

More social housing and funding are urgently needed- the housing and homelessness crisis.

We are in the middle of a homelessness and housing crisis. It is a situation rapidly spiralling out of control; we see it every day. Homelessness and the risk of homelessness are on the increase. The economic crisis, along with the decline in affordable housing for vulnerable people and those on low incomes, has coincided with rising demand for homeless services.

There are almost 90,000 households on the social housing waiting list. Rents are increasing by 4 to 11 per cent in our major cities and the number of properties available has declined sharply since 2009. With the lack of available social housing and the barriers preventing people from accessing the private rental sector, those who are homeless are effectively trapped in emergency homeless accommodation. For many, the social welfare safety net is all that stands between them and homelessness. Rent supplement levels are proving insufficient to meet the asking price for many rental properties, so this is causing homelessness.

The homeless include people and families staying in emergency accommodation such as B&Bs and hostels, as well as those sleeping on sofas and staying in squats or with family and friends. Homeless people often face poverty, social exclusion, poor mental and physical health, problem drug and/or alcohol use, broken family relations or poor education and training. Homelessness can only be addressed if housing and these related needs are dealt with at the same time.

Lack of statistics

Simon Communities all around Ireland have seen a significant rise in demand for their services; in 2012, there was an increase of 24 per cent in those using our services, bringing the number to over 5,000 individuals and families. Demand continues to rise. There is no official count of homeless in Ireland. On census night in 2011, 3,808 people were in accommodation for those homeless or sleeping rough. Of those, 43 per cent were staying in emergency accommodation. On one night in November 2013, Dublin Region Homeless Consultative Forum confirmed 139 people were sleeping rough in Dublin; a massive 60 per cent increase since winter 2012. Shockingly these figures are available only for Dublin – and they do not take hidden homelessness into account. The Government has committed to ending long-term homelessness by 2016. We are very supportive of this. We believe with sufficient resources, political will and national

direction, it can and must be achieved. People who are homeless must be prioritised. The Government has committed to achieving this using a housing-led approach which involves moving a homeless person immediately into accommodation and providing them with ongoing support. But, as homeless numbers grow and demand for housing outstrips supply, where will the homes come from? The Simon Communities are doing everything possible. We have put extra beds in our shelters. We are opening up new projects, sometimes with little or no funding from the Government.

Social housing

Urgent action is required on foot of the report of the Homeless Oversight Group established by Minister of State for Housing Jan O’Sullivan. Critically, there must be funding commitment up to 2016 across the key departments with responsibility for homelessness. Better and more sustainable and affordable housing options must be made available. Critical is the recommencement of private and social housing construction. The National Asset Management Agency must deliver on its social housing commitments. The Government needs to set a target to increase social housing to 20 per cent of total stock. Within any social housing developments, there should be ring-fencing for people moving out of homelessness. All lead local authorities should prepare an inventory of empty properties and some stock should be made available to NGOs by transfer or lease, in addition to Budget 2014 commitments. The introduction of rent control would be critical to keeping rents affordable.

A key component to ending long-term homelessness is the support to help people become independent. Cuts to funding and to frontline staff in statutory bodies are making it more difficult for people to access these services due to waiting times and lists. It is essential there are no further cuts to the Health Service Executive “social inclusion” budget and the homeless budget within that.

Urgent action is required to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in the State – people who are homeless and those at risk. In the run-up to the local elections, we are urging people to make the crisis an election issue. It is vital those elected in May make homelessness and housing a priority.

Niamh Randall is national spokesperson for the Simon Communities in Ireland