
Ending Homelessness in Ireland: Ambition, Adversity, Adaptation?

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› **Abstract** *In 2013, the Irish Government launched a plan to end long term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Ireland by the end of 2016. This ambitious target will not be achieved, and indeed, the extent of homelessness, particularly family homelessness, is at unprecedented levels. This paper attempts to explain why homelessness, particularly long-term homelessness, has increased rather than decreased in Ireland over the period 2013 and 2016. The paper provides an overview of the evolution of homelessness policy in Ireland, with a focus on the period from 2013 to 2016. The various initiatives and recalibrations of policy over the period are examined in detail, as are trends in the extent and dynamics of homelessness. The paper concludes that despite the many successful initiatives preventing homelessness and ensuring sustainable exists from homelessness, the unremitting flow into homelessness, driven primarily by a dysfunctional private rented sector and a lack of social housing, has resulted in unprecedented numbers of homeless households in shelters, hostels and commercial hotels at the end of 2016.*

› **Keywords** *Ending homelessness, Ireland, trends in homelessness, housing markets*

Introduction: Ambition

In February 2013, the then Minister for Housing and Planning, Jan O’Sullivan, launched a **Homelessness Policy Statement**.¹ A relatively brief document, it promised to end long-term homelessness, which was later defined as living in emergency accommodation for longer than six months, and the need to sleep rough in Ireland by the end of 2016.² It proposed to end homelessness by adopting a ‘housing-led’ approach, which was defined as “the rapid provision of secure housing, with support as needed to ensure sustainable tenancies” (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013, p.2).³ Thus, Ireland, like many other jurisdictions, set out to end particular forms of homelessness and to put in place measures to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first instance, or from reoccurring. It was a particularly ambitious objective given the contraction of the Irish economy from 2008, and in late 2010, the Irish Government was forced to secure a loan – formally known as a ‘Programme of Financial Support’ – from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. As part of the loan agreement and underpinned by earlier and later treaties, the amount of public spending on capital projects such as social housing was restricted.

To assist the Minister in monitoring and measuring progress towards ending homelessness in 2016, a three-person Homelessness Oversight Group was established, comprising a senior social policy academic, a retired former senior civil servant and a senior financial services professional from the private sector. Some 10 months later, in December 2013, the oversight group produced its first and, ultimately, its only report (Homelessness Oversight Group, 2013) as it was effectively made redundant by a change in the Minister with responsibility for homelessness, with Alan Kelly replacing Jan O’Sullivan in July 2014. The report noted that it was difficult,

¹ The report drew in turn on an overview of homelessness policy in Ireland and internationally by the current author, entitled *Ending Homelessness: A Housing Led Approach* (O’Sullivan, 2012).

² This was not the first strategy that sought to end homelessness in Ireland: in 2008, a national homeless strategy entitled *The Way Home: A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008-2013* was published and committed to eliminating long-term homelessness by 2010. The Way Home was published following a detailed review of two earlier strategies – *Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy* (2000) and a *Homeless Preventative Strategy* (2002). These strategies were independently reviewed in 2006 and the recommendations from this review informed The Way Home Strategy (see O’Sullivan, 2008 for a detailed overview). The date chosen for ending homelessness, 2016, was symbolically significant in Ireland as it marks the 100th anniversary of what is commonly known as the Easter Rising, an armed insurrection against British colonial power, which led to further conflict between 1919 and 1921, ending in British withdrawal from the southern part of Ireland.

³ In addition to the national Homelessness Policy Statement, Local Authorities are required under the Housing Act, 2009 to draw up Homeless Action Plans; the first set of plans drawn up covered the years 2009-2013 and the second set of plans cover the period 2014-2017.

in the absence of robust data, to determine if progress was being made in reducing long-term homelessness, but from the limited data available to them, the rate of reduction was “too little and at too slow a pace” (2013, p.10) to achieve the policy objective of ending long-term homelessness by 2016. Despite this caveat, it was noted in the report that, given the relatively limited scale of long-term homelessness in Ireland, which they estimated at between 1,500 and 2,000, the target of ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough by 2016 was realistic.⁴

The idea of ending homelessness has, in the words of Baker and Evans (2016, p.25) “gone from politically unthinkable to politically mainstream.” In a review of over 60 plans and strategies in North America, Europe and Australia that aim to end homelessness, it was noted that there was little consistency in how ending homelessness was operationalized, but that the majority had a broadly ‘functional zero’ definition (Turner *et al.*, 2016). That is a definition that does not seek to completely eliminate homelessness, an ‘absolute zero approach’, but rather aims to ensure “there are enough services, housing and shelter beds for those who need it. In this approach, emergency shelters are meant to be temporary and the goal is permanent housing” (2106, p.5). The definition set out in Ireland in 2013 was broadly a ‘functional zero’ approach, in that ‘ending homelessness’ is ending long-term shelter use and the need to sleep rough. However, it is now clear that the ambitious target of ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Ireland by the end of 2016 will not be achieved. Indeed, the extent of homelessness, particularly family homelessness, is at unprecedented levels.

This paper aims to provide an overview how the initial optimism that long-term homelessness could be ended was eroded to the point that the most recent iteration of homelessness policy no longer contains a specific time-frame to end homelessness. Instead, it contains a commitment to ending the use of commercial hotels for homeless families by mid-2017, to minimise the need to sleep rough by providing

⁴ Shortly after publication of the Homeless Policy Statement, an assessment of the need for social housing – a periodic count of the demand for social housing – took place, with 89,872 households assessed as qualifying for social housing support (Housing Agency, 2013). Of these, 2,808 households were residing in an institution, emergency accommodation or a hostel, with 1,937 of these households located in Dublin (Housing Agency, 2013). Detailed analysis of the Dublin figure of 1,937 demonstrated that when rough sleepers and those who were accessing emergency accommodation but had not completed an assessment of housing were included, the estimate for the extent of homelessness in Dublin in early 2013 was 2,867 (Feely and Maphosa, 2015). This was a 48% increase on the assessment figure and if this is applied nationally, a figure of 4,156 is arrived at. Thus, at the time of the publication of the Homeless Policy Statement, a reasonably accurate estimate of the extent of homelessness in Ireland was in the region of 4,150 homeless adult households. If the profile for Dublin was applied nationally, just over 70% of the homeless were male, the average age was 37, and three-quarters were of Irish origin.

sufficient emergency shelter beds and to aid households exiting emergency accommodation by enhancing financial support to access housing. Thus, the ambition to end homelessness was replaced with more modest proposals to reduce the use of inappropriate emergency accommodation, particularly for families, and to strengthen mechanisms that would enhance supply and facilitate exits from homelessness.

Implementing the Homeless Policy Statement: Plans, reports, strategies

In May 2014, a detailed **Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness** (2014) was published. The response contained 80 specific actions that were required to end homelessness by the end of 2016. On 4 December 2014, a special summit on homelessness was held in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (the lead Government Department with responsibility for homelessness policy) following the death of a homeless man in the vicinity of the Irish Parliament. The outcome of the summit was an **Action Plan to Address Homelessness**, which identified a further 20 actions aimed at ending homelessness, giving a total of 100 actions. These 100 action points ranged from identifying vacant housing units, including NAMA⁵ units, and making them available for homeless and other vulnerable households; prioritizing homeless households for social housing allocations; putting in place protocols in relation to discharge from institutions; and securing rent supplements for homeless households.⁶

In November 2014, a **Social Housing Strategy** was launched by the Government. This provided for funding to allow Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to build, acquire or lease 35,000 units of social housing over a six-year period, and to provide new social housing supports for eligible households utilising the private rented sector. In April 2016, **Laying the Foundations: Housing Actions Report** was launched by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2016). It outlined the 31 actions that were underway to address the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland. Five of the actions related to homelessness. They were: the provision of rapid-build (prefabricated) housing for 153 homeless families by the end of 2016; to maintain the 'Housing First' approach to ending rough sleeping; directing Local Authorities to provide up to 50% of social housing allocations to homeless families; to enhance the levels of rent support for homeless households;

⁵ The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) was established by the Irish Government in 2009 as a 'Bad Bank'. At the end of March 2016, NAMA had identified 6,637 units on its books as suitable for social housing and had delivered just over 2,000 for social housing (some 2,450 units were deemed unsuitable or were in locations where there was no demand).

⁶ Reviews of progress in achieving the 100 actions points are published each quarter. The review for Quarter 2 2016 shows that less than half the actions were outstanding.

and to provide substantially increased levels of central government funding to local government to ensure adequate services. It also noted that from November 2015, legislation governing the private rented housing sector had been changed to permit rent increases every two years instead of one, and that the period of time that a landlord must give to a tenant to vacate their dwelling after a valid notice of termination was served was substantially increased.⁷

New government: more reports

While awaiting the formation of new Government following the general election in February 2016, where a Christian Democrat and others minority government was eventually formed in early May 2016, an indication of the degree to which housing and homelessness were firmly the priority for all political parties was the rapid establishment of an **All-Party Committee on Housing and Homelessness** in mid-April. Having taken submissions from a raft of interest groups, they produced a 157-page report on 17 June (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2016). On homelessness, it recommended that the Government increase the social housing stock by an average of 10,000 units per year for five years; increase security of tenure and protection from evictions for tenants in the private rented sector; reinstate the policy of ring-fencing 50% of local authority allocations to the priority list in Dublin and other areas where homelessness is acute, which was introduced in January 2015, but had lapsed in April 2016; ensure that no homeless shelters are closed until alternative accommodation is available elsewhere; that Housing First should be significantly expanded; and that there should be enhanced cooperation between homeless services and mental health services.

In May 2016, a new Programme for Partnership Government was announced, which stated that “[i]t is not acceptable in 2016 to have families living in unsuitable emergency accommodation or to have people sleeping rough on our streets” (Government of Ireland, 2016, p.19). The Programme committed to publish, within 100 days, a new Action Plan for Housing, to increase the rent limits on the rent supplement scheme and to increase the social housing output substantially. The document also promised that the Action Plan on Housing would contain specific

⁷ In addition, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), which advises the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) on strategic policy issues relating to sustainable economic, social and environmental development in Ireland, published four detailed reports on aspects of housing policy in Ireland: *Social Housing at the Crossroads: Possibilities for Investment, Provision and Cost Rental* (2014a), *Homeownership and Rental: What Road is Ireland On?* (2014b), *Ireland’s Private Rental Sector: Pathways to Secure Occupancy and Affordable Supply* (2015a) and *Housing Supply and Land: Driving Public Action for the Common Good* (2015b), and the Housing Agency, which supports Local Authorities, Approved Housing Bodies and central Government in their housing functions published a *National Statement of Housing Supply and Demand 2014 and Outlook for 2015-2017* (2015).

measures to prevent homelessness and to end the use of hostels and bed and breakfast type accommodation as long-term emergency accommodation, primarily through the provision of rapid-build housing (2016).

On 19 July, and within 100 days of the formation of the Government, an **Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness**, entitled '**Rebuilding Ireland**' (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2016a), was launched. The Plan stated that the "long-term solution to the current homelessness issue is to increase the supply of homes" (2016, p.33). The Plan promised to limit the use of hotels for accommodating homeless families by mid-2017, to increase Housing First tenancies in Dublin from 100 to 300 by 2017; to extend Tenancy Sustainment services across the country; and to increase the amount of rent subsidy available to homeless households. On 22 September 2016, an elaboration of the homelessness actions was published, which, in addition to the earlier actions, promised to accelerate the rapid-build programme to ensure the provision of 1,500 units by the end of 2018, and the addition of 200 emergency beds for rough sleepers by the end of 2016. It is of note that the **Rebuilding Ireland** action plan does not contain a commitment to ending homelessness, in contrast to the 2008 and 2013 strategies. Table 1 provides a chronology of these various reports.

Table 1. Homeless Strategies, Action Plans and Reports, 2013-2016

	Date		Minister Responsible
Homelessness Policy Statement	February	2013	Jan O'Sullivan
Homelessness Oversight Group Report	December	2013	Jan O'Sullivan
Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness	May	2014	Jan O'Sullivan
Progress Reports on the Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness	Q3 onwards	2014	Jan O'Sullivan
Social Housing Strategy 2020	November	2014	Alan Kelly
Action Plan to Address Homelessness	December	2014	Alan Kelly
Stabilising Rents, Boosting Supply	November	2015	Alan Kelly
Independent Review of Homeless Services (Mazars)	December	2015	Alan Kelly
Laying the Foundations: Housing Actions Report	April	2016	Alan Kelly
All-Party Committee on Housing and Homelessness Report	June	2016	
Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness	July	2016	Simon Coveney
Rebuilding Ireland: Homelessness Pillar	September	2016	Simon Coveney

What is evident from these multiple reports is the significant degree of overlap, with the provision of social housing and measures to address rent inflation in the private rented sector central in all reports. While many of the reports contain 'something

new' – for example, rapid-build housing or an extension of the Housing First project – ultimately, the reports conclude that increasing the supply of housing, both public and private, is fundamental to reducing homelessness. The sundry plans provide slightly different timelines and output figures, and revisions of earlier objectives, but from the enormous pile of reports, the core recommendation of increasing supply is the common denominator.

Trends in Homelessness: Adversity

To measure progress in ending homelessness, from January 2014, at the end of each quarter, local or municipal authorities, who have primary statutory responsibility for the provision of homeless services, were required to produce **Performance Reports** providing data on a range of indicators, including the numbers in emergency accommodation for more than six months and the numbers exiting homeless services to independent accommodation. These authorities were also required to produce detailed quarterly **Financial Reports** outlining the distribution of funding to preventative, emergency, long-term supported and other services.

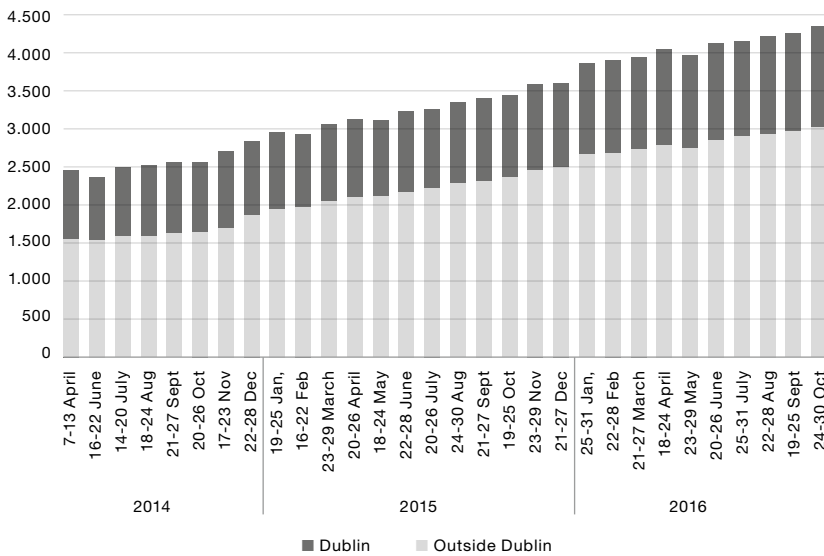
In addition, to address the data deficit highlighted in the first report of the Homelessness Oversight Group, the PASS (Pathway Accommodation & Support System), established in Dublin as a bed management system, was rolled out nationally and allowed for a **Monthly Report** on the number of households in designated homeless accommodation, starting in April 2014 and broken down by gender, age and nature of accommodation to be produced. While not a comprehensive figure of the extent of homelessness in Ireland, in that it only captures those households in designated homeless accommodation, it nonetheless provides timely, detailed, reliable and consistent data.⁸ These three sources of data have allowed, for the first time ever in Ireland, the monitoring of trends in homelessness and of the extent and nature of the now considerable expenditure.

⁸ This data provides information on households in homelessness accommodation funded under Section 10 of the Housing Act, 1988. It does not, therefore, include homelessness services not funded under Section 10, but it is estimated that only a very small number of services with approximately 110 beds do not, for various reasons, receive such funding. In addition, from 1 January 2015, accommodation for those escaping from domestic violence (ETHOS category 4) that was funded via Section 10 – a total of 21 residential services with a bed capacity of approximately 250 – the annual funding of just over €2.1m was transferred to the statutory Child and Family Agency, and such services have not been enumerated in the monthly data since that date (see Mayock *et al.*, 2013 for further information on services and funding of such services in Dublin). Neither does the data include the 3,200 adult individuals and over 1,000 children in temporary accommodation centres for those seeking asylum, which are managed by the Reception and Integration Agency (ETHOS category 5) at a cost of €53.2m in 2014.

Entering homelessness

The data (see Figure 1) show that nationally, number of adult homeless persons in designated homelessness accommodation increased by over 80% from June 2014 to October 2016 – an increase of nearly 100% in Dublin and 60% outside of Dublin. This rapid increase in entries to homelessness exacerbated a situation where the capacity of designated homelessness accommodation had already reached saturation point, and by October 2016, nearly 50% of all homeless adults nationally were being accommodated in commercial hotels, with a figure of 55% in Dublin.⁹

Figure 1. Number of Homeless Adults (in Emergency Services), April 2014-June 2016



Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2016) Monthly Homelessness Reports.

⁹ Twice a year, a rough sleeper count takes place in Dublin, and since 2010 the minimum number of rough sleepers enumerated at these counts has averaged 100. On average, nearly 80% of rough sleepers are male and a significant minority are non-Irish nationals. As part of Census 2016, rough sleeper counts were undertaken in urban centres on Census Night, 24 April: the majority of areas recorded no rough sleepers; 25 rough sleepers were recorded outside of Dublin and 102 in Dublin (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2016).

A significant contributor to the increase in homelessness is the number of families entering homeless services for the first time. Their number increased in Dublin from 264 in June 2014 to 1,026 in October 2016 – the majority accommodated in commercial hotels; the number outside Dublin increased from 81 to 152.¹⁰ The number of families entering homelessness for the first time ever increased in Dublin each month from an average of 15 a month in 2013 to an average of 32 in 2014 and of 62 in 2015. By the third quarter of 2016, the average per month had increased to 78 new families.

In addition to the 4,377 homeless adults at the end of October 2016, there were a further 2,470 child dependants of these adults. As a result of the increase in the number of families that are homeless, particularly in Dublin, 46% of homeless adults in Dublin, and 34% outside of Dublin, are female. If current trends continue to the end of the 2016, some half of the homeless adults will be female. Given that the aforementioned assessment of the extent of homelessness in 2013 found that 29% of the known homeless population were female, this feminization of homelessness has occurred in a remarkably short period.

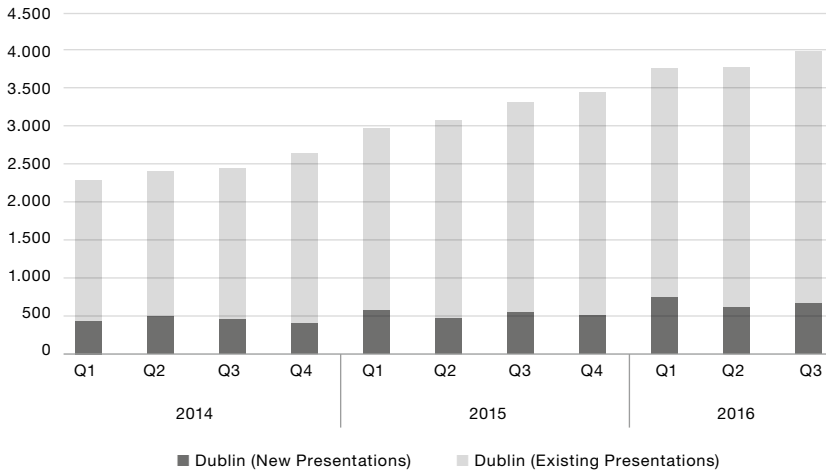
Exiting homelessness

While the numbers of homeless households increased each month between June 2014 and October 2016, a significant number also exited homelessness. For example, in Dublin 1,236 households exited homelessness to a tenancy in the private rented sector, social housing or long-term supported accommodation in the first nine months of 2016.¹¹ However, in the same period 2,039 households presented to services as newly homeless. In addition to the 2,039 new households presenting as homeless to services in the first nine months of 2016 in Dublin, there were a further 3,338 repeat presentations in Quarter 3 2016 (see Figure 3), in that they had presented in earlier quarters but were still in homelessness services in Q3 2016. Consequently, the number of households who, on the last day of the quarter, had been in emergency accommodation for more than six months – the long-term homeless – increased from 48% at the end of Q1 2014 to 65% at the end of Q3 2016 in Dublin.

¹⁰ The placement of homeless families in Bed and Breakfast type accommodation in Dublin started in 1990 when, during that year, five families were placed in such accommodation (Moore, 1994). By 1999, just over 1,200 families were placed over the year (Houghton and Hickey, 2000). No accurate numbers are available since that year until recently, but it would appear that the number of families presenting as homeless declined until the recent upsurge over the past two years. The negative consequences for children living in such accommodation have been documented in a number of research reports (Halpenny *et al.*, 2001; 2002).

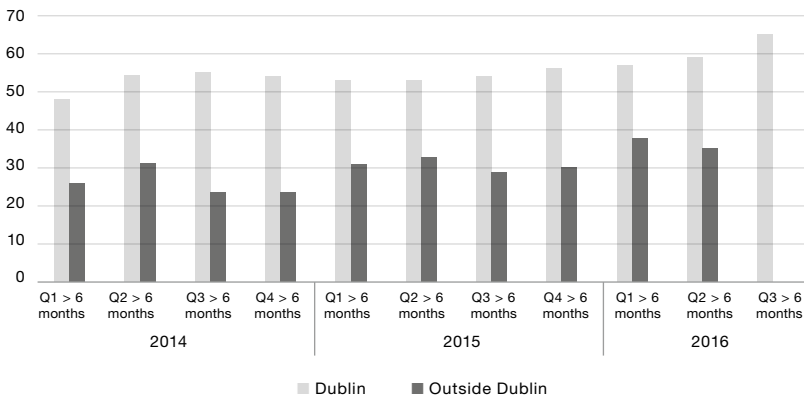
¹¹ A further 619 households exited homelessness in Dublin in the same period – primarily to insecure accommodation with friends or family or for various medical treatments or imprisonment, and these are likely to be episodically homeless. See Mayock *et al.* (2015) for a detailed qualitative analysis of the experiences of single homeless women repeatedly entering and exiting homeless services from prison and psychiatric hospitals.

Figure 2. Adults Using Emergency Homeless Services in Dublin, Q1 2014 – Q3 2016



Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2016) Local Authority Regional Performance Reports.

Figure 3. Adult Individuals in Emergency Accommodation for more than Six Months

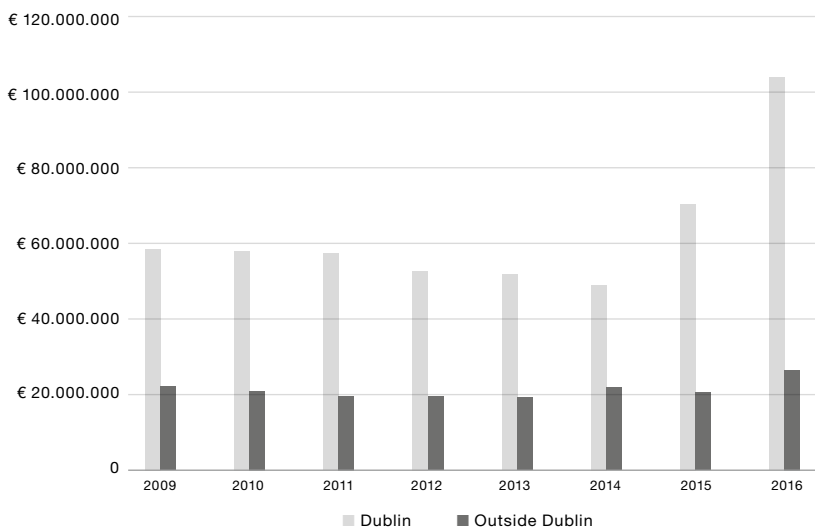


Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2016) Local Authority Regional Performance Reports.

Expenditure on Homeless Services

Due to the growth in households entering homelessness, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of funding for homeless services being expended on privately-owned emergency accommodation. In Dublin in 2015, 65% of funding went on emergency accommodation; outside of Dublin it was 50%. In Dublin, by the final quarter of 2015, 54.5% of expenditure on emergency accommodation was on private emergency accommodation; it was 31.4% outside of Dublin. This reflected the fact that accommodation provided by designated homeless service providers had reached capacity, particularly for homeless families, and that authorities were increasingly dependent on securing accommodation in hostels, B&Bs and other private accommodation. In Dublin alone, it is estimated the four Local Authorities and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government will spend in excess of €100m on homeless services in 2016 – an increase of €30m on expenditure in 2015. Outside of Dublin, expenditure of over €26m is estimated – an increase of €3m over the previous year (see Figure 4) (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2016b).

Figure 4: Expenditure on Homelessness Services (Section 10 and Local Government), 2009-2016



Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2016) Local Authority Regional Financial Reports.

In addition to Section 10 funding, various service providers receive funding under Section 39 of the Health Act, 2004, which for 2016 will be in the region of €25m.¹² It is difficult to give an overall figure for the income generated by NGOs working in the homelessness sector from fundraising. However, it is not inconsiderable. For example, the Dublin Simon Community, established in 1969, received statutory funding in the amount of just over €7m in 2015; donations and other income amounted to €5.5m. Thus, for every euro received from statutory grants, they generated a further €0.79 from fundraising and other events (Dublin Simon Community, 2016).

Structure of homeless services

The rapid rise in expenditure on homelessness services reflects the demand-led nature of homelessness, and the nature and structure of homelessness services largely reflects the mission of individual non-governmental agencies and the availability of beds in commercial hotels and B&Bs. No local or municipal authority in Ireland operates homelessness accommodation services directly. Historically, most Local Authorities made provision for homeless men in the casual wards of county homes (former workhouses), but they began to be phased out from the mid-1960s (Doherty, 1982). Dublin City Council was unique in that it provided hostel accommodation for homeless men and women, but this service was contracted out to an NGO in 2014. Thus, the nature and type of homelessness service in Ireland is determined in part by the origins and ethos of various NGOs and, more recently, by their funding arrangements with Local Authorities. Being dependent on a disparate range of providers, often with little in common with one another, and seeking to develop services via funding protocols limits the ability of policy-makers to develop coherent strategies. It has also led to a relatively small number of agencies providing most services – for example, 4 NGOs received nearly 50% of all section 10 funding nationally – which poses considerable risk for these agencies if the funding model were to change, and risk for the State as it becomes increasingly dependent on these bodies.

¹² This allows the statutory Health Service Executive (HSE) to provide funding to agencies providing 'similar or ancillary services' to the HSE. It is estimated that 57 agencies providing housing and homelessness services receive Section 39 funding (McInerney and Finn, 2015).

Adaptation

As noted in Table 1, a plethora of action plans and strategies have been formulated and summits convened to respond to the increase in homelessness. Expenditure has also increased. The objective of ending long-term homelessness by the end of 2016 was quietly removed from policy documents and statements and replaced with an adaptive strategy to manage the extent of homelessness through more vigorous gatekeeping and enhancing exit options. The following section looks in more detail at several specific initiatives that aim to prevent homelessness and to provide exit options for those in emergency accommodation.

Social housing supports and exiting homelessness

As noted in the introduction, one of the consequences of the economic downturn was the virtual cessation of the building of social housing units by Local Authorities. By 2015, only 75 units were built nationally – the lowest number in the history of the State, down from nearly 5,000 in 2008. Similarly, due largely to changes in the funding regime, the output from Approved Housing Bodies declined from nearly 2,000 units in 2008 to 401 in 2015. Local Authorities did acquire a further 1,099 units from the private market to make available as social housing and operated a social housing leasing scheme that provided a further 1,500 units in 2015. In addition, at the end of 2015, social housing support was provided via an increasingly bewildering array of schemes: the Rental Accommodation Scheme (circa 20,000 households), the Housing Assistance Payment (circa 6,000) and the Rent Allowance system (circa 62,000). Aside from the 476 units built by Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies, all remaining units are being sourced from the private housing market, with little or no additionality relative to demand. The Social Housing Strategy (2014) and the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan (2016) respectively committed to providing 35,600 and 47,000 social housing units. These units will comprise new builds and the purchasing and leasing of existing units of housing. The Rebuilding Ireland plan envisages that less than half of the target will be met by new builds; thus, the remaining units will have to come from the already stretched existing stock of housing. Many of these are likely to come from the private rented sector – in some cases households that qualify for social housing may simply find that their landlord has changed to an Approved Housing Body or Local Authority; in other cases, this may result in the displacement of one household to facilitate another.

As noted at the beginning of the article, when the Homelessness Policy Statement was published in early 2013, nearly 90,000 households qualified for social housing supports and were waiting for a dwelling to become available. By early 2016, the number of qualifying households had increased to nearly 140,000 and, in response

to high levels of refusals of housing in some authorities for various reasons, it was announced in July 2016 that Choice Based Lettings¹³ would be introduced in every Local Authority to cut down on the rates of refusal.

For homeless families in particular, social housing provided by Local Authorities or Approved Housing Bodies is the preferred option, given their experience of instability in the private rented sector. The Rebuilding Ireland plan envisages that by 2021, some 5,000 units of social housing will be constructed, but between 2016 and 2019 fewer than 10,000 units will be constructed; the remaining units will be purchased or leased from the private market. Thus, in the short to medium term, the construction of new social housing will have only a limited impact on homelessness; in the absence of Directives compelling Local Authorities to provide a specific percentage of allocations to homeless households (see below), and given the number of households assessed as qualifying for social housing, it is difficult to see social housing having a significant impact on reducing homelessness.

Social housing allocations

Following the publication of the Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness (2014), the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government noted in a Circular¹⁴ to all Local Authorities that only 4.1% of all social housing allocations by Local Authorities were made to homeless households. The Circular reminded Local Authorities that the Minister had the power to issue directions to Local Authorities as to how an allocation scheme should operate¹⁵ and that he had decided not to exercise this power but would review the position at the end of the year. In January 2015, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government decided to utilize his power, and issued a Directive to the four Dublin Local Authorities to the effect that 50% of dwellings available for allocation for the period 27 January to 26 July 2015 should be allocated to homeless and other vulnerable households, and that 30% should be allocated in the other urban centres

¹³ Choice Based Lettings (CBL) originated in Delft in the Netherlands in the late 1980s and sought to allocate social housing on the basis of qualifying tenants bidding for a desired unit, thus displacing the more common model of bureaucratically matching properties with those households on the waiting list. It was subsequently adopted in Britain and Australia (see Pawson and Hulse, 2011 for further details).

¹⁴ Circular Housing 45/2014, Housing Allocation Schemes: Homeless and other Vulnerable Groups, 23 October 2014.

¹⁵ Section 22(17)(a) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

of Galway, Cork, Waterford and Limerick.¹⁶ The Directive was reissued in August 2015,¹⁷ extending the 50% allocation for homeless and other vulnerable households from 7 August 2015 to 31 January 2016, and again on 1 February to the end of April 2016, but it was not renewed thereafter.

On 22 April 2016, the Chief Executives of the four Dublin Councils wrote to the Minister to request that the Directive not be extended. They argued that “[i]t is our view that this requirement is now having the effect of encouraging some households who are in housing need and who are awaiting social housing to enter the ‘homeless’ system in the mistaken belief that this will hasten the allocation to them of a social housing unit” (Keegan, 2016). In February, the Housing Agency, at the request of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, conducted a review of the impact of the Directive, and based on the Housing Agency’s analysis, a decision was taken not to extend it again. The Minister stated that the report “concluded that the prioritised allocation of social housing to homeless and other vulnerable households came at a cost to other households on the social housing waiting lists.”¹⁸ As noted earlier, the Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness, which reported in June 2016, recommended reintroducing the Directive. However, the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness did not specifically address or debate this recommendation; rather, it claimed that the expanded supply of social housing that the plan aimed to deliver would address the issue (2016, p.107).

At the time of writing, the review of the Directive conducted by the Housing Agency has not been published, and therefore it is not possible to assess in full the rationale for the non-renewal of the Directive. However, based on evidence from other jurisdictions, we know that it is difficult to substantiate claims that policies that aim to move households out of homelessness have the perverse effect of drawing households into homelessness in an effort to acquire the scarce resource of permanent social housing. For example, we have some comparative material to reflect on from

¹⁶ Eligible households are those: i) in an institution, emergency accommodation or a hostel (i.e., a homeless household within the meaning of Section 2 of the Housing Act 1988); ii) with an accommodation requirement arising from an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment (i.e., households where one of its members has a disability and, as such, is deemed to be a vulnerable household); and iii) that were in accommodation unsuitable for the household on exceptional medical or compassionate grounds (i.e., including households that were subject to domestic violence and young people leaving state care and as such deemed to be a vulnerable household). In the first Circular, households had to be eligible on or before 1 December 2014. Between February 2015 and October 2015, 612 Local Authority houses were allocated to homeless families (Housing Agency/Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2016).

¹⁷ Circular Housing 31/2015, Housing Allocation Scheme: Ministerial Direction, 12 August 2015.

¹⁸ Dail Eireann, Debates, 26 May 2016, 141.

the case of what became known as the 'Dinkins deluge', where in the late 1980s, the City of New York substantially increased the rate at which they moved families out of homeless accommodation and into subsidized housing. As the rate of exits to subsidised accommodation in New York increased, the numbers of families in emergency accommodation and hotels doubled and the conventional wisdom was that "families found the prospect of getting a subsidised apartment so enticing that they entered homeless shelters *en masse*" (Cragg and O'Flaherty, 1999, p.378). Following the conventional wisdom, the number of exits to subsidized housing was reduced, but family homelessness increased.

Cragg and O'Flaherty (1999), in their detailed analysis of the policy change, found that the prospect of subsidized accommodation did draw some families into homeless accommodation but that what caused the real increase in the number of homeless families was the reduction in the number of exits to subsidized accommodation; if the City of New York had maintained the increased rate of subsidised exits, the number of homeless families would have been almost eliminated by 2004. They concluded that "it takes placing at least seven families into subsidized housing to draw one family into the shelter system" (1999, p.379). They also observe that in conditions where subsidized housing is rationed and where the demand is significantly higher than the availability, some queue jumping will occur, but reducing the number of families in homelessness may be an overriding consideration.¹⁹

Preventing homelessness: tenancy protection

The substantial increase in homelessness, noted earlier in the paper, has occurred despite the introduction of a Tenancy Protection Service in June 2014. This service allowed for an enhanced rent supplement if the household was at risk of homelessness. Between June 2014 and September 2016, just over 9,000 contacts were made with the service, with just over half the contacts identified as being at risk of homelessness. Just over 2,100 households were provided with a rent enhancement or uplift and only 39 households that contacted the service entered homeless services. The service allows applicants to access an enhanced rent supplement (RS) payment if they are at risk of homelessness, which means that they "face a rent increase that is above the current RS limit and they can't find alternative accommodation that will accept RS as per this limit and thus face the prospect of eviction or have received

¹⁹ One of the proponents of the perversity thesis on family homelessness at the time, Thomas J. Main, recently argued that, although scholarship has debunked the myth of perverse incentives, for the city administrators in New York, it remains a concern (Main, 2016). In the case of England, Pawson's study of homelessness prevention noted that there was a perception that a perverse incentive existed to become homeless in order to jump the queue for social housing allocations and thereby undermine the allocations process, but that "empirical evidence for such arguments has never been produced" (2007, p.874).

a notice (invalid or valid) of termination” (Threshold, 2015, p.8). Thus, the service can only assist tenants where the landlord has sought a rent increase, and not where the property is being sold, repossessed or required for the landlord’s own use.²⁰ In the first year of operation in Dublin, 744 households received enhanced rent supplement payments at a cost of €0.76m, which allowed them to stay in their homes. By May 2016 the service had assisted nearly 6,000 households who were at risk of homelessness. On the basis that in the first three months of 2016, €6.2m was expended in Dublin to keep, on average, just under 600 homeless families in hotels, the Tenancy Protection Service has demonstrated its worth. Despite the undoubted success of the service, in the first nine months of 2016 in Dublin alone, just over 700 families nonetheless entered homelessness for the first time ever.

The limits of Rent Supplement

Analyses of the trajectories of a significant number of homeless families suggested that upward rent reviews in the private rented sector contributed to their initial homelessness, and the subsequent inability to access alternative private rented housing was because the rate of rent allowance was not keeping pace with market rents, or that landlords were refusing to accept tenants on rent allowance. (O’Donoghue-Hynes, 2015; see also Walsh and Harvey, 2015; Focus Ireland, 2015; 2016). The termination of the tenancies resulted from unsustainable rent increases at a time when rent allowances were static, as well as from the sale of dwellings by landlords or banks.

Reviewing the rent limits set by the Department of Social Protection, a review of the private rented sector noted that “it appears that the market for Rent Supplement tenants has become increasingly restricted in recent times and that tenants may be increasingly challenged in sourcing accommodation within these limits in Dublin.” (DKM Economic Consultants *et al*, 2014, p.42). In a review of rent limits in February 2015, where the limits aim to make between 35% and 40% of the private rented sector affordable for qualifying households, the Department of Social Protection (2015, p.24) argued that with such tight rental markets, increasing the allowance “would generate homelessness for low income / single earner families who could no longer compete with the higher rents available under Rent Supplement.” Instead, as noted above, the policy was to allow for an increase in

²⁰ Section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Act, 2004 allows for the valid termination of a private rented tenancy if the landlord wishes to sell the dwelling, or requires the dwelling for his or her own occupation or that of a member of his or her family. Responding to allegations that landlords were terminating tenancies on this basis but subsequently re-letting the dwelling, the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act, 2015 amended Section 34 by requiring a statutory declaration (a written statement of fact signed by an authorized person such as a solicitor) as additional proof if the landlord intends to sell the property or if the landlord or a family member of the landlord intend to occupy the dwelling.

the rent payment on a discretionary basis when rent increases were sought by landlords and where tenancies were at risk. This policy was abruptly changed in July 2016 when significant increases in the level of rent allowance were announced. In most areas of Dublin for example, the rent allowance limit for a single person increased by 20% and for a couple or one person with one child by just over 30%.²¹

In late December 2014, a new Housing Assistance Payment pilot scheme was introduced for households who were accepted as homeless in one of the four Dublin authorities.²² Known as Homeless HAP (Housing Assistance Payment), it allows for rent supports of up to an additional 50% of the rent allowance from July 2016. While the rent allowance increases announced in June 2016 will assist households, particularly homeless households, to compete in the private market, a key constraint is the availability of properties to rent. At the beginning of May 2016, the commercial property website, daft.ie, noted that only 3,082 private properties were available to rent nationally (with just over 1,000 available in Dublin) – the lowest on record since the commencement of the collection of this data at the beginning of 2006, and down from a peak of nearly 24,000 properties to rent at the end of 2009 (Lyons, 2016). With further declines in the availability of properties to rent predicted, particularly in Dublin, increasing the rent allowances will have only a marginal effect on assisting households to exit homelessness. Furthermore, it would appear that, in 2016, a key reason for the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector leading to homelessness was not rent increases, but the repossession of dwellings by banks or landlords. In Quarter 2 2016, 305 buy-to-let (BTL) residential properties were repossessed on foot of an Order or voluntarily surrendered, up from an average of just over 200 per quarter in 2015. With nearly 15,000 BTL properties in arrears for over 720 days in Quarter 2 2016 (Central Bank of Ireland, various years) it is likely that the number of repossessions will continue to grow.

Increasing security in the private rented housing market

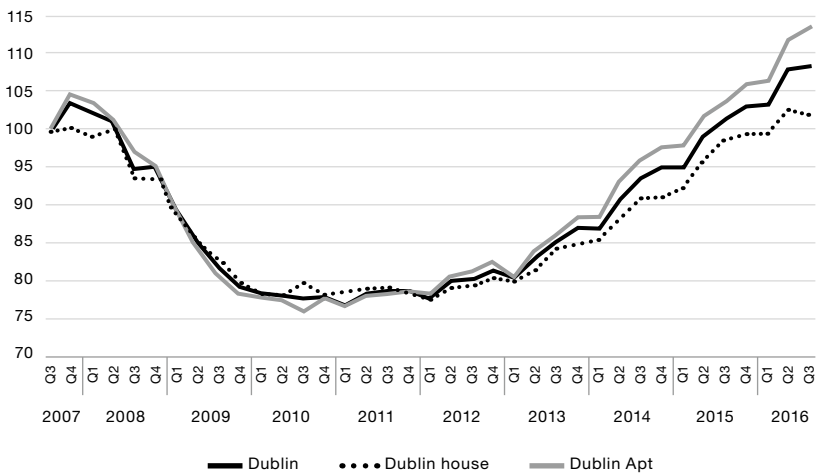
With rapid rent inflation from 2013 in Dublin (see Figure 5), after a period of decline and stability, measures to regulate rent increases were announced by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government in February 2015. Following protracted negotiations between the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the

²¹ Despite these increases, a survey by the Simon Community showed that at the end of August 2016, only 20% of rental properties across a number of urban and rural locations were within the Rent Supplement / Housing Assistance Payment limits (Simon Communities of Ireland, 2016).

²² The scheme was restricted to those who were residing in designated homelessness accommodation on 1 December 2014 or had resided in designated homelessness accommodation in the preceding six months. A couple or one person with one child who qualified could obtain rent support of up to nearly €1,900 in most parts of Dublin. Statutory Instrument No. 575 of 2014, Housing Assistance Payment (Section 50) (No.3) Regulations 2014.

Environment on increasing rent stability and security of tenure in the private rented housing market, legislation amending the Residential Tenancies Act, 2004 was signed into law in December 2015. These amendments came into effect on 9 May 2016, including the following provisions: that rent cannot be reviewed more than once in any 24-month period – it had been once every 12 months;²³ an extension of the notice period of rent review from 28 days to 90 days; an extension of notice periods for both landlords and tenants in respect of termination of longer term tenancies – up to 224 days for landlords and 112 days for tenants; and verification procedures where the landlord intends to sell or refurbish a property and therefore terminate the tenancy. However, as Figure 5 shows, this measure has not resulted in a stability in rent levels in Dublin.

Figure 5. Private Rented Sector Rent Index: Dublin, Q3 2007-Q3 2016 (Q3 2007=100)



Source: Economic and Social Research Institute / Residential Tenancies Board (2016) The RTB Rent Index.

At a Forum on Housing and Homelessness held by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government on 31 March 2016, the Minister claimed that he was restricted in what could be achieved to protect tenants due to Constitutional

²³ This applies only until December 2019; after that date, rents can again be reviewed once in every 12 months. In addition, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015, effective from 1 January 2016, prohibits discrimination in the letting of residential property against people who are in receipt of a rent supplement or any other social welfare payment, including a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

provisions on private property.²⁴ A strategy on the private rented sector is due to be published by the end of 2016, so an opportunity may present itself to revisit the purpose of the sector and the balance between the common good and the right to private property.

Housing First

In April 2011, a Housing First Demonstration Project was established in Dublin, managed through Dublin City Council with staff drawn from a number of agencies (Greenwood, 2015). This Demonstration Project operated until September 2014, when the service was put out to contract by Dublin City Council; the contract was won by two non-governmental bodies: Focus Ireland and the Peter McVerry Trust. Targeted exclusively at entrenched rough sleepers, with a target to house 100 households by June 2016, 54 individuals were accommodated in 47 housing units in Dublin. Under the aforementioned Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (2016), it is proposed to increase the target to achieve 300 Housing First tenancies in 2017. According to Quinn and Sheridan (2016) a key constraint is the inability to secure properties in the private rented sector, and as a consequence, a significant number of the units are coming from the Local Authority and Approved Housing Body stock. In addition, many of the prospective tenants express a preference for social rather than private rented housing. Despite the relatively small number of tenancies, the programme has contributed to ensuring that the number of rough sleepers in Dublin has remained relatively low and stable over the last year, with a minimum number of rough sleepers of 91 counted in November 2015 and 142 in November 2016 (Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, 2016).

Rapid-build housing

In response to the growing number of families in temporary accommodation, in October 2015, it was announced by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government that Government had approved the delivery of 500 units of modular housing (later retitled rapid-build housing). Twenty-two of these units were to be provided in December 2015 with the remainder coming on stream in 2016.

²⁴ Article 43 of the Constitution states that: "The State acknowledges that man, in virtue of his rational being, has the natural right, antecedent to positive law, to the private ownership of external goods. The State accordingly guarantees to pass no law attempting to abolish the right of private ownership or the general right to transfer, bequeath, and inherit property." However, it does go on to outline that: "The State recognises, however, that the exercise of the rights mentioned in the foregoing provisions of this Article ought, in civil society, to be regulated by the principles of social justice. The State, accordingly, may as occasion requires delimit by law the exercise of the said rights with a view to reconciling their exercise with the exigencies of the common good." Thus, it would appear to be a matter of interpretation whether it is deemed to be in the common good to delimit the absolute right to private property to prevent homelessness.

Due to a combination of inclement weather and protests against the location of the 22 units, it was not until April 2016 that the first families moved into these units. The Rebuilding Ireland plan proposes to increase the provision of rapid-build housing to 1,500 by the end of 2018, with 200 units becoming available in 2016, 800 in 2017 and the remaining 500 in 2018.

Gatekeeping

On presenting to statutory homeless services, two small-scale pieces of research with families that entered homeless services described the majority of front-line staff as helpful and courteous (Walsh and Harvey, 2015; Focus Ireland, 2015). However, their initial contact resulted in few services being provided, and in many cases families were told to try to source their accommodation in the private rented sector, commercial hotels or B&Bs, or to stay with friends or family. Families also commented on the intense pressure that frontline staff were under and the long queues to get advice and accommodation. Frontline staff must balance their statutory obligation under the Housing Act, 1988 to provide social housing supports to those deemed eligible for such supports, with preventing households from entering homelessness and providing supports with existing accommodation. For example, in Dublin City Council, under their Housing Allocations Scheme, homeless persons get priority status for the allocation of social housing supports. Their definition of homelessness is determined by Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1988, which sets out that:

A person shall be regarded as homeless if, in the opinion of the City Council, the person is unable to provide accommodation from his/her own resources and (i) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the City Council, the person together with any other person who normally resides with him/her or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him/her, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or (ii) the person is living in a hospital, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he/she has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (i).

In addition, the Scheme states that: “The City Council will determine whether applicants who are claiming to be homeless because they have no fixed abode are genuinely homeless or not” (Dublin City Council, 2013). This clearly raises the spectre of intentionality, suggesting that not all those claiming to be homeless are genuinely so, and that some people may be making themselves intentionally homeless to secure social housing by getting priority status for social housing supports.

As noted earlier, the construction of social housing decreased significantly during the period of austerity, but it can also be argued that the nature of social housing in Ireland has gradually been transformed over the past 35 years (See Norris and Fahey, 2011 and Norris, 2014 for further details). Until the early 1990s, social housing

was largely understood as local authority constructed and managed dwellings, which provided *de facto* life-time security of tenure and the option to purchase at a discounted rate subject to a minimum set of obligations. Since the early 1990s, Approved Housing Bodies have gradually become key social housing landlords, and from the 2000s onwards, income supports to allow households access private rented housing have been relabelled as social housing supports, particularly the relatively new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the earlier Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). Until the introduction of HAP, a household could receive a rent allowance that rendered the private rented sector affordable for an eligible household, and they could remain on the social housing waiting list. In contrast, in the case of the HAP scheme, which like the rent allowance scheme requires tenants to access housing in the private rented sector albeit with more progressive rent payment arrangements, the household's social housing need is deemed to be met. While, as noted above, recent legislative changes via the Residential Tenancies Act, 2015 have enhanced the rights of tenants, landlords in the private rented sector can still terminate a tenancy under certain conditions, even where the tenant is receiving social housing supports. In these circumstances, families who are homeless have expressed a preference for Local Authority or Approved Housing Body accommodation, rather than social housing supports in the private rented sector due to the stability and certainly offered by the former (Walsh and Harvey, 2015).

Research in England has highlighted the fact that there is often a fine line between 'homelessness prevention' work that successfully ensures households do not enter homelessness, and 'gatekeeping', which attempts to restrict access to homeless services because of budget or accommodation constraints (Pawson, 2007). Pawson notes that homelessness prevention grew in significance in England in the early 2000s, due in part to the rising cost of placing homeless households in B&Bs and other temporary accommodation and a perception that homeless households were excluding non-homeless households from social housing lettings. Similarly, Alden (2015) found, again in England, that gatekeeping by Local Authority Housing Option Services frontline staff was widespread, due to a lack of resources, heavy workloads, and pressures to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. In the absence of research on gatekeeping in Ireland, it is not possible to state its existence of or not, yet when demand outstrips supply, as in the case of social housing, it would be naïve not to think that some degree of gatekeeping is operating in Local Authority homeless services in Ireland. Indeed, one Local Authority in their financial estimates for 2016 made provision to employ a duty officer whose role is "to gate keep entry into the homeless system" (Mid-West Region, 2016).

Conclusion: Adapting to New Realities

It is clear that the ambitious target of ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough in Ireland by the end of 2016 will not be achieved. The aspiration to reorient homeless service provision towards a housing-led approach is further from being realised than at any point over the past 30 years. Instead, this paper suggests that despite the raft of action plans and strategies, homelessness will continue to rise in the short-term, particularly amongst families; expenditure on hopeless hostels and bleak B&Bs will consume an increasing share of homelessness budgets; and Housing First will remain marginal in the overall scheme of homelessness provision, despite some rhetorical nods in its direction from some NGOs. This is due to a lack of social housing in the short term, the relentless increase in rents in the private rented market and the plummeting availability of such dwellings, particularly in Dublin.

The majority of interventions over the past three years are valuable in their own right, and some like the prevention work extremely successful at a relatively low cost, but others, in the absence of housing supply, may have had distorting effects. For example, the fact that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government gave commitments to restrict rent increases in February 2015 but that legislative effect was not given to this commitment until April 2016 may have provided an impetus to landlords to raise rents substantially, in the knowledge that such changes were pending. Increasing the allocation of social housing to homeless households may have had the effect of marginally increasing entries to homelessness, but in the absence of a such a directive, the number of families languishing in extraordinarily expensive and inappropriate hotel accommodation will grow remorselessly. Families may at least entertain some expectation of social housing at some stage, but for the single homeless person, wasting away in homeless hostels, only if they attain the age of 55 and claim senior citizen's status will such security become available to them. In face of such challenges, perhaps it is not surprising that the ambition to end homelessness in Ireland within a defined timeframe has been replaced with a more general aspiration to reduce the use of private emergency accommodation for families, and to increase the number of hostel beds with the objective of reducing rough sleeping. It can be argued that current policy set out in Rebuilding Ireland is an adaptive response to a range of unprecedented current circumstances: unprecedented numbers entering homelessness; unprecedented rates of rental inflation in the private sector; and unprecedented low levels of social housing output relative to demand. In these circumstances, a policy objective of ending homelessness by a specific date may be politically risky, and a vaguer set of ambitions and timeframes reduces such risk.

Finally, the very rapid increase in homeless households over the past 3 years in Ireland demonstrates the centrality of housing markets in creating homelessness. This may seem self-evident, but historically and contemporaneously, a pervasive view was that homelessness was the consequence of a range of individual failings and ailments. There is nothing to suggest that the rate of personal ailments and afflictions amongst the Irish populace increased over the past three years, thus resulting in greater numbers of homeless people. However, there is ample evidence that in the absence of secure affordable housing, as demonstrated in Ireland over the past 3 years, homelessness will increase. This is not unique to Ireland. In a review of 10-Year Plans to end homelessness in four Canadian cities, Adamo *et al.* (2016) noted that despite the plans, homelessness was increasing in all four cities. This, Adamo *et al.* (2016: 36) concluded was 'not the result of poor plan design and weak implementation; rather it is due largely to the limited supply of new affordable housing that cities can deliver with current levels of funding under the Federal-Provincial IAH program, coupled with the declining availability and affordability of purpose-built rental housing in the private rental market and the impact of stagnating incomes and social assistance rates on the ability of households to secure and retain housing.' Both the Irish and Canadian cases demonstrate the value of devising plans to end homelessness and to put in place clear monitoring and reporting mechanisms. However, neither the four Canadian cities nor the local authorities in Ireland could adequately address the structural issues of housing affordability and supply, particularly in the private rented sector, and until this structural issue is addressed by policy makers, homelessness and housing insecurity will remain an extraordinarily expensive and damaging outcome of the failures of housing policy.

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