Evidence into Action: How the Dublin Homeless Agency's Data and Information Strategy have shaped Homeless Policy Development and Implementation in Ireland

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❭ **Abstract_** *Homelessness became a specific policy focus in Ireland in 2001 with the adoption of the national policy framework Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy (HAIS). Previously homelessness had remained (at best) a secondary concern of Irish social policy, identified only occasionally as a priority issue in a patchwork quilt of unrelated policy initiatives: some local, some national, but rarely (if ever) a combination of both. Key to understanding this was the absence of quality, systematic and programme-based data, considered vital for effective public policy formulation and implementation in Ireland. The Homeless Agency Partnership, established under HAIS in Dublin in 2001, identified this deficit and set out to develop a data and information strategy to bridge this gap. This paper reviews the challenges and obstacles to establishing the Homeless Agency's data and information strategy, how these were tackled over the period, and the resulting changes. Adopting a critical perspective throughout and taking the phenomenon of homelessness as its key focus, the paper considers how the relationship between primary research, and policy making and implementation has changed since 2001.*

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[1]   The Homeless Agency was established in Dublin in 2001, having replaced the Homeless Initiative, which was established in 1996. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive formally replaced the Homeless Agency in July 2011. It is a local government shared-services arrangement established as part of the Dublin Homeless Consultative Forum and Management Group as per the provisions of Chapter 6 of the Housing Act, 2009. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive or the Dublin Homeless Consultative Forum and Management Group.

Introduction: Evidence in the Making: Homelessness, Data and the Role of Dublin's Homeless Agency since 2001

Prior to the adoption of *Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy* (HAIS) in 2001, Irish housing, health, welfare, education and justice policy in relation to homelessness was characterized by little or no integration and few attempts at inter-agency action (O'Sullivan, 2008). A major weakness identified by statutory and NGO actors seeking to influence policy decision-making on behalf of homeless households was the absence of sufficient data on the causes and consequences of homelessness. The adoption of HAIS in 2001 provided the first real opportunity to address this data deficit and to render decision-making on homeless policy development and imple-mentation more rigorous and outcome-focused.

To do so, the Homeless Agency (established under HAIS) used its data and informa-tion strategy to deliver on, and lead in the adoption of an evidence-based approach to the creation of homelessness policy in Dublin. Importantly, this has included an emphasis on local policy implementation in Dublin. Notably, HAIS directed that each Irish local authority assess the homeless situation in its area. Central to the delivery of this was the need to establish an agreed methodology for measuring homelessness. Core to this was how the legislative definition of homelessness under the Housing Act, 1988 allows for subjective judgement in that it includes a qualifying statement to the effect that classifying an individual as homeless is based on "the opinion of the (local) authority" (see Bergin *et al*., 2005).

It was subsequently concluded in an independent assessment of Irish homelessness policy that by allowing such a broad interpretation of homelessness between local authorities "there remains scope for the problem to be hidden in certain areas, and for responsibility to be shirked to some degree" (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2006, p. 54). In the meantime in Dublin, the Homeless Agency ensured that work commenced on developing an agreed methodology for measuring homelessness. This work built on lessons learned from a previous attempt at enumeration of homelessness conducted by the Homeless Initiative in Dublin in 1999 (named *Counted In*) (Homeless Initiative, 1999; Homeless Agency 2008a). The original methodology employed proved instru-mental in the subsequent development of the data and information strategy of the Homeless Agency from 2001, beginning with its first three-year action plan *Shaping the Future* (2001-2003). Since then, and over the course of two subsequent action plans (*Making it Home* 2004-2006 and *A Key to the Door*, 2007-2010), the Homeless Agency has worked to adopt, develop and adapt methodological approaches in order to generate evidence that is relevant to making and implementing policy in Dublin.

This work reached a peak of activity in 2008 with the commencement of three major, parallel projects to:

(a) Undertake the periodic *Counted In* survey to measure and describe the extent and nature of homelessness in Dublin using a more extensive survey instrument;

(b) Undertake a systems evaluation of all homeless services in Dublin to ascertain their coherence as models of service delivery; and

(c) Generate the first formal review of expenditure and finance using the established Central Government Value for Money methodology.

Subsequently, a submission to the Irish Government, based on the evidence generated and setting out the case for key operational changes in service delivery, led to the establishment of a change management process that in turn resulted in major changes to the configuration and delivery of services in Dublin. Since 2009, the statutory and voluntary (NGO) partners in Dublin have developed a change management process based on stakeholder consensus achieved using the evidence base itself (Homeless Agency, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d).

This has supported Homeless Agency partners' and stakeholders' reconfiguration of housing, homeless and support services into a new model of service delivery known as the *Pathway to Home* model (Homeless Agency, 2009). It is the final outcome of a process, underway since the establishment of the Homeless Agency, aimed at agreeing and adopting a model of service delivery for homeless, housing, support and care services in Dublin, and its agreement, under the Homeless Agency's final action plan *A Key to the Door* (2007), represents a major achievement.

Evidence in Action:
the Pathway to Home Model of Service Delivery

The establishment of the *Pathway to Home* model is based on ensuring the prevention of homelessness, as well as the swift and speedy exit from homelessness into housing with support (as required) for those experiencing it. It is unique in that it represents the first comprehensively evidence-based service model implementation plan for the delivery of housing, homeless, care and support services in Dublin. Indeed, without the evidence base required at each stage in the change management decision-making process over the period since 2009, the confidence of stakeholders in the Agency's ambition to eliminate long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Dublin would have quickly diminished.

Notably, the desired outcomes and overall performance of *Pathway to Home* will be measured on a person-centred basis under the original coordinating vision of the Homeless Agency; the desired outcomes are to prevent homelessness, to eliminate the need to sleep rough, and to eliminate long-term homelessness. To ensure that this happens, a customized data management system has been developed to

support the delivery of all service functions established under *Pathway to Home* – from information and advice services to prevent homelessness, through assessment and placement in emergency accommodation, and onto supported progress towards an exit into secure, affordable and appropriate housing (with support as required).

Called the PASS (Pathway Accommodation and Support System) system, it is a central element of the *Pathway to Home* model: it organizes the key work-flow processes affecting service-users at risk of and experiencing homelessness; it supports inter-agency cooperation and care, as well as case management activity focused on meeting the service-user's needs; and it ensures that critical real-time data at the level of the individual household is available to authorized service providers. In turn, this data supports decision-making and service responses that ensure the household's progression through emergency homeless services and towards an exit into independent living with support as required.

Filling the Evidence Gap: Data Strategy and Methods of the Homeless Agency since 2001

The key questions considered here are: how did the Homeless Agency get to this stage of service development in Dublin, and how established and sustainable is the evidence-based approach for future decision-making?

From the adoption of its first action plan *Shaping the Future* in 2001, the Homeless Agency recognized the significant evidence gap in data on homelessness. Without adequate data of sufficient quality, the planning, coordination and delivery of services in Dublin, and the measurement of their effectiveness and quality of outcome (in terms of both strategic policy objectives and service user outcomes) was likely to be based more on anecdote and assertion than evidence.

The Agency's aim to fill the evidence gap was not, however, uncontested or without opposition. Resistance was encountered from the very beginning among a number of internal and external stakeholders in the policy and service delivery areas of what has become known in the period since 2001 as the 'homeless sector' (Brownlee, 2008). Reasons for this resistance are specific to the nature and origins of different service providers (statutory or voluntary) and to the services they seek to provide across the spectrum of crisis intervention and accommodation provision, care and supports; they can be explained by one or a combination of the following:

• A reluctance to agree to the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) initiatives in homeless service provision, particularly the desired focus on accountability and transparency in the funding regime in terms of public expend-

iture in both statutory and voluntary agencies, as well as the service delivery compliance with performance management required of organizations under new forms of service level agreement;

- A failure to resource the process of gathering and reporting evidence effectively and equally. This ensured the continuation of a lopsided sector wherein larger organizations could afford the required investment in staff, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and service user participation, while some couldn't and some others simply didn't;

- A reaction against so-called 'bean-counting' methods (in use or proposed) that were perceived by some stakeholders, rightly or wrongly, as changing the culture of service provision for the worse in being over-bearing, inappropriate and displaying a fundamental disregard for the identity, privacy, and needs of the individual experiencing homelessness.

While resistance is legitimate for many reasons, the rationale behind it during different periods of change management since 2001 (and leading up to the reconfiguration of stakeholder organizations) has been less than consistent. More often than not, it has appeared to be self-serving, and it has not always focused on attaining the desired outcomes envisioned by the Homeless Agency. For many people working in the sector, the vision of the Homeless Agency is the ultimate organizing rationale, yet it is worth noting that it has been disparaged as overly ambitious and unrealistic by many. Recognising the contested reality of the day-to-day experience of homelessness, the Homeless Agency has been careful to ensure that a variety of evidence from all types of interested parties and actors is requested, generated, used and communicated.

This has been achieved through collaboration with academics, professional researchers, advocates, service providers, policy decision-makers and especially with service users themselves. Over time, this has generated confidence and success in methodological innovations focused on problem-solving and filling the evidence gap for decision-making purposes as well as for purposes of explanation, understanding and advocacy. Methods include:

- Empirical approaches to measuring the extent of homelessness using scientific approaches;

- The use of longitudinal panel data on pathways into, through and out of homelessness;

- The use of qualitative case-study evidence based on focus groups and one-to-one interviews;

- The use of service user testimonies and participant observation in fieldwork when evaluating services in terms of impact and overall outcomes;

- The use of individual submissions and communications reported on an almost daily basis through the various working groups and networks established by the Homeless Agency;

- The use of information submitted directly via email, the Agency's website and the phone.

Knowledge Transfer and Communication: The Role of Evidence in Policy Implementation in Dublin since 2007

Since the adoption of the final Homeless Agency action plan *A Key to the Door* in 2007, the implementation of national policy objectives to the end of 2010 at the local level in Dublin can be likened to driving over speed bumps while attempting to reach one's destination intact and on time. The speed bumps represent periods when the rate of the change management process, and progress in attaining the Homeless Agency's vision, had to be reduced in order to overcome hurdles and obstacles – mostly caused by inadequate information on, and evidence for, the effectiveness or otherwise of decision-making. The absence of verifiable and up-to-date real-time data at the level of the individual service user was identified as presenting a considerable challenge to the decision-making process. More importantly at the time, however, was the realization that the Agency's roadmap was incomplete, and that major decisions were required for the configuration of services into a coherent model of service delivery.

From 2007 on, as confidence in the role of evidence-based approaches became more established in the homeless sector in Dublin, the Homeless Agency's focus turned to the issue of knowledge transfer, and the dissemination and communication of findings and evidence relevant to homeless policy decision-making. Beginning in 2008, a sequence of primary evidence generating work projects led by the Homeless Agency resulted in rapid and significant knowledge transfer into both national policy decision-making and local policy implementation.

This was also facilitated by important early changes in the formulation of national policy made in response to recommendations arising from the aforementioned Fitzpatrick review to establish a National Homelessness Consultative Committee (NHCC), which the Homeless Agency was invited to be a part of. The NHCC proved to be a timely and successful innovation by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government as it helped to ensure an appropriate forum for the open discussion of policy options in response to the overall recommendations of the Fitzpatrick review. Importantly, the NHCC also established a Data Sub-group with an explicit focus on methodology and data strategy.

Table 1 below sets out key milestones in the transfer of research evidence into the development and implementation of national policy; the degree of national and local integration in terms of programme decision-making has increased significantly, especially in Dublin.

Table 1: Chronology of Key Milestones

Year	Evidence/ Knowledge Transfer	Policy Change and Development at National (N) and Local (L) levels
2006	Fitzpatrick Associates (2006) *Review of the Implementation of the Government's Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies* (Dublin: Stationery Office).	Early change made in the policy development infrastructure with establishment of NHCC (**N**)
2007	*A Key to the Door*, Homeless Agency action plan to 2010 (2007) setting out the vision of preventing homelessness, and eliminating long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Dublin	Impacted on debate on policy formulation in response to recommendations of Fitzpatrick Associates Review (2006) (**N**)
2007/8	Homeless Agency commissioned Impact Evaluations of Emergency and Transitional Accommodation	Policy statement *Pathways to Home* (2007) issued by Homeless Agency in response to evaluation findings and recommendations. Identifies three steps necessary for real and lasting implementation of recommendations: revise standards-based approach to delivery of services; create targeted programme of capital investment and development of appropriate revenue finance model; and establish holistic models of support in housing and care as well as ensuring access to mainstream services. (**N**) (**L**)
2008	*The Way Home*, *2008-2013* (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008)	The newly revised national homeless strategy was launched in August 2008.
2008	*Counted In* (Homeless Agency, 2008a) *Evaluation Series* (Homeless Agency, 2008b) *Review of Finances and Expenditure* (Homeless Agency, 2008c)	*Homeless Agency Submission to Government* (2008d) (**N**). This policy submission was the most comprehensive evidence-based analysis yet produced by the Homeless Agency as a direct input into the implementation of the national strategy, *The Way Home*, and into realizing the Agency's 2010 vision as stated in *A Key to the Door* action plan (Homeless Agency, 2007).
2009	*Pathway to Home* (Homeless Agency, 2009)	This policy document is the Homeless Agency's implementation plan for the major reconfiguration of services into one agreed model of service delivery arising from agreed actions based on recommendations for change made in the *Homeless Agency Submission to Government* (2008d) (**N**) (**L**)
2009	*Homeless Strategy National Implementation Plan* (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2009)	Published by the Government shortly after *Pathway to Home* (Homeless Agency, 2009), this national implementation plan sets out the specific actions required to meet the strategic aims of *The Way Home*, 2008-2013 (**N**) (**L**)

Strengthening the Evidence Base
on Homelessness: New Developments

The adoption of the revised national policy *The Way Home* (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008) is arguably the best example thus far of an evidence-based approach to homeless policy-making in Ireland. In addition to the poverty and health impact assessments that accompanied its formulation, it was followed by an innovative and detailed implementation plan (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2009) setting out key actions under each strategic aim. Throughout *The Way Home* and its implementation plan, there is an emphasis on the importance of information flow in monitoring key targets. Other commitments to the evidence-based approach are found in actions aimed at refining measurement systems; monitoring and evaluating progress in meeting long-term housing needs; sharing good practice; and ensuring consultation with, and the participation of, service users in the configuration of services.

The Way Home includes a data and information strategy as a key strategic aim. Priority actions here include commitments to establishing a national data system based on the PASS data system developed by the Homeless Agency under the *Pathway to Home* model of service delivery. PASS generates real-time data across Dublin on a service user's progress through services and towards their exit from homelessness into housing, with support as required. It also produces verified data on key trends in relation to the extent and duration of a person's experience of homelessness, their needs and how these are being met, and the speed with which they are progressing towards the sought-after exit from homelessness.

The PASS system has been in operation in Dublin since January 2011, and although resources have been required to address compliance and data verification issues and to maintain standards, PASS is undoubtedly a success and is now central to decision-making on assessment, placement, support and housing allocation in Dublin. It is the basis upon which the four Dublin local authorities will report their periodic assessment of the extent and nature of homelessness in Dublin in 2011, and as such will replace the *Counted In* survey method previously utilized for that purpose. In 2012 the PASS system will be rolled out on a national basis and preparation for this roll-out has already begun in central and local government.

Furthermore, a very significant commitment has been made to improving attempts to measure the extent of homelessness nationally. Since 2009, collaboration between the NHCC Data Sub-group and the Central Statistics Office – the national body responsible for the Irish Census – has resulted in a project to deliver the most comprehensive enumeration of persons who are, on Census Night (April 2011), resident in communal establishments which have been pre-identified by local authorities and the Department of Environment as providing shelter and temporary

emergency accommodation to homeless persons. Additionally, the CSO worked with Dublin's newly established joint Homeless Consultative Forum and Management Group to conduct a Rough Sleeper's Count in Dublin on Census Night 2011 using the methodology originally pioneered by the Homeless Agency in Dublin.

Notably, this will allow the CSO to produce a dedicated 'sub-population' report on the extent of homeless in Ireland as well as establishing comprehensive data on the characteristics of individuals and families experiencing homelessness on Census Night in Ireland.

Reflections on Evidence in Action: 'Going Forward' while Making Progress?

Since the end of 2010 the Homeless Agency's mandate as an administrative entity has ended, and it is undergoing a transition to new arrangements under the provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2009 that establishes the Dublin Joint Homeless Consultative Forum. The original timeline for delivering on its vision of ending the need to sleep rough as well as long-term homelessness in Dublin has passed without the vision being achieved in full. Nonetheless, major achievements have been made, and work towards the realization of the original vision continues and is ongoing while the organizing rationale of the vision remains unchanged. For example, the *Pathway to Home* model has been developed and is now being implemented, and the effectiveness of service configuration within the model is beginning to show results, most notably in new service provision for rough sleepers, and in the establishment of both the Dublin region local authorities' combined Assessment, Placement and Freephone Service, and the new single, integrated, client-based data and bed management system.

The *Pathway to Home* model is now the basis of the new statutory Homeless Action Plan (HAP) in Dublin. However, the economic context is extremely challenging in terms of its ongoing implementation with public expenditure cutbacks and service retrenchment. Furthermore, while there is still no actual shortage of housing stock, access to housing for low-income and excluded populations remains a very real challenge, and needs are currently unmet. The new HAP to 2013-called 'Delivering the Pathway to Home' aims to demonstrate how making surplus, unoccupied housing available to (formerly) homeless households is a realistic and cost-effective action for the near future.

There have been many lessons learned along the way; from the development and adoption of the Homeless Agency's first action plan right up to the establishment of the *Pathway to Home* model of service provision. Not least among them are lessons on how to overcome the challenges and obstacles to gathering evidence

on homelessness, and equally importantly ensuring the transfer of knowledge that bridges the gap between researcher and policy-maker. When dealing with home-lessness, it is always the homeless person that must be at the heart of the process of change, and this means applying methods and developing competencies that ensure that the consultation and participation of service-users are central to the decision-making process. This means using innovative methods that demonstrate the lived reality of people experiencing homelessness and that can verify the effec-tiveness and efficiency of services tackling and preventing homelessness.

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