

Speech by
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On the Occasion of
The Homelessness Policy Statement
Launch

On
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Introduction

Good morning and thank you all for joining me here today.

The dignity and equality of citizens has always been a fundamental political principle for me. I strive, in all my political activity, to have that principle at the forefront of my thinking. It is a principle that of immense importance when addressing the issue of homelessness.

You will all be aware that when I took up office here in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, I made it clear that tackling the issue of homelessness would be a priority for me. The launch of this Homelessness Policy Statement today is but an important step on that journey – there is a lot yet to be achieved!

I need not tell the people in this room of the human and personal tragedy that the threat or reality of homelessness can trigger in a person's life. Homelessness is not a label or category, it is a destructive social condition that can wreak havoc on human dignity and wellbeing. As a social condition it requires a social response – from Government, from the voluntary sector, from citizens. Homelessness is an affront to every value that we assign to the concept of citizenship. In a real republic there is an onus on us all to ensure that all citizens have a place they can call home.

This policy statement is a clear, concise and accessible articulation of the political and policy focus that will inform the approach to ending homelessness in the coming years. It is a natural progression from the existing strategy and from the principles articulated in the Government's 2011 Housing Policy Statement.

You have a copy of the Homelessness Policy Statement in front of you. It is not a long document. The issue of homelessness is clear and unfortunately in our cities one aspect of homelessness, rough sleeping, is all too visible. The path to a solution is the adoption of a housing-led approach to homelessness and this is what this policy statement is all about.

Long-term, sustainable housing should be the primary response to all forms of homelessness. This may sound simplistic but as practitioners, I'm sure you will all agree that this has not always been the case. Previous approaches saw individuals trapped in emergency accommodation for long periods of time. The emphasis on emergency accommodation has proved expensive to administer and operate – but more importantly, neither did it serve the individual well in terms of dignity and well-being.

Government, local authorities, the voluntary sector and academics, at home and internationally, have spent many years trying to implement solutions to homelessness. As you know, it is a complex and multifaceted issue. However, it is clear to me that to make progress in addressing this issue all sectors need to work together with a singularity of purpose.

That is why I have developed and launched this policy statement – I want the valuable contribution, that is available from a variety of stakeholders in homeless services, to be united around an identified and stated objective that will concentrate all our efforts and resources.

I am confident that the adoption of a housing-led approach across homelessness services will make a meaningful difference and accordingly I have set an ambitious target of ending long-term homelessness by the end of 2016.

Review of National Homeless Strategy

This Government has made firm commitments towards tackling the issue of homelessness. An undertaking was made in the Programme for Government to review the existing Homeless Strategy and to implement a housing-led approach to end long-term homelessness.

An assessment of the current Homeless Strategy was conducted last year by Associate Professor Eoin O'Sullivan of Trinity College Dublin who is with us here today. Consultations on Eoin's assessment were also undertaken and involved Government Departments and Agencies, the voluntary sector and other stakeholders.

The assessment strongly endorsed the fundamentals of the current Homeless Strategy. For a moment I would like to reflect on the progress that has been made in implementing that strategy, which has included:

- the new legislative provisions of the Housing Act 2009, which put Homelessness Fora and Homelessness Action Plans on a statutory basis;
- the adoption of statutory Homelessness Action Plans by the 34 City and County Councils in 2010;
- annual provision of current funding to provide for sufficient bed capacity to accommodate all those in need of emergency accommodation;
- the ongoing reconfiguration of existing emergency and transitional facilities to provide secure long-term tenancies for homeless persons;
- the development of the *Support to Live Independently* scheme, which provides visiting supports for persons leaving homelessness assisting them to live in independent mainstream housing;
- the introduction of PASS, the online data and bed management system, which is operational in Dublin and is being extended nationally on a phased basis with the South-West and North-East Regions having just gone live; and
- the development of a devolved system for the provision of accommodation-related funding by housing authorities with an emphasis on increased decision making at local level; these devolved arrangements have commenced in the Dublin Region and will be implemented nationally during the course of 2013.

Indeed, a lot has been achieved. But yet the incidence of homelessness would appear to be on the increase – this is no indication of a failure of strategy but is an indication of the challenges that we face in these difficult times.

Homelessness Funding

While the review process found much to commend in the implementation of the Homeless Strategy it was also critical of the value for money obtained from the relatively high levels of funding provided for homeless services.

Considerable funding is expended on homelessness annually across government. My Department has been overseeing State and local government expenditure exceeding €50 million a year in respect of the running costs of homeless facilities and associated services. Considerable capital investment also goes into homeless services on an annual basis. In addition, the HSE is spending over €30 million in respect of care packages for the homeless every year.

Going beyond this, there are also significant financial resources expended by the voluntary and charity sector in the provision of homelessness services, funding which comes from their own resources.

Homelessness funding has been substantially protected over the past number of years – and this fact is important in the context of wide scale pressure for reductions in Government spending across all Departments.

However, it is clear that these funding challenges will be an issue for Government for some time to come – and accordingly homeless services must also strive to achieve efficiencies and produce the best return for the public investment involved. .

Voluntary Sector

The contribution made by the voluntary sector is essential and cannot be measured in monetary terms alone—voluntary organisations have a great capacity to harness the concern and altruism of people to create networks of services, including housing services, for those unable to provide for themselves. They also are pivotal in raising awareness of the issue and advocating for change. While at times this may cause a degree of tribulation in a Minister's office, robust and evidence based criticism is something that I value and welcome.

While I will be seeking generous and flexible responses from all stakeholders at national and local level in the implementation of this policy, it must be acknowledged that many in the voluntary sector have been advocating the position articulated in the policy statement for a period of time.

My Department has been working closely with service providers for many years in the delivery of social housing and supports for homeless people and will continue to do so. I look forward to continued and enhanced cooperation between the sector and all State agencies in our combined efforts to end homelessness. The dedication and efforts of leaders in the community and voluntary sector will make a huge difference to the success of this policy.

Housing-led Approach

This Homelessness Policy Statement advocates the adoption of a housing-led approach as the key to ending long-term homelessness in Ireland. A housing-led approach is about accessing long-term sustainable housing as the primary response to all forms of homelessness. It incorporates the provision of support to people in their homes according to their needs. We need to focus on long-term solutions to homelessness. This policy statement moves away from the traditional model that places hostel or shelter-type accommodation at the centre of provision and through this simple change in emphasis seeks to realise much better value for money.

More importantly, it offers better outcomes for the individual. Short-term emergency interventions are expensive for the State to support but at the same time they are not a solution to homelessness. How can an individual escape a spiral of decline or be empowered to consider dealing with their own personal issues while they are subsisting in an emergency facility?

There can be no greater solution to homelessness than providing people with a home where they can live as full and valued members of society.

For me, a home by definition encompasses security, safety and well-being. It is not just a place to shelter but a place where we flourish and from where we contribute to our wider community. Without a home a person is robbed of security and a sense of belonging – and from there situations can deteriorate rapidly.

The goal of this policy statement is to assist homeless persons, who can live independently, into mainstream accommodation as soon as possible. It is about sustaining tenancies. It is important that there is a range of housing options available to enable someone move out of emergency accommodation as quickly as possible into long-term accommodation more suitable to their needs.

This approach, together with appropriate outreach and resettlement support, is essential in assisting people out of homelessness altogether. The concept of tenancy sustainment - providing assistance and support to people to remain out of the cycle of homelessness and in their homes - is a powerful tool in the fight against further marginalisation.

Preventing people from becoming homeless is crucial in protecting families and individuals from hardship and forms an important part of the Homelessness Policy Statement. Many of the homeless action plans and indeed housing policy in general have placed special emphasis on preventative measures to assist families and individuals at risk of losing their homes or apartments in the first instance.

Homelessness prevention is an essential part of any effort to end homelessness either locally or nationally. Effective services to help people exit homelessness, must go hand-in-hand with measures to prevent families and individuals from becoming homeless.

Oversight Group

There are already many institutional arrangements in place to monitor and measure progress and develop responses, with regard to homelessness. It is essential to ensure that any new policy is working. I have therefore established a high-level oversight group to monitor and review the approach outlined in this policy statement.

The oversight group consists of three highly-regarded individuals from the field of business, the public sector and academia – Mark Kennedy, Sylva Langford and Tony Fahey. The group will review progress, identify obstacles, and propose solutions. I also hope that they will bring a new and fresh perspective to deal with the issues as they present.

For this group to operate effectively it will require data. Data that measures progress. Today, I am announcing a set of indicators that will be used to demonstrate the dynamics of homelessness. These indicators will give a clearer picture of homelessness in Ireland and they will assist the oversight group in reviewing progress.

Conclusion

Often the discourse around homelessness focusses on figures – our language refers to the numbers presenting, units provided, millions spent, rough sleepers counted, bed-nights occupied. I myself have set a quantifiable target of ending long-term homelessness by the end of 2016.

It is not just about the figures though, our driving ambition here is about the dignity and value of individuals and families. It is a responsibility that I take very seriously in my role as Minister for Housing and Planning and that is why finding solutions to homelessness ranks high on my agenda. I am determined to address this issue and to succeed in achieving our objective.

I hope that you will work with me and the oversight group on this.

Homelessness Policy Statement
List of Indicators

1. Number of new presentations on a daily basis.
2. Number of persons in emergency accommodation for longer than 6 months.
3. Number of persons leaving emergency accommodation.
4. Occupancy rate in emergency accommodation
5. Number of persons moving on into independent living with support.
6. Number of persons moving on into independent living without support.
7. Number of persons sleeping rough voluntarily and involuntarily.