



The Meascán Housing Model

**Towards a Focus Housing Association model
of socially mixed, supported housing provision**

An introduction and discussion paper

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December 2020

Summary

This discussion paper sets out an innovative approach to achieving social integration for people moving out of homelessness through building communities of 'intentional social mix'. This model, which Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association are calling the Meascán Housing Model, builds on experiences in the Netherlands. Rather than simply placing people who are moving out of homelessness into units that have been purchased in an existing community, the Meascán Model is based the idea that 'mainstream' households are aware in advance of moving into their home that some of their neighbours have experienced homeless and may, from time to time, continue to experience periods of difficulty. All households in the development will also be aware of the supports that are available and the standards and processes that will be applied. This approach will allow Focus Housing Association to become more active in building housing developments while maintaining the good practice of providing 'scatter site' housing and social integration for people moving out of homelessness. The paper sets out the challenges of the current models and explores the steps that will be required to pilot the Meascán Model in a number of Focus Housing Association developments.

Introduction

The core objective of both Focus Ireland and its property wing, Focus Housing Association, is to provide sustainable homes for people who are likely to require on-going tenancy and case management support with lived experience or risk of homelessness. This objective creates a number of significant challenges as Focus Housing Association attempts to build up its housing stock – above and beyond the already significant challenges faced by other Approved Housing Bodies.

This document sets out to analyse those challenges in the light of our experience and international research, and to set out the outlines of a new approach to building communities that support a social mix of tenants including tenants who have a lived experience of homelessness and have on-going support needs – an approach which Focus Housing Association has named the Meascán Housing Model (Meascán means mixture or blended in Irish) to reflect the ‘mixed’ nature of the new approach.

Focus Ireland’s experience, confirmed by international research, shows that vulnerable people with underlying mental health, addiction or behavioural issues are more successfully housed in ‘scatter site’ locations rather than together in developments with a high density of similarly ‘vulnerable’ households. Scatter-site housing, with the right supports, reduces stigma, facilitates broader social integration and reduces the potential for mutually-damaging interactions between tenants (Padgett, 2008). This approach is one of the pillars of the ‘Housing First’ approach adopted as Government policy since 2014.

This approach needs to be understood within the Government policy on mixed communities as set out in ‘Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities’ (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2007) and reiterated in Rebuilding Ireland (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2016). However, in looking at the much more specific issues of the social integration of people with complex support needs into wider communities, it goes well beyond the idea of ‘tenure mix’ which underpin those documents.

Arising from this analysis, acquisition of one-off, scattered site housing units has been the main direction of Focus Housing Association growth in recent years. This approach has allowed Focus Housing Association to provide approx. 660 homes in the last 5 years. However, reflection on our own experience identifies that this approach presents a number of significant challenges:

- There is only a limited supply of such housing units, in particular one-bedroom units, available on the market. This problem is even more acute outside of Dublin.
- By relying on the acquisition of existing dwellings, Focus Housing Association is not making a contribution to increasing the overall supply of housing, and so is not addressing one of the underlying causes of the current housing and homelessness crisis.
- Placing tenants with potential challenging behaviour into mainstream communities can create problems, both for the tenants and the existing community. Sometimes the problems reflect prejudice, but where tenants with complex support needs have behaviours which are problematic this can place an unreasonable burden on neighbours. While problems arise only in a small minority of cases, they represent a significant reputational risk not just to Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association but to the broader project of creating socially mixed communities.
- These problems reflect the paradox that a crudely applied idea ‘social mix’ can have the effect of reducing the housing options of low income (including formerly homeless) households (Busch-Geertsema, 2007).

One approach that Focus Housing Association has adopted to overcome these problems is to build blocks of apartments where Focus Housing Association is the landlord for all tenants. While these have been delivered to a very high quality, in some cases it has proven difficult to create a balanced community within such developments. The community of tenants is a complex balance arising from the housing allocations policy of each individual local authority, and Focus Ireland’s objective of moving households out of homelessness. In some cases, due to the number of households with support needs, we have struggled at times to provide the quality of life for all our tenants which they and we aspire to. In some cases this can put vulnerable tenants at increased risk. These problems, too, present a significant reputational risk to Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association, as well as to our partners in local authorities.

One of the core issues we have identified is that, while the tenant moving out of homelessness is supported to understand their obligations and rights as a member of their new community, the ‘mainstream’ tenants who provide the other essential part of the ‘social mix’ have no preparation or support for any challenges that might arise from this – their participation in this form of social mix is unintentional. Since, in the vast majority of cases, the Focus Ireland-supported tenants, presents no difficulties for their neighbours this policy of anonymity is entirely justified, and protects the privacy of our tenants and avoids any risk of stigma.

However, as we move into our new Strategy period with Restating our Vision 2021–25 to work more effectively with families and adults with high complex needs, we want to explore a new model of building or acquiring housing developments in which the tenants who do not require specific housing supports (‘general needs tenants’) are informed of the nature of the development they are moving into and participate in an ‘intentional social mix’ approach.

This paper was produced for circulation within Focus Ireland/Focus Housing Association and relevant policy-makers to set out a first description of the model, which we have named the Meascán Housing Model, and to outline the work that would be needed to develop it further.

Intentional social mix

The initial proposed model of housing comprised an apartment block/development of between 10 – 40 units. The units would either be built by Focus Housing Association, leased from the local authority or purchased from the market.

Through agreement with the local authority, some of the units which would be allocated to Focus Ireland customers and some of which would be rented out to ‘general needs tenants’ from the local authority’s social housing waiting list. The Focus Ireland customers would either be moving out of homelessness or have been identified by the relevant authority as at high risk of becoming homeless and would be assessed as needing some level of tenancy sustainment support. These tenants could come from the local designated Housing First programme, Tusla CAS, the range of mental health housing programme operated by Focus Ireland with the HSE¹, or similar Focus Ireland engagements.

However, this mix of tenants would result in a development comprising entirely of social housing tenants. To fully deliver the ‘scattered site’ outcome, Focus Housing Association would like to rent some units to households not on the social housing list who are seeking homes in the private rented sector at market rates. Such households might be offered rents set at slightly below the local market rent level as an incentive to take up the tenancies.


All tenants would be aware of the nature of the development, the potential that some of their neighbours had experienced homelessness and might, occasionally, have challenging behaviours. They would also be aware of supports available to them and be expected to participate in the governance and community organisation required.

¹ For more details of these projects see ‘An Evaluation of the North Tipperary Intensive Tenancy Sustainment Service (2020)’ Aoife Dowling <https://bit.ly/3n7GIlle>


International experience

This model draws on six housing projects in Utrecht, NL which have been researched by the Centre of Social Innovation of HU University of Applied Sciences.

The projects are described in the fact-sheet as:

 Mixed Housing projects are home to people from different backgrounds who intentionally live next to each other, connect and engage in joint activities. These projects provide housing for (relatively) vulnerable groups of citizens who form a community together with other, 'regular', tenants or homeowners. These vulnerable groups in need of some form of support include ex-homeless persons, (former) users of mental health services (previously living in protected housing facilities), former users of youth care and people with (mild) intellectual disabilities. In some cases, also refugees are among the inhabitants. In terms of the number of residents, the size of these housing projects varies from 15 up to 500 people.

Commenting on the success of the projects Davelaar, et al (2019) state:

 Crucial aspects seem to be the existence of a social management policy including a clear vision on self-organisation and community building, smart selection procedures with expectation-management to foster a realistic level of reciprocity and the availability of individualised professional support when needed.

What social mix works?

The social mix in the first three Utrecht models appear to be on a ratio of around 50% of the tenants being from a homeless background, as set out in the following table.

Mixed housing projects in Utrecht	Regular tenants	Tenants from 'special target groups'	Type of dwellings	Facilities
't Groene Sticht (since 2003) Small neighbourhood in new large city district	69 (including families and single households, 3 members Emmaus community and approx. 12 home-owners)	35 ex-homeless people (including 10 people living in the Emmaus community)	32 self-contained apartments, 9 rooms, 1 Emmaus-group, 9 owner-occupied properties	Offices for floating support workers, meeting spaces, garden, neighbourhood restaurant, second-hand shop
Parana (since 2014) Purpose build complex under architecture	24 (including students and young working people)	20 people in emergency services, 24 'multi-problem', ex-homeless people	48 apartments (one and two rooms, including bathroom and kitchen)	Communal kitchens, living rooms and rooftop garden, Kiosk, offices (24/7 staff)
Majella (since 2016) Older, basic, post-war dwellings	39 (mainly working people, few students)	35 ex-homeless people (including some families)	67 apartments (one and two rooms, including bathroom and kitchen)	Office for floating support workers (will be transformed in 2020 into communal space), garden

This is a much higher proportion of households with an experience of homelessness than Focus Ireland has sought to achieve, and the ratio in the Meascán Model is likely to be significantly lower than this. The Housing First programme, for instance, recommends no more than 20% of households in a community should be Housing First tenants. The decisions made on this ratio will not only be decisive in relation to the social success of the projects, but will have crucial implications on cost, via both the rental income and the cost of support.

Funding the development

One of the challenges with this model is how the development will be funded. If all the units were to be used for social housing tenants, Housing Finance Agency funding would be available to build the social housing units and P&AA funding from local authorities would service that debt. However, the funds to deliver a proportion of affordable rental units at slightly below market rent would have to be sourced elsewhere and the rent charged would need to be adequate to both service that debt and also allow for the life cycle maintenance costs of the units. The Utrecht research refers to "owner occupiers" as part of the social mix, which is interesting in terms of consideration of initial discussions with some local authorities.

A potential development

Focus Ireland is working to develop elements of this approach in a range of developments as they arise. The approach is currently being applied in a development in Co. Tipperary and will be further developed in developments which are in the pipeline.

On a larger scale, Focus Housing Association is in preliminary discussion with a local authority (subject to planning permission) to provide 70 homes near a large urban centre with significant housing and homelessness issues. The outline proposal was to provide dwellings as per the table below:

No. of homes	Type	No. of Bedrooms
12	Terraced	3
26	Duplex 2 bed ground floor apt. with 3 bed houses over	13 × 2 bed apts. & 13 × 3 bed
16	Apts. – Block 1	2 bed
16	Apts. – Block 2	2 bed
Total No. Homes	70	

The local authority has confirmed that they have the demand and will support Focus Housing Association to deliver these new homes. However, this support is conditional on Focus Housing Association providing what they term an ‘intentional income mix’ within the development. While expressed in terms of income, the local authorities rationale is in line with Focus Ireland’s proposals for the Meascán Housing Model – as mixed tenure having the best chance of providing a long-term stable community.

The proportions of different tenancy types, and how they are defined, is a matter for each local authority and they will likely change from time to time. For this example, the local authority has agreed with their sectoral representatives and Councillors on their Housing SPC that the mix on any large development should be as follows:

- a) 30% social housing (including Focus Ireland tenants and ‘general needs’ social housing tenants.
- b) 20% private downsizing – elderly step down – contribution made to local authority to become tenant in managed scheme and pay a differential rent.
- c) 50% affordable through new build incremental purchase and cost or affordable rental (when guidance is received from the DHPLG).

Focus Housing Association will own and manage c.80% of the development and this will be funded through CALF & P&AA. The local authority will own c. 20% of the homes, which will be made available to their tenants for purchase via the Incremental Purchase Scheme (IPS).

Staff supports and their funding

Regardless of whether this pilot scheme is ever delivered, it seems clear that this model and working in partnership with a local authority is capable of providing the necessary funding mechanism for purchase/building of the physical housing units. However, tenancy supports to some of the tenants and community supports to the overall project are essential to its viability.

An appropriate level of skilled support is essential for supporting the tenants to sustain their tenancies and to ensure the overall development/s function effectively and provides a high quality of life to all tenants. In line with the Housing First model and Focus Ireland's own experience, this cannot be time-limited and will be required for the entire life-time of some tenants.

Focus Ireland/Focus Housing Association support currently comprises two forms of support:

- Property Management Officer, responsible for upkeep of the property and dealing with issues of communal welfare (use of common area etc) as well as collection of rent etc.
- Key worker, responsible for supporting the tenant, helping them link in with other health and well-being supports, helping the tenant fulfil their 'care plan' and sustaining the tenancy.

Focus Ireland commissioned a review of experiences in recent housing developments in Harold's Cross and John Lanes West. This review will help inform indicative answers to the following questions:

- Is the PMO/KW structure clear to tenants and effective.
- What should the staff support ratio be?
- Is there need for 'on-site' and/or 'overnight' staff. Is this a security or support need?
- Is there need for separate 'community development' expertise as part of the team?

The funding of the required level of support must be factored into the financial plans for the overall project.

Allocations and tenant selection

The allocation of social housing units to tenants is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authorities, which each drawing up a 'Scheme of Lettings' which is reviewed every five years. This 'scheme of lettings' applies equally to homes owned by the council to homes provided by AHBs using government funding schemes. In most schemes the primary mechanism for allocation is 'time on list' with a range of provisions to balance this with a responsiveness to urgent needs based on disability, medical needs etc. These schemes are designed to deliver fairness in the allocation of social housing and, while some local authorities work closely with AHBs on the allocation process on an ad hoc basis, there is little structured provision for ensuring social balance and integration in the resulting community.

As noted above, the Utrecht projects note “smart selection procedures” as one of the criteria for success. To apply this idea in the Irish context, the initial ‘pilot’ projects in this model will have to be developed in close collaboration with a local authority to ensure sympathetic and supportive allocation of social housing tenants, while respecting the approved scheme of lettings. The location of the first developments should be selected with this in mind. With the wider adoption of ‘choice based lettings’ policies there is greater scope for this approach.

The selection of the ‘market-related’ tenants will also be important. The reduction from market rent must be sufficient to ensure the option is attractive, but not so great as to encourage tenants who are insufficiently prepared to engage in the project. The selection of private rented tenants’ will also have to comply with anti-discrimination legislation and other private rental tenancy legislation, for instance our intention of creating a mixed community would not justify declining a tenancy to a household eligible for social housing support via HAP.

Building issues

There are a few key practical issues that need to be resolved as part of the project planning:

- › Design: In what respects should the design of new apartment blocks or estates reflect the specific requirements of all the tenants that are part of the project.
- › The reluctance of families outside of Dublin to live in apartment blocks needs to be factored into non-Dublin projects at a design and finance stage.
- › Building land: where and how will Focus Housing Association acquire the land for building the units.
- › Risk of arrears from market tenants.

Reputational risks

Focus Ireland has always been a leader when it comes to pilot projects and innovative solutions, and, if successful, the new Meascán Housing Model, could have a significant impact on how social housing is built, allocated and funded in Ireland.

However, are risks associated with the model:

- › Lack of comprehension from market or ‘general needs’ social housing tenants regarding the purpose of the project leading to unrealistic expectations of vulnerable households.
- › Risk of lack of engagement from non-Focus Ireland tenants which could damage the community aspects of the projects.
- › Could receive questions or objection to use of Focus Ireland funding being used to provide homes to market tenants and not vulnerable households.

What does success look like?

It is important at an early stage to establish a clear set of outcomes that will define the success of the model.

In addition to the normal KPIs for social housing (Voids, rent arrears, number of complaints, etc) a number of more ambitious and quality of life indicators could be developed:

- Sustainability of tenancies for formerly homeless households.
- Duration of all tenancies/level of transfer requests.
- Social Return on Investment measures.
- High quality of life and community well-being for all tenants.

Practical steps forward

From several perspectives working on a pilot with a local authority, such as that proposed by the local authority set out here, seems the optimum next step. It not only fulfils the aims of the intentional social mix but also provides a funding stream that may prove challenging to access in other circumstances.

Another initial exploratory approach might be to explore an ‘all social housing’ variant in which the social mix was provided by carefully selected tenants on the social housing list, and this is the approach being taking in the Co. Tipperary project. This approach would make the financial model much simpler but would require a strong local authority partner using a ‘choice based lettings’ system of social housing allocation, where the nature of the project was made clear to the non- homeless tenants.

Given the strong inter-action between the physical infrastructure of the housing units, the social support of some of the tenants and the goal of social inclusion, the potential of EU funding and support from dedicated budget lines in the European Investment Bank should also be explored.

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