

Building a comprehensive and participative strategy on homelessness

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Introduction

It is a very welcome and unique opportunity afforded to the Irish Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to be able to consider and comment on the Portuguese strategy. It is very apparent the amount of work and planning that has been undertaken to produce the document and which continues in its implementation. Often in our own work, we can overlook the lessons learned by other member states which can be used to inform our own future planning and policies.

Background on the roles in relation to homelessness in Ireland

The Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government's role in relation to homelessness involves, primarily, providing a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. The overall policy framework to address homelessness is set out in the Government's Homeless Strategy, *The Way Home*, and the Implementation Plan for the Strategy, which was published in April 2009. New legislative provisions relating to homelessness in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 came into force on 1 February 2010.

Responsibility for measures to deal with or prevent homelessness rests with the housing authorities and the Health Service Executive (HSE), which have statutory responsibility, respectively, for providing accommodation and health/care services. It is a function of housing authorities under section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to assist, or provide or make arrangements for the provision of accommodation for, homeless persons. The Department's responsibility in relation to homeless accommodation involves recoupment of 90% of approved current expenditure by local authorities (either directly or by way of payments to non-statutory service providers) for the operation of accommodation and related services. Most homeless accommodation facilities are operated by approved housing bodies and or Non Government Organisations (NGO's).

To what extent do national strategic approaches to homelessness already exist in the peer countries, and in what respects are these strategic approaches similar to, and different from, the Portuguese Strategy?

In Ireland *The Way Home* is the new Government strategy to address adult homelessness from 2008 to 2013. It builds on the progress achieved to date in tackling homelessness through the implementation of the Integrated Homeless Strategy (2000) and Preventative Strategy (2002) and is informed by the findings and recommendations of the Review of the Implementation of

Homeless Strategies by Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants in 2006, (Independent Review) so that commitments to solve homelessness nationally could be refocused and enhanced.

The Core objectives

Portugal has as its core objective that no one should need to sleep rough from the lack of sufficient accommodation as cited in the document, the strategy aims to create conditions so that no one has to stay on the street for lack of alternatives and, above all, ensure the existence of conditions that guarantee the promotion of independence by mobilizing all available resources according to the diagnosis and individual needs with a view to full citizenship.

This is echoed in Ireland where we identified our rather ambitious vision that from 2010, long term homelessness (i.e. the occupation of emergency accommodation for longer than 6 months) and the need for people to sleep rough will be eliminated throughout Ireland. The risk of a person becoming homeless will be minimised through effective preventative policies and services. When it does occur homelessness will be short term and people who are homeless will be assisted into appropriate long term housing.

Strategic Aims of the Irish Strategy

The strategy has six strategic aims to with the 3 core objectives being:

1. Prevent homelessness;
2. Eliminate the need to sleep rough;
3. Eliminate long term homelessness.

Does Portugal provide a useful model for strategic development on homelessness for other European countries, or are there circumstances specific to Portugal (for example, the pre-existence of local social networks) which enabled this Strategy to be developed that do not pertain elsewhere in Europe?

The Portuguese remit is far wider than Ireland in so far as it is responsible for homelessness and accessibility to education but also included access to sufficient income to avoid social inclusion and guarantee access to employment Homelessness is a very complex issue and the solutions to address it would appear to be similar from the strategies and plans the can be observed from research.

A fundamental difference is the issue of the right to housing. This is not a constitutional right in Ireland. The access to homeless services were first addressed in the Health Act, 1953 which, imposed a duty on health boards (now Health Service Executive (HSE)) to provide assistance and shelter to people who are homeless, a duty usually performed by Community Welfare Officers. Under the Child Care Act, 1991, health services have a responsibility to provide for the care, welfare and accommodation of children and young people aged under 18 who are homeless.

Under the Housing Act, 1988 local authorities are empowered to respond to homelessness in a number of ways: by housing people who are homeless directly, by funding voluntary and co-operative bodies to house them, by providing advice and information to them, and by providing them with financial assistance to access private rented accommodation.

In particular, does the Portuguese model of cross-sectoral co-operation have valuable lessons for northern, central and eastern European Member States, or are the circumstances in northern, central and eastern Europe so different that 'transfer' of this sort of policy process is not feasible and/or appropriate?

The emphasis on cross sectoral is of significant relevance to Ireland given the cross cutting nature of Homeless and the various Government Departments, Agencies and NGO sector involvement. Details of this cross sectoral approaches been used in Ireland for is outlined in the question below.

How can the development of national strategies in other countries achieve and sustain the commitment of a range of relevant stakeholders as appears to have been attained in Portugal?

In Ireland the Cross Departmental Team on Homelessness was set up in 2000 and chaired by the Department of Environment Heritage and local Government. It was set up to provide an all of Government response to the issues of homelessness and involves a number of Departments including, Department of Health and Children, Probation and Welfare Service, Irish Prison Service, Dept of Social Protection, Dept of Education and Skills, Dept of Finance, Dept of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, FAS (Training), VEC (Educational) and the HSE.

In addition and in recognition of the role of the NGO sector a National Homeless Consultative Committee was established in 2007 to input formally into policy development. This is comprised of representatives from both the statutory and the NGO sector. Both groups previously met on a quarterly basis. Since December 2009 a joint meeting of both groups have been held and it is proposed to continue quarterly joint meetings going forward, but with the option of convening separate Cross Departmental Team meetings if necessary.

Is a focus on the narrowest definitions of homelessness, such as that settled upon in Portugal, sensible and realistic in some contexts or should this pressure to narrow definitions be resisted?

In Ireland the Government is satisfied that the definition of homelessness under the Housing Act 1988 is broad and inclusive and it is not anticipated that it will be reviewed. A review of the definition of homelessness for operational purposes will be carried out. In this case, this review will be undertaken by the Cross Department Team on Homelessness in consultation with the National Homeless Consultative Committee with reference to the ETHOS typology Review of the operational definition was carried out In Dublin where we have four local authorities spread over a small geographical area but where the treatment or definition of homeless varied for operational

purposes. Since the launch of the strategy work has been carried out and an agreed operational definition has been approved.

Focusing on a narrow definition allows for a more focused response to be directed at the most vulnerable. In Ireland we have people who will never be able to live independently and are in long term supported accommodation who are still labelled homeless and in fact these persons should no longer be regarded as homeless.

Is a focus on staff training likely to deliver significant results with respect to improving the quality of services for homeless people or are available resources better spent in other ways?

In Ireland the area of staff training was considered a vital tool in the improvement of the range of services/responses for homeless persons. Staff were trained in the Implementation of Care and Case Management and the Holistic Needs Assessment across homeless services in Dublin. There is also a new Accredited Homeless Agency Partnership/Dublin City University Professional Development Training Modules for key workers/case managers and managers (with supervisory responsibility for key workers/case managers) working in the area of housing and homeless services. It is imperative that professionals in the field continue to develop and enhance their skills and competence base. However, it must be stressed that the staff training element is only a fraction of the budget and is to complement the service provision.

Does the adoption of a narrow definition of homelessness raise significant equalities concerns, especially with respect to gender, as women's homelessness tends to manifest itself in different ways to that of men's?

In Ireland, all homeless persons are treated equally regardless of gender. Priority is given to certain specific groups in separate policy areas e.g. disabled people, the elderly, victims of domestic violence etc but they are not regarded as priority groups in homeless policy. Homelessness is gender neutral. It is however recognised that Domestic violence can give rise to homelessness and in many cases the victim is female. Domestic violence refuges provide emergency accommodation to individuals and their children fleeing domestic violence. It is now considered best practice that it is more favourable to remove the perpetrator rather than the victim from the home.

Similarly, how much emphasis should be placed on strengthening the evidence base on homelessness as opposed to funding direct service provision?

It is important to see if policies are working, are people being moved on from emergency shelters and what are the outcomes are for the service user. An evidence database is essential to ensure that policies and procedures are being carried out effectively.

Is there scope for the promotion of more EU-level influence on the homelessness policies of Member States, such as that which has clearly been very important in the Portuguese context, particularly with respect to those Member States which have less developed policies on homelessness?

While some people hold the view that homelessness is something that can happen to anybody, there is a growing body of research which indicates that there are underlying causes of homelessness, such as poverty and lack of housing options, and risk factors such as mental ill health, addiction, weak family supports and experience of institutional care, which put certain households at increased risk of becoming homeless. At the same time, there are triggers which may give rise to homelessness, such as eviction and relationship breakdown, and protective factors, including a significant positive relationship and engagement in work or training, which can help to prevent homelessness, even where the underlying causes and risk factors are present (Fitzpatrick, Kemp and Klinker, 2000).

While homeless populations are not homogenous, these underlying causes and risks may give rise to a number of common characteristics, including high levels of mental ill health, psychological, behavioural and personality disorders, intellectual and learning difficulties and addiction problems. Across the developed world, the majority of homeless people are single men. This evidence shows that homelessness is not a random process and as such allows for the development of targeted interventions to address homelessness and to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Homelessness is not a point in time experience but can be seen as a continuum, ranging from being at risk of becoming homeless, through to becoming institutionalised into homelessness - staying long term in hostels and moving between them, to being entrenched in a street homeless life style. Providing effective interventions, appropriate to the point on the continuum, can ensure that household's progress out of homelessness. Failure to provide appropriate interventions at each stage can result in people progressing through the continuum.

What impact will the economic recession ("the crisis") have on the ability of Member States to pursue effective strategic approaches to homelessness such as that attempted in Portugal? In particular, how will it affect their capacity to adequately fund such strategies? How well equipped are Member States for coping with the needs of new homeless cases generated by the crisis?

The current recession is presenting more challenges to this already complex problem. The issues that pertain to the Irish situation is probably similar in many regards to the member states including

- Possible reduction in available funding going forward

Despite the most difficult budgetary situation in decades, current funding for homeless accommodation services in 2010 was kept at the record level reached in the 2009. With overall funding available for payments to non-statutory service providers, along with some services provided directly by local authorities themselves, totalling around €62 million, plus a further €1 million available for homeless projects from the Dormant Accounts Fund. This, in

tandem with HSE funding for health and care related costs. The 2011 budget process is under way against the backdrop of a difficult and challenging fiscal and economic environment.

- Difficulty in securing long term mainstream accommodation, a number of issues have been cited in this regard mainly.
 - Uncertainty generally in the property market and the economy;
 - Reluctance of property owners to engage in long term contracts based on current rent levels;
 - Property developers and financial institutions less interested in leasing than in sale of property;
 - Due to negative equity some property owners property are precluded from disposing properties.
- Increased demands on services.
Food and advice centres are recording increased demands on their services from persons who have economic difficulties and are seeking help to prevent homelessness.
- Increase in incidence of non national sleeping rough.

Additional Supporting Material

Role of Portuguese Local Networks & Irelands Local and Regional Approach

We note that the Portuguese strategy requires delivery through local networks. Arising from previous homeless strategies in Ireland local homeless fora were established and local homeless action plan were prepared. Implementation of the current Homeless Strategy will be carried out primarily at local/regional level in accordance with regional homelessness action plans which are developed in conjunction with the regional homelessness Consultative Fora. The 2009 Housing Act put these fora and action plans on a statutory basis.

These regional homelessness Consultative Fora provide a vehicle for ensuring effective inter-agency arrangements and protocols to determine responsibilities, liaison, etc, between agencies both statutory and non statutory and also co-ordination with adjacent/constituent local authorities.

Extensive guidance was issued to local authorities regarding the establishment of these homelessness fora and formulation of homelessness action plans. Homelessness Action Plans have now been adopted for the regions in the form of regional framework plans. An approach has been suggested to housing authorities outside of Dublin for the formulation of the action plan in the format of a regional homeless services framework outlining, at a generic level, the various components of homeless services and arrangements required. This would constitute an overall policy framework for homeless services at local/regional level, providing a comprehensive model for effective homeless services and arrangements required to achieve the aims of the Government's Homeless Strategy in the area/region. Following compilation and analysis of more detailed data and completion of a rigorous review of homeless service requirements, as necessary, the Action Plan would be supplemented by a detailed implementation blueprint of homeless services, which would provide the necessary detail to give effect to the framework model, with more specific identification of the nature and extent of homeless services, facilities,

measures and arrangements required during the life of the plan to give effect to its provisions and necessary details such as location, quantification, operational arrangements, service provider involvement, etc.

Ireland brief report on Rough Sleeping

Ending any need to sleep rough by end 2010 is another core objective of the Homeless Strategy. Trends in this area have been quite positive. A rough sleeper count in the Dublin area showed a welcome reduction to 60 in November 2009 compared with 115 in April 2008 and 185 in 2005.

Further progress in this area was made during the severe weather arrangements in early 2010. For example, a proactive outreach service was operated and detailed daily reports were provided which contained useful information in relation to those who refuse to avail of shelters.

Dublin City Council (the centre where the main concentration of homeless persons exist) in conjunction with the Homeless Persons Unit is also working to ensure maximum efficiency in the co-ordination, monitoring and management of emergency places and street outreach teams, funded through the Department are working to ensure that people who might otherwise be sleeping rough are linked into emergency services. Every effort will be made to maintain a steady balance between the usage of emergency beds for people who might be sleeping rough and the establishment of more "move on" accommodation for people who should be in a more suitable form of accommodation for their needs.

While the incidence of rough sleeping arises mainly in Dublin, the Department also funds special cold weather initiatives in a number of other urban areas where needed where special facilities has been opened. The incidence of rough sleeping is reported to be minimal elsewhere.

The next rough sleeper count will take place in November and in the meantime work to address any potential shortfall of emergency beds is being undertaken. When further progress happens on the mainstream accommodation side this will have a knock on effect on availability of emergency accommodation but it is also necessary to ensure supply side of emergency accommodation is adequate. A robust assessment of all emergency beds is being undertaken to ascertain if there is any spare capacity in the system to ensure that there is a bed for anyone who needs one and to end the need to sleep rough.

Ireland's Definition of a Homeless Person

The 1988 Act defines a person as homeless if:

- (a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who resides normally with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of; or
- (b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a) and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources.

Strategic Aims of the Irish Strategy

The strategy has six strategic aims

1. prevent homelessness;
2. eliminate the need to sleep rough;
3. eliminate long term homelessness;
4. meet long term housing needs;
5. ensure effective services for homeless people; and
6. better co-ordinate funding arrangements.