

# Review of Food and Food Centres

**John A. Weafer**  
for the Homeless Agency

**HOME  
LESS**  
agency



# Foreword

I am very pleased to welcome this report on *The Review of Food and Food Centres*. It has been completed by John A. Weafer of Weafer and Associates Research and Consultancy Ltd on behalf of the Homeless Agency.

The Homeless Agency is a partnership body that was established as part of the Government strategy on homelessness in May 2001. It is responsible for the planning and co-ordination of the delivery of quality services to people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin. The Homeless Agency co-ordinates homeless services in Dublin, provides training and other supports, monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of services, carries out research and administers statutory funding to homeless services.

The Homeless Agency is comprised of voluntary and statutory agencies, who are working in partnership to implement agreed plans for the delivery of services people who are homeless, assisting them to move rapidly to appropriate long term housing and independence. A Consultative Forum advises the Board of Management.

The report reviews food services in Dublin and makes recommendations on their future purpose, funding and operation. It outlines a profile of food centres in Dublin in terms of food and other services offered and the people who use them. It also assesses the nutritional value of food served in food centres.

The report also examines the views of a sample of service users on food centres and also assesses the role and potential role of food centres in addressing needs of people who are homeless. It is interesting to note the observations made by service users indicated that the often repeated phrase '*there is no need for anyone to go hungry in Dublin*' – has substance.

At the same time the report highlights the changing profile of people accessing services and in particular the growth in use by EU10 Nationals.

**Dr Derval Howley**

Director · Homeless Agency

The logo for the Homeless Agency, featuring the words "HOME", "LESS", and "agency" stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. "HOME" and "LESS" are in black, while "agency" is in white. The text is set against a light blue square background.

**HOME  
LESS  
agency**

*The Homeless Agency has commissioned and funded this report. Responsibility for it (including any errors or omissions) remains with the Consultants. The views and opinions contained in any reports arising from this contract are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Homeless Agency*

## i Introduction

The primary aim of the current research is to review food services in Dublin and to make recommendations on their future purpose, funding and operation.

Commissioned by the Homeless Agency, this review was carried out by Weafer and Associates Research and Consultancy Ltd. Within the general parameters of this broad aim the terms of reference of this study are as follows:

1. To compile a profile of food centres in Dublin in terms of food and other services offered and the people who use them.
2. To assess the nutritional value of food served in food centres.
3. To elicit the views of a sample of service users on food centres.
4. To assess the role and potential role of food centres in addressing the needs of people who are homeless and other groups.

It is also important to be clear what the research is **not** about:

- It is not a project on homelessness per se, since the service provided by the food centres is usually available to anyone who needs the service, regardless of personal circumstances. However, as will be shown in chapter two, many of the people who eat in food centres are in fact homeless, while others live on the margins of society and are at risk of becoming homeless without vital supports, such as those provided by food centres.
- It is not a project on poverty, although food poverty is clearly an important factor in why some people use food centres and, without the benefit of food centres, a substantial number of socially excluded persons would suffer from increased levels of food poverty and isolation.
- It is not a project about the nutritional value of what homeless persons eat. This has been dealt with comprehensively in other recent research (Hickey and Downey 2003). Rather it presents a profile of the food and other services that are available to homeless people and other socially excluded persons through food centres in Dublin.

## ii Methodology

Acknowledging the presence and value of many places in Dublin that provide food to its clients, such as social, parish and community centres, and emergency shelters, it was decided to confine the present review to the major food centres located in the Dublin area that have a specific remit for homeless and other vulnerable people. Accordingly, twenty food centres listed in the *Homeless Directory 2004–2005* were contacted in January 2005 and asked to complete a structured profile questionnaire and a diary that recorded the food provided over a two-week period. By mid May 2005, when the fieldwork deadline was reached, nineteen food centres had completed the required forms, as follows:

**Table 1. List of Participating Food Centres**

### Food Centre

1. Capuchin Day Centre, Dublin 7.
2. Crosscare – Dun Laoghaire Day care.
3. Crosscare – Dun Laoghaire Night shelter.
4. Crosscare – Longford Lane, Dublin 8 – Day care.
5. Crosscare – Longford Lane, Dublin 8 – Night shelter.
6. Crosscare – St. Brigid’s, Holles Row, Dublin 2.
7. Crosscare – Portland Row, Dublin 1.
8. Focus Ireland – Childcare Centre. Dublin 8.
9. Focus Ireland – Coffee Shop. Dublin 2.
10. Focus Ireland – Extension Day Service. Dublin 8.
11. Focus Ireland – Family Programme. Dublin 8.
12. Focus Ireland – The Loft. Dublin 8.
13. Guild of the Little Flower. Meath street. Dublin 8.
14. LINX Project. Ballymun. Dublin 11.
15. Merchants Quay – Open Access. Dublin 8.
16. Salvation Army – Cedar House. Dublin 1.
17. Sophia Housing Association. Dublin 8.
18. St. Joseph’s Penny Dinners. Dublin 1.
19. Mendicity Institution Trust, Dublin 8.

From the outset, it is important to distinguish between the different types of food centres, with some offering a ‘walk-in’ service to people who wish to use their service and others that are attached to specific programmes. Furthermore, while most of the centres operate during the day, four centres offer a night service that provides accommodation and other related services in addition to food. The following table identifies food centres by service type:

**Table 2 Food Centres by Service Type**

Food Centre	Service Access	Night or Day
Capuchin Day Centre	Walk-in access No charge	Day
St. Joseph's Penny Dinners	Walk-in access €1 for lunch	Day
Focus Ireland – Coffee Shop	Walk-in access Homeless or at risk of homelessness €1.50 for main lunch	Day
Linx Project	Walk-in access €1 for lunch	Day
Crosscare – Holles Row	Walk-in access €2 for lunch	Day
Crosscare – Portland Row	Walk-in access €2 for lunch	Day
Crosscare – Longford Lane	Walk-in access €1.50 for lunch	Day
Guild of the Little Flower	Walk-in access €1.50 for lunch 20 cent for lunch in homeless section	Day
Mendicity Institution Trust	Walk-in access No charge	Day
Merchants Quay Open Access	Walk-in access No charge	Day
Sophia Housing Association	Mainly residents but some locals €3 for non-residents	24 hour
Salvation Army – Cedar House	Residents only €4 for accommodation and meals	24 hour
Crosscare – Dun Laoghaire Day Centre	Day support to homeless persons using night shelter €1	Day
Crosscare – Dun Laoghaire Night Shelter	Emergency shelter for homeless men and women €2	Night
Crosscare – Longford Lane, Night Shelter	Homeless men €2	Night
Focus Ireland – the Loft	Under 18 homeless No charge	Day
Focus Ireland – Family Programme	Homeless families and single parents No charge	Day
Focus Ireland – Childcare Centre	Children of families in emergency accommodation No charge	Day
Focus Ireland – Extension Day Service	Drop-in service for homeless people aged 18–26 years €1 for lunch	Day

Most of these abovementioned centres were visited and personal interviews conducted with staff and clients. These interviews were relatively unstructured and generally took the form of conversations with clients as they ate their meals or immediately afterwards. Their co-operation was sought in each case and the interview was stopped immediately if the respondent indicated any sense of unease at the questions or the interruption to their meal. A number of the interviews were conducted with two or three persons sitting at the same table if they felt more comfortable speaking in a group. For the most part, respondents appeared willing to engage in conversation, provided, of course that it didn't interfere with their meals or time-honoured seating arrangements!

Interviews were also conducted with a number of statutory stakeholders and service providers.

### iii Key Findings

#### Type and Frequency of Food Served

Each week, approximately 13,000 meals are served through 19 food centres in Dublin to homeless people and others who are housed but experiencing difficult times. Over half (52%) of these meals are substantial hot meals, with the remainder comprised of breakfast (19%), snacks (12%), meals on wheels (8%), soup and sandwiches (5%), food parcels (4%), and packed lunches (0.5%).

Overall, food centres offer a good range of food to their customers at affordable prices. Almost all centres serve soup, meat/poultry, fresh vegetables, potatoes, milk, and bread to their customers 4–5 times each week. Fresh fruit is also available in a number of centres, although more so for evening meals than lunchtime. Conversely, there is limited availability of low-fat dairy products and very few centres serve low-fat meals. Nearly all the service providers serve desserts, confectionary and snacks on a regular basis. This pattern of food provision is consistent with the findings of a survey conducted by Focus Ireland (Hickey and Downey 2003).

#### Service Provided to Clients

The standard of food preparation is consistently high, with each of the food centres applying the HACCP regime<sup>1</sup> and most employing at least one qualified cook in a commercial kitchen setting that contains the full range of cooking implements. Conversely, none of the centres employ a nutritionist.

In spite of their common brand name, food centres are not homogenous entities, encompassing a broad range of services, management styles, ethos and diverse customer/user groups. In addition to the provision of affordable food, these centres, to varying degrees, also provide accommodation, laundry facilities, shower facilities, skin treatments, footbaths, advocacy, recreational activities, health care by professionals, blankets, clothes, and referrals to other agencies. While four centres

<sup>1</sup> HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) is a food safety management system for food catering businesses. HACCP is a systematic approach to identifying and controlling hazards (microbiological, chemical or physical) that could pose a threat to the preparation of safe food (Food Safety Authority of Ireland, 2005).

operate a night service, most are day services. The services can also be differentiated between those attached to a specific programme and those offering a 'walk-in' service. Similar levels of diversity in the service offering of day centres can be found in London and Glasgow.

### Availability of Food Service

Just over half of the food centres provide a daily service, with an additional one sixth providing a service six days of the week. However, many of the high volume 'walk-in' services are closed on Sundays and none offer a food service at night. Allowing for the perceived gap in service at nights and on Sundays, the research findings indicate that the often-repeated phrase – *'there is no need for anyone to go hungry in Dublin'* – is substance. If a person has the physical and mental capacity, and knows where to go for a subsidised or free meal (usually through word of mouth), it is possible for a homeless person to eat their fill most days of the week in Dublin, including breakfast, at least one substantial hot meal, regular snacks throughout the day, and soup and sandwiches at night. A hot meal is also available at night for residents of hostels.

### Client Profile

The typical food centre customer is Irish, male, adult, and homeless or at risk of homelessness. However, a number of centres have noted an increase in foreign nationals using their service, particularly people from Eastern Europe. Africans and Asians are largely conspicuous by their absence. The small but noticeable increase in foreign nationals raises issues of how appropriate these centres are in addressing their specific needs and if these centres could ultimately do more harm than good if foreign nationals become marginalised through unemployment and get drawn into the street culture of drink and drugs.

Although most often associated with homelessness, these food centres also serve a substantial number of people who are housed but living in difficult circumstances. In essence, these centres assist housed people in two fundamental ways, by meeting their basic nutritional needs and providing opportunities for sociability. A number of stakeholders felt that this should continue, especially if it helped prevent vulnerable people becoming more marginalised and having to use the more expensive critical care health services. A similar situation was also found in England where many housed people who use day centres are perceived to be 'vulnerable, isolated, and having problems coping in their accommodation' (Crane et al 2005). Some people receive assistance from their neighbours or family on occasions when food centres are closed or when they cannot physically get into a centre for their regular meal. However, this help is limited to specific occasions, such as Sunday dinner or Christmas, and a number of males, living alone or in B&Bs 'just don't eat' and substitute alcohol for food when faced with this situation.

### Food Centres

Overall, food centres are very much valued by customers of food centres and would be sorely missed if they closed or operated a reduced service. While most people mentioned the availability of good quality affordable food as a primary consideration for their use of food centres, many also highlighted the warm welcome they receive from staff and other service users as a positive feature of their experience. These points notwithstanding, many people who use food centres are also quite fussy about where they eat, with many respondents expressing a preference for some centres over

others on the basis of food served, location, the customer profile, security, other services offered, anonymity, social networks and so forth.

Most of the food centres indicated they have extra capacity, or soon will have following renovations to their premises. This suggests that there is probably an adequate supply of food centre places in Dublin for existing clientele. However, other research indicates that a substantial number of homeless people do not use the food services provided (*Service Users' Survey 2003*). The reason for this non-use needs further investigation.

All things considered, homeless people would appear to have a reasonable choice of where to eat good quality, affordable food in Dublin. They can effectively choose between different locations (although most centres are situated in the inner city/ Dublin 8), types of meals served, times when meals are served, a range of additional services, if alcohol or drugs are tolerated, the user group, whether or not they have to pay even a nominal fee and so forth.

### Gaps in Service Provision

The lack of a food service for non-hostel residents in the evenings and weekends, especially Sunday, was identified as the main gap in food service provision. However, when asked how this situation could be addressed, service providers and other stakeholders had somewhat mixed views. Those in favour of extending current food provision pointed to the need for such a service and felt that, with additional funds to cover the extra staff required, it would be possible to introduce an evening and Sunday service. Conversely, others felt that introducing a night drop-in service should be considered carefully as it might have unintended adverse effects, such as, encouraging homeless people to stay on the streets rather than availing of the more structured range of supports available through night shelters and also perhaps, antagonising local residents and others using the areas by increasing the number of homeless people congregating in the areas concerned.

## iv Recommendations

At one level, the '*Don't fix it if it isn't broken*' argument has merit in considering the potential role of food centres in meeting the needs of homeless persons and other marginalised groups in Dublin. The centres clearly provide a valuable service for many vulnerable people in Dublin and most respondents to this and other surveys are generally satisfied that the service is meeting their needs. The heterogeneous nature of day centres means that some day centres will continue to provide a basic food service, while others pursue a more interventionist role, by providing a comprehensive range of services over and above food. Essentially, day centres comprise a hybrid service that has evolved organically and, with the passage of time, will undoubtedly continue to evolve to varying degrees in responding to the needs of homeless people and others living in difficult circumstances.

However, the research has also raised a number of issues that would benefit from further consideration by the *Homeless Agency* and other voluntary and statutory agencies that are concerned with the welfare of homeless and marginalised people. Accordingly, nine recommendations are detailed below.

## 1. Night, Weekend and Day Services

In view of the findings from the research identifying a perceived gap in night and weekend services, it is recommended that a pilot scheme be undertaken to evaluate the demand for such a service, who would benefit from the service, the cost implications, and other salient issues, such as a possible adverse impact on residents in the surrounding neighbourhood. The perceived need for more day places should also be investigated.

## 2. Centres of Excellence for Homeless Services

Given the many difficulties in accessing the homeless population and their need for a comprehensive range of social services, it is recommended that a number of existing services develop as day centres of excellence and be supported in Dublin that can provide the full range of services required by homeless individuals and families. Food would continue to be a service provided by these centres but no longer the predominant service. Over time, if and when homelessness is eliminated or confined to specific groups, these centres could respond by providing more specialist services required by those remaining on the streets or in temporary accommodation. The key centres should be developed as centres of excellence, incorporating integrated service teams from statutory agencies and voluntary/ community groups.

A pilot scheme, using the experience of existing multi-agency initiatives in Ireland and elsewhere should be initiated and evaluated to assist in the development of a more comprehensive programme in Dublin city. In Seattle<sup>2</sup>, for instance, geographically based health care teams serve selected homeless sites. The teams typically comprise nurses, nurse practitioners, and mental health and chemical dependency counsellors. Clients are linked to community clinics and other systems of care as needed. The teams also include eligibility counsellors or ‘access advocates’ who provide information about Medicaid and other health coverage options ([www.metrokc.gov/health/hchn/services.htm](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/hchn/services.htm)).

The provision of primary care services to homeless people and other ‘hard to reach’ groups, such as travellers, sex workers and asylum seekers is a recognised problem in the UK. One recent response entailed the creation of a new primary care service for these groups in Norwich. The scheme which adopted a consultative approach<sup>3</sup> to its evaluation proved very acceptable to the groups involved and the agreement generated should ‘ensure that management and health workers can combine their efforts more efficiently to achieve their common goals’ (Pfeil and Howe 2004: 190). Closer to home, the integrated service model in operation in Crosscare’s day centre in Dun Laoghaire may offer some practical assistance in the design of an appropriate integrated service for homeless people. Cedar House Primary Health Care Clinic, Merchants Quay, the Access Psychiatric Outreach Team and the Multi-Disciplinary Team may also be of practical assistance for this purpose.

<sup>2</sup> *The US HCH programme emphasises a multi-disciplinary approach to delivering care to homeless persons, combining aggressive street outreach with integrated systems of primary care, mental health and substance abuse services, case management, and client advocacy. Emphasis is placed on coordinating efforts with other community health providers and social service agencies* ([www.bphc.hrsa.gov](http://www.bphc.hrsa.gov)).

<sup>3</sup> *The evaluation methodology was designed with service providers and users through a participator research framework.*

### 3. Centres of Excellence for Food Services

The provision of food is central to the ethos and raison d'être of food centres and given the current level of demand for food services in Dublin, it is clear that these services provide a valuable service for homeless and housed people living on the margins of society. However, it is also clear that adherence to HACCP standards and the need to raise funds is placing considerable pressure on many centres, especially those dependent on volunteers. Accordingly, it is recommended that all food centres should receive adequate funding to allow them to continue to provide food to the highest standards and to prevent their clients from having to resort to emergency services, all of which cost considerably more than a regular meal. This should be reviewed as part of the Unit Cost Analyses

### 4. Research the Limited Use of Food Centres by Homeless

While current users of food centres are generally satisfied with the food and overall service provided, research indicates that a substantial number of homeless people do not use food centres. Accordingly, it is recommended that further research be conducted into the reasons why different groups of homeless people don't use food centres more regularly, if at all, to establish if changes are warranted to the service.

### 5. Develop Specific Strategy for Foreign Nationals

The issues of foreign nationals are typically quite distinct from traditional homelessness, even if circumstances lead them into the culture of homelessness. The present research indicates that foreign nationals are increasingly availing of food services in Dublin. Additional resources will undoubtedly be required to ensure adequate provision of culturally appropriate food and also staff with appropriate language skills, especially in relation to advocacy and referrals. While there are cost-benefits of concentrating such services in a limited number of food centres, there is also a danger of stigmatising centres and their clients. Accordingly, it is recommended that the views of foreign nationals should be specifically targeted to identify their needs and to develop an appropriate, integrated response to their diverse needs.

### 6. Acknowledge the Benefits of Food Centres in Meeting the Needs of Housed People

The primary focus on people experiencing homelessness may over-shadow the value of food centres in preventing others who are housed from becoming more marginalised and possibly homeless themselves. For some, homelessness is more or less a permanent way of life. However, for others, it is a transient category, from which people drift in and out. In effect, the service provided by food centres is a service for Dublin's marginalised communities rather than homeless persons per se. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge the role of food centres as a key element of the welfare 'safety net' for housed individuals who are marginalised. Without such an acknowledgement, there is a danger of overlooking a significant benefit of the centres when assessing their preventative role and funding.

### 7. Distinguish Between Different Clients

At present, food centres cater for the needs of homeless and housed persons. However, apart from their common food requirements, it is likely that both groups have different needs. In the interests of efficiency, the needs of different client groups should be identified and targeted in an appropriate way, which builds on the

strengths of the individual centre. Thus, while housed persons may be satisfied with a meal and social contact, a homeless person may require more specialised assistance and possibly, a referral.

### 8. Be realistic about what can be achieved through food centres

Change can happen and homeless people can be helped to take greater control over their lives but the process can be slow if not impossible for some people who are not able to change. This idea is best expressed by a UK homeless activist who has himself experienced life as a homeless person:

‘For me, day centres are places of warmth and acceptance, a link between street life or loneliness and a better future. Within reason, I believe that people best undergo the process of change and taking control of their own lives at a pace that suits them, that opportunities for change for someone not ready for it is not an opportunity at all. For many, the process is long, chaotic, characterised by success and failure in equal measure and involves a pressure to succeed that many people living normal lives would find intolerable... Independence through the acquisition of work or activity-related skills is an extremely difficult objective for some and might be beyond the capacity of day centre staff to deliver in some cases’

(Danny Levine [www.homeless.org.uk](http://www.homeless.org.uk) )

### 9. Improve Monitoring and Recording Procedures

At the moment, most centres are content to feed people without asking too many, if any, questions. While this tradition is appreciated by clients and respected by centre staff, it is possible that some people have difficulties and could be helped if the need was identified. Accordingly, it is recommended that day centres develop ways of routinely assessing the needs of their clients, and of identifying those with problems. Furthermore, the staff needs to be skilled or trained to assess needs, to detect problems and to respond accordingly<sup>4</sup>.

The broader recommendations of this report will be available in the report on the recommendations for all reports commissioned by the Homeless Agency under the Action Plan Making it Home 2004–2006.

<sup>4</sup> A similar recommendation was made in a review of the role of homeless day centres in supporting housed vulnerable people in England (Crane et al 2005).

## Bibliography

Crane, M., Fu, R., Foley, P., and Warnes, A. (2005) *The Role of Homeless Sector Day Centres in Supporting Housed Vulnerable People* Sheffield University: Sheffield Institute for Studies on Ageing.

Food Safety Authority of Ireland (2005) HACCP – A Food Safety Management System. Catering. Dublin: Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

Hickey, C. and Downey, D. (2004) *Hungry for Change: Social Exclusion, food poverty and homelessness in Dublin* Dublin: Focus Ireland.

Pfeil, M. and Howe, A. (2004) 'Ensuring primary care reaches the 'hard to reach' in *Quality in Primary Care*. 2004:12:185–190.

Service Users' Survey (2003) Homeless Agency.



Parkgate Hall  
6-9 Conyngham Road  
Dublin 8  
Tel 01 703 6100  
Fax 01 703 6170  
Email [homeless@dublincity.ie](mailto:homeless@dublincity.ie)  
Web [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie)

The logo for Homeless Agency is a blue square containing the text "HOME LESS agency" in white. "HOME" and "LESS" are stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font, while "agency" is positioned below them in a smaller, lowercase, sans-serif font.

**HOME  
LESS**  
agency