



# Simon Communities of Ireland

## Submission on the Statement of Strategy for the Department of Social Protection

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### Introduction

The Simon Communities of Ireland welcome the opportunity to input into the development of the Department of Social Protection’s Strategy Statement 2023-2026. The upcoming Statement of Strategy is an opportunity for the Department of Social Protection to reflect its position as one of the key agents in tackling the crisis of homelessness. The housing and homelessness crisis reached unprecedented levels in 2022. While housing availability and affordability is at the heart of the issue, so too is the necessary supports and provisions of the Department of Social Protection.

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated what an all-of-government crisis response can achieve. The lessons from the pandemic need to be applied to the homelessness crisis with the same focus, ambition and determination. To move toward ending homelessness, an all-of-government, inter-agency approach is required.

After providing an overview of homelessness, this submission outlines key priorities which the Department of Social Protection should consider including in its Statement of Strategy in order to meet the stated aim of the Programme for Government to tackle homelessness.

### Overview of the Housing and Homelessness Crisis

2022 figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage illustrate worrying trends in homelessness. In 2022 – for 12 consecutive months – we witnessed an increase in homelessness. There are now 11,632 people living in emergency homeless accommodation; a 30.49% increase in 12 months and the highest figure on record.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>

## Total Number of People living in Emergency Homeless Accommodation in Ireland, May 2016 - present

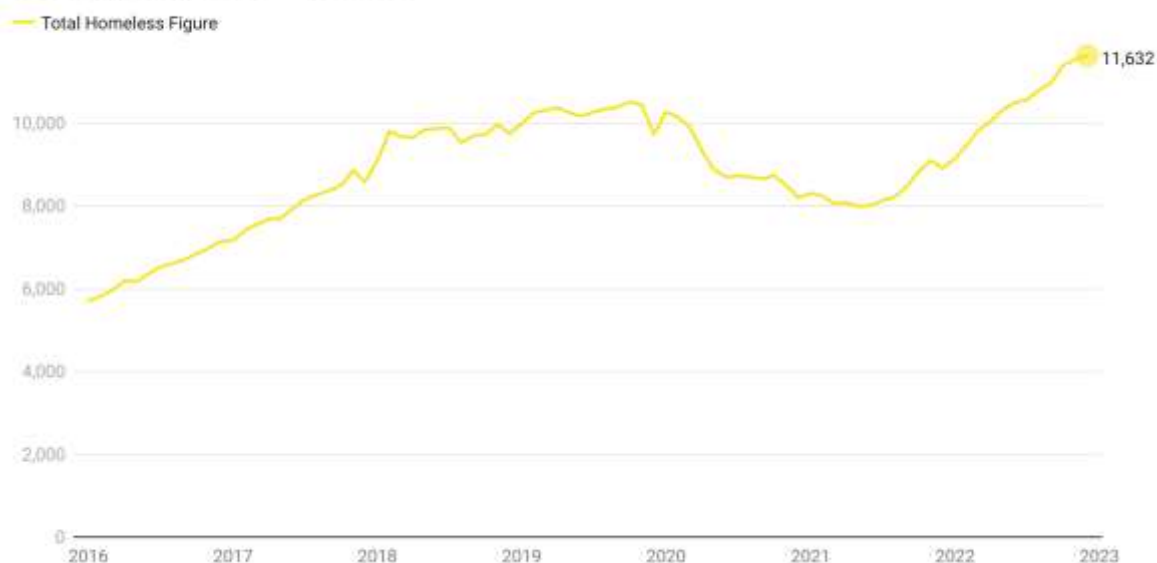


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland • Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage • Created with Datawrapper

The latest Rental Price Report from Daft.ie<sup>2</sup> found that rent prices increased by 14.1% between Q3 2021 and Q3 2022; this is the highest year-on-year increase in market rents since the Daft Report was launched in 2005. The average national monthly rent now sits at €1,688. Increases in rents have been twinned by an ongoing contraction of supply. Daft.ie reported that, on November 1st, there were just 1,087 homes listed to rent nationwide; down almost 60% on the same date a year ago.

Homelessness is the sharpest end of the housing crisis affecting vulnerable people with limited access to social capital and support. Ireland has committed to ending homelessness by 2030, yet figures continue to rise. Action is needed to protect households worst affected by rising rents, increased costs of living, and high inflation rates from homelessness. In the long-term, we need to increase the supply of affordable and social housing. In the short-term, we need to ensure those who are most vulnerable to housing exclusion and insecurity are protected through our welfare system.

### Strategic Objective 1: Put the Client at the Centre of Policy and Service Delivery

**Commit to a Whole-of-Government approach to homelessness as a high-level strategy:** The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are mandated to support the sustainable and efficient delivery of well-planned homes, effective local government and vibrant inclusive communities. While a supply of secure affordable homes are central to tackling homelessness, it is not the only element. Homelessness does not exist in isolation. It is a complex, diverse experience that cannot be fully supported by one Department or agency alone. This is a barrier faced by the Simon Communities in Ireland in enacting a person-centred, trauma informed approach to care and support. Input is often needed from several Departments to ensure well-rounded support is provided to people in need, including Children, Education, Justice, Health, and of course, Social Protection.

<sup>2</sup> Irish Rental Report Q3 2022, Daft.ie. Available at: [https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2022-Q3-rentalpricedaftreport.pdf?d\\_rd=1](https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2022-Q3-rentalpricedaftreport.pdf?d_rd=1)

Implementing a whole-of-government approach is in line with the Department's approach to tackling Climate change and poverty. The Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that the upcoming strategy commit to implementing the same ambition for a whole-of-government approach to tackling homelessness and increasing inter-departmental communication and planning with the view to tackle and prevent complex issues such as homelessness.

**Identify if there is a housing need and ensure to a more full assessment of the person as a high-level strategy:** The Simon Communities regularly work to prevent individuals and families becoming homeless when their housing situation has reached a crisis point. Social welfare Intreo offices and services provide an important space to identify and flag where a person or family is at risk of experiencing homelessness. Early intervention to prevent homelessness can help in turning the tide on homelessness. An example of this prevention in action would be the provision of training and support to Intreo office staff to ensure that they have the skills to identify a person or family who may be at risk of homelessness. Where this is the case, they can work to ensure that the household is linked in with services in the relevant local authority. While such good work does happen in Intreo offices across the country, this kind of action could be formalised in the work of Intreo office staff as an outcome of a strategic focus on homelessness prevention.

There is a body of work that could support the Department in identifying those at risk of housing insecurity, and overrepresented in homelessness. There is an opportunity to direct those vulnerable to homelessness to appropriate prevention and services. Through timely intervention, we can limit the number of people entering homelessness and break cycles of poverty and social exclusion for countless families and individuals.

## Strategic Objective 2

**Ensure Inclusion in the age of Digitalisation as a high-level strategy and key outcome of Strategic Objective 2:** Digitalisation has become a key strategy for the Department. Commitments in the 2022 – 2025 Digital strategy statement aim to 'prioritise the delivery of online services and engage regularly with customers and stakeholders to drive the delivery of 90% of the Department's services online by 2030'.<sup>3</sup> Digitalisation can increase accessibility to services to a large number of clients and help the Department to achieve its sustainability goals. It can be hugely beneficial to people in homelessness, at risk of homelessness or working in the homelessness sector, as access to information is widely available. However, the Simon Communities recommend that the Department acknowledge and plan for the continuation of in-person services. Homelessness can increase a person's risk of digital exclusion as access to equipment or 'inputs' (computer, smartphone, internet connection, data, charging ports, etc) and data skills can be limited.<sup>4</sup> The Simon Communities of Ireland recommend that this barrier to services and information is acknowledged and a holistic plan of inclusivity underpins the Strategy.

**Review the Effectiveness of Social Supports through consistent reviews in line with current inflation and cost of living as a key high-level strategy:** There are many supports provided by the Department of Social Protection that support those in homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Welfare payments relating to housing, such as Rent Supplement, play an important role in homelessness prevention by helping to bridge income gaps and ensure tenants do not fall into arrears. Social transfers such as jobseekers, lone-parent supports, and disability allowance are key

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/05b877-strategy-statements/#statement-of-digital-strategy-2022-to-2025>

<sup>4</sup> *Digital inclusion for homeless people and homeless service providers*, Available at: [https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Digitalisation\\_Policy\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Digitalisation_Policy_Paper.pdf)

for preventing poverty that can contribute to housing insecurity and homelessness. However, inflation and rising cost of living means that these supports are no longer as effective in providing income adequacy. As a high-level strategy, the Simon Community recommends that the Strategy include a commitment to conduct a regular analysis of suitability of current payment rates in relation to the market, inflation, and rising cost of living.

Actions relating to this high-level strategy:

- conduct regular analysis of availability of affordable accommodation in the private rental market and, as a key homelessness prevention measure, seek to ensure that rent supplement rates match the realities of the private rental market
- set out a roadmap for benchmarking social welfare against liveable income.

### Key challenges and Opportunities

**Housing and Homelessness Crisis:** We are in the midst of a housing crisis that is driving increases in homelessness. It is key that the Department recognise this as a key challenge given the inter-connection between homelessness, housing insecurity and poverty, and the key role in the Department of Social Protection in tackling poverty.

In the last 12 months alone, homelessness has increased by 30.5%. Between Q3 2021 and Q3 2022, rents increased by 14.1% while the supply of rental properties dropped by almost 60%.<sup>5</sup> Properties that are available in the rental market are unaffordable, particularly for those on low incomes. The Simon Communities of Ireland's quarterly *Locked out of the Market* report is witnessing a notable reduction in the number of affordable properties available. Our latest report<sup>6</sup> found just 41 properties across 16 study areas available to rent within HAP limits; down 96.5% from 1,106 available in December 2020. Both the number and proportion of properties affordable under HAP rates is dropping. In the December 2020 *Locked Out* report, 38.4% of properties found were affordable under HAP. This dropped to 11% in December 2021. Our latest publication found that just 5.4% of properties were affordable under a HAP rate.

#### **Locked Out of the Market: Breakdown of properties available with a standard or discretionary HAP rate**

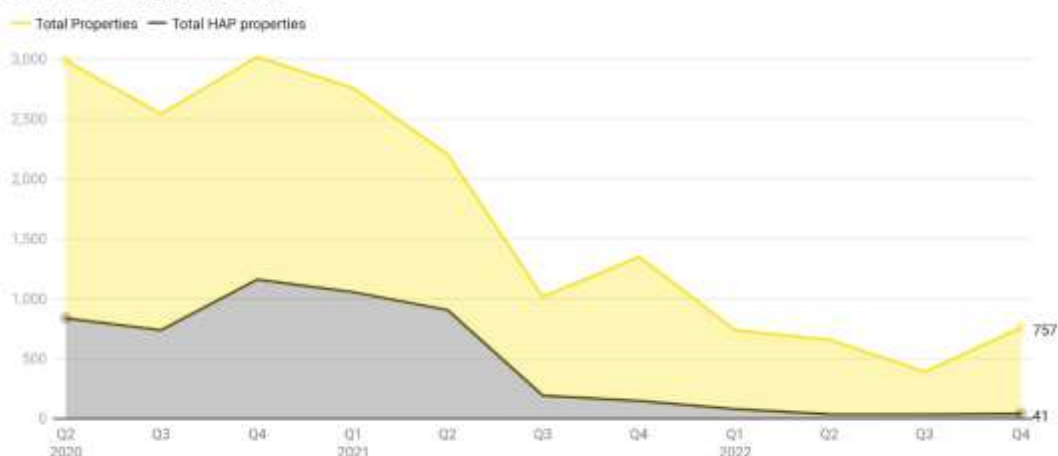


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland - Source: Locked Out of the Market - Created with Datawrapper

<sup>5</sup> Irish Rental Report Q3 2022, Daft.ie. Available at: [https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2022-Q3-rentalpricedaftreport.pdf?d\\_rd=1](https://ww1.daft.ie/report/2022-Q3-rentalpricedaftreport.pdf?d_rd=1)

<sup>6</sup> *Locked Out of the Market*, December 2022, Available at: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/locked-out-of-the-market-december-2022/>

The accelerating housing and homelessness crisis has been a focal point of 2022 and is likely to continue through 2023 and beyond. This major societal challenge needs to be recognised and acknowledged as a key challenge within the upcoming strategy statement.

**Rising Inflation:** Increasing costs of living has had a deep effect in 2022 resulting in Budget 2023 introducing emergency one-off payments to offset rising prices and protect households from falling into poverty. According to the Central Statistics Office, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 8.2% between December 2021 and December 2022<sup>7</sup>. While this is down from an annual increase of 8.9% in the 12 months to November 2022, this is still drastically higher than pre-pandemic. Prices on average in December 2019, as measured by the CPI, were 1.3% higher compared with December 2018.<sup>8</sup>

Housing and associated housing costs are one of the main drivers of inflation in 2022. The divisions with the largest increases over 12 months in 2022 were housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuel with a 25.9% increase, followed by food and non-alcoholic beverages (+11.7%). As a comparison, in 2019, there was a 3.3% inflationary increase in housing and associated costs.

High inflationary rates are expected to continue into 2023 and beyond making housing, heating, and bills more and more unaffordable, particularly for households on lower wages. The Simon Community recommend that this be highlighted as a key challenge within the Strategy.

**Poverty Reduction and Active Inclusion:** This challenge is listed in the current Statement of Strategy and it is rightly highlighted that social transfers play a vital role in alleviating poverty. The Simon Communities see that social transfers are also a key homeless prevention measure. We recommend that there is a greater focus in the 2023-2026 strategy in identifying poverty and inequality for groups that are currently falling through the cracks. Young people are of particular concern.

Reduced social welfare rates are a barrier for young people trying to lift themselves out of homelessness and achieve housing security. According to the ESRI, only 5% of young people are not in education, employment or training, yet 1 in 10 (11%) report financial strain making it difficult to make ends meet.<sup>9</sup> There has been some progress to ensure young people under the age of 25 who are in vulnerable situations are not subject to the reduced social welfare rates, including those who:<sup>10</sup>

- live independently and receive a state housing support such as RS, RAS, or HAP;
- have dependent children;
- are transferring from Disability Allowance to Jobseeker's Allowance;
- were in the care of the Child and Family Agency during the 12 months before reaching 18

Despite these necessary exclusions, the Simon Communities still encounter young people trapped in homeless services and accessing a lower rate of social welfare. This is concerning given the increasing rate of homelessness among young people. In December 2022, there were 1,387 young people aged 18-24 living in emergency homeless accommodation; an increase of 458 (49.3%) year on year from 929 in December 2021. This is a record high number of young people in homelessness.

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpi/consumerpriceindexdecember2022/>

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/cpi/consumerpriceindexdecember2019/>

<sup>9</sup> Disrupted transitions? Young adults and the COVID-19 pandemic, Available at:

<https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS142.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>

[https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social\\_welfare/social\\_welfare\\_payments/unemployed\\_people/jobseekers\\_allowance.html](https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/unemployed_people/jobseekers_allowance.html)

No vulnerable young person should be left with a reduced social welfare payment that can further compound their poverty and housing issues. The Simon Communities recommend that a key objective of this upcoming Strategy is to ensure people vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness – particularly young people – are protected by social welfare rates and that no one falls through the gaps.

The Simon Communities recommend that that this strategy provides space for greater outreach and evaluation of populations most vulnerable to homelessness, poverty, and social exclusion who are currently falling through the gaps of our welfare system and not receiving the support they need.

### Priorities for the 2023-2026 Strategy: Summary of Recommendations

#### Recommendations for Strategic Objective 1:

- Commit to implementing the same ambition for a whole-of-government approach to tackling homelessness and increasing inter-departmental communication and planning with the view to tackle and prevent complex issues such as homelessness.
- Create processes for staff within Intreo offices to identify if there is a housing need and ensure to a more full assessment of the person as a high-level strategy:

#### Recommendations for Strategic Objective 2:

- Ensure Inclusion in the age of Digitalisation as a high level strategy and key outcome of Strategic Objective 2
- Review the Effectiveness of Social Supports through consistent reviews in line with current inflation and cost of living as a key high-level strategy. Actions relating to this high-level strategy:
  - conduct regular analysis of availability of affordable accommodation in the private rental market and, as a key homelessness prevention measure, seek to ensure that rent supplement rates match the realities of the private rental market
  - set out a roadmap for benchmarking social welfare against liveable income.

#### Recommendations for Key challenges and Opportunities:

- Recognise the housing and homelessness crisis as a key challenge and opportunity for action within the Department of Social Protection
- Recognise high inflation – and particularly rising housing costs – as a key challenge
- As part of the current work on ‘Poverty Reduction and Active Inclusion’, increase focus and introduce processes in the 2023-2026 strategy that will identifying groups currently falling through the cracks in our welfare system. Young people are of particular concern.

### About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities support over 22,000 men, women, and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the Northwest and the Southeast, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research, communications and best practice. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level.

Whatever the issue, Simon’s door is always open for as long as we are needed. For more information, please visit [www.simon.ie](http://www.simon.ie)

**Services include:**

- Early Intervention, Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction
- Housing with support and Housing First services
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports)
- Personal development, education, training, and employment services
- Food banks, drop-in centres and soup runs.

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