



Finding the Way Home

Housing-led responses and the Homelessness Strategy in Ireland

Summary of Research Findings and Recommendations

“ I’m an adult. I am capable of looking after myself...you know, the idea of getting your own key, closing your own door... ”

(Woman, long term homeless, aged 53)

The findings of this study demonstrate that:

- Housing led approaches should be part of the overall service mix in Ireland maximising wellbeing, choice and independence within a framework designed to provide a sustainable exit from homelessness.
- The supply of affordable and good quality housing is essential to the success of housing led approaches.
- The focus has to be on more than just access to housing, it is also important to explore ways to tackle poor health and wellbeing, loneliness, isolation and worklessness.



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Background to the Research

This paper summarises the key findings of the study **Finding the Way Home – Housing-led responses and the Homelessness Strategy** in Ireland and outlines the Simon Communities recommendations on the implementation of a housing led approach to address homelessness in Ireland.

In light of the Government's commitment to end long term homelessness by implementing a housing-led approach, the Simon Communities in Ireland commissioned a piece of research to explore the potential effectiveness of housing-led services in meeting the needs of people who are homeless with support needs in Ireland. The research was undertaken by the Nicholas Pleace and Joanne Bretherton of the Centre for Housing Policy in York University and was designed to help inform and critically assess the use of housing-led services as response to homelessness at both a national and local level.

The research was designed to gather the views of people who were homeless, front line and management staff delivering homelessness services within Simon Communities and the views of other homelessness service providers on the potential use of housing led services in Ireland.

The key questions for the research centred on whether housing-led services would represent an improvement on existing practice in service delivery in Ireland. The research was intended as a critical appraisal of the adoption of the housing-led approach in Ireland, looking at the international evidence, the opinions of people who were homeless and service providers and asking them to consider the merits and demerits of housing led responses in relation to existing homelessness service provision in Ireland.

The research had four main parts which included:

- A review of existing research on housing-led services response to homelessness,
- A consultation with a group of homelessness service providers in Ireland,
- Interviews with people who are homeless and service providers working with Simon Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk and the North-West,
- A high level consultation briefing event was held with participants across Government and the homelessness sector which discussed the emerging findings of the research.

The Simon Community in Ireland

The Simon Communities throughout Ireland provide the best possible care, accommodation and support for people experiencing homelessness and those at risk. Together, with people who are homeless, we tackle the root causes, promote innovative responses and urge the government to fulfill their commitments. Simon delivers support and service to between 4,500 and 5,000 individuals and families throughout Ireland who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness every year. The Simon Communities of Ireland is an affiliation of local Communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East.

Services range from

- Housing provision, tenancy sustainment & settlement services, housing advice & information services helping people to make the move out of homelessness & working with households at risk;
- Specialist health & treatment services addressing some of the issues which may have contributed to homeless occurring or may be a consequence;
- Emergency accommodation & support providing people with a place of welcome, warmth & safety;
- Soup runs & rough sleeper teams who are often the first point of contact for people sleeping rough.

Main findings of the Research

There is growing **international evidence** that housing-led services are very effective in ending homelessness among people with high support needs. Housing-led services emphasise treating people who are homeless with high needs with respect, giving them choices and control over their lives and supporting them back into society through immediate provision of a settled home. This approach delivers much higher rates of housing sustainment among long-term and people who are repeatedly homeless with high support needs than some other homeless service models.

“ Having your own home would give you a lot of confidence... It'd open a lot of other doors for you. You start respecting yourself, you start respecting your home and you respect your neighbours, because you've already been down and for people who have been there, a lot wouldn't want to go back I expect.

Woman experiencing homelessness, 30's

Housing-led services do not exist in one form. Housing-led approaches are best described as a group of services that follow a common 'housing-led' philosophy centred on maximising choice, promoting independence and harm reduction, within a framework designed to provide a sustainable exit from homelessness for vulnerable people who require support. Success in ending homelessness appears linked to fidelity with this common philosophy.

The housing-led **philosophy** was viewed positively by people who were homeless and service providers. Several elements of the philosophy were widely regarded by service providers, including Simon Communities, as reflecting already current practice in homelessness services in Ireland. The most commonly recognised form of housing-led services among service providers was the Pathways 'Housing First' service from the USA. However, while housing-led philosophy was widely supported and sometimes reflected current practice in services, working examples of housing-led services were not widespread.

The **harm reduction** approach to drug and alcohol use, which is integral to housing-led services, was widely seen as more effective than services requiring abstinence from people who are homeless, both by people who are homeless and by service providers.

“ It's more effective, the harm reduction, than being given an ultimatum, which I've been given through me life and I just left like, just one day you just leave and find yourself homeless again.

Male, former long term homeless, 40's.

Housing-led services offering **ongoing support** were viewed positively by people who were homeless.

“ Just knowing you can make that phone call is enough to keep you off the street, knowing that support is there, knowing that if I do have a slip or whatever, have a bad situation and drink, knowing there is someone there you can phone and there is some help, that alone can be an incentive.

Male, long term rough sleeper, aged 51

It was widely believed that there was an **ongoing role for communal supported housing** for some people who were homeless who had very high support needs and sustained experience of institutional living and a preference not to live alone.

There were concerns that people who were homeless might be **isolated** and **bored** and living in a situation of **sustained worklessness** if they were settled into scattered ordinary housing by some forms of housing-led service.

Housing-led services require access to a sufficient supply of affordable, adequate and suitable housing in order to function well. Most forms of housing-led services require a sufficient supply of affordable and adequate housing to operate. Almost every respondent for this research reported that there was not a sufficient supply of adequate and



affordable housing in Ireland. A key reason for the success of some housing-led services, such as the Pathways approach, has been the role that these services take in securing a housing supply.

Housing-led services require **joint working** with health, mental health, drug and alcohol, social work and other services. Many services had been cut and were difficult to access, causing worries that housing-led services might not function well.

“ Responses need to be tailored to respond to individual needs, rather than expecting clients with multiple needs or diagnoses being expected to fit to a particular stationary model of service provision. Provision need to be dynamic and flexible

Service Provider

Concerns existed that **policy attention** was overly focused on housing-led services. Some respondents reported that other forms of homelessness were not receiving enough attention.

There were some concerns that successful housing-led models, such as the Pathways approach, would be **‘watered down’** in Ireland and not given the same resources used by effective housing-led services elsewhere.

There is a need for **care and caution** when adopting housing-led services. It cannot be assumed that housing-led services will be more effective and less expensive to run than existing services. There are three reasons for this:

- The most effective examples of housing-led services, the Pathways Housing First model and various housing led services used in Finland and the USA, are **not low cost services**. The cost offsets, from reductions in use of emergency accommodation, emergency medical services and contact with criminal justice services by people who are long-term homeless, that result from these services do significantly offset their running costs, but services like Pathways have relatively high running costs by EU standards. It is however, an error to assume that *effective* housing-led services are a ‘low cost’ option.
- Many existing homelessness services in Ireland, such as those run by Simon Communities alongside other service

providers, while they are not ‘housing-led’ in the sense of something like the Pathways model, are often close in philosophy and operation to housing-led models. This means that it **cannot be assumed existing services are less effective** than housing-led models.

- Housing-led services, including those like the Pathways model with a strong evidence base showing success in sustainably ending long-term homelessness, are **not a total solution** to long-term homelessness and do not present themselves as such. There are some people who are long-term homeless whom these services are not able to work successfully with and housing-led services are often used in several forms, alongside other homelessness services, to deliver an integrated homelessness strategy.

“ My recovery plan, would be someday to be in a council or social tenancy, I’m working towards that goal, I’m getting there very, very slowly.

Male with experience of long term living rough, 43.



The Simon Communities recommendations



1 Effective service mix

Housing led approaches should be part of the overall service mix maximising wellbeing, choice and independence within a framework designed to provide a sustainable exit from homelessness.

2 Adequate housing supply

The supply of affordable and good quality housing is essential to the success of housing led approaches. A range of housing options must be explored in-depth to meet the long term housing need amongst people who are homeless including social housing allocations and prioritisation, the Social Housing Leasing Initiative, CAS, RAS, Capital Advanced Loan Facility, and the Private Rented Market.

Barriers preventing people from moving out of homelessness into affordable and suitable housing must be eliminated e.g. Rent Supplement thresholds.

3 Housing plus

The focus has to be on more than just access to housing, it is also important to explore ways to tackle poor health and wellbeing, loneliness, isolation and worklessness.

4 Open ended and ongoing support

The provision of open ended, ongoing support, as required, is critical to the effectiveness of housing led approaches and must be planned for and resourced.

In addition, this research indicated that there is a role for ongoing communal supported housing for some people who are homeless who have high support needs and who often have sustained experience of institutional living.

5 Harm reduction

Harm reduction approaches and ethos contribute to the efficacy of housing led approaches therefore need to be integrated as a key part of housing led models.

Alcohol and drug services across the spectrum of service provision must be tailored and targeted to the needs of people who are homeless with alcohol and/or drug related problems including harm reduction, access to substitution treatment¹, detoxification, rehabilitation and aftercare around the country.

6 Joint working

Housing led services, with the exception of CHL models, only work effectively where suitable, affordable, long-term housing can be secured and there is access to health, drug and alcohol services.

Effective joint working practice (interagency, interdisciplinary and multi disciplinary) are essential to the success of housing led services. Integrated approaches ensure people have access to the most appropriate services and support therefore improving interventions and outcomes.

7 Enhancing current practice and service provision

New housing led developments should seek to enhance and support existing good practice. This research found that there is currently much good practice in operation in Ireland which reflects the housing led philosophy. Some of the enhancements which are required identified in this research include:

- The provision of ongoing support.
- Emphasis on choice and control for individual service users in personalised support plans.
- No conditionality in relation to access to housing/settled accommodation other than compliance with a tenancy or license agreement e.g. no requirement to attend treatment or to be/remain abstinent.
- No inclusion of a supported housing stage to get people 'housing ready'.

8 Resources

Housing led approaches are of value because they can offer real improvements in the lives and wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness. There may be long term cost offsets from reductions in use of emergency accommodation, emergency medical services and contact with criminal justice services etc by people who are homeless. The key point to note however is that such approaches are successful, effective and efficient, and offer better value for money due to the tangible quality of life improvements achieved.

Housing led approaches must be adequately resourced if they are to work effectively.

9 Structures and Processes

We recommend that the NHCC establishes a 'Housing Led Subgroup' to explore housing supply, provision of support, joint working and the barriers which may exist at national level.

We recommend each Regional Homelessness Fora establishes a 'Housing Led Subgroup' to explore housing supply, provision of support, joint working and the barriers regionally and locally.

It is critical that the voluntary sector, as service providers and as advocates for and with people who are homeless, are included as partners in all national, regional and local processes and structures.

10 Evidenced Informed Approach

We recommend evidenced informed approaches when addressing homelessness. The consensus of the academic research confirms that housing led approaches are effective in ending long term homelessness particularly among people with high support needs and those with sustained experience of homelessness. Such approaches were also supported by service users and those working in the sector who participated in this research.



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