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# The Drugs Problem and Dublin Corporation's Role

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## Introduction

Dublin Corporation is the largest local authority in Ireland with approximately 24,000 rented dwellings and 14,400 tenant purchase houses which includes 13,000 flats, 8,000 houses, and housing for 3,000 senior citizens. The Housing and Community Services Department is responsible for the management and maintenance of Dublin Corporation's housing estate. In performing its housing management function, the Corporation operates under various legislative powers, policy documents, Department of the Environment guidelines and within the framework of the Corporation's own Strategic Management Initiative and the "Better Local Government" Report produced by the Department of the Environment in 1996. This Report centred on the four core principles of enhancing local democracy, serving the customer better, developing efficiency and providing proper resources. Figure 1 shows two key statements from the Report on Estate Management and drugs.

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Figure 1

### Better local Government Report 15>96

Key Statements on Estate Management and serious anti-social misbehaviour

"Local authorities will significantly develop their housing management responsibilities to deliver a high quality, cost effective customer service. Development of the local authority estate management function will include greater tenant and community participation in the management of their estates, improved training for local authority housing staff and better information services in the housing area."

and

"New legislation will provide additional powers to local authorities to deal effectively with serious anti-social behaviour in their housing estates, focusing especially on drug-related activity."

## Estate Management

The legislation referred to was introduced as the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1997. This Act was specifically intended to speed up the procedures for evictions from local authority rented dwellings in cases of anti-social behaviour, with particular reference to drug pushing and related serious anti-social activities. There is a very important provision in the Act that allows local authorities to evict squatters or illegal occupiers who are engaged in **serious** anti-social behaviour without recourse to the Courts system. With the assistance of the Gardai, this has proven to be a very efficient procedure for the Corporation. The Act also introduced a new "Exclusion Order" procedure against individuals involved in such behaviour to avoid having to evict the entire household. The Act provides for the refusal of applications for local authority housing on grounds of anti-social behaviour and for exchange of information with designated bodies including the Gardai. This Act has facilitated the Corporation in adopting a very strong position in relation to anti-social behaviour, particularly drug-related activities.



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Court Orders and evictions are sought by the Corporation in all cases where tenants or members of their household are involved in drug dealing or allow their dwellings to be used for drug dealing. Tenants evicted are regarded as having deliberately rendered themselves homeless and are not rehoused. There are, however, practical difficulties for the Corporation when it adopts such a position. A Corporation Official was recently ordered by a Judge to appear before a court, to explain why accommodation was denied to a heroin addict who had just been released from prison. The Judge stated that he understood the Corporation's concern to keep drugs out of certain areas, but this addict had a right to accommodation and social welfare assistance. He now faced having to serve the remainder of a nine-year sentence because he had not been given any opportunity to amend his life.

The primary consideration of the Corporation as a housing authority, however, must remain the safeguarding of the right of people living on Corporation estates to what a call from the *Drugs in Dublin- Conference Proceedings, 1997* termed, "*the peaceful enjoyment of their homes without threat or intimidation from people who consider that ultimately no sanction will be applied against them*". Our main concern must always be for the people living on these estates who, through no fault of their own, have to endure often nightmarish abuse at the hands of a minority anti-social element. Not all anti-social behaviour on our estates can be linked to drugs. The Corporation's Chief Welfare Officer, Michael Kelly, in a 1995 report on the problem noted, "in recent years, drug abusers and drug traders have added a new dimension of terror to the lives of many who are trying to survive." He added, "the problems presented to me, and verified by reliable third parties, indicate that there is an ongoing and serious problem of harassment on Corporation estates which causes extreme distress to individuals and families and which often requires Dublin Corporation to transfer the victim family or individual for their own safety and security." A recent Sunday newspaper article highlighted the fact that addicts sometimes tape syringes to the underside of banisters in flat complexes, to inflict a chance jab at the Gardai when they visit. This gives just one indication of the very nasty reality of the drugs problem today. Another indicator is the extent of the linkage between illicit drugs use in the Garda Dublin Metropolitan Area and a range of crimes explored by Sergeant Eamonn Keogh (1997).

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### **Application for Eviction**

Applications for eviction are only brought by the Corporation in the more serious cases of anti-social behaviour. The Corporation could not effectively manage its housing estate without the power of eviction and the additional powers conferred by the 1997 Housing Act. The 1997 Act has been criticised by some as being draconian and at odds with current principles of tenant consultation and participation but the reality is that it provides an essential last resort for local authorities dealing with serious anti-social behaviour problems on the ground. Indeed, should this

behaviour, it would be extremely detrimental to the consultation and participation of the majority of law abiding tenants and to our efforts to build strong communities where people can live their lives peacefully and productively. The provision of the necessary prison places and/or treatment facilities as the case may be is not a matter for the Corporation.

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The Estate Management Section fully investigates all complaints of anti-social behaviour and takes the necessary strong action. Legal proceedings in estate management are vitally important and a separate unit in the Corporation deals with all aspects of this to ensure that these proceedings are carried out as efficiently and effectively as possible. Tenants of Dublin Corporation are required to sign a tenancy agreement, a contract between the Corporation and the tenant, setting out the conditions of the tenancy. Section 13 of the agreement is of particular importance to estate management, as it deals with "nuisance, annoyance or disturbance" caused to "neighbours, their children or visitors or to Corporation Staff." The Corporation also issues a tenants handbook as part of a resource pack given to tenants. This handbook outlines the wide range of services available to its tenants and makes the Corporation's position on anti-social activity very clear. It states that tenants must make sure that they do not cause damage or become a nuisance to their neighbours. In particular this means no drugs, no criminal activity, no violence or threats of violence, no harassment or abuse and no loud noise, and the handbook outlines the consequences of such behaviour.

The Corporation believes that a multi-agency approach is essential to make any real impact on the drugs problem. No one agency will succeed on its own. The First Report of the Ministerial Task Force on Measures to Reduce the Demand for Drugs (1996) made a key recommendation in this regard. It recommended that there should be a Local Drugs Task Force established in each of the designated priority areas identified in the report. Eight such Task Forces were established in Dublin City, bringing together representatives from the voluntary, community and statutory sectors. The Task Forces provided the first real opportunity for all local community agencies to co-operate in tackling the drugs problem. Each Task Force was asked to produce a development plan for their area, setting out a strategy to tackle the drugs problem. In 1997 the Government allocated <U0m. to support proposals which were recommended for funding in the development plans. To cater properly for the problem of drugs, the Corporation has recently created three new specialised posts of Estate Services Officer to work closely with the Gardai .

The Corporation now sees tenant consultation and participation as essential. Our best plans would be meaningless without the tenants "on board." The fostering of real community spirit can achieve a lot and the Corporation is in a unique position to do this, to give people a say, a belief that they matter and can make a difference. In 1996 the Corporation embarked on a major Estate Management Initiative with the aim of providing a better level of service in our estates. We have deployed Housing Estate Officers



throughout the City to liaise with tenants and various sections of the Corporation in relation to matters affecting the running of the estates. These Officers meet with the tenants and tenants associations on a regular basis. Estate management initiatives include consultation with tenants regarding the allocation of dwellings and transfer of tenants, improved maintenance, strong emphasis on reducing anti-social behaviour, the fostering of strong working relationships with local representatives of other relevant agencies including the Gardai, Eastern Health Board and the schools; and an increasingly area-based approach as opposed to the normal functional approach. The housing and community functions of the Corporation have been linked, enabling the Corporation to offer a comprehensive service delivered at a local level with a teamwork approach.

#### **The Corporation's Wider Role**

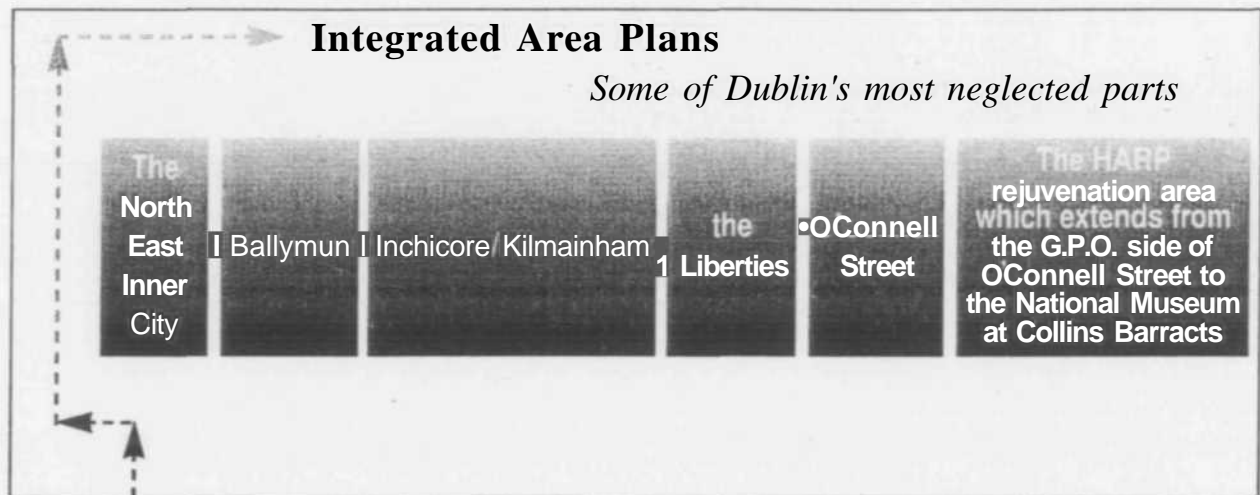
Dublin Corporation is very aware of the link between drug abuse and low self-esteem and in turn the link between low self-esteem and the environment in which a person lives - not everyone is in the fortunate position of being able to choose that environment. In recognition of these facts the Corporation has been taking a much broader view of its housing role than would traditionally have been the case. Our role extends beyond the mere provision of housing to "having an interest in, and concern with, every issue that affects community life around the City." Problems of social deprivation are concentrated in local authority estates. Dublin's City Manager, John Fitzgerald, told an anti-drugs conference in 1997 that many Dublin Corporation housing estates had become "seed-beds" for drug-linked activity. The Corporation has recently been taking a very proactive approach to this and in its Strategic Management Plan 1997-2002 the Corporation stated that it would "take an active role with other relevant Agencies in tackling crime, drugs and vandalism in the City."

The overall thrust of the Corporation now is an area-based and teamwork approach, bringing Government to the people, actively seeking their involvement in the decision making process and supporting that involvement in whatever way it can, so the City can achieve its full potential economically and socially, with particular emphasis on its most deprived areas and eradicating the kind of conditions which breed drug abuse. This approach is clearly evident in numerous Corporation activities in recent years. for example, tenant surveys; a tenants charter for Ballymun, outlining our responsibilities to its residents and vice versa; organisation of courses for tenants in, for example, "Conflict Resolution"; training in drug awareness for staff; hosting a conference on Drugs in Dublin for the voluntary, community and statutory sectors; the hosting of information sessions for people from all areas of the City representing community groups, the retail and commercial sector, schools, statutory bodies and the Gardai; participation along with other relevant agencies in the Dublin Healthy Cities Project which aims to promote the health of Dublin, its environment and its people, with the active involvement of citizens in decisions affecting their health; local area plans; the setting up of an Economic Development Unit

which brings the activities of all Corporation Departments together to assist developers, with the objective of securing good development for Dublin, and so on.

More than £60 million is to be spent over three years on refurbishing housing around the City, with the bulk of the money being raised by a shift in investment away from new building and into refurbishment and recommissioning of existing properties. This Area Regeneration Programme involves the Corporation working closely with the communities involved to identify priorities and develop a co-ordinated plan for improvements. Works undertaken on this programme include the provision of individually controlled central heating, replacement of windows and general environmental improvements such as landscaping and street lighting. The Corporation has produced six Integrated Area Plans, for some of Dublin's most neglected parts -

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The Corporation is also involved, along with a number of other bodies, in the regeneration of Urban North Dublin through the EU's URBAN Initiative. An application was made to the EU for funding and approximately £10 million has been obtained for the North Dublin URBAN Initiative, for the period 1997 to 1999. The purpose of this Initiative is "to develop and implement a range of integrated programmes which will accelerate economic and social growth in the Ballymun, Darndale-Belcamp and Finglas areas, and improve the quality of life for people living there." (Quay Issues Vol. 2 No. 6, 1998) This area has the highest concentration of local authority housing and unemployed people in the Country.

The Corporation has moved increasingly in the direction of local area planning in recent years as it is recognised that each area of the City has its own specific problems and needs and it is difficult to produce a blanket plan which will cater successfully for these individual needs. Local groups are invited and encouraged to take part in the development and implementation of plans which reflect the real needs of their community. These local area plans are then incorporated into the City's overall Development Plan. The Development Plan is built around these Integrated Area and Local Area Plans, not the other way around. This is a departure from our previous planning approach. Good estate management begins with good planning. Good planning in the first place can prevent many **problems** later, a lesson often learnt the hard way. It has been argued that "design can influence the crime rate by

denying or offering opportunities for offending". "By creating anonymity, lack of surveillance and escape routes, it puts temptation in their way." (Communities and Crime Reduction, 1988)

Since 1996, the Corporation has opened regional offices in Darndale, the North East Inner City and Ballyfermot to add to the one which already operated in Ballymun. These Regional Offices deal mainly with housing matters but they also co-ordinate the entire range of Dublin Corporation services in their region. The Corporation has nine Community Development Teams operating throughout the City, which work in partnership with local communities to set up and support tenants and residents groups, summer projects, womens development groups and so on. The Housing Welfare Section provides a social work service for both our existing and prospective tenants. The Corporation is responsible for School Attendance within our functional area. This is a vitally important function, particularly in the context of today's drugs problem amongst the young. The Corporation provides many positive options for people in the form of leisure opportunities, from art and libraries to parks and sporting facilities.

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### Conclusion

Drug addiction does not occur in isolation and it does not occur overnight. Our role in tackling the drugs problem centres on the provision of as many positive alternatives as possible for people who don't believe that they have any, and encouraging and enabling those people in as far as we can to take those positive alternatives. The ultimate test of the success of any administration is the difference it makes to its most deprived areas and the lives of the people who live in those areas. Given the current economic climate there is no excuse for not tackling these problems now. It is in the interests of all those who live with addiction, and in our own interests that we succeed in making a difference. We also owe it to all those who have died as victims of the drugs battle. Lets hope that we can translate the Corporation's favourite slogan "Working Together, We *Can* Make A Difference" into "Working Together, We *Did* Make A Difference."

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