

Homelessness

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The Housing Crisis

Homelessness is the most visible, and extreme, consequence of a dysfunctional housing system. And the housing system in Ireland today is certainly dysfunctional; indeed, it could be said to be an example of the perfect storm, with all three of the main housing sectors in crisis at the same time.

In the private housing market, demand greatly exceeds supply leading to an increase in house prices, particularly in the Dublin area, with a consequent increased demand on the private rented sector and increased pressure on the social housing sector.

The social housing sector has seen a 227 per cent increase in housing waiting lists since 1996.¹ Such an increase reflects a failure by government to devote adequate attention and resources to social housing. This neglect is not a consequence of the recession; it existed during the years of the economic boom when budget surpluses would have allowed significant spending on social housing had successive governments so wished.

In the private rented sector, demand far exceeds supply leading to an increase in rents, making them unaffordable for many people. This predominantly affects those on low incomes, and those dependent on Rent Supplement. Increasing numbers have found themselves either priced out of securing accommodation in the private rented sector or, if they are already tenants, facing the threat of eviction when they are unable to afford an increase in rent. No alternative accommodation is available and they inevitably become homeless.

In a dysfunctional housing system, attempts to rectify the situation in one sector lead to unintended, and negative, consequences in another. For example, attempts to dampen demand for private housing, to prevent another possible housing bubble, lead to increased demand in the private rented sector and to longer waiting lists for social housing. But both sectors are already incapable of meeting any extra demand.

And the outlook in regard to mortgage arrears

would suggest a red alert: in December 2014, just over 37,700 mortgage accounts in respect of 'principal dwelling houses' were in arrears for over 720 days (i.e., nearly two years or more).² These represented 34.2 per cent of all such mortgages in arrears. In addition, 15,386 buy-to-let mortgages were in arrears for longer than 720 days.³

How many of the homes with mortgage arrears will be repossessed by the financial institutions over the next few years? Each one repossessed potentially represents a family plunged into homelessness.

The Rise in Homelessness

Homelessness is officially defined as including not just people who are sleeping rough but those who are living in emergency hostels or bed and breakfast accommodation, and those living in insecure or temporary accommodation (for example, living temporarily with family members or friends).⁴

The number of homeless people in Ireland has been rising relentlessly. In Dublin, where the demand for homelessness services is greatest, 4,976 adult individuals accessed homeless accommodation in the course of 2014; more than one-third had never previously used such accommodation.⁵ The number of people identified as 'sleeping rough' in Dublin in the 'count' carried out in Dublin in winter 2014 was 168 – the number in the count for winter 2013 had been 139.⁶ In September 2014, Dublin City Council indicated that each day five households were presenting as homeless, and with an average of 32 new families presenting as homeless each month it would appear that, on average, one of the five newly-homeless households each day was a family.⁷

In the weeks leading up to Christmas 2014, as the number of emergency beds was clearly proving insufficient, and the numbers sleeping on the streets increased, the Government put in place a package of measures, including opening an extra 271 beds in Dublin.⁸ A few weeks after Christmas, however, all emergency beds in Dublin were once more full every night and the numbers sleeping on the street were again increasing.⁹ Is the Department of the Environment now willing to fund even more beds to meet current demand? If not, then the

suspicion arises that the provision of the additional 271 beds in December had more to do with the political embarrassment associated with the fact that a homeless man, Jonathan Corrie, had died in a doorway near Leinster House, than with the issue of rough sleeping itself.

The dramatic increase in the number of families becoming homeless is especially worrying. While not confined to Dublin, the problem is most severe in the capital.

In March 2015, there were 411 families, including 911 children, in emergency accommodation in Dublin.¹⁰ By contrast, in November 2013 there were 128 families in such accommodation;¹¹ in other words, the numbers had increased by over 220 per cent in just over a year. Even between December 2014 and March 2015, the number of families in emergency accommodation in Dublin rose by 25 per cent (increasing from 331 to 411).¹² In addition to the families who were homeless in Dublin, there were 60 families, including 143 children, in emergency accommodation in other parts of the country in March 2015.¹³

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In emergency accommodation, parents and their children have to live in one room. Parents do not have access to cooking facilities; there is no place for children to play and they cannot invite friends in. The move into emergency accommodation may have significant impact on children's education – they have no quiet place to study, and in some instances may have to make long (and expensive) journeys in order to remain in the school they have been attending. Focus Ireland has rightly called the situation of children living in emergency accommodation a 'child welfare crisis'.¹⁴

Emergency accommodation for families is now in very short supply. Whole families are being told that there is no accommodation available. I had a telephone call late at night from parents I know asking if they could sleep in my car with their child, as there was no accommodation available to them. One mother rang me late on a Friday night to say

that she and her young child had been told there was no accommodation for them. She was in great distress at the thought of sleeping on the street with her child all weekend. I made a phone call, booked her into a B&B for the weekend with a credit card. But I wondered: why did the State-funded homeless services, which have responsibility for responding to homelessness, not do the same, instead of telling her that there was no accommodation available? Parents are putting their children into care, or into the care of grandparents or extended family, so as to avoid them having to sleep on the street, as the parents themselves are having to do.

If homelessness is the visible tip of a housing crisis, rough sleeping is the visible tip of a homelessness crisis. The frustration level of homeless people is high and rising. To secure a bed for the night in Dublin, many homeless people have to ring the homeless services at 2 p.m. A computer will tell them that they are, perhaps, fifty-first in the queue to access an operator; 45 minutes later they may be told there are no beds available and asked to ring back at 4.30 p.m. When they do so, they go through the same procedure but may be told again that there are no beds available and to ring back at 10.30 p.m. At 10.30 p.m., having once more gone through the same procedure, they may then be told that there are no beds available that night. One 52 year-old man, having been told at 10.30 p.m. that there were – yet again – no beds available, broke into tears. A Good Samaritan brought him to a B&B and paid for him for the night.

Even if you get a bed for the night, you have to leave the hostel early in the morning and walk the streets all day long. You have to bring all your belongings with you, as there is no guarantee that you will get the same bed – or any bed – the following night.

Just as patients may have to wait on a trolley in an emergency department for several days in order to be admitted to a hospital ward, because beds are occupied by patients who are unable to secure a nursing home place, many temporarily homeless people are unable to access an emergency hostel bed because these are occupied by long-term homeless people who should be accommodated in 'six-month' hostel accommodation. It is estimated that there are at least 150 long-term homeless people who are forced to go on using emergency accommodation because of the lack of alternative, more appropriate, provision. They continue to face the daily anxiety that comes with the process

of trying to secure a 'one-night only' bed. And because these longer-term homeless people have to use emergency accommodation, many people who are temporarily homeless are unable to access an emergency bed.

Why the Increase in Homelessness?

Where are all these homeless people and families coming from? Most people's perception of homelessness is of people with a drug or alcohol addiction, or a mental health problem, or some combination of these problems. It is understandable how that perception arises. The only homeless people most members of the general public encounter are those they see in the city centre under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

But most homeless people do not have an addiction or a mental health problem. They are the invisible homeless. A major cause of homelessness has always been relationship breakdown. If a person's relationship with their spouse or partner, or with their parents, or with friends with whom they have been living, breaks down to the point where they have to leave their home, and if they do not have access to several thousand euro to pay for private rented accommodation, or have family or friends willing to offer them accommodation, they may quickly become homeless.

However, a major new cause of homelessness is an inability on the part of individuals or families to pay the increased rents being demanded in the private rented sector. Some of these are people who are working, but their wages are insufficient to allow them pay the increased rent; others are dependent on the Department of Social Protection's Rent Supplement, which was reduced by 28 per cent during the recession when rents were going down, but has not been increased now that rents are going up again. In Dublin, rents are now only 9 per cent lower than they were at the peak of the Celtic Tiger.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Department of Social Protection will not allow tenants who receive Rent Supplement to 'top-up' out of their own pocket, in order to cover the shortfall. If they discover that the tenants are doing so, they will discontinue the payment entirely and require the tenant to find alternative, cheaper, accommodation. But it is usually impossible to do so, as cheaper accommodation may not exist. So tenants do not tell the Department and just slip the 'top-up' into the landlord's hand, often leaving themselves short of money for

essentials, such as food. Since tenants do not reveal to officials what they have done, the Department can, correctly, state that it has no evidence of this happening!

In summary, most of the 'new homeless' have no addiction problem and some will have spent most of their lives working; they now find themselves in a situation where their accommodation is no longer available and no alternative accommodation can be found; they cannot afford to pay for accommodation in the private rented sector and they find themselves on a long waiting list for social housing. They end up homeless simply because their income cannot meet the cost of housing.

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Another significant aspect of the homelessness crisis is the absence of accommodation for some young people leaving the care system. In July 2014, Focus Ireland drew attention to 'a growing homeless crisis for young people leaving care',¹⁶ with some young care-leavers 'being forced to access homeless services directly from care at the age of 18'.

Focus reported that a significant percentage of the 140 young people who were accessing its 'aftercare support services' in Dublin, Waterford and Limerick were in a precarious situation regarding accommodation. Around 30 per cent were either using homeless services or were sofa-surfing – that is, staying short term on friends' or families' couches. A further 25 per cent were in private rented accommodation but some in this group were 'in serious arrears' with their rent, putting them at risk of losing their accommodation.¹⁷

While most young people look forward to their eighteenth birthday, as marking the start of their adulthood, many of those in care dread that landmark birthday and fear for their future, as they have little sense of assurance that they will be able to access and maintain affordable accommodation or receive the supports they need. If a child enters care at the age of twelve and remains there until eighteen, the State will spend in the region of

half a million euro on his or her care. However, if they are discharged from care without provision of appropriate accommodation, all the effort and money that has been expended is in grave danger of being negated, as the young person will be at high risk of spiralling downhill into addiction, crime and homelessness.

Another group who often end up in homelessness are those leaving prison. Almost every day, people are discharged from prison into homelessness. Many tell me that they were better off in prison, where at least they had three meals a day and a bed to sleep in, neither of which is available to them now that they are released. Indeed, some prisoners refuse temporary release over the Christmas period, as they know they will end up spending Christmas on the streets. One young man, when offered early release, declined; when asked why, he said he wanted to stay in prison to see what a Christmas dinner was like.

Every weekend, on my visits to the prisons, I meet people in jail who had been released just a few weeks earlier: they tell me they got out to nothing and soon they were on the route back to prison again. With only €5 in their pocket on release, no accommodation available, and nothing to do all day long, it was almost inevitable that they would drift back into the same lifestyle which had brought them into prison in the first place.

Another group affected by the lack of accommodation are asylum seekers who have been successful in their claim for the State's protection. Over 600 people who have been given refugee status or leave to remain in this country are stuck in direct provision accommodation because they are unable to find private rented accommodation at a price which they can afford.¹⁸ Having fled persecution or the threat of torture or death in their own home country, and now that the Irish State has officially recognised that it is unsafe for them to return to their country of origin, they find themselves unable to properly start a new life here as they cannot access independent accommodation.

Policy Responses

Even as the number of people who are homeless is skyrocketing and whole families are in danger of being unable to access even emergency accommodation, the Government's stated commitment to ending long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by the end of 2016 remains official policy.¹⁹ How does it intend to achieve this?

Local authorities have been given the resources to renovate the houses and apartments which, following the death or departure of the previous tenant, had been left lying empty because the authorities did not have the resources to bring the accommodation up to the standard required. This measure will result in a small, but of course welcome, increase in the stock of social housing available for rent.

Many local authorities have been reluctant to offer accommodation to homeless people, as perhaps they perceived them to be potentially 'difficult' tenants. However, in early December 2014, the Minister for the Environment instructed the four housing authorities in the Dublin area to devote 50 per cent of units available for allocation over the following six months to people who are homeless or have a disability.²⁰ Local authorities in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford have been instructed to allocate 30 per cent of units to these groups.²¹ This will undoubtedly have a positive impact on homelessness, if followed through.



Rough sleeping is the visible tip of a homelessness crisis

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The Government has undertaken to secure €3.8 billion to provide 35,000 new social housing units by 2020.²² Some of these may come on stream by 2016, but there is no guarantee that they will be offered to homeless people, as most local authorities have huge social housing waiting lists, which include, for example, families with dependent children, elderly people and people with disabilities who have been deemed eligible for social housing.

The Government, which has stated quite categorically that it is not in favour of rent control in the private rented sector (a measure which exists quite successfully in some other European countries), is nevertheless considering emergency rent control to prevent tenants being evicted

because of exorbitant rent demands. Tenants would have their rents fixed for up to three years and linked to the rate of inflation until housing supply catches up with demand, under plans being drawn up by the Minister for the Environment, Alan Kelly TD.²³

In May 2015, Government announced that it will introduce a number of new measures to try to tackle the mortgage arrears crisis. These include reform of provisions in relation to insolvency, with the promise that they will become more responsive and accessible. The proposed measures also include an expansion of the mortgage-to-rent scheme, under which borrowers in serious mortgage arrears may switch from owning their home to renting it as tenants of a local authority or a voluntary housing body. The take-up of this scheme to date has been very limited, as it is only an option for those who qualify for social housing, whose house is in negative equity and has a market value of less than €220,000 in the Dublin area or less than €180,000 in the rest of the State. The Government has promised that these property value thresholds will be increased and that ‘a number of other flexibilities will also be introduced, making the scheme more accessible’.²⁴

The Government is considering bringing in legislation to ban discrimination by landlords against tenants relying on Rent Supplement. In my own experience, the vast majority of landlords are currently refusing to accept new tenants from this group. Whether this is a situation that can be effectively addressed through anti-discrimination legislation is very much open to question. With a queue of potential tenants lining up to view every flat that is advertised, it would be almost impossible to prove that any particular tenant was discriminated against.

Most landlords refuse tenants dependent on Rent Supplement because they know that they will not be able to afford to pay the market rent being demanded, as the Rent Supplement is inadequate. Furthermore, in a situation where demand exceeds supply, landlords are unwilling to put up with the bureaucracy involved in taking on a tenant who will be dependent on Rent Supplement. A landlord is required to fill out forms, including providing their bank account details, and official documentation proving that they are the owners of the property being offered for rent, before the potential tenant’s application to the Department will be considered. There may then be a wait of up to six weeks before

any money is paid by the Department to the tenant for passing on to the landlord. Most landlords will simply not be bothered with such bureaucracy and delays and will offer the flat to a working tenant who can pay cash each week or month.

The Government also plans to introduce measures which will increase the supply of private houses, such as relaxing building regulations (while keeping standards high) and compelling the owners of unused land to put the land to constructive use. Increasing the supply of private housing will, in theory, make house purchase more affordable and enable those who may be currently stuck in private rented accommodation to buy their own home, and free up flats for those who are homeless and on low incomes. But these measures to increase private housing supply, while welcome, will take a significant time to have any impact on the shortfall in new building and ultimately to have the expected positive knock-on effects in terms of creating vacancies in the private rented sector into which homeless people might be able to move.

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Conclusion

Homelessness is now worse than at any time in recent memory. The number of single people who are homeless has been increasing dramatically over the past few years. More and more families are also becoming homeless. And emergency accommodation for homeless individuals and families is insufficient to meet the need. Many of the ‘new homeless’ have never been homeless before, and until this current crisis would never for a moment have thought that they could become homeless.

Today, the level of frustration and despair amongst homeless people is also growing as they see the two primary escape routes out of homelessness – into social housing or private rented housing – effectively blocked.

While most of the measures so far announced by the Government in response to the crisis are welcome, and will alleviate the problem of homelessness in time, all the evidence suggests that the goal of eliminating long-term homelessness and

rough sleeping by the end of 2016 is not simply achievable with the policies and funding currently in place.

Notes

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