

The Focus Ireland proposal to tackle long-term homelessness.

The background

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the delivery of housing, and social housing in particular. This is welcome and hard won through the work of Approved Housing Bodies, local authorities, the Department of Housing and private building contractors.

Welcome though this increased supply is, it has not translated into a decline in either overall homelessness or long-term homelessness. In fact, as we all know, homelessness has increased remorselessly virtually every month since the end of the pandemic.

There has been a lot of attention to the contraction of private rental sector, and while there may be some uncertainty about the extent of the reduction we know that it has led to a rapid growth of 'no-fault evictions' where the landlord wishes to sell up or move in his or her family into the unit. Not all these evictions result in homelessness and the Tenant-in-situ scheme (in which the landlords who wish to sell up are encouraged to sell the property, with the tenant still in place, to local authorities) has to a limited extent reduced the flow into homelessness – but there continue to be around three 'evict-to-sell' notices of termination reported to the RTB for every TiS purchase.

Nevertheless, Eoin O'Sullivan's presentation showed that there has been no consistent increase in the number of households becoming newly homeless¹. Rather the rise in the numbers stuck in emergency accommodation is explained by a steady stream of newly homeless households and a declining rate of households finding their way out.

The most significant impact of the contraction of the private rental sector has not, then, been an increase in the number of households entering homelessness but rather a decline in the numbers able to leave. Although there have been occasional spikes in exits to the private rental sector, the overall exit rate to such homes has been declining significantly in recent years. Although there has been a very substantial increase in the number of social houses constructed and purchased, this has not resulted in an increased rate of exits from homelessness to social housing – or at least not a sufficient increase to compensate for the decline in exits to the private rental sector.

There is now a consensus that we need to further increase the construction of housing, the only disagreements being whether we need to aim for 250,000 or 300,000 new homes over the next five years, and of course disagreement about how – and if - this can be reasonably

¹ The experience of front-line staff and Advice and Information services would suggest that one reason that the flow into homelessness has not increased is much stronger 'gate keeping' by local authorities with a significant rise in the number of households reporting that they have been assessed as 'not homeless' by the local authority or told to make alternative arrangements as there is no emergency accommodation available.

achieved. From the perspective of homelessness, however, consideration of the international and national evidence suggests that further increases in social housing supply, while necessary, will not, on their own lead to significant declines in the level of homelessness or in the average duration of homelessness in the foreseeable future.

The Housing Deficit and the Homeless Deficit

Each month the level of homelessness increases, which shows that even as currently functioning the housing system is not working for the people that we support. But behind this current problem, we have a much deeper problem of the high levels of homelessness and very long-term homelessness that has taken more than a decade to build up. This accumulated problem hangs over the entire question of tackling homelessness and makes it seem insolvable - both to the general public and to politicians – and sometimes to the people working hard each day in local authorities and homeless organisations.

Focus Ireland is arguing that this accumulation of homelessness, and the human misery that it involves, should be seen as a product of what the Housing Commission refers to as the 'housing deficit' in which the broader housing system has failed to meet emerging need over the last decade since home building halted during the financial crisis.

The Housing Commission argues that tackling this accumulated housing deficit requires a supply of affordable, appropriate housing of around 235,000 homes *in addition* to the supply needed to meet structural demand (future need in line with population projections). Similarly, the accumulation of homelessness, which is the most visible manifestation of this deficit, requires such a supply of affordable, appropriate housing.

But our experience over the last few years shows that such a supply is not, in itself, sufficient to guarantee a fall in homelessness and even less guaranteed to reduce long-term homelessness. Even if we fix the on-going problems of the housing and homelessness system, we cannot expect its routine functioning to solve the problems built up over a decade.

If we go on as we are expecting routine housing policy, in itself, to solve our accumulated homelessness problem we will be living with large scale homelessness for many years to come.

The transition of households from homelessness into the housing system is not a simple issue of supply and demand but is mediated by a range of different factors and shaped by specific policies. These policies have not been designed to maximise the impact of housing supply on homelessness but rather to meet a number of different policy goals appropriate to different periods and different objectives. To solve long-term homelessness, we need a specific and targeted approach.

In order to tackle the number of households which have accumulated in homelessness over the last decade, in addition to an adequate supply of social housing, we need to divide the problem into two parts: first, measures to fix the ongoing housing and homeless system and so prevent the accumulation of new cohorts of homeless households, and second

measures to target the specific circumstances of the accumulated households that are already homeless as a result of the housing deficit, particularly those who are long-term homeless.

Over several years, Focus Ireland has set out proposals to address the first goal of creating a more effective on-going housing and homelessness system, this document sets out an innovative approach to achieving the second of these policy goals.

A proposal to tackle accumulated homelessness

The proposal to tackle the scale of accumulated long-term homelessness involves (i) identifying a defined group of people currently trapped in emergency accommodation, (ii) providing them with active case management and (iii) providing a dedicated stream of social housing shaped to meet their housing needs.

The target group

The defined group should, as much as possible, include all those who have become, and remained, homeless as the result of the housing deficit. This should be a one-off measure so that decisions about who to include in this group should be as ambitious as possible while remaining feasible within a defined period.

Focus Ireland propose that the defined group to benefit from this measure should be all those who are long-term homeless at the time the programme is announced. Successive Governments have defined long-term homelessness as households which have been homeless continuously for at least 6 months or who have been homeless for at least 6 months during the last two years.

According to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Quarterly Report, [as of June 2024](#), there were 4,791 households who had been homeless for over 6 months (3,473 single person households and 1,318 families). Due to changes in the way the Department calculates this figure, it excludes those who have been intermittently homeless for more than 6 months during the last two years. While this is likely to be a small group it includes a number of particularly vulnerable families that should be included in the programme.

Why not include everyone who is homeless? While current data is not available, earlier studies show that most people who become homeless exit within 6 months, most with very little outside assistance. So, a wider approach, for instance, taking in all those who are homeless at the time of the announcement would direct resources to a significant number of people who would exit homelessness in any case. By targeting households in long-term homelessness, we are attempting to provide solutions for more complex circumstances. The very reason that households are in long-term homelessness indicates complexity in circumstances which will not be resolved solely by supply. A targeted approach focused on the cohort experiencing long-term homelessness would address these policy gaps.

Why not be more targeted? A narrower, less ambitious approach, for instance concentrating on those who have been homeless the longest, such as the 1,443 households who have

already been homeless for over 2 years (1,039 singles and 404 families), would require fewer homes and could be completed sooner. There would be serious concern however that those who are already homeless over 6 months would find it hard to exit homelessness, so running a higher risk of replicating the accumulation of very long-term homeless people. Our proposal to target the cohort in homelessness 6 months or more strikes a balance in yielding impact for the most amount of people while remaining realistic about what can be achieved within the timeframe.

Case management

Case management (or key working) has been at the heart of efforts to tackle homelessness for well over a decade. A skilled case manager supports a homeless households both to overcome the challenges of being homeless and plan a route out of homelessness. They link the person or family in with the range of, often hard to access, social services and other supports.

The effectiveness of case management has been eroded because the number of case managers has not kept pace with the rise in homelessness and because of the barriers to accessing suitable social or private rental housing.

Every household included in the target group would be allocated a qualified case manager, the housing and support needs of each household would be assessed and an individual and overall project plan developed.

The housing supply

Simply ring-fencing this group and providing active case management would not in itself solve the problem, to overcome the range of barriers that exist for this group of people in accessing secure homes requires that a stream of dedicated social housing supply be made available to this group. International evidence suggests that ending long-term homelessness requires a targeted approach involving predicated housing units allocated to homeless households, alongside a well-functioning social housing system.²

Current policy aims to construct around 10,000 new social homes each year, the total number of new (i.e. newly built) social housing dwelling in 2024 was 8,100³. Political proposals for the next Government suggest that social housing targets might be around 15,000 homes or more.

If ten percent of all new social housing allocations were reserved for households that are already long-term homeless, even at the current rate of house construction all were provided with homes by 2030.

² Juhila, K., Raitakari, S. and Ranta, J., 2022. Combatting Long-Term Homelessness in Finland. *Successful public policy in the Nordic countries*.

³ A policy of targeting 10% of all allocations towards this group would include allocations to vacancies in existing housing stock as well as new supply but figures for the total number of housing allocations has not been published for many years, the calculation is done only in relation to new housing stock.

If social housing supply increases as proposed, or if the proportion were increased above 10%, the goal could be achieved sooner.

If the criteria of being already 18 months homeless were applied, either as a first priority within the larger group or as the entire project, this group could move out of homelessness in around 18 months (with the reservations below).

However, a policy of simply allocating a proportion of the existing pipeline of social housing to the target group would soon come up against the problem that the existing pipeline of social housing does not match the needs of the people who need it – too few homes are for 1-person households and too few are for families with 4 or more children. There is also a problem with too few houses being constructed in Dublin City, where homelessness is most concentrated. DCC only met half its new build social housing target in 2023 creating serious challenges for addressing long-term homelessness in the city.

In the first year of the programme, there is no alternative but to allocate from the supply that is currently under construction, but from that date the implementation of the Housing Commission recommendations in relation to building the right sort of housing in the right areas should start to come through.

Focus Ireland proposes that starting from year 2, and building up from there, the 10% of housing to be designated for the long-term homeless households should be designated in the planning, design and financing stage. This would mark a distinct shift from the system of deciding allocation only on completion of the unit. This approach would have a number of distinct advantages:

Making the decision that the unit will be allocated to long-term homeless households early in the process, will reduce tensions over conflicting priorities at local level. If the funding for these unit predates their use for this project, even before they are constructed, tensions at the time of allocation will be reduced.

If social housing supply is to increase over this period, the additional housing could be specifically designated and funded for this purpose. This approach will also ensure that the units in this programme actually meet the housing needs of the households who are targeted.

It is crucial that this approach does not propose blocks or zones of housing specifically for households who are long-term homeless, to avoid the risk of concentrated areas of social exclusion. The 10% of housing designated for this programme must be fully integrated into general social housing and the wider community.

We also argue that a further 1% of social housing output is designated for young adults who are in state care (including Section 5 orders where appropriate) and are at high risk of becoming homeless on turning 18.

Objections.

The primary objection to measures which target homeless households for social housing is that they may create a distorting effect, with people ‘choosing’ to become homeless to increase their prospects of being allocated a home. The fact that there is no evidence to justify this concern does not prevent it being a potential barrier to effective targeted measures⁴. However, by introducing a one-off programme which would ring-fence households that already meet the criteria, with no prospect of a second round, it would be clear that there was no possible benefit to be accrued by ‘voluntarily’ becoming or remaining homeless.

A second objection to such targeted measures is that they are ‘unfair’ to people who have been on the waiting list for many years, if the targeted homeless households have fewer years on the list. Some of the impact of this objection is related to the first – the sense of unfairness is keener if the targeted family is seen as ‘queue jumping’ in order to gain precedence. If we remove the possibility that people deliberately constructed their homelessness to gain advantage, by the one-off ring-fencing of people already homeless, it is easier to focus on the issue of need.

A further objection is that the existing cohort of homeless households will just be replaced by a new cohort. There are two responses to that: It is important to recognise that the current number of long-term homelessness households has taken several years to build up and is a result of the decade in which we were building very few social houses. In this sense the current stock of long-term homeless households can be seen as a shadow of the ‘housing deficit’ identified.

Finally, the cost of the plan will largely comprise of the additional case managers required to support the targeted group. There is no additional cost in relation to housing as the proposal involves the a targeted allocation of housing that is already built or planned to be built. At a ratio of 1 case manager to 20 households, this will initially require around 240 case managers to undertake the initial assessment. The full cohort of 240 case managers would require a budget of some €16 million in a full year, but the requirement would fall to zero over the period as the households moved out of homelessness. The additional cost would be reduced by the fact that many of the households already have a case manager, who would be able to work more effectively in this programme. Crucially the cost would be offset by the reduction in the cost of emergency accommodation which currently accounts for almost 90% of the homeless budget of some €434m. The estimated cost of providing an emergency bed is around €35,000 per annum⁵, so that if all long-term homeless families were accommodated – and not replaced – the saving would be in the region of €171m per annum.

⁴ During the period when Minister Alan Kelly introduced a measure to require local authorities in Dublin, Cork to allocate a percentage of new allocations to homeless and disabled households, the number of families becoming homeless did in fact rise – but this happened at a time when the numbers were already rising and the numbers becoming homeless rose at the same rate in the period before the measure, during the measure and in the 6 months after the measure was ceased.

⁵ See O’Sullivan, Byrne and Allen “Focus on Homelessness: Public Expenditure on Services for Households Experiencing Homelessness” March 2023, p14 <https://bit.ly/FOHExpenditure2023>

Conclusion

The proposal we are making here includes a number of significant changes in practice and policy:

That a group of already long-term homeless households be identified and ring-fenced for a programme of intensive case management and designated housing supply.

That a proportion of social housing supply be designed specifically for this group, in the first days of the programme through simple allocation but moving quickly to having a designated stream of social housing which, while remaining integrated into communities, is designed to meet the actual household size of the designated group.

Tackling homelessness is always about the specific human conditions of real people, as well as such broad policy ideas. Difficult cases will emerge – the families that are not yet eligible for social housing, families with ‘estate management issues’, households with very specific aspirations about where they wish to live. These individual human issues will not simply disappear with our proposal, but they become contextualised in a system which is better able to concentrate its attention and resources on finding solutions, through a case management process.

The proposal does not pretend to solve the day-to-day problems with the housing and homelessness system. If the designation of some social housing and case management for the long-term homeless households draws resources away from responding to the newly homeless, we will end up again where we are today. More effective measures to prevent homelessness and to respond to it quickly are needed in parallel with measures to deal with the accumulated legacy of the housing deficit. We believe that this proposal would provide valuable lesson in tackling long-term homelessness and housing supply deficits for future governments and policymakers. The learnings from implementing such a proposal would further the ultimate objective of resigning homelessness to an emergency or temporary social situation, which does not result in households spending prolonged periods of time in homelessness, as has been the case in the decades following the financial crisis. The phenomenon of long-term homelessness can be reversed, with the targeted policies and practices outlined.

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