make a few suggestions. We might not offer an immediate solution but we can give people a nudge and facilitate them to problem solve.

‘We also link in with the Housing Estate Management system. Sometimes there is intimidation and it can become intolerable – if you have a vulnerable family, for example a lone parent and their children, it can be very difficult for them. Sometimes we get a situation where people in a private house could be causing quite a lot of distress for their neighbours in a local authority house and it’s hard to deal with that.

‘In an extreme situation the family will transferred by the Allocation Section if that applicant has applied and received a priority under the Exceptional Social Grounds Scheme. Under this Scheme people write to me as Chief Welfare Officer and request to have their situation assessed for a priority or extra points. A case is built up, using supporting evidence to show that the case is very serious and exceptional. We get about 800 requests a year and assessing these is a time-consuming task.

‘Generally prioritised transfers and allocations go into date order and people understand that. Some people, such as those with exceptional or urgent medical needs, homeless people and members of the Traveller Community are prioritised.

‘The tenant might have reported their problem to the Housing Estate Area Manager; the Gardai, and have sought medical advice concerning the stress. Reports from the Gardai, doctors or psychiatric service can be submitted. If it’s sufficiently serious I will recommend the applicant as a priority in the area that they have specified. Sometimes instead of giving priority I might give a block of up to 15 points. If somebody has points that are high enough they might get a transfer quicker than if they are on priority.

‘People can be choosy. A person might have decided that there is no other place that they are going to live except Finglas. Even when the situation presents as quite urgent and you suggest that they broaden their area of choice they will decline. For others there is a sense of hopelessness, and that’s something I would take into account if someone sends in an application that has been refused. It’s the not knowing where they stand that is the biggest problem. As soon as they know that priority or extra points have been given to them, the person can actually calm down because they know that there is light at the end of the tunnel and they will keep going to the Area Office or into the Allocations Officer to see where they are on the list.

And people who are homeless?

‘People who are homeless would usually be dealt with in Allocations where they are on a separate list, as homelessness entitles you to priority, but we would still have a certain number that access us directly. Some would be referred to us because the Housing Advisor might feel that they have other needs. We would establish a relationship with them and often maintain a certain amount of contact. If we felt that they needed a resettlement programme we would refer

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them to the resettlement officers and see if they could establish a programme for them. Many don’t need a ‘blanket’ resettlement programme but are well able to sort themselves out.

‘There are a lot of young males in a semi-homeless situation. They are moving from friend to friend or dropping home occasionally but aren’t actually living on the streets or in a hostel. They sometimes fall through the net if only because they aren’t aware that they can access the housing list. Housing supply is improving slightly: Housing Associations are providing different types of accommodation, Part V is starting to have an impact and Affordable Housing is taking off. But the demand still exceeds supply.

‘We could also be asked for a report on elderly people who are homeless as to whether they are capable of independent living. Obviously if someone can live independently, every effort should be made to try and encourage them to do so, as peoples’ dignity and integrity is often bound up in their ability to cope. A lot is taken away from them when you say they can’t manage.

‘When people go into a senior citizen complex run by DCC, it can be termed sheltered housing but they still need to be capable of independent living because they are actually living in their own little flat and they don’t necessarily have people coming in to assist them all the time. In certain situations where senior citizens get sheltered accommodation we can make provision for carers to go in with them and will adapt to suit the situation. If they are not capable of independent living then we have to start liaising with different services to see if we can get them into somewhere where they can be looked after like Simpson’s Hospital or the Royal Hospital in Donnybrook. Simpson’s Hospital would tend to take people who are not able to manage. It on their own but you would need to have a presenting medical problem before you can be admitted to the Royal Hospital.

‘Overall services for the elderly can be quite sparse. I’m not talking in terms of Dublin City Council but the whole situation of the elderly in Ireland. Our forecasted demography is such that we are going to have a very high number of elderly people in the year 2020.’

In the interim it seems that the social work service that Terry and her colleagues in the Housing Welfare Section of Dublin City Council provide will continue to be very much in demand. ■



CornerStone Questionnaire

Sr Angela Burke, D.C.

Director of services, Vincentian Housing Partnership – Rendu Apartments

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

I returned from working as a nurse in Nigeria in 1997 and was asked to work with the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Galway. Part of this appointment was working with those experiencing homelessness.

Has your understanding of homelessness changed since then?

Yes. Back in 1997 I thought the problem of homelessness perhaps only affected one sector of society. I know from my work today that it crosses all divides and can affect anyone of us or anyone of our family or friends.

What one policy initiative would make the most difference to homeless people?

From my experience I believe raising the awareness of the public to the fact that those experiencing homelessness are 'people' would help everyone to see beyond the

old perception or image they have regarding those who find themselves homeless.

What have you learnt from homeless people you have met?

My work has really brought it home to me that all those who experience homelessness are human brings the same as you or me with perhaps a different set of life problems to solve.

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

Unfortunately yes. I would however hope that I can do all in my power to lessen the burden for those who find themselves in these situations.

What's the main difference between NGOs and the statutory sector?

I believe NGOs work to a different agenda than statutory bodies – both sectors have different strengths. In my own work our

mission is underpinned by Christian values first and foremost. This not only urges us to respond but allows us sometimes to creatively respond to those in need.

What would you do if the housing and homelessness problem was solved and you were no longer needed?

I would be really delighted to see that day. However, as a Daughter of Charity I do believe they would have other work for me! I would also be open to the workings of the 'spirit' in whatever challenges life offers me.

Do you give money to people who are begging?

Never – I try to give them my time in conversation and something to eat. ■

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