

Editorial Comment - Second Report of the Morris Tribunal

on Monday, 13 June 2005. Posted in [Issue 50 Housing the New Ireland, 2005](#)

Editorial Comment - Second Report of the Morris Tribunal

Peter McVerry SJ

The Second Report of the Morris Tribunal, published on 1 June 2005, makes even more disturbing reading than the First Report, which was commented on in November 2004. The Tribunal investigated the corruption that existed among some Gardai in Donegal, the manipulation of facts intended to deceive Garda Management, "gross intelligence at senior level" and "appalling management".

While much of the commentary on the Morris Report has emphasised the conduct of the Gardai, the Report seeks to go behind the conduct to answer the questions: "How could this have happened? Why was it not detected?" It focuses on two significant contributory factors, the structures of accountability that were hopelessly inadequate and the culture of silence and non-cooperation with investigations that permeates the Garda Síochána. Mr. Justice Morris, although using very polite language, is clearly furious with the Government for its perceived lack of interest in his First Report. He states, with not a little irony, "The Tribunal notes, however, that notwithstanding that its report under the terms of the resolution setting it up, was required 'urgently', neither Dail Éireann and Seanad Éireann have debated the first report. Now that two reports are available, it may be considered reasonable that a debate might be considered." Of concern is not just the Government's lack of interest in the First Report, but the lack of action that followed. Justice Morris pointedly repeats, in an appendix, without commentary, all the recommendations of the First Report!

Some of the recommendations relating to structures of accountability are so basic that it beggars belief that a major, and expensive, Tribunal should have been required to make them. The Report states: "There should be an obligation on Superintendents in Districts to review the files of Inspectors, Sergeants and Gardai by physically taking them up and looking through them on a periodic basis. The Chief Superintendent of a District should interest himself or herself in major cases as they occur.. ."

He points out, again, the absurd situation where a Garda did not have to account for his movements while on duty. One Garda was drinking in a pub when he was supposed to have been on duty, yet when asked where he was, and what he was doing at that particular time, he was under no obligation to answer. Although Mr. Justice Morris had highlighted this absurdity in his First Report, and recommended that such a refusal to answer should merit dismissal, nothing was done. Well, not quite nothing! In the Garda Bill currently before the Dail it is proposed that the Gardai "could make an application to a Circuit Court Judge to require a Garda to account for duties that he or she has performed and for which pay has been received from the people of Ireland, as their ultimate employer". The Tribunal is scathing of this response:

The cumbersome and time-consuming nature of Garda disciplinary inquiries is further enhanced by the (my italics) of the necessity to apply to a Circuit Court Judge to compel a Garda to account for public duties.

Many of the Gardai accused in the First Report of lying were still serving members of the Gardai one year later, when the Second Report was written. The Tribunal was informed that "under the current state of the law nothing could be done". Clearly exasperated, Mr Justice Morris confines his remarks to a recommendation whose very curtness speaks volumes: "A new means of removing Gardai from office should be considered."

Both Morris Reports make for sad and depressing reading. Even more depressing is the fact that the First Report was not even discussed by our political leaders and that in the intervening year little, if anything, changed. Most depressing of all is the refusal to guarantee the legal expenses of those who were the victims of Garda corruption; as a consequence, they have had to battle alone, without legal expertise, against highly-paid lawyers representing those very Gardai whose negligence, mismanagement and lies made this Tribunal necessary.

Planning for People Observations on NESC

Chapter 5

on Monday, 13 June 2005. Posted in [Issue 50 Housing the New Ireland, 2005](#)

Michael J. Bannon
June 2005

Introduction

At the close of the 20th century, a mere five years ago, there was delight and optimism in planning and environmentally informed circles that Ireland was for the first time ever about to have a hierarchically integrated system of interrelated plans covering the country and operating at every level. Preparation of the National Spatial Strategy was well advanced. The provided a statutory basis for the preparation and implementation of Regional Planning Guidelines. The Act also modernised the 'Development Plan' process and established procedures for making and implementing Local Area Plans. This new approach to planning was introduced against the continuing national partnership approach, most recently articulated in .

The new Irish planning approach drew heavily on the (henceforth ESDP), which was to bring Ireland into line with the more enlightened planning approaches operating in advanced European countries. Importantly, these new arrangements were imbued with the ESDP philosophy of a balanced vision of 'sustainable spatial development' where economy, environment and society are seen as harmonious partners. Throughout, the ESDP approach places particular emphasis on cultural considerations in future development, on inclusive approaches and on what is termed "parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge".

Changes in Housing Policy

The view of Professor Patrick Geddes, as expressed to the Dublin housing inquiry in 1913, that "the house is the fundamental fact of real wages"² was accepted as a guide for many decades. Successive governments from the 1920s up to the late 1990s broadly supported this concept and evolved a housing policy which sought to ensure that: "as far as the resources of the economy permit, every family/household can obtain for their own occupation a house of good standard at a price or rent they can afford located in an acceptable environment".³ In turn, planning was seen as an essential tool to modify the excesses of the market in the interest of the common good and for the needs of society. Since 1999, Irish housing policy and provision have moved decisively in favour of an unbridled free market approach, an approach described in some detail in the NESC report, No.112, .4

This article focuses on NESC Chapter 5, which is entitled 'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development'. However, the NESC review of the approach to housing and neighbourhood development has to be set in the wider context of housing policy and housing development. Irish housing output has reached an unprecedented level, with 76,954 new dwelling units completed in 2004. But of this output, a mere 6.7 per cent was provided for social housing needs. The shift away from social housing has occurred despite a high level of established need.

A second concern is in respect of housing affordability. While the expansion of the housing construction sector (often supported by an array of tax led incentives) has made a significant contribution to economic growth and to employment in recent years, house prices continue to escalate beyond the reach of many, especially first-time purchasers. There is growing dismay at escalating prices, which prompted the following letter from a bewildered reader to (14 March 2005):

dilapidated, two-bedroomed house in Dublin 4, with the kitchen ceiling falling in and a lean-to toilet that one wouldn't house cattle in, was advertised with guide price of €320,000 (originally €290,00). I have just returned, dazed from its auction, where the gavel gave a sharp crack as it brought the madness to a conclusion at €505,000.

The author asks: "which form of madness is driving this mindless purchasing frenzy?". For an increasing number of households, house prices are far beyond people's 'real wages', as Geddes had put it.

We have a situation, then, where housing output has been at an all-time high, but the emphasis has been on the provision of housing units for the private market, sometimes with commercial services, and often situated at considerable distances from work locations. Too many new housing developments are places where people have only time to sleep and from which they commute increasing distances with difficulty. Many of these housing developments on the edge of cities and towns are devoid of essential public and community services or the necessary support infrastructures. All too frequently, there is a neglect of the social dimension of planning in favour of an 'Urban Design' approach primarily concerned with aesthetics and building form and arrangement, a sort of architecture writ large - an approach that is often more attractive to market driven schemes and projects. Good design is about more than higher densities and proper planning is wider and deeper than both.⁵ Questions also arise as to the quality and planning standard of at least some of the new free market developments.⁶

'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development'

In Chapter 5, 'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development', the Council of NESC argues that sustainable and well-integrated housing developments are now being delivered and that such delivery is compatible with a continuing increased level of housing supply well into the future. This view is largely based on the fact that a wide range of principles, strategies, procedures and policy instruments have been introduced and on a belief that these "are of great significance".

Chapter 5 is masterful in its use of language: four of the five words in the title above are capable of a myriad of definitions and have the capacity to imply much more than may be evident in practice. The concepts of 'sustainability' and 'integration' can be used in many ways and usually have strong social connotations, though not in this case. There are numerous definitions of the concept of 'neighbourhood', much of the literature dealing with issues of size, organisation, the levels of service provision and the extent and nature of social inclusion. As for the term 'development', it can be as inclusive as policy directs or as resources allow.

The Chapter is structured in line with current thinking on Urban Design criteria. The emphasis is on matters such as 'sustainable urban densities', 'consolidated urban areas', 'compact urban satellites', 'rapid communication networks' and 'sustainable rural settlement'. The sustainable neighbourhood is described as 'centred, diverse and walkable'. Such neighbourhoods are argued to have six characteristics that distinguish them from sprawl.

These distinguishing features include the centre for local service provision, - residences being within five minutes walk from the ordinary means of daily life, . This is the language of Urban Design and a language attractive to the market economy. There is little in this about people; absent are references to 'the Living City', to 'community' or to social provision.

NESC argues for the 'urban advantage and added value of good planning' without realising that, while their entire model may constitute an Urban Design approach, it falls far short of what might be commonly conceived as planning.⁷

{mospagebreak}'New Principles, Strategies and Procedures'?

In reading the Chapter, 'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development', much depends on the practical confidence one can place on the following statement:

The Council believes that this evolution of thinking and procedure is potentially of great significance in assuring both high-quality sustainable residential areas and an adequate supply of housing ...

(p. 111, emphasis added)

The principal documents referred to and bearing on the 'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development' approach are listed as:

- *The National Spatial Strategy*
- *The Regional Planning Guidelines*
- *Development Plans*
- *Integrated Framework Area Plans*
- *Residential Density Planning Guidelines*
- *Housing Strategies*
- *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines.*

The following sections of this paper examine some of these 'foundation' documents in terms of their current or likely effectiveness in achieving proper planning or in securing sustainable residential development. Reference will also be made to a number of official reports which could have a bearing on quality of life in residential areas but which are not discussed in Chapter 5. As will be shown, much of what is inferred as being reality is often more in the realm of the possible, the potential or the ideal. In practice, there is a question mark over implementation in many cases and a number of reports on critical issues have been overlooked or quietly shelved by Government.

Whither the National Spatial Strategy?

(henceforth NSS) was published with great fanfare on 28 November 2002.⁸ The Strategy designated a total of nine Gateways, and a further eleven towns received designation as Hubs, most of these being located in the relatively underdeveloped areas of the country and designed to stimulate growth in these regions. As noted in NESC 112, the NSS also proposed what is termed a 'Green Structure' for future development, including the prevention of sprawl, the reduction of the loss of agricultural land to other uses, the protection of the rural identity, the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, the protection of existing buildings and other elements of cultural heritage and the creation of a green setting for cities and towns, providing recreation within easy reach.⁹

While the NSS was enthusiastically welcomed on its publication and the Taoiseach gave an unconditional assurance "that this Government will work towards full implementation" of the Strategy, few if any key decisions have yet been taken to give effect to its strategic proposals. The announcement in December 2003 of the relocation of 10,000 public sector posts out of Dublin to fifty-three locations around the country, almost all to centres other than the NSS Gateways, is difficult to reconcile with the overall strategy. This decision by the Department of Finance to opt for a dispersal of public sector work has raised major questions as to the commitment of government departments, other than the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, to the National Spatial Strategy. Pending difficult policy decisions and significant investment in the strategic elements of the NSS, it is hard to see how the existence of the Strategy in itself can be said to contribute to either sustainable neighbourhoods or integrated development. There is a need for a national urban policy within which to implement the strategic components of the NSS, if the production and publication of the report is not to have been the only real outcome of the exercise, yet again.¹⁰

{mospagebreak} Regional Planning Guidelines

NESC cites the Regional Planning Guidelines (henceforth RPGs) as being one of the key tools in securing joined-up planning approaches. The RPGs, introduced on a statutory basis by the , are a welcome addition to the range of instruments available to planners and administrators to manage development and change. However, it is doubtful if, at this stage, the Regional Authorities have the resources, the staff or the technical skills to effectively manage development or to ensure its sustainability. Effective power rests not with the Regional Authorities, but with the Department of the Environment and Local Government and with the local authorities. The composition of the Regional Authorities is inimical to the strategic choices which may be critical for a region in the medium to long term. At this incipient stage, and in the absence of the effective implementation of the National Spatial Strategy, it is doubtful if the Regional Authorities are in a position even to withstand the vested interests of their own constituent local authorities. In some cases, local authorities have taken a cavalier approach to the requirement under Section 27 of the that: "A planning authority shall have regard to any regional planning guidelines in force for its area when making and adopting a development plan." In the case of the Greater Dublin Area, an original and widely welcomed proposal to reopen the Dublin to Navan rail line put forward in the 1999 Strategic Planning Guidelines was deleted from the 2004 Regional Planning Guidelines. Recent proposals and/or decisions by both Wicklow and Laois County

Councils have little regard for their *Regional Guidelines*. It is to be hoped that in the future *RPGs* will be resourced and strengthened to enable them to play an effective strategic role in land management. But for the present, it is difficult to see how regional guidelines can manage to control the sprawl of Dublin or effect a better balance of population across the country.

Development Plans

All too often, planning authorities do not have control over the necessary resources to ensure that their *Development Plans* respond adequately to the needs of people. Two by-elections in February 2005 in constituencies on the fringes of Dublin were fought substantially on the inadequate delivery of social and infrastructural services to match the needs of recent housing expansion throughout the area. Across the suburbs of Dublin, much of the recent development has been housing-led, with serious time-lags in the delivery of those services which are not provided through the market - improved roads, public transport, schools and recreation facilities. Many of the new developments, while attractive, make little or no provision for active recreation, some even having notices saying: 'Well Behaved Children Welcome'. There is a lack of joined-up thinking or of integrated delivery, despite the best efforts of the planners.



The section on *Development Plans* includes detailed data on the 'development contributions' now being charged by local authorities, but it does not allude to the reality that normally developers just add these to the price of the dwelling.

Integrated Framework Area Plans

Much hope has been placed in the ability of , utilising the supports of the 'Strategic Development Zones' legal mechanism, to effect a more efficient and more sustainable form of suburban development, as at the first such site of Adamstown. The success of such an approach will require on-going and sustained resourcing, adequate staffing, careful and constructive management and joined-up thinking across many public bodies. An attempt in the 1970s to develop the Corduff neighbourhood of Blanchardstown on a plan-led basis proved unsuccessful.

{mospagebreak} Residential Density Planning

The NESC report strongly supports the trend towards higher residential densities on the grounds of a more economic use of existing infrastructure and serviced land. Increased densities are especially desirable in inner urban areas. The NESC case for higher densities leading to "a reduced need for the development of green field sites" is more questionable since a law of diminishing returns quickly sets in as density increases. To be truly effective, higher density policies have to be linked to mass-transit facilities, which is not the case in much of Dublin's recent suburban and ex-urban expansion. NESC argues strongly that the move towards higher residential densities "does not necessarily mean high rise" and, of course, this is correct. But pressure for high rise development is intensifying amongst designers and developers. Some architects argue that tall buildings should be seen as "expressions of the 'new Ireland' - expressions of the freedom and of the responsibilities that it lays on us all".¹¹ The economic, planning and social case for higher densities can too easily be transposed.

Housing Strategies

Housing strategies were an important innovation introduced in the (Section 94). These strategies were intended to match residential demand and supply and to help manage the necessary land supply. But in a developer-led culture, where Government is committed to supporting the house building industry, it is questionable how meaningful housing strategies are in practice, at the present time.

Rural Housing Guidelines

Inclusion of reference to draft Rural Housing Guidelines in a chapter dealing with 'Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Integrated Development' may appear incongruous. There is a general view that much of the rural housing which has been erected throughout the country over the past decade offends against the principles of sustainable development; there is considerable resistance to placing such developments within villages or 'neighbourhood' nucleations. There is increasing concern about the location and design of some of the new rural housing and growing evidence that a disproportionate share of new rural housing is used only as second homes. It is to be hoped that the Minister's view will prevail and that the Rural Housing Guidelines "can ensure that applicants and planning authorities can work together, on the basis of clear and objective criteria, to select the best design for a house and the best design solution for that site".¹² It is important for society and the environment that the criteria set out in the Guidelines are adhered to, adequately staffed and properly implemented. But in a society where "upwards of 90 per cent of all jobs are now urban-based"¹³ the creation of sustainable neighbourhoods and integrated development remains predominantly an urban issue.

In summary, Chapter 5 has been built around a very optimistic interpretation of the potential impact of a number of reports and strategies. While such optimism may prove warranted, urgent action is required to resource and fully implement the recommended policies.

Significant Omissions

Perhaps of even greater concern than NESC's benign view of stated policies is the lack of reference in Chapter 5 to critical issues, such as Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, to consideration of social inclusion or to urban land policy - issues which should be central to current or future residential development policies.

Furthermore, it is difficult to understand why NESC, in its consideration of integrated development, did not examine the local implications of the socially regressive and anti-integration policy of local authorities divesting themselves of their stock of public housing accommodation, a policy criticised in earlier NESC reports.¹⁴

{mospagebreak} Part V of the 2000 Act

Part V of the was enacted to bring order into the planning and provision of housing and to ensure that future housing developments would have within them a mix of private, affordable and social housing. The provisions of the Act empowered local authorities to require housing developers to set aside part of their development area (usually around twenty percent) for social and affordable housing, in accordance with their housing strategy and the objectives of the Development Plan.

These provisions were resolutely resisted by the construction industry and were significantly amended by the . The amended Act allowed for agreements to be made "to reserve land or to provide houses or sites at another location, or to make a payment to the local authority which will be used for the provision of social and affordable housing, or to agree to a combination of any of these options". This amendment significantly undermined the concept of socially mixed housing developments in Ireland and it largely reversed the proposals for integrated neighbourhoods. Instead, we have a vast number of wholly mono-class, private housing developments, while in Dublin social housing is largely concentrated in locations where land has been purchased by the local authority, most notably in the Cherry Orchard area.

It can also be argued that the 2002 amendments have adversely affected the scale of provision of both affordable and social housing. Only 809 dwellings have been constructed under the revised Part V arrangements, whereas it has been argued that if the requirements of the original Act had not been relaxed the total number of units provided for social and affordable needs would have been closer to 10,000 in 2004 alone, although this figure is disputed by the Department of the Environment and Local Government.

Ireland is a deeply divided society and visibly so. By so seriously weakening the inclusion and social integration thrust of the 2000 Act, Irish society effectively rejected any significant attempt to broaden the scope of planning so as to embrace a socially inclusive dimension.

Development Land

Another major issue omitted from Chapter 5, but central to any notion of proper planning and neighbourhood provision, is the need to free up land availability for development at reasonable cost. The All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution in its deliberations on property rights and the planning process¹⁵ broadly endorsed the constitutionality of the principal recommendation of the 1973 Kenny report to the effect that "land required for development by local authorities should be compulsorily acquired at existing use value plus 25%".¹⁶ The Oireachtas Committee's report also brought forward a number of other important recommendations relating to compulsory purchase, the operation of the property market, the recouping of 'betterment', social housing provision and the management of the planning system. To date, there has been little discussion or practical action in response to the Committee's report. This topic is raised elsewhere in the NESR report, but it is of critical concern and central to any attempt to provide rational solutions to Ireland's urban residential development.

Conclusion

A mere five years after the introduction of new legislation, policies and strategies that seemed to herald a new era in Irish planning, much has changed in Irish development circumstances, attitudes and policies. The relatively balanced ESDP approach has been pushed to the margins by a forceful and dominant market driven approach, with decreasing regard for anything that might delay, modify or hinder economic progress. In turn, planning is in danger of being consigned to a role similar to that which it played in Britain in the early 1980s where planners were reduced to being mainly the enhancer of the value of land and other private property.¹⁷ The cultural change that has occurred in Ireland has had major implications for urban planning and for residential development,

especially since residential land uses account for approximately half of all urban land. The emergence of a market-led approach to housing and housing policy has had profound implications for households, for urban structuring and for Irish society in general.

The housing boom of recent years has created a massive increase in the national housing stock, but this has been at the expense of affordability, social mix and adequate social provision. What is evident from the examination of Chapter 5 is that the ideas, concepts, reports and plans are available to enable the creation of satisfactory, well-planned and socially integrated residential areas. But there is either a lack of will to implement such policies or a belief that their implementation would be detrimental to the free market approach now in place to facilitate the Irish construction industry. This very visible model of exclusive housing development is, unfortunately, a symbol of the deeper and persistent divisions within Irish society.

Above all, we in Ireland could do well to closely examine best practice in those successful EU Member States where affordable housing provision is a priority and where land, housing and planning policies are regularly reviewed and where recommendations and reforms are implemented. Economic success and social progress do go hand in hand in many advanced countries.

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Aspects of Catholic Social Teaching on Housing

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What Have You Done to your Homeless Brother?

The United Nations proclaimed 1987 the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and to coincide with that time Pope John Paul II asked that the Church undertake its own reflection on the problem of housing. The result was *What Have You Done to your Homeless Brother?* a document of the Pontifical 'Justice and Peace' Commission, presented on 27 December 1987 by its President, Roger Cardinal Etchegaray.¹ This short article will focus mainly on some of the points from that document.

Many readers will have heard of Niall Mellon, the Dublin developer who has taken on the task of providing houses for families in the South African township of Imizamo Yethu. Some years ago, Niall had bought a house in Cape Town, and straying into the township out of curiosity was shocked by what he saw - 12,000 people living in ramshackle huts, all squashed into an area of 50 acres, with no proper sanitation. He set up what became the Township Challenge inviting Irish builders to volunteer their time and expertise to build by now more than 450 houses for 2,500 South Africans. According to a press release at a civic reception in Dublin to honour Niall Mellon and the 150 Irish builders, who included carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers, electricians, plumbers, painters, roofers and tilers who had fundraised for, and worked on, the project, Niall Mellon put up 2 million euro of his own money and asked some of his associates to do likewise.

The houses cost the equivalent of 5,000 euro to build and people pay back a twenty-year interest free loan subsidised by Niall Mellon. As people repay their loans, the money is ploughed back into funding more houses. To qualify for inclusion in the scheme, people must put 300 hours of labour into building one of their neighbour's houses. According to Niall Mellon, "Anyone who comes here to help will not only feel inspired but will walk away feeling proud to be Irish. I want the lasting legacy of the Celtic Tiger to be that the Irish can look beyond their own lives and help those less fortunate."

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{mospagebreak} Scope and Aims

The Pontifical Commission had consulted widely in all continents and concluded that in global terms 'the housing problem is one of today's most serious social questions.' One of the aims of the document was to awaken the moral conscience of people to the facts so that there might be 'greater social justice and broader solidarity.'

Globally, those lacking adequate housing number in the millions. The problem seems overwhelming. Large numbers are born, live and die in the open air. The homelessness of refugees who are uprooted by war or natural calamities, and of many others who are victims of injustice and greed, makes for a situation which is a serious obstacle to economic and social development, and indeed to assuring those conditions necessary for a dignified human existence.

Young People

Young people who want to get married are mentioned particularly. The circumstances of so many of them lead to long and painful delays before finding a place to live. The amount of money needed, coupled with housing shortage, can create serious obstacles to their right to found a family and are often a dissuasive force when it comes to assuming a commitment to marriage. The struggle with the burden of housing costs or high rents during their early years can have negative consequences for their life together and sometimes results in 'an almost forced delay in having children' which, in turn, may upset the harmony of married life which is 'detrimental to both society and the Church'.

A Structural Problem

The document's description of the overall situation shows homelessness to be the result of a whole series of economic, social, cultural, physical, emotional and moral factors. Homelessness is seen as a structural problem and not merely the result of a series of unrelated circumstances. A suitable place to live is an essential human need and yet the number of people who earn less than what might be called a family income, not to mention those whose salary is below the legal minimum, can be counted in the millions. Rapid population growth in certain regions, and changes such as progressive aging of the population in others, present new challenges. But it is urbanisation, accompanied by inflated prices in the housing market and the lack of infrastructure to meet basic needs that is seen as one of the most complex problems of present-day societal organisation. In 1959, 29 per cent of the total world population was urban; by 1980 the figure was 40 per cent and the document predicted that by 2005 more than half the world's population would be living in cities.

A Just Housing Policy

Calling for a consistent political will to be developed as well as increased awareness of the collective responsibility of all, and particularly of Christians, for the future of society, the document notes that 'a just housing policy must necessarily include the participation of the private sector as well as that of the State. Moreover, it should encourage self-help projects and collaborative efforts within the local community itself.' The assistance to individuals provided by social services and aid organisations must be complemented by a recognition by the public authorities that the lack of housing is a structural problem concerning the overall organisation of a given society or country.

This document does not treat in detail the situation of refugees but mentions the need for 'widespread acts of international solidarity' in their regard and reminds us that refugees are often forced to remain for years in conditions that would be tolerable only in emergencies or for a short time of transit.

Ethical and Christian Evaluation

The section headed 'An Ethical and Christian Evaluation' sees the housing problem in terms of

deprivation of a human right to an adequate standard of living. It spells this out in some detail quoting the , published by the Holy See, which explicitly states that "the family has the right to decent housing, fitting for family life and commensurate with the number of its members, in a physical environment that provides the basic services for the life of the family and the community". (Article11) Such a juridical formulation sets homelessness firmly in the realm of structural injustice. To be homeless is to be deprived of something which is . The document goes further in commenting that in some situations not only are people unable to live a dignified life as individuals or as families, but do not live at all, they simply exist. This distinction between living and simply existing is accompanied by a reminder that society as well as the State has an obligation in this regard. No pretext that the lack of housing is proper to a certain type of culture, or that in some regions of the world many people pass their entire life in the street, dispenses the State or society from this obligation. The document strongly states that \anything which does not meet the basic needs of a person - alone or in a family - cannot be considered part of any authentic culture\. The right to housing is thus understood as a universal right.

Property at the Service of the Human Person

The traditional teaching of the Catholic Church that the goods of the earth are intended for everyone is cited directly as follows: "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all people, so that all created goods would be shared fairly by all mankind, under the guidance of justice tempered by charity"²; In other words, property has a social function. Housing constitutes a basic social good and cannot simply be considered a market commodity. The questions of just distribution of housing, building speculation, the rights of tenants and owners, illegal housing, legal evictions, are discussed as issues to which solutions need to be found based on the right of all to a decent home.

There is emphasis on the obligation of each one of us to do what he or she can in regard to the situation, whether directly or indirectly, through existing organisations. This includes a call to men and women who themselves are homeless to take action in regard to their rights, and to defend them by involvement in grass roots associations for the purpose of procuring housing. The rights of people who prefer not to settle in one place to access basic services are mentioned specifically, as is their right to an understanding of their way of life on the part of the settled community.

Scripture Teaches

Specifically for each Christian, and for the Church, the reality of homeless persons and families constitutes an appeal to conscience and also a demand to do something to remedy the situation. Many Scripture citations are included to illustrate why this is so. For example, the Christian is to recognise Christ himself in every person lacking a basic good (Mt 25). We are reminded that when Jesus was coming into the world, His family found that there was \no place for them in the inn\. It was the indifference of the rich man to the plight of Lazarus lying at his gate that brought about the judgement of him as one deserving of \torment\ in the next world, while Lazarus was "comforted in the bosom of Abraham" (Lk 16, 19-31).

Several Old Testament texts are referred to in order to illustrate that loss of a place to live was one of the greatest misfortunes that could strike a people in time of war. (Lam 2, 2; Jer 4, 20) To be in exile, and find no place to settle, is contrasted with living in one\'s own home, with one\'s family,

which was a sign of happiness (Ps 127/128). The concept of 'house' or 'dwelling' also expresses our final destiny with God - "In my Father's house are many rooms" (Jn 14, 2).

What is Being Done?

A final section of the document reviews the witness and action of the Church in regard to housing. This reads as an account of what is going on, and, at the same time, as an exhortation to all Catholics to engage in authentic solidarity with homeless people by taking some part in the actions recommended. In addition to providing material help by means of, for example, housing programmes and the provision of emergency shelters, the promoting of educational and community development through involvement of the entire community, in a system of mutual help and collective labour, is acknowledged. Particular mention is made of dialogue with civil authorities to urge legislation and housing policies that are favourable to the poor.

What this section seems to reinforce is that charity and the struggle for justice go together. Charity and the seeking of justice are part of the same desire to relieve the suffering of those who have not the means to do it themselves. Whether this is because of their own personal circumstances, or because the systems and structures in which they and we are obliged to participate need to be changed, the call to Christians and specifically to Catholics in regard to housing is clear.

It is interesting to note that the Jewish people in their celebration of the Festival of Passover eat 'the bread of affliction' and remember what it is to be a slave. When they celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (this involves constructing a dwelling in the open air and passing the night there) they know what it is to live in a temporary home. As Jonathan Sachs points out in , 'These enactments and reminders are a more powerful education than any other of the responsibilities of wealth and its creation. However successful they might be, Jews annually tasted the salt tang of poverty and homelessness and they could not be indifferent to those for whom it was a reality, not a ritual.³; Further questions could be raised about whether the right to a home necessarily involves a right to a homeland.

The Work of Justice

Perhaps Christians, whose faith and many traditions have their source in the Jewish Scriptures and traditions, have lost something in that ways of remembering have become tame for many. However, there is nothing tame about the words in the social teaching on housing in the document on homelessness from the Pontifical Commission. Even less tame is the language in the Irish Bishops' Pastoral, , issued in 1977.

Fully ten years ahead of the Vatican document on housing the Irish Bishops discussed the issue at some length. Bad housing as an important factor in the generation of poverty and its perpetuation is cited as a cause of some families being defeated in their effort to better their conditions. Rents that are excessive and not in proportion to the conditions and amenities provided represent another area "in which the consciences of some seem to be insensitive."

(par. 105-6)

The language may seem somewhat dated but the teaching is strongly and confidently expressed. Almost thirty years later we are discussing these very issues, but now, for the most part, it is the social and environmental correspondents and commentators in our media who are setting the questions. The Church has lost much of its ground in our society. In regard to the social teaching on these issues, we may well ask ourselves, "What became of it?" or, "Was a homily ever preached on this teaching?" Can it be that we were all, clergy and laity alike, willingly distracted by issues of sexual morality, and so avoided discussion within the church of the really difficult issues of poverty, charity, justice, and systems and structures that perpetuate serious inequality of opportunity in our society?

The place where a person creates and lives out his or her life, also serves to found, in some way, that person's deepest identity and his or her relations with others."

I return to Niall Mellon and his initiative in South Africa. Whether or not he is, like many people, unaware of the social teaching of the Church in regard to housing, he and his many volunteers have shown most decisively that it can work. On any number of criteria, he and his group of volunteers have succeeded in making a vital difference to the lives of many people. As John Paul II said in his letter marking the occasion of the presentation of " ...a house is much more than a simple roof over one's head. The place where a person creates and lives out his or her life, also serves to found, in some way, that person's deepest identity and his or her relations with others."

The social teaching of the Church, based on the dignity of each human person and the right of everyone to share in the goods of the earth, cannot become real until it is put into practice in instances such as the Township Challenge.

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Housing the New Ireland Comment on the NESR Report

on Monday, 13 June 2005. Posted in [Issue 50 Housing the New Ireland, 2005](#)

June 2005

Margaret Burns*

Introduction

In spring 2004, Focus Ireland, the voluntary organisation dealing with homelessness, placed a series of poster advertisements around Dublin city. These were designed to look rather like the plaques which are put on buildings to indicate that a noted artist, political figure or other famous person once lived there. A typical Focus Ireland 'plaque' read: 'Paul Ryan, Homeless Person, Lived Here, August 2003'. Posted alongside doorways, bridges and other places that might provide minimal shelter, they were a graphic reminder of the continuing problem of homelessness in the midst of a vibrant and clearly prosperous city. On the evening I first saw one of these posters, I turned on the radio and encountered a very different advertisement: this one announced a Holiday Home Fair for the latest location to become 'the' destination for Irish people wanting to buy that second home abroad. The two advertisements pointedly illustrated the widening gap in the experience of different groups of people in Ireland with regard to housing (and income and wealth) which has been such a feature of this society over the past decade.

NESC Report

Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy, Report No. 112 of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) was published in December 2004.1

NESC begins its Report by outlining the wide range of 'issues and anxieties' most frequently expressed about the Irish housing system - including the increase in house prices, the inadequate supply of social housing, low-density suburban development, and rural housing. It states that the concerns can be clustered into three general areas. The first is the of the Irish housing system - in effect, whether the private housing market is a realistic reflection of underlying economic; social factors, or whether it is may amount to a 'bubble' that might burst. The second is in the distribution of resources and opportunities. The third is of the system - whether the pattern of settlement is storing up social, budgetary and environmental problems for the future.

The Report draws attention to the factors that underlie the strong demand for housing over the past decade - economic growth, an increase in population (which rose by 8 per cent between 1996 and 2002); the increase in income and wealth, and the availability and cost of finance for housing.

It highlights the overall increase in construction, with three times as many dwellings completed in 2003 as in 1994, and describes this rate of construction as 'unprecedented' and "exceptional when compared to other European countries" (p. 34). It shows the significant increase in the number of apartments built, with a concentration of these in; Dublin and the Greater Dublin area, and the high proportion of new housing that is in the form of single dwelling; - nearly one-third in 2002 and one-quarter in 2003 (p. 37). The increase in housing output in the Dublin area is shown to be lower than the national average, while the increase in counties surrounding Dublin and in the 'outer' counties of Leinster has been significant. The result is a 'pronounced doughnut pattern' to development in Leinster (p.38).

Affordability

The Report deals at some length with the issue of affordability, showing that while a majority of the population has been insulated from any affordability problems (either because they own their home outright, had acquired a mortgage before the take-off in prices or because they live in rent-protected social housing), a significant minority experiences serious affordability problems.

Using as a measure of affordability the percentage of average industrial earnings, post tax, required to service a twenty-year mortgage on an average house (while recognising the reality that many young people are taking out significantly longer mortgages), NESC shows that, from the late 1990s, the mortgage on an average house would cost a single earner around 60 per cent of income but around 80 per cent in the Dublin area (p. 47). This is compared to the official 'affordability threshold', under which a person is regarded as being eligible for housing assistance from the State if the cost of a mortgage would exceed 35 per cent of their net income (p. 46). NESC calculates that 'dual earning households' on average earnings; (where the incomes are equal and full individualisation applies), be able to meet the official affordability criterion - though only just in the case of Dublin houses. However, it shows that whereas a dual earning household, with each person having two-thirds of average earnings,; could have met the affordability criterion in the mid-1990s, it; would no longer be able to do so.

NESC does not discuss the wider implications of assuming dual earnings as the basis for housing affordability. The majority of those faced with affordability problems in relation to house purchase are young, and presumably most will at some stage wish to have children. What choice does 'affordability' based on two incomes leave parents who would prefer for one of them to stay at home full-time or part-time to care for their children and what are the implications if they do continue to work full-time but must meet the considerable costs of child care?2

Affordability must also take account of the need to pay 'point-of-entry costs' - deposit, taxes and fees. NESC shows that in 1989 an individual on average industrial earnings would have needed to save 62 per cent of one year's net earnings to accumulate a deposit of 10 per cent for an average new house; today, they would need to save 100 per cent (130 per cent for an average house in Dublin). It notes the increase in the pressure to obtain assistance for point-of-entry costs, 'most notably through parental gifts' (p. 49), and cites research showing that 71 per cent of first-time buyers earning less than 40,000 euro had obtained parental or third party assistance in some form (p. 31).

NESC suggests that the Government should explore ways of assisting those who would have difficulty in accumulating a deposit, which it suggests could be done either through a tax-assisted savings scheme or the provision of a loan by the State.

Attention is also drawn to affordability issues for those in private rented accommodation: in 1999-2000, 20 per cent of households in this sector spent more than 35 per cent of their income on rent (p. 50). A possible policy response raised by NESC is the development of a 'cost rental' sector through the subsidisation of not-for-profit or limited profit housing providers (p.168).

In its interpretation of the Irish housing system, NESC takes the position that a large increase in house prices was inevitable from the mid-1990s, given the prevailing economic and social circumstances (p. 77). While this may be true in essence, is it really the case that no public policy measure was available to curb prices in the interests of meeting people's primary need for housing and of ensuring more just distribution of resources?

The Reality of Housing Need

What is striking about the Report's opening chapters is that although they present an array of facts and analyses about the evolution of Irish housing in the past decade, they do not provide a quantitative or qualitative account of the reality of housing deprivation in today's Ireland for those who are experiencing it. There is a table outlining the numbers in the 'categories of need' in local authority assessments (p. 56). However, there is nothing that conveys the experience of homelessness, the situation of the Traveller Community, the life of those forced to live in B&B accommodation, or in the lower end of the private rented sector, or in poor quality local authority estates. The Report does not consider the particular housing issues facing the increasing number of older people, especially those living alone, or present the perspectives of those who are now shut out from the home ownership that they once could have assumed to be a reasonable aspiration.

The impact of the current housing system on children is not discussed - even though the 2002 housing assessment showed that there were 50,000 children in families with housing needs. Children are also affected by decisions concerning planning and design, which fundamentally

impact on their ability to move around independently, to be safe where there is traffic, and to play outdoors. The omission regarding children occurs despite the commitments in relation to housing and the environment, and its further commitment that all government departments will be required to identify the impact of proposed policies on children.³

The Report does, however, give some attention to the specific needs of people with disabilities. It says there is 'urgent need' to develop a strategy to support the provision of tailored housing and housing supports across all sectors of the housing system.

{mospagebreak}Land for Housing

In its discussion on the availability and cost of land for housing, the Report makes several references to the 2004 Report on Private Property of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution. Yet it makes no comment on the extremely important central conclusion of that Report. In the view of the All-Party Committee, the recommendation of the 1973 Kenny Report that local authorities should be empowered to acquire land needed for development at existing use value plus 25 per cent, would be unconstitutional. The All-Party Committee Report, in effect, gave a 'green light' to the Oireachtas to proceed with the enactment of legislation to implement the Kenny recommendation.⁴ More than a year after the publication of Report, there is no indication that the Government has plans for such legislation.

Social and Affordable Housing

Opening its deliberations regarding future policy on social and affordable housing, NESC declares that: "There is greater dynamism in the supply of private housing than in that of social and affordable housing in the Irish housing system." (p.145) A description more accurately reflecting reality might be that successive governments over recent decades have simply accorded insufficient priority to ensuring an adequate response to social and subsidised housing requirements.

The Report shows that in the three-year local authority assessments of housing need, the number of households requiring housing assistance rose from 27,427 in 1996 to 39,176 in 1999 and to 48,413 in 2002 (p. 56). There was, therefore, an increase of 76 per cent over six years. The percentage assessed as being in need because they were 'unable to afford' housing increased significantly, representing 43 per cent in 2002. Given the comparatively low level of output of social housing since 2002, along with the increase in the country's population, it would be surprising if the assessment carried out in March 2005, but not yet published, were not to show a further increase in the numbers needing housing assistance.



NESC describes Part V of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (which gave local authorities the power to ensure that up to 20 per cent of all residential developments could be retained for social and affordable housing) as 'perhaps the single most important policy development of recent decades' (p. 57). It makes no comment on the implications of the amendment to this legislation in 2002 which seriously weakened the potential of Part V to increase the supply of social and affordable housing and to promote social integration. Instead, it euphemistically describes the change to Part V thus: "The legislation was amended in 2002 to provide additional methods of compliance for developers." (p. 58)

NESC says it is 'is firmly of the view' that 'a robust policy response' is required to ensure there is an increase in the output of social and affordable housing, and that this sector is given priority in public spending (p. 146).

Social Rented

The Report speaks of the need for 'a high level of ambition' in relation to the provision of social housing by local authorities and voluntary housing associations and of the 'urgency of actions' required to achieve this (p. 153).

Throughout the past decade, even though output of social housing has gone up in absolute figures it has remained at only around 5 to 6 per cent of new housing. As NESC notes, the level of provision has fallen behind even the relatively low target set in the (2000-2006).

The Report recommends that there should be 83,000 new social housing units built up to 2012 - the target date being the ending of the next National Development Plan. Allowing for continued sales of local authority housing, this level of output would result in a net increase of 73,000 and would bring the stock of social housing up to 200,000, representing 12 per cent of all housing. The recommended increase would require an output of 10,000 units annually over the eight years 2005 to 2012, which is a level of new provision more than 50 per cent higher than the yearly output during the last decade. A target of 200,000 for the national stock of social housing provides a nice round figure, easy to remember for those wishing to lobby on the issue. But the question remains, would this level of provision, even if it were to happen, be sufficient? It is frequently argued that the present system for determining housing need is too narrow - for example, many in the private rented sector are not included in the assessment of housing need, despite the high percentage of their income that goes on rent.

An important aspect of social housing is the provision of social supports for tenants who are vulnerable. NESC recognises the inadequacy of financing for such supports and recommends that there should be a 'defined revenue funding scheme' to ensure adequate funding for housing bodies providing social housing for vulnerable groups who require on-site or care supports. (p. 171)

Supplementary Welfare Allowance

NESC supports the view that the social rental sector should be defined as including the subsidisation of rent in the private rented sector, through the supplementary rent allowance scheme (p. 153). It notes that the number of households receiving rent allowance rose from 34,7000 in 1996 to 58,000 in 2004, and that such households now represent about 40 per cent of the entire private rented sector. Moreover, rent supplemented housing equals about half the size of the rented local

authority and voluntary housing sectors (p. 65).

NESC expresses support for the introduction of the Rental Accommodation Scheme announced in 2004, which aims to address the situation of those who are receiving rent allowance for more than eighteen months. The scheme provides for long-term contracts with landlords already providing accommodation to people in receipt of rent allowance, as well as 'specifically built premises' and 'new developments under public-private partnerships' (p. 65). While some of the possible drawbacks of the proposed scheme are acknowledged, NESC concludes: "These are valid concerns, but innovative measures should not be held back because they are typically attended by new uncertainties" (p. 160). Yet the concerns listed are of a substantial nature: the fact that this arrangement will not provide the same long-term benefits to tenants as would social housing, such as life-long security of tenure and the opportunity of tenant purchase; the possibility that stigma may attach to tenants if buildings become identified with the scheme; the difficulty of ensuring that repairs to property are carried out; the fact that the public subsidisation involved will not result in the acquisition of equity for the State. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that, whatever about the need to do something about the prolonged use of rent supplement, the proposed scheme reflects the current tendency in policy to prefer a solution that is 'private' - though almost inevitably subsidised by the State - to one that is public.

Beyond its reflections on the proposed Rent Accommodation Scheme, the Report makes no comment on the operation of the rent allowance scheme, including issues such as the cap on the amount of rent for which the allowance will be paid, the restrictions that have been introduced to curtail access to the system, and the quality of the accommodation supplied to those availing of rent allowance.

{mospagebreak} **Affordable Housing**

The Report refers to what it terms 'intermediate households', which it defines as those households whose incomes are too high to qualify for social housing but too low to allow them to purchase a home or who struggle to rent privately. Another way of putting it would be to say that these were households who would in the past have been able to buy a modest home but who, because of the astronomical rise in house prices, have been priced out of the market.

NESC estimates that current schemes to subsidise the acquisition of homes will provide around 4,000 units per annum up to 2006, which would mean that 5-6 per cent of buyers of new homes may expect to purchase a house at a discount. It suggests that "the number of people eager to purchase a home but unable to do so under market conditions is unlikely to get smaller", since even if there were a further reduction in the rate of increase in house prices, and a catch-up in earnings relative to them, this would be offset by interest rate rises. It proposes, therefore, continuing with policies to provide subsidised housing at around the present level, but before doing so does not provide any analysis showing to what extent the current level of provision matches demand for this type of housing. It does, however, speak of the need to "stand ready to improve the effectiveness of these policies in the light of experience." In view of the Council's projections concerning the growth in the population and the composition of the labour market, it would seem very likely that there would be need for a revision upwards of this target.

NESC argues that the existence of four separate schemes to subsidise private ownership - the

Shared Ownership Scheme and the three Affordable Housing Schemes - have given rise to variations in eligibility and allocation criteria, and to different levels of subsidy to the purchaser. It recommends that they be amalgamated into a single First Home Scheme, under which households could apply either for housing supplied by local authorities or supports to purchase, or build, their own home.

It also refers to emerging initiatives for shared equity schemes in the voluntary and co-operative sectors, and recommends that funding and other supports should be made available to enable the extension of such partial equity housing (p. 165).

Second Homes

There is no precise, up-to-date figure for the incidence of second-home ownership in Ireland but the evidence suggests that it is significant and growing.

NESC does not refer specifically to the impact of second home construction in its analysis of the increase in the price of housing - unlike the , which stated unequivocally: "An important driver of the price of building houses is the demand for second dwellings."⁶ The speaks very clearly about the detrimental effects of second home building, including the fact that it narrows substantially the differential between house prices in Dublin and regional locations. "This runs totally counter to the needs of balanced regional development, making it unnecessarily expensive for individuals to live and for businesses to operate in regional locations."⁷

NESC says that the issues facing Ireland in regard to housing bear comparison with the other major challenges that faced the country over the past half century

NESC says that there is a strong case for measures that would recover from owners of second homes 'the full costs' of, for example, connection to services, environmental damage and lost amenities, as well as an additional contribution to ameliorate the knock-on effects of second home ownership on prices locally, which impact on people wanting to buy a primary home (p. 185).

And what of the question of imposing a tax on second homes, an issue which has been raised by various commentators in the past few years? The Report says merely that NESC "believes that consideration should be given to a separate tax on second homes" (p. 185). It adds, however, that a decision on whether to introduce such a tax, and what form it might take, would "depend on how the wider issue of land value intervention and betterment is treated". Why the decision should be so dependent is not elaborated on.

The Right to Housing

The NESC Report is silent on the question of the right to housing. This is disappointing for a number of reasons. First, Ireland has ratified a number of UN human rights treaties which include the right to housing, in particular, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Under this, and other UN conventions, a State Party is required to implement the rights outlined 'to the maximum of its available resources' with a view to progressively achieving their full realisation. Ireland's obligations to respect the right to housing must therefore take account of the significantly increased resources now available.

In a , issued in 1991, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights elaborated its views as to how the right to housing is to be interpreted. It noted that: "The right to adequate housing ... is of central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights". The right "applies to everyone" and the interpretation of the right should not be one that "views shelter exclusively as a commodity", but rather it should be seen as "the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity".⁸ These reflections of the UN Committee could have provided a valuable source for NESC in setting out a vision and a set of priorities for Irish housing.

Second, in 2004, the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution in its committed itself to examining the question of socio-economic rights, including the right to housing, at a future date.⁹ This was in response to the large number of submissions it had received urging the inclusion in the Constitution of a right to housing. A reminder to both the Government and the All-Party Committee of this commitment would have been timely.

Third, NESC itself, in a previous report, looked at the issue of socio-economic rights and in its conclusion said: "the Council proposes that Irish policy, and any new national programme, should contain a process to explore how standards of public service can be better identified, monitored, achieved and improved in order to vindicate socio-economic rights."¹⁰

Conclusion

The quality of housing available to the majority of people in Ireland has improved immensely over recent decades. Since the economic boom, standards have improved still further. In addition, a majority of households have seen an unprecedented leap in their wealth-holding as a result of the increase in the value of their homes. In this context, it is all the more unacceptable that a minority should have to live in poor quality, insecure accommodation, or be homeless, with little immediate prospect of their situation improving. In relative terms, the position of those experiencing 'housing poverty' in Ireland has deteriorated in recent years. Against this background, the Irish housing system appears to have been providing four to five times as many houses for use as second homes as it has for social housing.

NESC in its conclusion says that the issues facing Ireland in regard to housing bear comparison with the other major challenges that faced the country over the past half century and that resolving them is essential to the social and economic future of Irish society. The implementation of the NESC recommendations, especially on social and affordable housing, would undoubtedly bring improvements. The question remains: do the NESC recommendations as a whole go far enough? They are, it must be remembered, the result of the deliberations, and inevitable compromises, of the diverse interests represented on NESC - Government, business, trade unions, farmers, and the community and voluntary sector.

In any case, the challenge to Irish society, as NESC makes clear, is considerable. Can it generate the political will, and level of public concern, to ensure that developing an adequate and equitable housing system can become a priority in public policy, and public expenditure, over the coming decade?

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Thanks to Focus Ireland for permission to reproduce its poster advertisement.

Home: Dream or Possibility? Challenges for the Homeless Services

on Monday, 13 June 2005. Posted in [Issue 50 Housing the New Ireland, 2005](#)

Peter McVerry, SJ
June 2005

Introduction

The evaluation of existing plans and services for homeless people currently being undertaken by the independent review of 1 provides an opportunity to reflect on the progress that has been made in recent years in addressing homelessness in Dublin and to highlight the significant challenges that are still ahead if the aim of eliminating homelessness in the capital by 2010 is to be realised.

In many respects, there have been significant improvements in the quality and range of services available to homeless people in Dublin since 2001. In particular, there has been a huge increase in the use of B&B accommodation (while the details are not published to avoid stigmatising those B&Bs which provide services to homeless people, one private landlord is estimated to be earning well over €1 million per year from the provision of B&B accommodation to homeless people). Dublin's first 'wet hostel' has been opened, so that homeless drinkers who are unable, for whatever reason, to leave behind their drink in order to access accommodation for the night, now have a hostel where they can bring in drink with them. There has been the provision of new, bright, and cheerful premises to replace old and dreary ones and the opening of a hostel for sixteen to twenty-one year olds. Other significant advances are the ready availability of good quality training courses for staff working with homeless people and an emphasis on quality standards, subject to evaluation, in services for homeless people. This list is not by any means exhaustive, but it gives a flavour of the improvements that have taken place in services for homeless people in Dublin.

A key factor in bringing about these improvements is undoubtedly the Homeless Agency. Established as part of the Government strategy on homelessness, the Homeless Agency is responsible for the overall management and coordination of services to people who are homeless in the Dublin area, for the delivery of funding to services in the homeless sector, and for the implementation of agreed action plans towards achieving the goal of eliminating homelessness by 2010. The Agency is a partnership structure, bringing together the voluntary and statutory agencies responsible for the planning, funding and delivery of services to people who are homeless.

The first Action Plan produced by the Homeless Agency, , covered the period 2001-2003 and stated the intention of the Agency to eliminate homelessness in Dublin by 2010. The Homeless Agency's second Action Plan, Making it Home, covers the period 2004-2006. Its focus is on the prevention of homelessness, early intervention and settlement into permanent accommodation as distinct from living in hostels.

Despite the progress that has undoubtedly been made, my experience of providing hostel accommodation for homeless young people shows that there remain several major concerns.

Accommodation for Single Men

When it comes to providing accommodation, there is, appropriately, a hierarchy within the ranks of homeless people: adults with children clearly have the highest priority, single homeless females come next as they are more vulnerable and, finally, single homeless males.

With the expansion of B&B facilities, the number of people who cannot access emergency accommodation has dropped considerably. Some nights, there are actually empty beds in some of the emergency hostels for single homeless men. However, the reason for this has to be carefully analysed.

There are a considerable number of hostels for homeless people in Dublin, some of them catering for people with special needs, such as mental health problems, and many of them very sought after. They provide excellent accommodation, on a long-term basis. Hence, vacancies do not arise very often; when they do, there are far more applications than can be catered for. As a result, these hostels have waiting lists, sometimes long waiting lists.

If I, as a single man, become homeless today, and seek accommodation from the Homeless Persons Unit in the Dublin area through its dedicated free phone number, 1800-724-724, I will usually be referred to one of two emergency hostels. Both these hostels provide accommodation in dormitories, on a first come, first served basis. One of them also has single rooms but they are in high demand and a person normally has to be resident in the dormitory section for a period of several months before they would qualify for a single room. These hostels cater for all-comers, including chronic drug users, career criminals and disturbed people. This is not a criticism of the hostels, as everyone is entitled to accommodation and it is to the great credit of the management and staff of these hostels that they can cope with this very difficult end of the homeless spectrum. But there are three categories of single homeless males who often refuse to accept a place in these hostels.

People who are drug-free

These homeless people may be reluctant to go into a hostel situation where drugs are being used and where drugs may be offered to them. They may, themselves, have been drug-users in the past and are trying to remain drug-free, or they may never have used hard drugs but find themselves under pressure to 'belong' or to experiment. For their own health and safety, and with concerns for their future, they often refuse an offer of a bed in such a hostel. Refusal to accept accommodation in a hostel will result in their unemployment assistance payments being stopped, as they now have no address (an address is a requirement for welfare payments, although with people's details and payment history now available on computer to welfare staff, it is difficult to see the rationale for this requirement). They may end up living on the street, penniless.

People who have been sexually abused as children

Many homeless men whom I know who have been sexually abused as children, are, reasonably enough, afraid to sleep in a dormitory with strangers. They talk of breaking out in sweats at the very thought of it, and of staying awake all night out of fear. This is not to suggest that their dormitory

companions would, in fact, interfere sexually with them (though it may occasionally happen) but their state of mind is one where sleeping in the company of strangers brings back memories and fears. These homeless people prefer the streets to a hostel.

People who are not streetwise

Some young homeless people are very vulnerable and find living with others who have been long-term homeless, with behaviour difficulties or addictions, very frightening. Some homeless people prey on the more vulnerable and I have heard allegations of being robbed in the dormitory, sometimes at knife-point, and of being pressured into using drugs. Some sleep with their runners under their pillow to ensure that they will still have them in the morning. These vulnerable homeless people also feel more secure on the street than in the hostels.

There is no adequate system for assessing the needs of homeless people who seek emergency accommodation and for providing them with accommodation that is to their situation. The only information a person is required to give is their name and date of birth, and they are then allocated a hostel bed, if one is available.

B&B accommodation is much sought-after by homeless people as an alternative to hostels. While the number of places in B&Bs has expanded significantly and at enormous cost (money which, it could be argued, would be more effectively used by providing a direct provision service rather than private, for-profit, accommodation), priority is clearly given to homeless adults with children and to homeless females. Single homeless males may access B&B accommodation if they can provide medical evidence that hostels are not suitable for their needs, but otherwise they find it very difficult to avoid the hostel circuit.

Move-on Accommodation

A person who becomes homeless needs emergency accommodation. If they have other difficulties, such as addictions, behaviour problems or emotional or psychological problems requiring specialist help, they may require a period of time in a hostel to stabilise their life, begin to heal the hurts they have experienced and learn the skills they will need for independent living. However, there obviously comes a time when such a person needs to move beyond their dependency on the hostel and begin to live a more independent life. Unfortunately, they will then encounter the chronic shortage of suitable move-on accommodation.

There are three options for a person trying to move out of hostel dwelling - local authority, private rented, and voluntary housing sector accommodation - but in each case provision does not meet need.

Local authority housing

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the number of local authority housing units being built dropped sharply, because of the crisis in the public finances. Furthermore, there was a very successful effort made to sell local authority housing, at very attractive prices, to sitting tenants both to raise money and to reduce expenditure on maintenance. Thus the housing waiting lists grew from 17,600 in 1988 to 28,600 in 1993. Due to the obscene increase in the cost of housing, the numbers on the waiting lists grew further to 48,400 in 2002. Homeless adults with children have found themselves waiting longer and longer in B&B accommodation before they can access local

authority housing. Single homeless people, who are at the bottom of the waiting lists, have more chance of winning the Lotto than getting a local authority home.

Private rented

As the possibility of obtaining a local authority home grew less and less, many formerly homeless people sought independent accommodation in the private rented sector. This was possible through the provision, by the then Department of Social Welfare, of a rent supplement. Rent supplement was originally intended to help people over a crisis; for example, if someone was in employment and living in private rented accommodation but suddenly found themselves out of work for whatever reason, rent supplement was a way of ensuring that they did not find themselves also out of a home. However, for people who were long-term dependent on social welfare (due to prolonged unemployment or lone parenthood, for example) rent allowance became a necessary on-going supplement to their income. Meantime, the possibility of their obtaining local authority housing, which could offer rented accommodation at a rent related to their income, receded as local authority housing provision declined and waiting lists grew longer and longer. As a result, more and more people needed rent supplements for longer and longer periods of time, some of them permanently. Between 1994 and 2004 the numbers availing of rent supplement grew from 30,000 to 57,500. At the same time, the cost of renting grew obscenely, in line with the cost of housing, and so the Department of Social and Family Affairs found itself spending enormous amounts of money (€354 million in 2004) supplementing rents in the private sector for people who could not get local authority accommodation - with no asset accruing to the State for this enormous expenditure. This unplanned expansion meant that the private rented sector had become a vital strand of Irish housing policy. The Department of Social and Family Affairs rebelled, and told the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government that it was no longer prepared to do its job for it. The money would be much better spent on investing in social housing, through which the State would acquire valuable housing stock for its money, taxpayers would see their taxes invested in tangible public goods which benefit society and tenants would get secure, affordable accommodation from landlords who are accountable. So, in 2002, the Department of Social and Family Affairs introduced a ceiling on the amount of rent a tenant could agree to pay and still be eligible for rent supplement, thus condemning single applicants for the supplement to the grottiest bedsits in the private sector. In 2003, the Department brought in restrictions that made it very difficult for most new applicants to get a rent supplement at all. Homeless people are exempt from the curtailment in entitlement to rent supplement but they are still subject to the cap on the rent level allowed for the supplement.

While homeless people have, in theory, access to private rented accommodation, in reality they will find it extremely difficult to obtain a suitable place to live. Since March 2004, the voluntary organisation, Threshold, has carried out a survey every three months to establish the actual availability of rented accommodation in the Dublin area that would be suitable for single people dependent on rent supplement. For each survey, Threshold has made enquiries about every bedsit advertised over a two-week period - bedsits being the cheapest form of private rented accommodation for a person on their own. In April 2005, for example, 126 bedsits were advertised, but just 52 were at or below the rent cap of €115 per week. In only twelve of these cases were landlords willing to accept a tenant who was relying on rent supplement, and of these landlords nine were unwilling to accept male tenants. Of the remaining three bedsits, two were not self-contained (as may be required to receive rent supplement). Therefore, of the 126 bedsits advertised during the fortnight, just one was suitable for a single man dependent on rent supplement.⁴

{mosimage}The reality, then, is that private rented accommodation for single homeless people is difficult to get, and most of it is of very poor quality and guaranteed to depress you. This is a particularly significant drawback for people who have overcome serious problems in their life, such as alcohol or drug addiction or who have problems such as mental health. Moving into a small, damp, depressing bedsit is not conducive to their ongoing and difficult efforts to recover. Further, qualifying for rent supplement entails going through a set of administrative hoops which requires great determination and some people just get fed up going from one office to another, in different parts of the city, to get a plethora of forms stamped before they can even make their application. Most importantly of all, however, people in the private rented sector could, until recently, be evicted with one month's notice, even through no fault of their own. In many cases, they would be told to leave within 24 hours and if they failed to do so, the landlord waited until they went out and then changed the locks on the doors, leaving all their belongings in the garden. Although this was completely illegal, there was nothing the tenant could do. Theoretically, he or she could begin court proceedings to vindicate their rights, but that was not going to get them accommodation that night - which was their priority - and it was not a course of action that the now homeless person would be likely to have the self-confidence to undertake. Moreover, the landlord would frequently refuse to refund the deposit paid, so that the person now had no deposit for alternative private rented accommodation. Under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, people in private rented accommodation who have been renting for six months will have security of tenure for a further three and a half years (except in specified circumstances), which is a major improvement. No doubt some landlords will exercise their right to evict after five months!

While homeless people still have some chance of accessing private rented accommodation, that possibility is now closed off to others who need it. For example, a person who successfully completes a residential drug treatment programme, and returns to the community drug-free, may have no safe place to live. They can physically return home, but home may also be home to drug-using brothers or sisters, or even parents. Such a situation guarantees that they will return to using drugs. Or they may owe money to local drug dealers arising from the months of drug use prior to entering treatment, and to return to their own neighbourhood guarantees that they will have to either rob or sell drugs to repay the money, or else they will end up in hospital or the morgue. We in the Aruppe Society frequently get requests from drug treatment centres asking if we can provide drug-free accommodation for someone who is due shortly to be discharged and has nowhere safe to go, and while we have two such houses, we cannot meet the demand.

Voluntary sector housing

Until the 1990s, voluntary housing associations had been very insignificant players in the provision of accommodation, unlike Britain where they are a major provider of accommodation for low-income households. Now, however, they provide 14,000 accommodation units, much of it for people with special needs, such as the elderly or people with disabilities, but there has been a significant increase also in provision for homeless people. Organisations such as Focus Ireland and Respond offer accommodation, both transitional and permanent, to homeless people but the scale of demand ensures that long waiting lists often apply.

Prevention of Homelessness

Given that private rented accommodation is the only realistic option (apart from hostels) for

someone who needs to, or has to, move out of their present accommodation, the requirement to prove that you cannot remain where you are, and that you have no other option open to you, in order to qualify for rent supplement, makes it extremely difficult for many people to leave what may be an unsafe housing situation. A 19 year old girl who is being sexually abused by her father, a person who is being beaten by the partner with whom they live, a person who wishes to leave the family home because of the stress of living with alcoholic parents, or an elderly person whose relationship with their partner breaks down, for example, must convince the Community Welfare Officer of the danger to themselves, or the total unsuitability, of remaining in their accommodation. They may be considered for rent supplement if they provide written confirmation of their situation. From the point of view of the Community Welfare Officer, this is necessary as he or she has no way of knowing whether the person applying is telling the truth, or is instead looking for a pad to live in with the boy/girlfriend whom they met at a party last night and now want to live with for the rest of their lives. However, it may be impossible, and usually embarrassing, for someone to provide written confirmation of sexual or physical assault by a family member. Hence they become homeless, because that is the one way they can become eligible for rent supplement. But this means joining the hostel scene with all the dangers which that may pose and the loss of self-esteem which accompanies it.

One of the key objectives of the Homeless Agency's Action Plan for 2004-2006, is the prevention of homelessness. Yet it appears that the Department of Social and Family Affairs is acting directly contrary to that objective, by implementing regulations that may lead to homelessness.

Homelessness and Housing Policy

Clearly, homelessness is related to the housing options open to poor people. There are no consistent or joined-up policies in relation to housing. The focus of housing policy is on the private market sector, trying to ensure that people who vote (or at least some of them) are not totally priced out of the housing market (while at the same time making sure that builders and speculators can continue making exorbitant profits and contribute to the party funds). Although there has been a housing crisis for poor people since the mid-1980s, there was no concern expressed or action taken by Government. Only when the crisis began to affect middle-class people from the mid-1990s onwards was any action taken. Then we had a flurry of reports, most noticeably three Bacon reports. A whole new category of housing came into being: previously there was 'social housing' and 'private housing', but now there is also 'affordable housing'. Most of the concern now for people who are unable to enter the private housing market is focused on 'affordable housing' with 'social housing' being pushed even further to the margins. Indeed, in the ten years up to 2004, some 9,000 units of social housing, for which Government had allocated the money, were not provided by local authorities, as the money was diverted to other projects. In 1960, just 50 per cent of all housing output was for private housing, the rest was for social housing; today, 90 per cent is for private housing. The encouragement to tenants of social housing to purchase their homes continues apace, so that there are now fewer social housing units available to poor people in the State than there were in 1966.

The social housing sector is patently incapable of providing, at any time in the foreseeable future, for those on low incomes who require housing, including the homeless. Yet at the same time, the only other avenue to accommodation - private rented - is becoming increasingly difficult to access.

The one bright light in the area of social housing is the increased provision by housing associations,

though they still remain a minor player in the housing arena. However, while Government funding is readily available for the capital cost of providing accommodation, it remains extremely difficult, sometimes impossible, to get funding to cover running costs, including salaries for staff. This makes organisations very hesitant to provide accommodation for people who require support, as the funding to pay for that support may not materialise. One of the emphases in the Homeless Agency's new Action Plan, is on the need to provide appropriate support for homeless people who secure their own accommodation, as the failure to do so often ensures that they are unable to sustain their tenancy in either the private rented sector or the local authority sector. This will require establishing policies and structures for ensuring that voluntary organisations can access funding to pay support staff, as no such policies now exist, except on an ad-hoc basis.

Homeless People with Mental Health Problems

In the Aruppe Society we are increasingly dealing with young homeless adults with mental health problems and finding it, almost always, impossible to access any sort of adequate mental health service. Some of these young people had been children in the care of the health boards, where services were so hopelessly inadequate (particularly for those homeless children who had special needs) that they have now become homeless adults with a significantly increased mental health problem. Although our hostel for homeless adults is primarily for those with an addiction, we find ourselves having to provide accommodation for people without an addiction but with mental health problems, as the alternative for them would be the streets. Not only is our hostel inappropriate for such homeless people but we find it extremely difficult to access psychiatric services which can help them, and us, to cope with their health problems. Without such help, homeless people with mental health problems are incapable of living independently and are consigned to hostels and the street for much of their lives.

A further issue arises where a person with a mental health problem also has an addiction. In our experience, the psychiatric services just don't want to know. The person's problem is identified as, at source, an addiction problem and they are referred to the addiction services. Due to their mental health problems, the addiction services may not be able to cope with their behaviour or their capacity to maintain a regular programme at the addiction services is impaired. While it is difficult to access adequate services for homeless people with only a mental health problem, it is well nigh impossible to access any mental health service for homeless people who also have an addiction problem.

Increased cooperation between the Homeless Agency (through the multi-disciplinary team) and the psychiatric services needs to develop in order to address the problems of homeless people who have mental health and/or addiction problems. However, cooperation alone will not result in an adequate service. The psychiatric services available to poor people generally are hopelessly inadequate and under-funded. Significantly increased funding and a re-structuring of the psychiatric services will be required if these needs are to be adequately addressed.

The target of eliminating homelessness in Dublin by 2010 is a very ambitious one. It can be achieved, but only if considerably more resources are made available, integrated housing strategies are developed, an immediate expansion in local authority housing is undertaken and voluntary housing associations are provided with on-going funding to enable them to support those to whom they provide accommodation.

Recommendations

- All emergency accommodation should be in single rooms; dormitory accommodation should be phased out as quickly as possible.
- A greater range of emergency accommodation options should be available, so that the needs of young, vulnerable, or drug-free single males can be met.
The recommendation of NESCC that an additional 73,000 units of social housing should be provided over the next eight years should be implemented⁵, and local authorities should consider the needs of single homeless people when planning their social housing starts.
- An integrated 'social' housing strategy comprising local authority housing, voluntary housing associations and private rented housing should be expanded.
- The capacity of voluntary housing associations to expand provision should be recognised and supported, in particular by significantly increasing funding for support services and staff.
- A review of the psychiatric services available to low-income people needs to be undertaken by the Health Service Executive and increased resources provided to improve radically the service on which homeless people - as well as others - depend.

References

1. This article is an expanded version of a February 2005 submission by the Arrupe Society to the independent review of , Dublin: Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2000.
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4. Threshold Access Housing Unit Bedsit Survey.
5. NESCC (2005), , Dublin: National Economic and Social Council (Report No. 112).