



Shelter costs in Ireland and the transition to secure more effective responses to homelessness

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In recent years, Ireland's homeless crisis has been characterised by a sustained increase in the total number of people accessing state-funded emergency homeless accommodation¹. As of January 2018, a total of 9,104 people were accessing homeless accommodation, a 59% increase in two years. This has presented significant challenges to local government, homeless agencies and voluntary homeless organisations who are seeking to ensure adequate provision of emergency shelter at a time of acute housing shortage.

As a result of the growing need for emergency accommodation, and in the absence of appropriate housing output, the spending on emergency homeless accommodation has risen substantially. Central government's allocation to local government for the provision of homeless services across Ireland rose from €70 million in 2016², to €98 million in 2017 and is expected to be almost €120 million in 2018³. This funding is then supplemented by allocations from within each local government's own budget and through fundraising by voluntary homeless organisations.

The rapid rise in the national homeless budget is not only linked to the increasing number of people in need of supports, but also the profile of those impacted by homelessness in Ireland, which has changed over the past five years. There has been rapid increases in the number of young people aged 18-24, as well as people in employment who are experiencing homelessness. More recently, there are also signs that rural homelessness is beginning to rise. However, in the context of access to shelter, it has been the issue of family homelessness which has had the biggest impact on budgets. This is due to the number of families who have become homeless and the provision of emergency accommodation through commercial and private operators, which caused such a budget increase in a short period of time.

By late 2012, the number of families presenting as homeless in Ireland began to rise quite quickly, particularly in Dublin. Ireland's pre-existing emergency accommodation structures had been created for single people, and to a lesser extent couples, and as such this system was clearly unsuitable for families.

In the absence of housing options and family specific emergency accommodation, the immediate response from local government and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive was to secure shelter in the form of hotel rooms and guest houses from private, commercial operators⁴. This type of reaction was intended as a short-term emergency reaction to family homelessness, as local government sought to put in place measures to secure pathways into private rental accommodation

and new social housing schemes. This included plans to deliver a new form of housing, known as rapid build modular housing, with programmes specifically developed to meet the housing needs of the rising number of homeless families.

Unfortunately, the plan to deliver rapid build modular housing schemes, which was critical in an increasingly dysfunctional rental market, faced varying degrees of delay and was shelved in late 2014⁵. It was reinstated in 2015 but only 22 housing units were delivered by the end of 2016⁶. Meanwhile, the unsuitable arrangement of placing families in commercial hotels and guesthouses continued. This form of emergency accommodation provision has proven to be very expensive. In Dublin, for example, the annual spend on hotels and guesthouse went from €455,000 in 2012, to €36 million in 2016 and was expected to reach €49 million in 2017. In addition, other funding was provided to homeless organisations offering in-reach supports to some families in hotels and guest houses.

MAKING THE SHIFT TO COST EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

By the summer of 2016, the government had published 'Rebuilding Ireland', a strategy document to tackle the housing and homeless crisis in Ireland⁷. The plan set out to significantly increase investment in social housing and to increase all forms of housing output in the period up to 2021. This of course would ensure a greater availability of housing, which would make it more likely that a housing led response to homelessness could be achieved, an approach that was re-confirmed as the government's preferred approach to the homeless issue. However, the new housing schemes would not appear overnight and with growing numbers of families in hotels a stop-gap intervention was needed.

It was at this point that the then Minister for Housing, Simon Coveney TD, committed to ending the use of commercial hotels and guesthouses for the purposes of accommodating homeless families by July 2017⁸. Though this was a goal with huge merit, it would be challenging to achieve given the consistent levels of new presentations of families into homelessness. His commitment was based on a decision to roll out a new form of supported temporary accommodation services for homeless families, known as Family Hubs⁹.

The new Family Hubs would, in the main, be operated by existing NGO providers of homeless services. They offer a cheaper alternative to hotels and guest houses but more importantly they undoubtedly provide a better response to the needs of families. The

1 <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

2 <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/2016-budget-details-homelessness>

3 <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/minister-murphy-announces-housing-budget>

4 <https://www.rte.ie/news/2014/0220/505648-dublin-housing/>

5 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/plan-for-prefabricated-homes-for-dublin-homeless-shelved-1.2041560>

6 <http://www.thejournal.ie/rapid-build-housing-3817997-Jan2018/>

7 <http://rebuildingireland.ie/>

8 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/viewpoints/analysis/housing-action-plan-simon-coveney-bets-his-career-on-promise-to-end-homelessness-411270.html>

9 The commitment was to provide better emergency shelter rather than house all homeless families accessing hotels.



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majority of these new services operate with 24/7 on site access to case workers and support workers. They also provided cooking and laundry facilities and play areas for children, something which almost all hotels and guest houses do not offer.

However, Family Hubs remain as a form of emergency homeless accommodation, and like all forms of homeless accommodation, the length of stay for people in the service depends largely on the availability of safe and secure housing. The current housing crisis in Ireland, and the lack of affordable and social housing move-on options, means that securing exits is very challenging, but it is happening and in record numbers as the current Minister for Housing, Eoghan Murphy, announced in January 2018¹⁰ with 4,000 adults exiting homelessness in 2017.

HOUSING FIRST AND OTHER LOWER COST HIGH IMPACT SERVICES

While families made up a significant number of the adult exits in 2017, this should not mask the other important and cost effective homeless interventions such as those who exited via a Housing First programme. The small-scale funding intervention, when compared to the sums spent on family hotel accommodation, through a Housing First model has resulted in over 170 individuals being accommodated in Dublin in the past few years, with half of those exits delivered in 2017.

In Dublin, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive funds a Housing First programme which is delivered jointly by Peter McVerry Trust and Focus Ireland¹¹. The programme initially targeted 100 people sleeping rough but was subsequently expanded with the overall target raised to 300 people and to also include long term homeless shelter users.

The move to target individuals who had very long stays in emergency accommodation was part of a strategic effort to progressively reduce the average length of stay in homeless services. Another reason to broaden the initial target group was that the individuals identified would be unlikely to secure an exit from homeless services without an intervention such as Housing First. These long-term service users were also those viewed as taking up the most resources and bed-nights in the sector and thus by securing a housing move-on, with wraparound supports, beds space and resources could be freed up to benefit other individuals who would likely exit the system more quickly.

While considerable attention is given to individuals in homelessness and securing exits into housing, less attention - or at the very least, less funding - is provided to *prevent* people coming into homelessness in the first instance. Even the measures that currently exist are focused primarily on the late stage emergency prevention interventions, such as assisting tenants who have been served a notice of eviction by their landlord. While these are important in helping reduce the flow of people into homelessness, there are other areas with significant scope for early stage prevention measures that could more effectively reduce and prevent homelessness in the long term. The Peter McVerry Trust has long advocated and campaigned for better strategic investment in areas such as childcare, education, employment, health and training for communities in which homelessness is prevalent or more likely to arise. Sustained and ongoing investment in these areas is the only way in the long term to stop the cycle of homelessness and ensure that we arrive at a point of eliminating homelessness. Rebuilding Ireland, the Government’s housing and homeless strategy, is the first comprehensive attempt to drive a cross-departmental response to the issue of housing and homelessness. It gives us the opportunity to improve all aspects of how we approach homelessness and the needs of those at risk and those impacted by the issue. It is in all our interests to ensure that Rebuilding Ireland is a success.

¹⁰ <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/minister-murphy-publishes-december-2017-homelessness-report>

¹¹ <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/housing-first-service>