



# Working to End Homelessness by 2030



Simon Communities of Ireland  
General Election Manifesto



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# 1. Introduction

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**Holding the ambition of the current 2030 target and making considerable progress on the housing and homelessness crisis must be a key priority for the next Government.**

The number of men, women and children experiencing homelessness has increased significantly over the last decade. In the three years since the Government signed the Lisbon Declaration, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland has increased by 80%, from 8,014 in June 2021<sup>1</sup> to 14,429 in July 2024.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the decisive implementation of progressive policies to turn the tide on homelessness in Ireland is now critical. The proposals we set out in this document are designed to meet that requirement. They are informed by knowledge and experience we have accumulated over more than 50 years of frontline work, along with engagement with colleagues nationally and internationally to learn from best practice.

That experience and knowledge of the Simon Communities points to clear evidence that considerable progress can be made in the lifetime of the next Government if it makes homelessness a priority. It is a priority that needs to be reflected in the incoming administration's Programme for Government and must be embraced fully across all arms of the State.

Any programme to address homelessness will have three pillars and requires actions that will see measurable impact:

- Pillar One: Supporting Exits Out of Homelessness.
- Pillar Two: Actions to Prevent Homelessness.
- Pillar Three: Supporting People Experiencing Homelessness.

In order to fulfil the commitment to work towards ending homelessness by 2030, there is a need for clear coherent coordination across Departments and relevant stakeholders to drive the change that is needed. A comprehensive plan to end homelessness is required, that must include a mechanism to drive implementation. We believe there are several ways this could be achieved. We would advocate for:

- 1) The Right to Housing: The Simon Communities of Ireland have long advocated for the enshrinement of the Right to Housing in the Constitution. This will act as a driving force for the policy change that is necessary to tackle homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> DHLGH (2021) *Homeless Report – June 2021*.

<sup>2</sup> DHLGH (2024) *Homeless Report – July 2024*.

- 2) Establish a Minister of State with responsibility for homelessness, ensuring that the Minister has the necessary powers to drive and implement cross-departmental action to tackle homelessness.

It is imperative that **impact** is as much a measure of success as **output**. The current extent of homelessness in Ireland is well-documented. We include a summary of the most recent data in the next section to illustrate how specific aspects of homelessness can be enumerated and monitored to assess impact.

## 1.1 Current Context

### **Emergency Accommodation**

There are a record 14,429 men, women and children living in emergency accommodation across the country, including 2,096 families with 4,401 children.<sup>3</sup> The consequence is an unprecedented increase in the provision of emergency accommodation for people experiencing homelessness, particularly private emergency accommodation.

The chronic shortage of appropriate, affordable housing options has resulted in people being trapped in emergency accommodation for years. There is broad agreement that lengthy stays in emergency accommodation are inappropriate for anyone, but especially for families with children. 896 family households are currently stuck in emergency accommodation for over 12 months, together with a further 2,204 single households.<sup>4</sup> This is unacceptable. Emergency accommodation should only ever be a short-term, emergency intervention.

The only answer is a commitment by the next Government to move away from reactive policy measures to address homelessness and adopt proactive prevention policies, accelerate exits from homelessness and significantly increase the provision of social housing.

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<sup>3</sup> DHLGH (2024) *Homeless Report – July 2024*.

<sup>4</sup> DHLGH (2024) *Homeless Quarterly Progress Report for Q2 2024*.

Figure 1

### Number of People in Emergency Accommodation

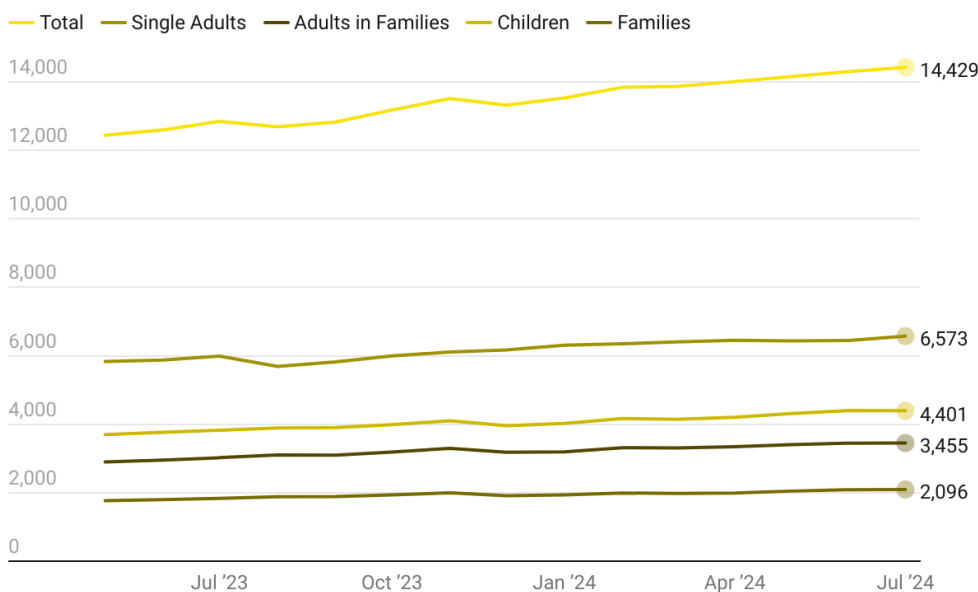


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland • Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage • Created with Datawrapper

### Rough Sleeping

The only official rough sleeper count in the State is conducted in Dublin twice per year. There are plans for an official rough sleeper count to be conducted in Cork as well as in Dublin in October 2024. The most recent rough sleeper count in Dublin was conducted in April 2024. This count excluded the large number of asylum seekers sleeping rough in the city at the time, as these individuals are a responsibility of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It found 128 unique individuals sleeping rough over a seven-day period. This is an increase of 25 (24%) individuals since the Spring 2023 count. An increase in the proportion of young people sleeping rough is of particular concern in the April 2024 count. Individuals aged between 18 and 25 years accounted for 14% of rough sleepers compared to 6% in the Winter 2023 count and 7% in the Spring 2023 count. Because the rough sleeper count has to-date been conducted in Dublin only, it is difficult to get a countrywide view of rough sleeping. In 2023, Cork Simon’s outreach team met 402 men and women sleeping rough and bedded down during the course of the year. This represents a 32% increase compared to 2022. The Cork Simon outreach team met an average of 15 men and women per night who were bedded down, a 139% increase compared to 2022.

This rise in rough sleeping is extremely concerning. Sleeping rough can have a detrimental impact on an individual’s physical and mental health and is a traumatic and chaotic experience. People end up sleeping rough for a variety of complex reasons which require trauma-informed and intensive

solutions. The Housing First programme has proven itself to be a successful intervention, both in Ireland and internationally. According to the Housing Agency, the tenancy sustainment rate for Housing First in Ireland is 86%, demonstrating its success in addressing long-term homelessness.<sup>5</sup> The expansion of this programme must continue if we are to eliminate the need for people to sleep rough in Ireland.

Figure 2

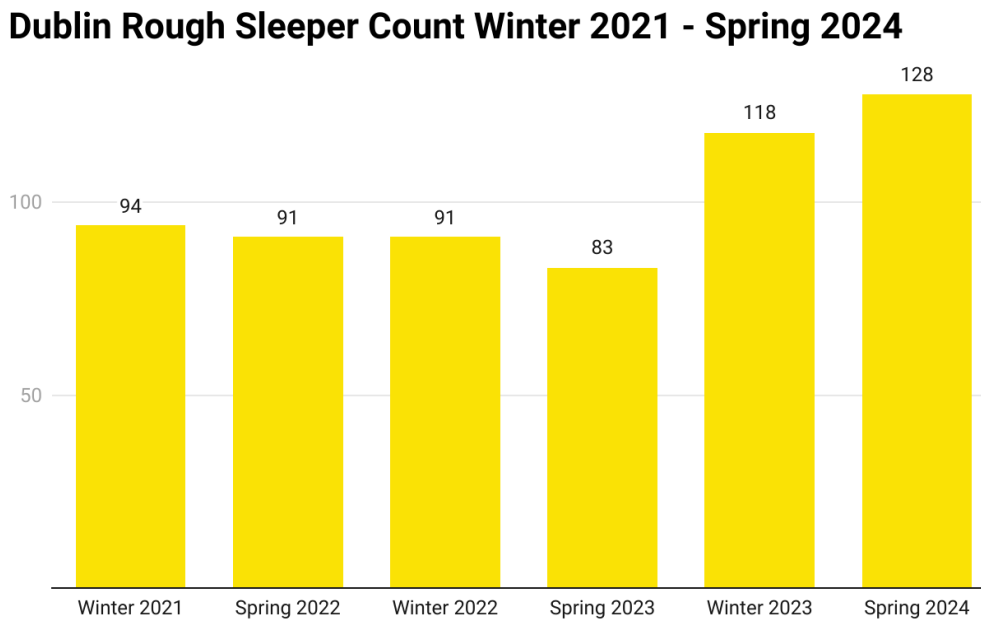


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland • Source: Dublin Region Homeless Executive • Created with Datawrapper

### Hidden Homelessness

While the official monthly homeless figures are indicative of the growing crisis we are facing, they only reflect those people depending on emergency accommodation. There are thousands more households experiencing hidden forms of homelessness across Ireland. A recent poll<sup>6</sup> conducted by Ireland Thinks on behalf of Simon Communities of Ireland estimated that there are 24,180 households experiencing hidden homelessness across Ireland. This includes people living in a range of circumstances, who are not visible on the streets or in the official statistics. For example, people forced to stay with relatives, sleep in cars/workplaces, stay overnight at cafés, squatters and people sleeping rough in hidden locations. Housing exclusion and homelessness are touching the lives of so many people across the country, and so demands a response from any prospective government.

<sup>5</sup> The Housing Agency (2023) *Press Release: Housing First successful in ending long-term homelessness.*

<sup>6</sup> Simon Communities of Ireland (2024) *Under the Radar: Unveiling Hidden Homelessness Across the Island of Ireland.*

## 1.2 Building on Progress

**The next government must build on areas of progress over the last number of years.**

Despite the number of households being pushed into homelessness increasing monthly in recent years, the scale of the crisis would be much greater were it not for some significant areas of development and progress. The next government must seize the opportunity to enhance these measures and build upon that progress. Three initiatives that deserve a particular mention are:

- The Housing First programme.
- The Youth Homelessness Strategy.
- The Tenant in Situ scheme.

# 1. Supporting Exits Out of Homelessness

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## 2.1 Public Housing Delivery: Greater Ambition

**The next Government must prioritise a greater ambition for public housing delivery.**

Homelessness is primarily a housing issue. Adequate secure and affordable housing is urgently required to enable people to move out of homelessness as well as reducing the risk of people becoming homeless in the first instance. People need the security and safety of their own home. It is a fundamental human need. As the recent report of The Housing Commission outlined, an emergency response is required to address the undersupply of housing, and only a radical strategic reset of housing policy will achieve this. The next Government must prioritise housing and homelessness policies that will deliver affordable, secure homes at the scale required. It must acknowledge the home as a fundamental building block to both social and economic life and establish a cross-departmental programme that will create a housing system that reflects this.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Implement the Housing Commission's recommendations for the social housing sector. The implementation of these recommendations would contribute to increasing social and affordable housing while strengthening the social housing infrastructure in Ireland. This would reduce its susceptibility to pro cyclical output and ensure that estate management and maintenance are adequately funded. Many of the recommendations outlined throughout this report are in line with recommendations from the Housing Commission.

- Commit to setting ambitious housing targets that reflect the current housing deficit along with future and unmet need. The Housing Commission has estimated a deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes.<sup>7</sup> This must be factored into future housing targets, along with projections for future demand. The ESRI recently projected structural housing demand to be approximately 44,000 per annum from 2023-2030, and 39,700 from 2030-2040.<sup>8</sup> Targets must be matched with the necessary resources and ambition needed to achieve them. The Government have consistently fallen short of housing targets in previous years, especially in relation to social housing.
- Commit to increase the share of social homes to 20% of the overall housing stock. In order to achieve this, at least 15,000 social homes need to be delivered annually. It is well established that the stock of social homes across the country is inadequate. This has had hugely negative consequences, including very long social housing wait lists, an over-reliance on the private rental market to provide social housing through housing allowances (HAP), and increased levels of homelessness and housing exclusion. We need to significantly uplift the stock of social homes across the country. At least 15,000 social homes need to be delivered annually to make progress towards this ambition, with the hope that this delivery will continue to increase in the coming years, enabling a more sustainable housing system overall.
- Deliver housing which reflects the composition of households with a social housing need. EG. one-bed properties. One adult households remain the majority household group on the main social housing list, growing proportionally from 56% in 2022 to 57.4% (33,746 households) in 2023.<sup>9</sup> One adult households make up the second largest proportion of HAP tenancies at 22% (12,519 tenancies).<sup>10</sup> Single people also make up the majority of the homeless population. As of July 2023, there were 6,573 (66% of the total homeless population) single adults living in emergency accommodation.<sup>11</sup> This reflects the critical need for one-bedroom properties.
- Establish a social housing allocations policy that reflects the current crisis and prioritises the allocation of homes to those in long-term homelessness. As set out earlier in this document, there are far too many people spending lengthy periods in emergency accommodation. While recognising that social housing allocations are a matter for local authorities, it is imperative that both families and individuals who have spent long periods in emergency accommodation are prioritised when suitable social housing units become available.

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<sup>7</sup> DHLGH (2024) *Report of the Housing Commission*.

<sup>8</sup> ESRI (2024) *Population projections, the flow of new households and structural housing demand*.

<sup>9</sup> The Housing Agency (2024) *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2023*.

<sup>10</sup> DHLGH (2024) *HAP Performance Indicators – 2022*.

<sup>11</sup> DHLGH (2024) *Homeless Report – July 2024*.



- Recognise that HAP tenancies are insecure and therefore do not meet households' long-term housing need. The HAP scheme should be reformed and reset as a short-term support, in line with recommendation 39 of the Housing Commission report. Households living in HAP tenancies should remain on social housing lists and should not be deemed as having their social housing needs met. This was recognised by the Parliamentary Budget Office, who introduced the term 'ongoing need' to more fully capture the cohort of households with an existing need for long-term, secure, state-supported housing.<sup>12</sup>
- Explicitly set out in legislation the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024 that access to social housing has no bearing on access to the humanitarian support of emergency accommodation. It is the experience of the Simon Communities of Ireland along with many of our colleagues in the sector that local authorities often require eligibility to social housing to access emergency accommodation, for which there is no legal basis. The introduction of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024 provides the perfect vehicle to address this issue by clearly stating that access to social housing has no bearing on access to emergency accommodation.
- Commit to reviewing the current arrangements for AHB financing, ensuring measures are in place to increase the capacity of the sector and encourage growth.

## 2.2 Making Efficient Use of Existing Housing Stock: Tackling

### Vacancy

**The incoming Government must use every lever available to deliver additional housing. The Simon Communities of Ireland urge the incoming Government to tackle vacancy and dereliction across Ireland, ensuring that a considerable proportion of these homes are returned for social housing use.**

Using existing housing stock for social and affordable housing offers a huge opportunity to bring additional units onstream in a sustainable way. Vacancy and dereliction are a blight across our villages, towns and cities and it is unacceptable that so many homes lie vacant at a time when there are over 14,000 men, women and children living in homeless emergency accommodation. There is no concise figure on the level of vacancy in Ireland. Different sources report varying levels depending on the methodologies adopted. For instance, according to the Central Statistics Office (CSO), on the night of Census 2022 there were 164,433 vacant properties across Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, 23,072 of these dwellings were vacant in 2011, 2016 and 2022. According to the latest Geo Directory report,

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<sup>12</sup> Parliamentary Budget Office (2024) *Social Housing - 'Ongoing Need' 2023*.

<sup>13</sup> CSO (2023) *Census of Population 2022 Profile 2 – Housing in Ireland*.

over 81,000 residential properties were recorded as vacant in December 2023.<sup>14</sup> If we take the 81,449 figure from the Geo Directory, returning just a quarter of these homes for social housing use could reduce the social housing need in the country by over 20,000 households. For context, this is equivalent to almost all households who have been on the social housing waiting list for over 4 years.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Set ambitious targets on the return of vacant properties for social and affordable use, backed by the necessary resourcing. We note that there have been a range of schemes introduced to tackle vacancy over the last number of years. Most of these schemes are aimed at returning properties to the private sector. Although this is welcome, vacant homes also offer an opportunity to bring more social and affordable housing onstream. For example, the repair and lease scheme targets vacant properties in need of repair for use as social housing. However, targets for the scheme are set exceptionally low.<sup>15</sup> Waterford County Council has delivered 312 out of the total 554 dwellings delivered through the scheme since its initiation, accounting for 56% of national delivery. In 2023 alone, Waterford County Council delivered 129 of the 174 dwellings delivered through the scheme, accounting for 74% of national delivery. This points to the potential of the scheme.
- Review the conditions of the Vacant Homes Tax, including exemptions and issues around self-assessment. The Vacant Homes Tax should function as a punitive measure, discouraging vacancy. As it stands, just 3,000 homes are liable, and the rate of taxation is low. For example, a vacant apartment in Limerick worth €250,000 would be liable to just €675 for the first chargeable period of Vacant Homes Tax, and €1,125 for the second chargeable period.
- Ensure that all local authorities are fully equipped with the knowledge and resources to become more proactive with their power to compulsory purchase vacant and derelict properties. We note that a €150 million revolving fund for local authorities to acquire vacant/derelict properties was introduced under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), and that targets for each local authority have been set under the CPO Activation Programme 2023. However, there are large disparities between various local authorities in using CPOs.
- Provide local authorities with the resources to implement a whole-of-authority approach to tackling vacancy using dedicated steering committees within each local authority. Members of the committee would include the housing team, vacant homes officers, regeneration

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<sup>14</sup> Geo Directory (2024) *Residential Buildings Report Q4 2023*.

<sup>15</sup> The current repair and lease target for 2025 is just 140 properties.

officers, planning officials, and other relevant parties. This approach has been adopted by Waterford County Council, who are leading the way in tackling vacancy.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Actions to Prevent Homelessness

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### 3.1 Stop Homelessness Before It Starts: Comprehensive

#### Prevention and Early Intervention

**The next Government must prioritise and adequately resource comprehensive prevention and early intervention measures to prevent homelessness from occurring and reoccurring.**

Preventing homelessness is the most sustainable way of reducing homelessness in the long-term. The Simon Communities of Ireland have long campaigned for the priority of homeless prevention policies and practices. Homelessness is a trauma, and therefore every effort must be made to prevent individuals and families from entering homelessness. We know from experience that prevention measures work. Of those who engaged with Galway Simon Community's prevention services in 2023, 93% did not access emergency accommodation. Of those who engaged with Cork Simon Community's Pilot Diversion Programme, 44 out of 57 people avoided a stay in Cork Simon's emergency accommodation.<sup>17</sup> There are multiple benefits to preventing homelessness, for both the State and the at-risk individual/household. Homelessness can have multiple negative impacts on people, including adverse effects on physical health, mental health, and overall wellbeing. For children, homelessness can negatively affect development, cognitive functioning, participation in education, and opportunities later in life.

Investing in prevention safeguards against the long-term damaging effects of homelessness. For the State, homeless prevention is a long-term investment. Addressing homelessness is costly. Investing in tackling homelessness before it occurs can save State resources by decreasing public expenditure on emergency accommodation and crisis support services in the longer-term.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Invest in and support homeless prevention measures - A designated funding line for prevention work should be developed under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988.

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<sup>16</sup> JCHLGH (2023) *Dereliction and Vacancy: Discussion 15 June 2023.*

<sup>17</sup> As of Q3 Report April 2024.

- Insert a legal duty for local authorities to provide homelessness prevention support to those who present with housing issues. Such legislation would seek to formalise and extend the prevention work undertaken by local authorities. Such duties exist in Scottish<sup>18</sup> and Welsh<sup>19</sup> legislation.
- Adopt upstream prevention policies. Upstream prevention acts early to identify and support at-risk groups, whereas crisis prevention efforts focus on those who are imminently at risk of homelessness. International evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of upstream prevention. For example, in Australia, The Geelong Project reported 40% reductions in the number of students entering the homelessness system through identifying those at risk of homelessness using screening surveys conducted with children in school settings. These surveys primarily identify children who are at risk due to conflict in the home and subsequently provide support before emerging conflict reaches crisis point.<sup>20</sup>
- Implement the Simon Homeless Prevention Bill (Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (Extension of Notice Periods) Bill 2021),<sup>21</sup> which triggers an extension to a notice of termination for households deemed imminently at risk of homelessness. This extension should be accompanied by a commitment from the relevant local authority to support the household to source alternative accommodation. The Bill provides an increased level of protection, for those at risk of homelessness following an eviction notice, to prevent their entry into emergency accommodation. The Bill completed Second Stage Dáil Éireann in December 2021. Since then, the Bill has not progressed further.
- Continue the tenant in situ scheme. The Simon Communities of Ireland have welcomed the scheme. The scheme is a demonstration of how effective crisis intervention can prevent homelessness. We acknowledge that this scheme can raise some housing management issues for local authorities, but it must be continued until social housing delivery and allocation is having a positive impact on homelessness.
- Establish an independent, statutory appeals process for the purpose of social housing assessments. The absence of an independent, statutory appeals process for the purpose of social housing came to the fore recently with the proposed Housing (Miscellaneous Bill) 2024. The legislation would, inter alia, give a legal basis for local authorities to assess whether housing applicants were ‘habitually resident’ in the State and exclude them from consideration for social housing allocations if they are not. A stated aim of the proposed

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<sup>18</sup> Part II of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Part II of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Barwon Child, Youth and Family (2018) The Geelong Project: Interim Report 2016-2017.

<sup>21</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas (2021) *Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (Extension of Notice Periods) Bill 2021*.

legislation is to establish consistency in how State entities assess access to social entitlements. However, there is no independent statutory appeals process for the purpose of social housing eligibility/assessment. This contrasts with statutory provisions regarding decision-making and appeals outlined in the Social Welfare Act.

## 3.2 Addressing Poverty and Deprivation

**The next Government must commit to addressing poverty and deprivation through benchmarking social welfare payments against a minimum standard of living.**

Adequate welfare supports are key to preventing poverty and deprivation for individuals and families, along with preventing homelessness and housing exclusion.

There are indications that progress is being made in reducing the rate of consistent poverty in Ireland. According to the most recent Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) the consistent poverty rate fell from 4.9% in 2022 to 3.6% in 2023. This fall can be attributed to a number of ‘one-off’ cost-of-living measures introduced in previous budgets. Unfortunately, we have not witnessed similar drops in rates of deprivation. Deprivation rates have increased significantly from 13.7% in 2021 to 17.3% in 2023. According to a recent ESRI report<sup>22</sup> 230,000 children are currently estimated to experience material deprivation: an increase of almost 30,000 since 2022. It is therefore obvious that although poverty rates are improving, people have less spending power than they had in previous years. To prevent poverty rates rising and reduce deprivation, it is imperative that the Government move away from the provision of ‘one-off’ measures and towards the benchmarking of social welfare payments against a minimum essential standard of living, creating a safety net that nobody should fall beneath.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Commit to benchmarking social welfare payments against a minimum essential standard of living.<sup>23</sup> This would ensure income adequacy for recipients, link payments rates to improvements in the general standard of living and allow for ongoing assessments of the adequacy of social welfare payments relative to the benchmark.

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<sup>22</sup> ESRI (2024) *Poverty, income inequality and living standards in Ireland: Fourth annual report.*

<sup>23</sup> The Vincentian Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) offers a reference point for benchmarking.

### 3.3 Providing Security in the Private Rental Sector

**The next Government must provide much greater security to households living in the Private Rental Sector (PRS). The PRS is one of the main drivers of homelessness. Improving tenants' security of tenure would act as an additional homeless prevention measure.**

The current PRS in Ireland is characterised by its unaffordability and volatility. In recent years, there has been an overreliance on the PRS to provide social housing. The Simon Communities of Ireland have welcomed the recent recognition that this is not sustainable, and the move away from providing social housing through PRS housing allowances such as HAP. However, we acknowledge that this is a long-term ambition which will take time to realise. There are still just under 58,000 active HAP tenancies. It is imperative that these households are protected from homelessness, especially in the current climate where there are unprecedented levels of eviction notices due to landlords selling their properties. Households issued with eviction notices face an extremely constrained market, with rents for new tenancies 16% higher than existing tenancies.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore extremely difficult for households to find alternative accommodation which suits their needs at a price they can afford.

SCI have continuously demonstrated the inadequacy of current HAP rates through our quarterly *Locked Out of the Market* reports. Figure 3 provides a long-term comparison of the report findings since the start of 2022. Although the availability of properties generally (total properties) has risen since a mid-2022 low, this has not coincided with an increase in the availability of HAP properties. This is a concerning trend, highlighting how new supply is largely out of reach of those on low incomes who are reliant on HAP.

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<sup>24</sup> RTB (2024) *Rent Index Report Q4 2023*.

Figure 3

### Total Properties and Total HAP Properties 2022-2024

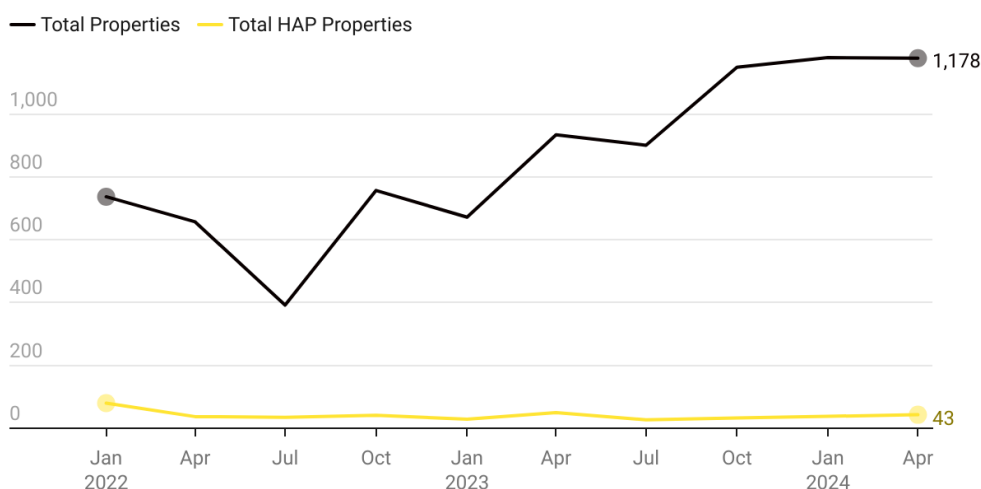


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland • Source: Locked out of the Market Reports • Created with Datawrapper

The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:

- Continue to move away from the over-reliance on PRS housing allowances (HAP) to provide social housing. As outlined earlier, HAP should be reformed as a short-term measure, and HAP households should remain on social housing waiting lists.
- Increase HAP rates in line with market rents. While Simon Communities of Ireland acknowledge that discretionary rates of HAP were increased in 2022, market rents have increased by 64% since HAP base rates were set in 2016. This means that even if local authorities implement full discretionary rates, HAP still falls below market rents. We acknowledge that it is unsustainable to chase runaway rents and into the future HAP should be used as a short-term support. However, as we wait for housing supply to come onstream, for many households HAP is the only available support out of homelessness or to prevent homelessness. To leave HAP rates at current levels is to continue to put the weight of the housing crisis on the shoulders of those least able to bear it.
- Increase Rent Supplement rates in line with ‘existing tenancy’ rents. Rent Supplement is a vital short-term support for renters who experience a sudden change in circumstances impacting their ability to pay rent, generally due to loss of employment. The maximum rent limits for rent supplement were set in mid-2016 by [S.I. No. 340/2016](#). Since then, national rents for new tenancies have risen by 64%. We note that Rent Supplement is a targeted measure for those who are already renting privately and therefore rates should be uplifted in line with market rents for *existing tenancies*.

- Deliver cost-rental housing at scale to take pressure off the PRS and enable a more sustainable and affordable system overall. In addition to social housing shortages, there is a severe shortage of affordable properties available to rent for those above social housing income limits. The introduction of cost-rental to the Irish rental market is extremely welcome, offering much needed affordable housing options for this cohort. The increased delivery of cost-rental, along with social housing, will contribute to the stabilisation of the rental market.
- For mixed social and affordable developments, promote social cohesion through tenure blind design and by dispersing social housing units among affordable units, i.e. avoid mono tenure social housing blocks that contribute to social stratification.
- Implement the Simon Homeless Prevention Bill, as outlined earlier.

### 3. Support People Experiencing Homelessness

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#### 4.1 Tackling Long Term Homelessness, Reducing Pressure on the Emergency Shelter System

**The next Government must prioritise exits for people entrenched in long-term homelessness, reducing pressure on the already constrained emergency shelter system. The number of individuals and families spending longer than one year depending on emergency accommodation is increasing, especially for families.**

While acknowledging the dynamic nature of homelessness and the significant flows of people in and out of emergency accommodation, it is also important to recognise that there is a cohort of both individuals and families who have been stuck in emergency accommodation for unacceptably lengthy periods of time. New presentations have remained relatively consistent over the last couple of years. However, overall homeless numbers have grown exponentially. This is due to households remaining stuck in emergency accommodation, unable to find housing despite their best efforts. This has significant implications for the health and wellbeing of those stuck in emergency accommodation, and for the pressurised emergency accommodation system. To end the trauma of long-term homelessness the next Government must prioritise the allocation of social homes to this cohort, through a number of different schemes and initiatives.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*



- Work with local authorities and council members to establish social housing allocation policies that reflect the current crisis and prioritises the allocation of homes to those in long-term homelessness.
- Expand and resource the Housing First (HF) programme at scale. The HF programme has been hugely successful in tackling long-term homelessness, both in Ireland and internationally. There are now 997 individuals currently in a HF tenancy. This is very welcome. However, as mentioned earlier, there are still far too many people spending years living in emergency accommodation. We note that the shortage of one-bed properties is a significant barrier to expanding the HF programme which needs to be addressed as social housing delivery ramps up.
- Explore communal HF as a solution for the small percentage of people that HF does not work for. HF in Ireland has a high tenancy sustainment rate of 86%, and therefore the current approach to HF has been hugely positive. There is a small group of people who are unable to sustain their tenancies, despite the support provided through the HF programme. The majority of HF properties are pepper-potted across the country in various social housing schemes. This affords HF clients anonymity and provides opportunities for integration into local communities. However, for the 14% of people who are unable to sustain their tenancies, we recommend exploring the concept of communal HF. Communal HF offers communal housing (single rooms or apartments) with security of tenure provided in a building only lived in by people using the HF service, with support and services situated in the same building or very nearby. The service makes an open-ended commitment to working with clients for as long as they need the service. Therefore, although some communal HF services may encourage and support clients to move on, they are designed to offer permanent accommodation for those who need it.<sup>25</sup>
- Expand housing-led solutions for people living in emergency accommodation who have support needs, but do not qualify for HF. Simon Communities across Ireland often support clients who require social or healthcare support to maintain tenancies, but do not meet the qualifying criteria for the HF programme. There needs to be an expansion of housing-led solutions for this cohort, which are provided in tandem with necessary supports. This could be done through updating the HF criteria, or through separate programmes.
- Introduce a dedicated stream of housing and support for those leaving residential addiction treatment who have no homes to return to.

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<sup>25</sup> European Observatory on Homelessness. *Housing First*.

- Continue to expand the Housing First programme to include families with additional support needs who have become entrenched in long-term homelessness. There are many families who have spent far too long living in unsuitable emergency accommodation, who have complex needs and require additional support to maintain a tenancy. Expanding HF to include families offers an opportunity to target this group and provide an opportunity to exit homelessness and avoid repeat homelessness. We note that there are two pilots underway in Galway and Dublin.
- Ensure no one spends longer than six months living in emergency accommodation. It has long been acknowledged in policy that the maximum time someone should spend in emergency accommodation is six months.

## 4.2 Supporting Children Experiencing Homelessness

**The next Government must commit to ensuring children who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness are adequately supported, and that their interests and rights are at the forefront of decisions made in relation to homeless services.**

As mentioned earlier, experiencing homelessness as a child can have devastating impacts. According to Census 2022, the largest age group among the homeless population was 0–4-year-olds, accounting for 11.4% of the total homeless population. This is the stark reality of child and family homelessness in Ireland. Children are growing up in emergency accommodation. The effects of homelessness on children are devastating. In a recent article, Dr. Aoibhinn Walsh explained how children experiencing homelessness are often well below the height and weight of their peers as a direct result of being homeless and not having access to a nutritional diet or a space to play. This faltering growth among children experiencing homelessness has led to cases of anaemia, vitamin D deficiency and rickets.<sup>26</sup> The next Government must take action to ensure that children experiencing or at risk of homelessness are adequately supported, while ensuring that the amount of time children spend in emergency accommodation is minimal.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Ensure every child experiencing homelessness has access to a childcare worker, should they require one. In a 2019 report by the Ombudsman for Children's Office, '*No Place Like Home*', both parents and children expressed their appreciation of the staff they worked with, particularly Child Support Workers.<sup>27</sup> Child Support Workers mitigate the trauma of

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<sup>26</sup> Shannon, J. (2023) 'When the diagnosis is homelessness, what is the cure,' *The Irish Times*, 10 August.

<sup>27</sup> Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019) *No Place Like Home*.

homelessness, and therefore it is imperative that every child experiencing homelessness has timely access to this support.

- Implement the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017, which amends the Housing Act 1988, requiring local authorities to put the rights and best interests of the child first in any decisions made in relation to supporting households seeking homeless services.<sup>28</sup> The current laws which guide our local authorities do not mention the specific needs of children who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Insert a statutory limit on the time a family may spend in emergency accommodation and insert regulations in relation to the type of emergency accommodation that families may be accommodated in. For example, in England, Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 places an obligation on local housing authorities to ensure that accommodation provided to homeless persons is suitable. Secondary legislation provides that “B&B accommodation is not to be regarded as suitable for an applicant with family commitments’ where the applicant has already occupied B&B accommodation for a period of six weeks.”<sup>29</sup>

### 4.3 Providing Health, Addiction and Wellbeing Support

**The next Government must commit to improving the health outcomes of those experiencing homelessness through homeless-specific outreach and in-reach health services.**

The links between homelessness and poor health outcomes are well established. While homelessness is primarily a housing issue, a person’s health can have a profound impact on their potential to experience homelessness, and on their ability to exit homelessness. People who become entrenched in homelessness have often experienced a number of traumas in their life, which can lead to addiction and/or mental health issues that can become increasingly pronounced in homelessness.

Recent research examining homelessness and health-related outcomes in Ireland found that homelessness is associated with the increased use of illicit drugs, reduced access to a general practitioner, frequent visits to emergency departments, frequent presentation for self-harm and premature departure from hospital.<sup>30</sup>

There is a complex, often non-linear relationship between mental health and homelessness. The prevalence of mental illness amongst people experiencing homelessness averages at 60% compared

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<sup>28</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas (2020) *Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017*.

<sup>29</sup> See Articles 3-4 of the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003 (SI No. 3326 of 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Ingram, C. et al. (2023) ‘Homelessness and health-related outcomes in the Republic of Ireland: A Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis and Evidence Map’, *Journal of Public Health*.

to 15% in the general population.<sup>31</sup> Dual diagnosis, for example alcohol addiction coupled with depression, is more prevalent among people experiencing homelessness than the general population, limiting access to adequate treatment options. The transient nature of homelessness acts as an additional barrier to accessing mental health supports, making the continuation of care and support a challenge for people experiencing homelessness and mental health difficulties. This highlights the need for strong inter-agency links between mental health professionals and front-line workers in the homeless sector, and those experiencing homelessness. Homeless-specific outreach and in-reach community orientated mental health services are required, with multi-disciplinary teams who are skilled in challenges related to dual-diagnosis and the unique needs of those experiencing homelessness.

HSE (Health Service Executive) funding has failed to keep pace with increases in homelessness over the last number of years. Between January 2016 and December 2023, the number of men, women and children living in homeless emergency accommodation has increased by 133%. Despite this, HSE funding (Section 39) has increased by only 30% over the same period. Essential health services for people experiencing homelessness are being cut in real terms.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Commit to improving the health outcomes of people experiencing homelessness through adequately resourced outreach and in-reach community orientated health services, with multi-disciplinary teams that are skilled in challenges related to dual-diagnosis and the unique needs of people experiencing homelessness.
- Ensure timely access to addiction services, including treatment, detoxification, rehabilitation, and aftercare services. Long waiting periods for services are detrimental to those seeking to address their addiction and were identified as a barrier to recovery by the clients of Dublin Simon Community.<sup>32</sup> In addition, clients identified the need for more services around the country, as services are concentrated in Dublin.
- HSE should commit to providing full cost of recovery funding for services such as Dublin Simon's Ushers Quay Service which will provide targeted services to people experiencing homelessness who are living with complex health and addiction issues, improving their overall wellbeing, and taking the steps to begin their transition out of homelessness.
- Commit to approaching drug and alcohol use with a health-led approach through the development of the next Strategy that will follow the current National Drugs Strategy 2017-

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<sup>31</sup> Devine, G., & Bergin, M. (2020). 'Experiences of Frontline Workers' Engagement with Mental Health Services for Homeless Adults in Ireland', *European Journal of Homelessness*.

<sup>32</sup> Dublin Simon Community (2023) *Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use*.

2025, 'Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery'. The next Government must prioritise this action as the current strategy is due to end in 2025.

- Implement the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, expanding alternatives to coercive sanctions including restorative justice programmes, youth diversion schemes and a comprehensive health-led response to possession of drugs for personal use.

## 4.4 Supporting Homeless Services

**The next Government must address the years of inadequate funding for homeless services.**

Homeless organisations providing essential services to the State have been burdened with years of underfunding, causing an overreliance on fundraising to remain operational. This has proved unsustainable and insecure, and many organisations struggle to make ends meet. Homeless organisations have been working tirelessly over the last number of years, dealing with unprecedented levels of homelessness, along with extensive governance and regulatory requirements, and a recruitment and retention crisis. While we welcome and recognise the need for the expansion of governance and regulation requirements and see it as an absolute necessity to ensure the delivery of high-quality services to vulnerable populations, this puts further pressure on resources. Current State funding does not consider the cost of more stringent compliance requirements.

Sufficient funding must also be provided to restore pay parity with public sector colleagues, for the talented and committed staff working for homeless organisations. Following the decline in public funding after the 2008 financial crisis, pay restoration has been awarded to public sector employees. Community and voluntary sector employees have been left behind. The high turnover of talented staff in the homeless sector has negative implications for service delivery, often resulting in increased workloads and risk of burnout among staff. The capacity to offer appropriate salaries and benefits is crucial to recruiting and retaining staff.

*The Simon Communities of Ireland call on the next Government to:*

- Commit to providing multi-annual funding that reflects the full cost of delivering homeless services and restores pay parity with public sector colleagues.

## 4. Cross-departmental Coordination, Driving Change and Implementation

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As set out earlier, tackling homelessness requires cross-departmental coordination and action to drive the change that is needed. In order to drive the actions set out in this document, we need a driving force to lead its implementation. We believe there are a number of ways this could be achieved but would advocate for the following:

- 1) The Right to Housing: The Simon Communities of Ireland have long advocated for the enshrinement of the Right to Housing in the Constitution. This could act as a driving force for the policy change that is necessary to tackle homelessness.
- 2) Establish a Minister of State with responsibility for homelessness, ensuring that the Minister has the necessary authority and ministerial powers to drive and implement cross-departmental action to tackle homelessness.

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