Homelessness in Sligo

Identifying the Pathways into Homelessness, and the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to Homeless Service Provision

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sligo social services

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Any errors or omissions in the report are solely the responsibility of the author.

Glossary of Terms & Abbreviations

Affordability: The rule of thumb for affordability is that monthly market rent should not exceed 30% of a tenant's gross monthly income.

AHB: Approved Housing Body. Not-for-profit organisations that provide affordable rented housing.

Cost-Rental Homes: Developments with rents targets at least 25% below market rents.

DVAS: Domestic Violence Advocacy Service.

ETHOS: European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. A transnational framework definition of homelessness for policy and practical purposes.

FEANTSA: European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. Brings together non-profit services to support homeless people in Europe.

HAP: Housing Assistance Payment. A social housing support for people with long-term housing needs.

HAP Rent Limits: The maximum rent payable on a private rented property. Rent limits vary by household size and local authority.

HAP 'Top-Up': A payment made by a tenant directly to the landlord when the monthly rent exceeds the maximum rent limit payable by the local authority.

HAT: Housing Action Team.

HICP: Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices. A measure of consumer inflation.

IHREC: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

NQSF: National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services.

PASS: Pathway Accommodation and Support System. An online shared system utilised by every homeless service provider and all local authorities in Ireland.

'Part Four' Tenancy: A tenancy that lasts longer than six months, with no notice of termination being serviced.

RAS: Rental Accommodation Scheme. The scheme caters for tenants in receipt of long-term Rent Supplement.

RPZ: Rent Pressure Zones. Designated areas where rents cannot be increased by more than general inflation (HICP), or by 2% per annum where HICP is higher.

RS: Rent Supplement: A short-term, means-tested, income support administered through the Department of Social Protection as part of the Social Welfare or Supplementary Welfare Allowance payment.

RTB: Residential Tenancies Board.

RTI: Rent-to-Income ratio. The percentage of income a tenant pays towards their monthly rent.

SCC: Sligo County Council.

SCSI: Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland.

SSSC: Sligo Social Services Council.

Short-Term Let: Properties rented out for stays of less than 14 days at a time.

SVP: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Table of Contents

Foreword..... 5
Executive Summary..... 7
1. Introduction..... 11
2. Methodological Approach..... 13
2.1 Methodology..... 13
2.2 Definition of Homelessness and Ethical Considerations..... 13
2.3 Methodological Limitations..... 14
3. Homelessness and the Rental Market in Sligo, the North-West Region and Ireland... 15
4. Policy Framework..... 18
4.1 Recent Policy for Private Renters..... 18
4.2 Recent Policy for Homeless People and Low Income Households..... 20
5. Pathways into Homelessness for Service Users in Sligo..... 23
5.1 Pathways into Homelessness..... 24
5.2 Concluding Remarks..... 30
6. SWOT Analysis..... 31
6.1 Strengths..... 32
6.2 Weaknesses..... 34
6.2.1 Supply, Affordability, HAP..... 34
6.2.2 Duration of Time in Emergency Accommodation..... 37
6.2.3 Lack of Communication and Information..... 38
6.3 Opportunities..... 39
6.3.1 Supply, Affordability, HAP..... 39
6.3.2 Greater Communication and Information..... 42
6.3.3 Improved Homelessness Supports 44
6.3.4 Review of Ireland's Homelessness and Emergency Accommodation Strategy..... 48
6.4 Threats..... 54
6.5 Concluding Remarks..... 56
7. Conclusion and Recommendations..... 58

Foreword

I am very pleased to introduce this report into Homelessness in Sligo. There is a dearth of relevant research in the area of homelessness in the region and it is our hope that this report is a first step in filling this gap.

Sligo Social Services has been providing homeless services in Sligo for many years and commenced providing Housing First in the North-West Region at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020. Over the many years we have been working with people, we have come to understand that homelessness is an issue which goes beyond geography, populations, and cultures.

While Ireland is a wealthy country, many individuals and families continue to be trapped in a cycle of homelessness, often moving from unstable housing, to emergency accommodation, to rough sleeping. For some this unfortunately can continue for many years resulting in a state of chronic homelessness. In this report, through the stories told by people who are homeless, you will get a brief glimpse of the difficult life circumstances many have experienced. We also hear how challenging it is to be in the 'homeless system', which given the current housing crisis many are now 'stuck' in. The report identifies changes which can be made to how services are provided and communicated which might help people feel not quite so lost in the system.

As you will read in this report, homelessness is not solely a problem associated with housing but encompasses many factors over people's life course. However, notwithstanding its complexity, homelessness is solved by providing an adequate supply of safe, appropriate, and affordable housing. In some situations, people who experience homelessness will need ongoing community support to sustain their housing and to access other services they need like health and employment. Resolving homelessness requires a range of responses to meet the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.

The need for an adequate and affordable supply of appropriate housing is a primary recommendation in the report. Safe, secure, stable housing allows people exit homelessness and rise out of poverty. It provides a stable home, school, and community for children to be a part of and can lead to improved health for themselves and their family. Ultimately a safe, secure, stable home can create the circumstances which help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by giving children the chance to thrive.

Homelessness is often presented as a complex policy area. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, resources were quickly directed towards people experiencing street homelessness, the effect of which could be seen immediately. With public health concerns at the forefront, new and significant interventions created a momentum for policy change which reduced levels of homelessness. The action taken during the pandemic showed us we can do things differently. Working together as a community, with a shared vision, we can deliver the foundation on which individuals and families can build a better future. With an escalating housing crisis, the situation throughout the country is worsening and bold action at government level is required.

I would like to thank all those who participated in interviews and focus groups which form the basis for this research project. I would like to acknowledge the support of The Community Foundation of Ireland and HSE Social Inclusion without whose support this project would not have been possible. There are no simple answers to the issues raised in this research. However, we believe that this study helps improve our understanding of homeless pathways and how organisations such as Sligo Social Services can continue to contribute to making home a reality for those who are on this difficult life journey.

Christina Mc Taggart
Chief Executive
Sligo Social Services Council CLG

The situation I'm in at the moment, it's very hard to see what's going to happen in the future.

- Niall

Don't judge a book by its cover until you read the last page. Everyone has a story behind their situation.

- Claire

I'm just stuck in limbo. Just waiting until I get a house.

- Adam

I never expected myself in that situation, to be in a tent. The embarrassment as well.

- Fiona

It's been a long trek.

- Paul

I never felt as frighted in all my life.

- James

I want to be able to provide my children with a home, not just a room.

- Anna

I mean, I was never homeless. But I don't know how people do it. I really don't.

- Daniel

I'm in a stage of my life I'm hoping will pass on. I hope it won't always be like this. I'll look back and hope I'll never see myself here again. That's it really. It's probably the hardest time of my life.

- Maria

Executive Summary

In a market where national average private rents have increased by close to 90% in the past 10 years, where the stock of private rented accommodation is at its lowest level since records were first collected in 2006, and where over half of private renters are receiving support for their housing costs, the level of dysfunction and crisis in Ireland's housing market is difficult to overstate.

With first-hand experience of the homelessness crisis, and in response to trends in the private rented sector in recent years, Sligo Social Services Council (SSSC) has commissioned this research to investigate the main pathways into homelessness in Sligo; influence the targets set in the revised Homeless Action Plan for the North-West Region, and inform decision making regarding how service users' needs can be best met over the short-, medium-, and long-term.

Research Questions and Methodology

A mixed-method approach is used to answer the two main research questions – (i) What are the pathways into homelessness in Sligo for individuals and families? and (ii) What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the service currently being provided to those who find themselves without a secure home?

A total of 14 current and previous homeless service users were interviewed for this study. The insights of service providers in Sligo are of equal importance, and seven of the main homelessness, mental health, and addiction service providers contributed their views to the findings.

The method of interviewing both service users and providers has facilitated a comprehensive review and analysis of the homeless system in Sligo as it operates today. As well as identifying the key pathways into homelessness, this approach also allows the various challenges and opportunities to be drawn out. All of these factors need to be understood to identify gaps in the system, and to fully inform the development of appropriate policy and service provision into the future.

Key Findings – Pathways into Homelessness in Sligo

The pathway into homelessness is not a clear, uniform one. While similar themes emerge, the interaction of the various factors is typically different for every individual and family.

This report shows that personal factors such as marital and family breakdowns, substance abuse, and mental health, are important and common pathways for those experiencing homelessness in Sligo today. The research also sheds light on the extent to which the dysfunction within the housing market is impacting the lives of many people.

Over half of the service users interviewed spoke of the challenges they faced in trying to find suitable private rented accommodation, at an affordable rent, in Sligo. This challenge presented itself both to those facing the threat of homelessness (and subsequently becoming homeless), and those trying to leave emergency accommodation. The extent to which economic and social factors are impacting individuals and families is stark and is unlikely to be alleviated until such time as meaningful and pragmatic action around affordable supply is taken at a national level.

Key Findings – SWOT Analysis

Service user and provider interviews were used in the SWOT analysis to evaluate internal and external influences on the performance, and future prospects, of homelessness services in Sligo. Reoccurring themes that emerged from the interviews informed this part of the analysis and the findings are presented below.

Strengths

1. For service users, there was acknowledgement of the **hard work and commitment** of staff members.
2. For service providers, the creation of the **Housing Action Team** and **National Homeless Action Committee** are both significant developments in recent years, with the introduction of the **Housing First** model considered to be a positive and significant change in homeless service provision.

Weaknesses

1. Across the board, the issue of inadequate private rented and social housing **supply, affordability, and HAP rent limits** were identified as primary weaknesses.
2. Individuals and families are finding themselves **stuck in emergency accommodation** for far longer than anticipated – often for a year or more.
3. Service users spoke in unison with regard to the **lack of communication and information** from service providers, and the sense of isolation that comes with living in emergency accommodation.

Opportunities

1. In addressing **supply, affordability, and HAP rent limits**, service users and providers unanimously called for greater urgency in the provision of social housing; addressing vacant stock in the county; greater enforcement of the Rent Pressure Zone (RPZ) rules; and a review and revision of the HAP scheme including increasing rent limits, for all cohorts, in line with market rents.
2. Service users spoke of a desire for **greater communication** with service providers to better understand their pathway through homelessness, including the range of services available to them; how long they are likely to be waiting for supports; and when, or how, they will secure affordable accommodation.
3. From both users' and providers' perspective there are opportunities to improve services through (i) strengthening the role of **key workers and introducing a peer support worker**, (ii) greater **mental health supports** for adults and children, (iii) better supports for rough sleepers and the development of a **'one-stop-shop'**, and (iv) improved **employment and training** opportunities.
4. The need to review Ireland's **homelessness and emergency accommodation strategy** emerged as an important opportunity for change with emphasis on homelessness prevention measures; the introduction of a broader definition of homelessness; the roll out of a Housing First type model for couples, young people, and families; and assessing whether the current stock/type of emergency accommodation is fit for purpose.

Threats

1. Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have all placed significant pressure on the European and global economy. The implications on supply chains and talent, has resulted in a rising **cost of construction**. The rapid increase in material and energy costs may put Housing for All targets in jeopardy.
2. Pressure on the housing sector is also likely to come from the **Ukrainian humanitarian crisis** with well over 35,000 Ukrainians already seeking refuge in Ireland, and upwards of 100,000 expected to arrive as the war continues.
3. The knock-on effects of the aforementioned factors on the **cost of living**, and the potential for a national, European, or global **recession**, is one that could have long-lasting effects on all sectors of the economy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The range of short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations put forward in this report reflect the voices and first-hand experiences of homeless service users and providers in Sligo. The recommendations range from those that can be implemented relatively quickly at a local level, to those that will require a fundamental shift in philosophy in terms of how homelessness is measured, tackled, and eradicated at a national level.

	Housing Supply, Affordability, HAP Rent Limits, Security of Tenure	Communication and Information	Improved Homelessness Supports	Review of Ireland's Homelessness and Emergency Accommodation Strategy
Short-Term		Sligo County Council (SCC) and other service provider to establish a regular 'check-in' system with those living in emergency to keep service users up to date on their case.	SCC should ensure that a designated key worker, with an appropriate work load, is assigned to each individual and family that enters emergency accommodation.	At a national level, consideration should be given to the reintroduction of the moratorium on evictions, for a defined period, to help ease high levels of demand on service providers.
Medium-Term	A State-level revision of HAP rent limits in line with market rents, for all cohorts, and a review of the HAP scheme more generally to ensure it is fit for purpose.	SSSC to create an 'Empowerment Strategy' to further enhance the relationship between service users and staff members.	SCC and other homeless service providers should review the opportunity of creating a 'peer support' role in the region, and their role on the Homeless Action Team.	SCC should undertake a review of the stock of emergency accommodation in use in Sligo and, where applicable, ensure that the funding allocation to service providers is adequate to maintain minimum standards.
	The establishment of a 'Rent Register' at a national level to enforce and track the application of RPZ rules.	SCC, along with other homeless, mental health, and addiction services, to develop and implement a 'Pathway through Homelessness' document. This should be a key objective of the forthcoming Regional Homeless Action Plan and should detail every stage of a service users journey through the system.	SCC, HSE and Tusla should work together to review the need for a 'mental health needs assessment' of families when they first enter emergency accommodation.	At a national level, a consistent and comprehensive definition of homelessness needs to be introduced, and timely data collected on that basis.
Long-Term	Greater urgency in the supply of social housing and more ambitious targets for vacant property, and cost-rental private rented accommodation over the lifetime of the Housing for All plan.		SCC, in partnership with other homeless agencies, should establish a 'One-Stop-Shop' in Sligo with provision for GP services, legal services, washing and laundry facilities, employment and training opportunities, etc.	Nationally, a Housing First type model should be extended to include young people, couples, and families. The type of emergency accommodation used should promote secure independent living, providing wrap around services where required.

It's when they lose that address - you lose everything when you lose your address.
- SP 2

It's hateful to have that meeting, and sit there and say 'Sorry, I just don't have any update for you.'
- SP 3

We have to produce housing at a far faster rate than has ever been done before in this country, and we just don't have an option.
- SP 6

A dramatic increase in housing provision. That is the only solution.
- SP 4

And certainly, if someone does end up homeless, financially they cannot get back out of it and that's a huge issue. And if something realistic isn't done, they are the Housing First clients in 10 years time.
-SP 5

It is difficult to know what the system is, unless you've worked in it, or been in it.
- SP 1

Allowing people to fail, learn, and move on is so important.
- SP 2

The extent of homelessness is really underestimated in the North-West. There's just not a realisation of what it is.
- SP 7

1. Introduction

On the 29 March, 2018 the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, acknowledged the scale of the crisis in the housing market - *"I have no difficulty whatsoever describing the housing shortage or the homelessness crisis as an emergency. We would not be spending €140 million a year providing emergency accommodation in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation and family hubs for 10,000 people if it was not an emergency."* [1]

In the four years since March 2018, private rents in Sligo have risen by 30%[2], and the annual amount spent on the HAP scheme nationally has increased from c. €280 million in 2018 to an estimated €550 million in 2021. Cumulatively an estimated €1.9 billion has been spent on the scheme since its introduction in 2013.[3]

It is clear that the Irish housing market is in crisis and the knock-on consequences on private renters, and the most vulnerable in society, are stark. Over the same four-year period, the total number of homeless adults in Ireland increased from 6,035 to 7,421 (+23%). In the North-West Region, while homeless numbers are low relative to other urban areas, the number of homeless adults has increased by more than one-quarter, and the number of families living in emergency accommodation has increased by more than half.[4]

These homeless figures reflect only those living in emergency accommodation and fail to capture, for example, those who are sleeping rough, 'couch-surfing', living in overcrowded or unfit accommodation, in women's shelters, etc. Including all of these categories in official numbers the level of emergency would likely be many factors worse.

The absence of up-to-date, relevant research on homelessness in the Sligo and North-West Region is a significant barrier to ensuring the most appropriate and effective service responses are provided to meet the needs of people who are homeless and at risk of becoming homeless.

As a result of the trends over recent years, and with a focus on informing a revised Homeless Action Plan for the North-West Region, this research has been commissioned by Sligo Social Services Council (SSSC) to investigate the main pathways into homelessness in Sligo; to give voice to the needs of people who are homeless; and to influence the decisions made regarding how their needs are best met in the medium- to longer-term. It is the hope of SSSC that this research will provide an opportunity to create a dialogue regarding homelessness in Sligo, and how statutory and voluntary organisations in the region can respond to the issue.

SSSC is a leading non-profit organisation in the North-West, working with a wide variety of service users. Founded in 1969, the organisation has a long-standing track record of providing services to socially excluded and vulnerable groups. All services respond to a broad range of needs and issues which cause difficulties in people's lives, with services provided to children and families, older people, and to people out-of-home or at risk of becoming homeless.

SSSC have been working in partnership with Sligo County Council (SCC) and the HSE to provide homeless services in Sligo for the past 30 years and began providing Housing First in the North-West at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The homeless services currently provided by SSSC include

- Emergency Accommodation
- Short-Term Temporary Accommodation
- Substance Misuse Service
- Housing Liaison
- Housing First

SSSC are an active member of the Sligo Homeless Action Team (HAT) and the North-West Joint Homelessness Consultative Forum. Over the past three decades SSSC have responded to identified needs of homeless people and have developed a range of services and interventions to the point that they now offer an integrated service with the service user at the centre of the service provision.

[1] Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, 29 March 2018
[2] Standardised Average Rent in new tenancies, Q1 2018 versus Q1 2022 - RTB Rent Index
[3] Housing Ireland: Trends in Spending and Outputs of Social and State Supported Housing 2001-2020, Parliamentary Budget Office
[4] March 2018 versus June 2022 Homeless Data, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Research Question

The last Homeless Action Plan for the North-West Region ended in 2018. This was the first and last homeless plan in the Region. Gaps in service provision and recommendations for future service development have not been identified for many years, with the result that it is unclear whether services continue to be fit for purpose and what gaps there are in service provision in the area. The Covid-19 pandemic, and other international developments, have also introduced new challenges in the provision of services and re-homing.

As such, this research project focuses on two aspects of homelessness in Sligo –

1. **To identify the pathways into homelessness in Sligo:** One-on-one interviews with 14 homeless services users in Sligo were undertaken to establish their routes into homelessness.

2. **To identify the various strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) in the provision of homeless services in Sligo:** Service user interviews, along with service provider interviews and focus groups, were used to inform a SWOT analysis. This analytical approach is an effective way to determine what aspects of the system are currently working and not working, and to formulate recommendations to improve the service received by users. This component of the research also takes account of the additional challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in delivering services and key learnings to be taken from the pandemic in future delivery of services to homeless people, and those at high risk of becoming homeless.

Report Structure

The report is structured as follows –

Section 2 sets out the methodological approach in addressing the two research questions.

Section 3 details the context in which this analysis is set. It provides an overview of key trends in homelessness and the private rented market in Sligo, the North-West Region and Ireland.

Section 4 details the policy context in relation to private renters, homeless individuals and families, and low-income households.

Section 5 presents the findings of the first research question. A 'Pathways into Homelessness' summary table is provided, followed by a high-level review of the key factors driving homelessness in Sligo.

Section 6 contains the findings from the SWOT analysis. The findings are informed by service users' and providers' first-hand experience of homeless services in the County. While identifying systemic failures in the system, this Section focuses on the many opportunities and solutions that present themselves.

Section 7 concludes the report, presenting a summary of the key findings and outlines recommendations.

2. Methodological Approach

2.1 Methodology

A mixed-method approach was applied, utilising both primary and secondary research sources. The primary research component involved (i) stakeholder consultations with key service providers in the form of one-to-one interviews and focus groups, and (ii) semi-structured interviews with service users.

Five one-on-one interviews and two focus groups were conducted with service providers in April and May of 2022. Service providers included SSSC; SCC; Focus Ireland; North-West Simon Community; HSE Addiction Services; HSE Mental Health Services; and HSE Social Inclusion. All service provider interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, audio recorded, and later transcribed. Anonymised quotes from the interviews and focus groups are used within the report. Service providers are anonymised using a randomised numbering system SP 1 (Service Provider 1) through SP 8.

Semi-structured interviews with service users were used to profile and identify the pathways into homelessness. This semi-structured approach helped to identify common contributory factors to people becoming homeless in Sligo. In doing so, it is possible to identify recommendations to address these issues and thus help to reduce the rising demand for such services in the County.

A total of 20 face-to-face service user interviews were scheduled in March 2022. However, some participants did not arrive for their allotted interview time, or had to cancel. As a result, 13 face-to-face interviews with 14 service users were conducted. SSSC took responsibility for identifying and arranging interviews with service users living in their emergency accommodation. SSSC requested the assistance of North-West Simon Community, Focus Ireland, and SCC to identify and arrange interviews with families and lone parents living in emergency accommodation in Sligo.

All service user interviews were audio recorded with participants consent, anonymised, and later transcribed. The audio recording was then deleted. Data analysis was carried out via Microsoft Excel and thematic coding using MAXQDA software.

The coding system focused on (i) the pathways into homelessness, (ii) the positive aspects of the homeless services identified by the interviewee, (iii) the negative aspects of the services identified by the interviewee, and (iv) the service users thoughts on the changes needed to improve the system of homeless service provision and homelessness prevention more generally.

The secondary research component involved (i) a review of trends in key homelessness and housing indicators; (ii) a review of the policy framework currently in place in Ireland and a review of service delivery approaches and models in relation to homelessness. The SWOT analysis of the homeless services provided in Sligo was informed by both the primary and secondary research approaches.

2.2 Definition of Homelessness and Ethical Considerations

For the purposes of this study, FEANTSA's European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) definition of homelessness was used.[5] The ETHOS categories classify people who are homeless according to their living or 'home' situation. As per ETHOS, there are four categories of homelessness – those who are 'roofless', 'houseless', living in 'insecure' housing, or living in 'inadequate' housing.[6] 'Roofless' and 'houseless' people were the focus of this study. In the context of how someone becomes homeless however those who were in 'insecure' or 'inadequate' housing prior to emergency accommodation feature in the study.

The research did not seek to interview children under 18 years of age, or other vulnerable cohorts who did not have the capacity to consent due to a recognised or diagnosed intellectual, physical, or mental health impairment.

All interviews took place either in the Sligo office of SSSC or at Maryville hostel. A SSSC member of staff was available at all times, should any participant have required assistance before, during, or after the interview. This support was not requested by any service user.

[5] ETHOS - European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, FEANTSA
[6] Note: Only those under ETHOS Operation Categories 2 and 3 are included in Ireland's monthly Homeless figures released by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Prior to consenting to participating in the research study, each service user reviewed an Information Sheet and written consent was obtained from each participant. A staff member from SSSC, Focus Ireland, North-West Simon Community, or SCC discussed the contents of the Information Sheet and the Consent Form with each service user prior to the interview and addressed any queries or concerns that the service user had. Research objectives, the confidentiality of information provided, and ability for the service user to end the interview at any stage, or remove themselves from the research at any point, were reiterated at the beginning of each interview. All participants were asked to read and sign a Consent Form before the interview started. One copy was kept by the participant, and one copy by the researcher. Approximately 90 minutes was allocated for each interview and interview durations ranged from 28 minutes to 73 minutes.

All participants were given a €20 Lidl shopping voucher for their participation in the interview process and contribution to the overall research study.

2.3 Methodological Limitations

All service user interviews were with individuals and families living in emergency accommodation in Sligo. Therefore, the findings may not be fully representative of the experience of homeless people in the North-West Region, or Ireland more generally. The sample is also relatively small and so limits generalisations to the wider community. The findings are still considered to provide valuable insights into the experiences of homeless individuals and families.

The analysis focused on exploring the issues faced by adults only. No-one under the age of 18 years was interviewed and so the research fails to capture the adequacy of homeless service provision for children.

The semi-structured format of the interviews relied on service users memories and own personal perception of the service they have received. The majority of those interviewed were still living in emergency accommodation at the time of the interview. The vulnerability, and heightened mental stress issues that such an environment creates means that interviewees were more likely to discuss the weaknesses/negatives in service provision, over strengths/positives. Service providers were interviewed in an attempt to balance these views.

FEANTSA Definition of Homelessness - ETHOS

Category	Operational Category	Living Situation
Roofless	1. People living rough	Public space or external space
	2. People in emergency accommodation	Night shelter
Houseless	3. People in accommodation for the homeless	Homeless hostel; temporary accommodation; transitional supported accommodation
	4. People in women's shelters	Women's shelter accommodation
	5. People in accommodation for immigrants	Temporary accommodation / reception centre; migrant workers accommodation
	6. People due to be released from institutions	Penal institutions; medical institutions; children's institutions / homes
	7. People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	Residential care for older people; People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)
Insecure	8. People living in insecure accommodation	Temporarily with family / friends; no legal (sub)tenancy; illegal occupation of land
	9. People living under threat of eviction	Legal orders enforced (rented); re-possession orders (owned)
	10. People living under threat of violence	Police recorded incidence
Inadequate	11. People in temporary / non-conventional structures	Mobile homes; non-conventional building; temporary structure
	12. People in unfit housing	Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation
	13. People in extreme over-crowding	Highest national norm of overcrowding

Source: FEANTSA

3. Homelessness and the Rental Market in Sligo, the North-West Region, and Ireland

For more than a decade the Irish Government has attempted, through various national plans, to tackle the housing crises. Despite their efforts, almost all key performance indicators for the sector confirm a continued deterioration. In 2014, when monthly homelessness figures were first published by the then Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (through the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS)), the national economy was beginning to show green shoots in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and housing bubble collapse.

At the time, there were 2,858 homeless people in the country, the majority of whom were male (65%), and under 45 years of age (75%).[7] In the preceding eight years, the numbers have trended upwards, and while the proportion of homeless males has held relatively steady, 2022 data shows that the profile of homeless people is becoming younger.

Nationally, the upward trend of homeless families and children has not been addressed in any meaningful way over the eight years. At the end of 2014, there were 407 homeless families across the country, with 880 dependent children living in emergency accommodation. Recent data (June 2022) from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage shows that the number of homeless families has more than tripled to 1,385 with over 3,000 dependent children without a home.

All regions have recorded an increase in homelessness in this time and Sligo, and the North-West region, is no different. During this time, in the North-West Region, the number of homeless adults has increased from 31 to 79; the number of homeless families has risen from one to 11, and the number of homeless dependent children has gone from one to 19 children.

The challenges for people in homelessness, and those facing the threat of homelessness, have broadened over the past decade. While relationship and personal factors, such as marital/family breakdown and substance misuse still play a significant role for a large cohort of homeless individuals (see Section 5), structural factors e.g., housing supply and affordability, have become a much greater issue.

According to Focus Ireland, 58% of homeless families in Dublin became homeless as a direct consequence of issues in their private rented home, and over one-third of families were living in their last stable home for over six years.[8] In Dublin too, it has been established that primary contributory factors to families becoming homeless are landlord selling or needing the property for personal/family use, and affordability.[9] The issues around the lack of supply of affordable rental property appear to be having a profound impact on private renters and those looking for a pathway out of homelessness.

Since 2016, the numbers of private rented properties available to rent has steadily declined, reflecting an exodus of small and medium landlords from the market. Between 2016 and 2020 there has been a 7% decrease in the number of private rented tenancies registered with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB).[10] This is broadly linked to increases in rental income tax, property tax, additional regulations, and landlords choosing to sell their property in a favourable purchasing market.[11]

[7] Homeless Data, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

[8] Long, A. E., S. Sheridan, L. Gambi and D. Hoey (2019), Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home, Insights into Family homelessness Series, Vol 2, No. 1, Focus Ireland
[9] Stamp, S. (2017), The Experience of Newly Homeless Families Accommodation by Dublin's Homeless Services in August 2015, Dublin Region Homeless Executive
[10] RTB Private Tenancy Registration Statistics
[11] DKM Economic Consultants (2014), Future of the Private Rented Sector, The Housing Agency

Key Homeless Statistics: North-West Region and Sligo

Rental Market – Sligo[1]

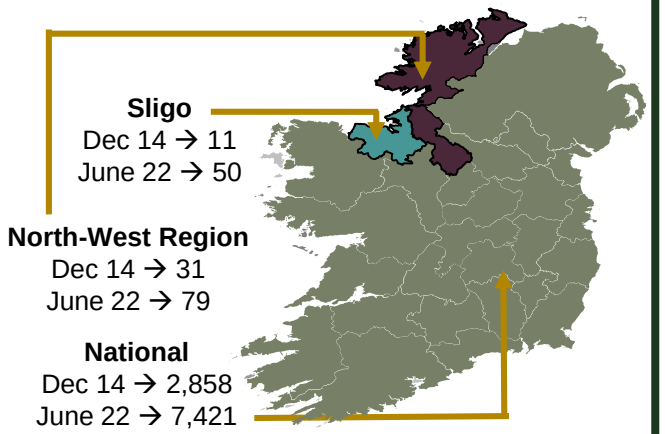
€1,004 — Average monthly rent for a new tenancy in Sligo, Q1 2022

19.7% — Annual percentage increase in average rents in Sligo, Q1 2022

93% — Percentage increase in average rents in Sligo since trough in c. 2013

13 — Number of homes available to rent in Sligo[3], 2 August 2022

Homeless Adults – North-West Region and Sligo[2]



Homeless Adults, by Gender – North-West Region[2]

Homeless families, by Type – North-West Region[2]

Total Families	(of which) Single Parent	Total Adults	Total Dependent Children
11	8	14	19

June 2022

Versus one single parent with one child in December 2014

Homeless Adults, by Age – North-West Region[2]

December 2014		June 2022
6%	18-24 years	8%
65%	25-44 years	63%
29%	45-64 years	27%
0%	65+ years	2%

Sources: 1. Daft.ie Rental Price Report Q1 2022 2. Homeless Data June 2022, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 3. Daft.ie website

This downward trend in rental stock is presented in the Daft.ie Rent Report for Q1 2022 which shows that there were only 851 homes available to rent nationally at the start of May 2022. This marks a decline of 75% on the same period in 2021 and compares to an average 9,300 homes available to rent nationally, at any given time, between 2006 and 2019.[12]

In all of Connacht and Ulster[13], there were just 126 homes available to rent on 1 May 2022, a new record low in a series that extends back to 2006. This represents an almost 60% reduction in stock on the previous year and compares to an average stock of some 4,000 homes available for rent, at any given time, between 2009 and 2019. The stock of private rented property is likely to further reduce in the coming years with 25% of small landlords, with one or two rental properties, planning to leave the market in the next five years.[14]

The deterioration in rental supply has significantly impacted the level of affordability in the market with standardised average national rents increasing by 86% in the 10 years to Q4 2021.[15]

More recent data from Daft.ie shows that annual rent increases in the North-West Region are now amongst the highest in the country. In Q1 2022, average monthly rents in Sligo, for new tenancies, stood at €1,004, marking a 20% increase in the year. The annual increase recorded in Sligo is the fourth highest in the country after only Leitrim (+25%), Donegal (+23%), and Roscommon (+22%).

With such significant increases in monthly rent levels, current and future tenants are facing ever deteriorating affordability. It is generally accepted that rental costs should not surpass 30% of a tenants monthly income. However, Threshold's Annual Tenant Sentiment Survey 2021 found that one-in-three tenants surveyed were spending between 31% and 40% of their after-tax income on rent each month, and just under one-in-five respondents were spending over 41% of their monthly income on rent.[16]

The ESRI takes an alternative view of the standard 30% affordability rule. They identify a '30/40 rule' which includes an income limit to capture households in the bottom 40% of the income distribution. Their research finds that lower income households report a higher average rent-to-income ratio (40% RTI) compared to higher income households (17% RTI). Single adult households are also more likely to have a higher RTI ratio (35%) compared to households with two or more adults (25%).[17]

This issue of affordability is starkly presented by Social Justice Ireland in their Housing and Poverty 2022[18] report which highlights the level of inequality experienced by people living in the private rented sector in Ireland. According to their calculations one-in-five of the population are at risk of poverty when mortgage interest rates and rent repayments are taken into account. This equates to almost one million people, including close to 300,000 children.

Their findings also show that one-third of private renters living without housing supports are at risk of poverty once their rent is paid. Starker still in the situation for renters in receipt of a social housing support – more than half of whom are at risk of poverty after their monthly rent commitment is met. Not only does the analysis show the dysfunction and inequality in the private rental market, it also portrays the failure of housing supports as a long-term housing solution (discussed further in Section 4).

Affordability for those looking for a pathway out of homelessness must also be considered. According to CSO Census 2016[19], close to 70% of the homeless labour force were unemployed meaning that over two-thirds of homeless people are in receipt of a social welfare payment as their primary source of income. In such a scenario, affordability is further diminished in the context of average monthly rents in excess of €1,000.

[12] Daft.ie Rental Price Report Q1 2022
[13] 'Ulster' refers to Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan.
[14] RTB Rental Sector Survey 2021
[15] Q4 2011 versus Q4 2021 Rent Index Q4 2021, Residential Tenancies Board
[16] Threshold Annual Tenant Sentiment Survey 2021

[17] Corrigan, E., D. Foley, K. McQuinn, C. O'Toole and R. Slaymaker (2019), Exploring Affordability in the Irish Housing Market, The Economic and Social Review, Vol. 50, No. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 119-157
[18] Housing and Poverty 2022, Social Justice Ireland
[19] CSO Census of Population 2016 - Profile 5 Homeless Persons in Ireland

4. Policy Framework

The Housing for All plan, published in September 2021, sets out targets in relation to overall housing supply and seeks to address the supply of private rented accommodation, social housing, affordability, and the elimination of homelessness. The overall plan will see 33,000 home delivered to the market on an annual basis as part of a €4 billion annual package. Included in the Plan -

For Renters:

- The rollout of an average of 2,000 new cost rental homes every year with rents targeted at least 25% below market level.
- Extended Rent Pressure Zones (RPZ) to 2024 and rents to be linked to the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) and capped at 2% per annum.
- The introduction of new short-term lettings regulation through a Fáilte Ireland registration system.
- Indefinite tenancies to strengthen security for renters.
- Minimum BER standards for private rental dwellings.
- Upfront deposit and rent payments capped at two months value.

For Homeless People

- A target to eradicate homelessness by 2030.
- Increased Housing First targets to 1,200 tenancies over five years.
- Establish a new National Homeless Action Committee.
- Expand Street Outreach Teams for rough sleepers nationwide.
- Individual healthcare plans.

For Low Income Households

- The provision of over 90,000 social homes by 2030, including an average annual new build component of over 9,500 social housing homes to 2026.
- Revision and reform of income eligibility for social housing.

4.1 Recent Policy for Private Renters

Research from, for example, Pillinger (2007)[20], Walsh and Harvey (2015)[21], Nowicki et. al. (2018)[22], has long demonstrated that one of the primary reasons for individuals, and families in particular, to become homeless is a lack of supply and affordability in the private rented sector. The Government's ability to successfully address the issues around supply and affordability in the private rental market, therefore, should see a significant improvement in the options available for those currently homeless, and those facing the threat of homelessness.

Addressing Supply

An adequate provision of cost rental homes is important in terms of securing greater balance and affordability within the market. Under the plan, c. 2,000 cost rental homes are targeted per year for the next 10 years with rents expected to be at least 25% lower than the prevailing market rent. In a progress update, the Government reaffirmed the delivery of 18,000 cost rental homes over the lifetime the Housing for All plan with funding already allocated for the delivery of almost 900 units. However, just 65 cost rental units were added to the market in 2021 and a further 241 units have been completed, or are projected to be completed, in the first two quarters of 2022.[23] The provision of this type of accommodation will need to be of a large enough scale to induce a moderation of rental prices.

In an attempt to temper the growth in short-term let properties, the Government has also committed to reviewing regulations to ensure that the needs in the long-term rented market are balanced with the needs of the tourism sector.

[20] Pillinger, J. (2007), Homeless Pathways - Developing Effective Strategies to Address Pathways Into, Through and Out of Homelessness, Focus Ireland
[21] Walsh, K. and B. Harvey (2015), Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness - The Families' Perspective, The Housing Agency
[22] Nowicki, M., K. Brickell and E. Harris (2018), Home at Last - Life in Dublin's Rapid Build Housing, Dublin City Council
[23] Housing for All - Q1 2022 Progress Report

As of 30 May 2022, there were 403 short-term rental properties/rooms in Sligo town and county, 78% of which were for entire homes/apartments. While this only represents around 2% of the total short-term stock in Ireland at the time, in the context of the availability of long-term rental properties in Sligo, further legislation may help to support the return of some proportion of these properties back to the long-term market.[24]

Research from Threshold[25] in March 2022 found that, in Dublin, the number of short-term rental properties were on the rise despite the introduction of legislation in 2019 requiring specific planning permission for a property in an RPZ to be used for tourism or short-term letting purposes.[26] This demonstrates that greater enforcement may be required in order to minimise the issue and ensure that any such legislation has a meaningful impact on supply.

While policies to bring additional accommodation to the market are welcome, one of the more meaningful ways to improve the current housing and homelessness crisis is to strengthen security of tenure. Measures introduced under the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2021[27], will see Part Four[26] tenancies be of an unlimited duration as opposed to the prior six year period. The measure came into effect in June 2022 and it will take six years from inception before all tenancies become tenancies of unlimited duration. While certain exemptions[29] still allow landlords to terminate a tenancy, the legislation will mark an important step towards greater agency for renters.

Aligned with this is the Governments commitment in the Housing for All plan to hold a referendum on housing and the establishment of a Commission on Housing[30]. Amongst the duties of the Commission is to assess the complex constitutional issues related to the wording of any such referendum. A 2016 study[31] examined the potential impact of the right to housing and concluded that any such constitutional change would *'put in place a basic protection in recognition that a home is central to the dignity of each and every person and a foundation of every person's life.'*

[24] See AirDNA Market Minder for details. Accurate as of 30 May 2022.
[25] Threshold - Short-Term Let Market, March 2022
[26] Sligo County Council - New Regulations on Short Term Letting
[27] Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2021
[28] Residential Tenancies Act 2004
[29] See Residential Tenancies Act 2004
[30] Commission on Housing - Expressions of Interest and Terms of Reference
[31] The Right to Housing in Ireland, Mercy Law Resource Centre, 2016

Addressing Affordability

Economic theory suggests that significant increase in the supply of affordable rental homes should lead to a stabilisation in rent inflation. However, measures are required in the short-term to temper the impact that rising rent prices are having for those currently renting or looking to enter the private rental market.

RPZs[32] have been the main course of action in this regard. Introduced in 2016 to regulate significant rent increases, primarily in urban areas, rent price inflation in RPZs has moderated by between 2% and 3% per annum in the intervening period.[33] Initially, the four Dublin local authorities and Cork City Council were designated as RPZs. Reflecting the nationwide housing crisis, six local authority areas and 48 local electoral areas (LEAs) now fall under the legislation, with Sligo-Strandhill LEA added to the list in late 2019.[34] Despite the spread of RPZs, standardised average monthly rents for new tenants have increased by close to 40% in the five years to Q4 2021.[35] Acknowledging the affordability pressures, the Government amended the RPZ legislation in late 2021, placing a 2% cap[36] on rent increases, as opposed to the original 4% cap that had been in place.

Research from the ESRI has found that rent controls, such as RPZs, tend to benefit existing tenants to a greater extent than potential new tenants, with the latter also likely to be more negatively impacted by higher prices on properties not covered by the regulations.[37] The research also highlights the balance required between addressing affordability and potential side effects of market exits of rental properties (as discussed in Section 3).

[32] See RTB for more details on PRZs.
[33] Ahrens, A., M. Marinez-Cillero and C. O'Toole (2019), Trends in Rental Price Inflation and the Introduction of Rent Pressure Zones in Ireland, ESRI and Residential Tenancies Board
[34] See RTB for the full list of RPZs.
[35] Q4 2016 versus Q4 2021 Rent Index Q4 2021, Residential Tenancies Board
[36] Rent increases can not be increased by more than general inflation as recorded by the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP), or by 2% per annum if HICP is higher.
[37] Coffey, C., P. J. Hogan, K. McQuinn, C. O'Toole and R. Slaymaker (2022), Rent Inflation and Stabilisation Policies: International Evidence and the Irish Experience, Research Series Number 136, ESRI, Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage

The knock-on effect of RPZs on the number of rental properties in the market is further highlighted by research jointly commissioned by the Irish Property Owners' Association and the Institute of Professional Auctioneers & Valuers.[38] This research found that RPZs, along with the regulation and taxation environment, treats private, usually small, landlords very differently from institutional landlords and is largely responsible for private non-institutional landlords leaving the market. Small landlords typically provide a different rental offering to the market i.e., three-bed semi detached type homes outside of urban areas. The shift from this type of rental offering, towards newer large scale institutionally funded rental properties, that are exempt from RPZ rules when first put to market, is likely leading to considerable cost and affordability implications for renters.

It is clear, therefore, that while rent controls are playing some role in stabilising rents in the areas where they are applied, there have been significant unintended consequences that have acted to contract the supply of property, as well as rental prices. The most sustainable approach to addressing affordability for renters is therefore likely to be through the provision of affordable, cost rental homes to the market.

4.2 Recent Policy for Homeless People and Low Income Households

Addressing Homelessness

In the Housing for All plan, the Government commits to eradicating homelessness by 2030. Over the past decade, the Government has made several promises to end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough (by 2016); and to end the use of hotels and B&Bs for families in emergency accommodation (by 2017).[39] The deadlines for these commitments have come and gone and the situation for homeless adults and children has scarcely improved.

More recently, significant steps have been taken to address long-term homelessness with the introduction of Housing First which provides *'a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing homelessness for people experiencing mental health, physical health, substance misuse, social, behavioural, and other challenges.'*[40] At the core of the initiative is the provision of a permanent affordable home as a first step to recovery, as opposed to the traditional 'treatment-then-housing' approach.

The Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022-2026 commits to providing 1,300 Housing First tenancies over the next five years, or c. 260 tenancies each year. The internationally successful programme saw more than 600 long-term homeless individuals successfully homed and treated in the first three years of implementation (2018-2021).[41] Continued success of the plan relies critically on the provision of one-bed apartments, permitted for use under the programme, which may prove to be the biggest challenge to meeting targets over the next five years (see Section 6.3.1).

[38] Power, J. (2022). The Irish Private Rental Market, Irish Property Owners' Association and Institute of Professional Auctioneers & Valuers

[39] O'Sullivan, E. (2016). Ending Homelessness in Ireland: Ambition, Adversity, Adaption? European Journal of Homelessness, Vol. 10, No. 2

[40] See Housing Agency for further detail on Housing First.

[41] Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022-2026, Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage

The Government has also established a first-of-its-kind cross-governmental and inter-agency National Homeless Action Committee. The core objective of the Committee, which first sat at the end of 2021, is to facilitate the various agencies and services to collaborate and work towards a common goal, and is tasked with *'accelerating the delivery of new supports and ensuring greater transparency and efficiency in the delivery of the various relevant funding streams.'*[42]

The North-West Regional Homelessness Action Plan 2013-2018[43] marked the first and last homeless plan in the region. While positive changes in the provision of homeless services followed on foot of the 2013-2018 plan, for example with the establishment of the Homeless Action Team (HAT), a multi-disciplinary team meeting on a regular basis to discuss complex cases of homelessness, the region has now gone four years without revised targets. An updated plan is being produced for the current period, based on up-to-date data, and informed by revised Government policy and objectives. The updated plan will look to identify gaps in service provision and set out achievable recommendations and targets for future service development.

Addressing Social Housing

The availability of social housing is as critical a component in addressing and preventing homelessness as affordable private rented accommodation is. Under the Housing for All plan, the Government has targeted the delivery of more than 90,000 social homes out to 2030, with 9,500 new build homes to be delivered annually for the next five years.

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) will play a significant role in local authorities meeting these targets, with the move towards direct build, as opposed to acquisition, a positive step forward in investment in State housing.

[42] National Homeless Action Committee - Terms of Reference
[43] North West Regional Homelessness Action Plan 2013 - 2018

The overall plans to reform the delivery of social housing will include

- Reform of differential rents in relation to various housing support payments;
- The roll out of Choice Based Letting for social housing which would see stock being openly advertised to people on the social housing waiting list; and
- A review and reform of income eligibility for social housing, which will focus on the efficacy of current income bands and equivalisation between single people and families.

Until such time as the supply of social housing meets the needs of the c. 60,000 households who currently qualify for social housing[44] the Government is currently relying on the private rented market, and HAP, to meet demand. The number of people on a social housing waiting list has dropped by over 32,000 nationally in the five years to 2021. This is likely linked to the increased reliance on the HAP scheme where, unlike Rent Supplement (RS), once a person receives approval, they are considered to have their housing need met and are removed from the social housing list.

Rolled out nationally in 2016 and 2017, HAP is now the most common support amongst tenants in private rented homes with close to 60,000 households (157,000 people) in receipt of the payment at the end of 2020.[45] Combined, the HAP, RS, Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), and Rent Allowance, support one-third of private renters today. This compares to just one-fifth of private renters in the early 1990s.[46]

Estimates made by the Parliamentary Budget Office suggest that at the end of 2020, the ongoing housing need i.e., those on the waiting list and those in receipt of HAP, totalled 260,000. This equates to more than one-in-every-20 people in Ireland with a housing need.[47] Research from the ESRI shows that just over half of all private renters were supported with their housing costs in 2020 and that those in receipt of a housing support see an improvement in affordability – 15% RTI for supported renters, compared to 23% for unsupported renters.[48]

[44] Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2021 - Key Findings
[45] Housing Ireland: Trends in Spending and Outputs of Social and State Supported Housing 2001-2020, Parliamentary Budget Office
[46] Doolan, M., B. Roantree and R. Slaymaker (2022). Low Income Renters and Housing Supports, Research Series Number 141, ESRI
[47] Housing Ireland: Trends in Spending and Outputs of Social and State Supported Housing 2001-2020, Parliamentary Budget Office
[48] Doolan, M., B. Roantree and R. Slaymaker (2022). Low Income Renters and Housing Supports, Research Series Number 141, ESRI

While HAP is shown to support a large proportion of renters to stay in their own private rented homes, there are significant limitations to the scheme. In the first instance, each local authority or AHB operates an independent system of differential rents (the rent contributed by tenants based on income). This means there is significant disparity between what households of similar size and income contribute in rent on a county-by-county basis. A lone parent with two children, earning €25,000 a year will pay a contribution of €226 per month in South County Dublin, €313 in Donegal, but €450 in Meath. A 2015 paper concluded that the differential rent system leads to identical households paying considerably different rents irrespective of the quality or size of their accommodation, simply because of geography.[49]

HAP rent limits, which represent the maximum rent payable on a property, also present a problem for renters. Rent limits were set in 2016 and vary by household size and local authority. In Sligo, for example the permitted HAP rent limit for a single person is €460 and for a couple, or lone parent, with three children the rent limit is €600.[50] This compares to the current standardised average monthly rent for a new tenancy in Sligo of €890.[51]

HAP rent limits have not been revised since 2016 when the standardised average rent in new tenancies were 46%[52] lower than they are today. Until recently, each local authority had the flexibility to increase the HAP rent limit by 20% on a case-by-case basis, and as of July 2022, the rent limit can be increased by 35% where appropriate.[53] This increased flexibility is a significant improvement, marking the first rate change to the scheme in six years.

Where gaps exist between the HAP rent limit and the market rent, HAP tenants are responsible for paying the landlord the difference in the form of a 'top-up'. A HAP 'top-up' is a payment, in addition to the permitted contribution (paid weekly to the local authority), made to the landlord when the monthly rent exceeds the maximum rent limit payable by the local authority. The combination of too low HAP rent limits and 'top-ups' means that a tenant's disposable income is now lower compared to what they would have under the differential rent system if HAP rent limits accurately reflected market rents.

[49] The Impact of the Differential Rent System on the Cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (2015), A Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice Working Paper
[50] See Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), Citizens Information.
[51] Rent Index Q4 2021, Residential Tenancies Board
[52] Q4 2016 versus Q1 2022 RTB Rent Index Q1 2022
[53] Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2022

Research from Threshold in 2019 found that 48% of HAP recipients were paying a 'top-up' directly to their landlord, with amounts ranging from €20 - €575 per month.[54] Similar research from the RTB found that of those paying a 'top-up' to their landlord, 70% were paying €100 or more per month.[55] For HAP recipients in receipt of a social welfare payment as their primary source of income, any requirement to pay an additional 'top-up', on top of the permitted local authority contribution could have serious consequences on their ability to maintain that tenancy.

The Simon Community's quarterly Locked Out report tracks the availability of affordable properties within the various standard HAP rent limits of 16 study areas. The report highlights the dysfunction with regard to HAP rent limits and the pressures on the private rented sector. In March 2022[56] there was -

- Only one property available within HAP limits for a single person;
- Only one property available within the standard HAP rent limits for couples;
- Three unique properties available within the standard rent limits for a couple/lone parent plus one child; and
- Four properties available for a couple/lone parent with two children.

As well as the issue of inadequate rent limits, there is also a long-standing issue with discrimination against HAP recipients. Although unlawful under the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018, research from Threshold found that the two main obstacles facing people eligible for a housing support were (i) finding a suitable property within the permissible HAP rent limits and (ii) finding a landlord willing to accept the payment.[57] The same research found that 85% of landlords and agents involved in discrimination refused outright to accept a housing support payment.

This reality, aligned with rising rent prices and low supply, makes the situation all the more challenging for those facing the threat of homelessness and those looking for a pathway out of homelessness, and emphasises the urgent need for meaningful supply of social housing to the market.

[54] Threshold (2019), Topping Up - The Cost of HAP: A Survey on the Housing Assistance Payment
[55] RTB Rental Sector Survey 2021
[56] Locked Out of the Market Study in March 2022 - The Gap Between Hap Limits and Market Rents, Simon Communities of Ireland
[57] Threshold (2021), HAP and Rent Supplement Discrimination - Discrimination cases identified by Threshold in 2020

5. Pathways into Homelessness for Service Users in Sligo

This Section of the report outlines the findings from the first stage of the analysis. The Section presents a profile of each of the service users who participated in the research and a brief summary table of their pathway into homelessness. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of each of the main factors identified as leading to homelessness, centred on key quotes from the interviews.

A mix of service users were invited to participate in the research, based on gender, age, family type (i.e., single, couple with/without dependent children, lone parent), and main homeless service provider (i.e., SSSC, North-West Simon Community, Focus Ireland).

Where possible, the research tried to achieve balance in terms of gender, and family profile, reflecting the mix of homelessness at a national level. However, due to the constrained study period, and factoring in the small number of service users who agreed to take part but ended up not participating, it was not possible to achieve this goal in all respects. Of the fourteen people interviewed

- **Eight** were male and **six** were female.
- **Nine** were aged 25-44 years; **three** were aged 45-64 years; and **one** was aged 65+ years.
- **Three** were single with dependent children being cared for by an ex-partner, or in State care; **three** were single with non-dependent children; **two** were single with no dependent children; **two** were in a couple with dependent children; **one** couple with no dependent children (male had dependent children being cared for by ex-partner, or in State care); and **two** were lone mothers.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Profile
1. James	Male	45-64	Single, dependent children cared for by ex-partner
2. Emma	Female	45-64	Single, non-dependent children
3. Adam	Male	25-44	Single, dependent children cared for by ex-partner
4. Claire	Female	25-44	Single, no dependent children
5. Fiona & Michael	Female & Male	25-44	Couple, no dependent children*
6. William	Male	45-64	Single, non-dependent children
7. Daniel	Male	65+	Single, non-dependent children
8. Niall	Male	25-44	Single, no dependent children
9. Paul	Male	45-64	Single, dependent children cared for by ex-partner, and non-dependent children
10. Anna	Female	25-44	Lone parent, dependent children
11. Maria	Female	25-44	Lone parent, dependent children
12. Patrick	Male	25-44	Couple, dependent children
13. Sophie	Female	25-44	Couple, dependent children

* Male has dependent children, cared for by ex-partner, and also non-dependent children.
Note: Dependent child – aged under 18 years; non-dependent child – aged 18+ years.

5.1 Pathways into Homelessness

Pathways into homelessness is a topic that has long been researched. An important contribution made by Focus Ireland in 2007[58] established a number of significant findings that still ring true over 15 years later. The report concluded, as a priority, that '*the provision of affordable, secure and good quality housing is at the heart of any policy to prevent and eliminate homelessness.*'

In the time since this report was published, the provision of affordable and secure housing has reduced, and the numbers of individuals and families living in emergency accommodation has increased. Importantly, and as is reflected in this analysis, the effective co-ordination of service provision, and enhanced co-ordination of services to reduce alcohol and drug addiction, mental health difficulties, and exclusion from mainstream society, family, friends, and local communities is critical in dealing with the effects of homelessness.

A more recent report from the Housing Agency[59] in 2015 echoed these findings and found that the number one factor leading to families becoming homeless in Dublin was a lack of affordable private rented accommodation. The over-dependency on the private rented sector has been evolving for several years and has been further compounded by housing support schemes i.e., HAP, that rely on the private rented market. As a result, the urgent need for suitable and affordable private rented accommodation is clear. Such provision will not only help to reduce the number of people in emergency accommodation, but it will also support those who are at high risk of becoming homeless as a result of rent increases, or no-fault tenancy termination.

[58] J. Pillinger (2007), Homeless Pathways - Developing Effective Strategies to Address Pathways Into, Though, and Out of Homelessness, Focus Ireland
[59] K. Walsh and B. Harvey (2015), Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness: The Families' Perspective, The Housing Agency

The remainder of this Section reiterates the types of issues that have been identified in existing research. Service users, while dealing with personal factors such as mental health, addiction issues, marital or family breakdown, are further hindered and socially excluded as a result of structural factors such as the lack of supply of affordable housing, and the rising cost of living.

Through the interviews, four common risk factors were identified

1. Private rented accommodation – supply, affordability, standards, and tenancy termination
2. Relationship / marital or family breakdown
3. Substance misuse and mental health
4. State care / prison

It is important to note that these are self-reported reasons for homelessness. The metric can be difficult to capture from the interview methodology employed but attempts have been made to be as concise as possible with regard to identifying the most important and most common factors for service users. The findings provide high-level insight into the main drivers of homelessness in Sligo.

Clear trends emerged from the interviews with regard to the risk factors leading to homelessness and the duration of time spent in emergency accommodation. Focusing on the latter first – at the time of the service users interviews, all but one of the service users had been homeless for more than three months, and the majority of service users were living in emergency accommodation for more than one year. The duration of time spent in emergency accommodation is a theme which emerged during the interviews and is discussed further in Section 6.

The following Table displays the most common factors in the pathways to homelessness for service users.

Main Pathways into Homelessness, Service Users in Sligo

Name	Relationship / Marriage Breakdown	Family Breakdown[1]	Substance Misuse	Tenancy Termination	State Care / Prison	Mental Health[2]	Private Rented Accommodation – Supply & Affordability[3]	Inappropriate / unsafe private rented accommodation
1. James	✓		✓	✓		✓		
2. Emma			✓	✓				
3. Adam	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
4. Claire	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
5. Fiona & Michael		✓		✓	✓		✓	
6. William	✓		✓			✓	✓	
7. Daniel	✓	✓				✓		
8. Niall	✓					✓	✓	✓
9. Paul	✓		✓		✓	✓		
10. Anna				✓			✓	
11. Maria				✓			✓	✓
12. Patrick							✓	✓
13. Sophie		✓					✓	

1. Denotes family breakdown as a result of dispute with parent, sibling, or other family member.
2. Denotes where it is considered by the interviewer that mental health played a significant role in the service user becoming homeless. Other service users spoke of availing of mental health services but in these cases mental health was not considered to be a primary reason for becoming homelessness.
3. Denotes where a limited supply of suitable accommodation or high rent prices locked the service user out of the market.

The Table clearly illustrates the multitude of often inter-woven risk factors that lead to people becoming homeless. It is clear that private rental supply and affordability, tenancy termination, and relationship/marital or family breakdowns are amongst the leading factors in individuals and families ending up in emergency accommodation in Sligo.

These factors, and other pathways into homelessness are discussed hereafter. Interview excerpts are presented to contextualise each of these homelessness factors.

1. Private Rented Accommodation – Supply, Affordability, Standards, and Tenancy Termination

Almost all interviewees (n=12) spoke of a frustration in trying to find suitable and affordable private rented accommodation in Sligo. Anna's story is one that reflects this frustration most accurately and demonstrates the acute dysfunction within the housing market.

Despite being afforded the full 120 days permitted under her notice of tenancy termination to secure alternative accommodation, Anna struggled to source a suitable rental property in Sligo for her and her children. Anna felt that as a lone mother, unemployed, and in receipt of HAP, landlords did not want to rent to her.

> *So, the 120 days started in October. But [the landlord] told me verbally in August that it was going to happen. So, I've been searching since last August for a house, for a property. And every property I applied for, or viewed, as soon as I mentioned, 'single parent', 'a child with extra needs', 'HAP' was another one -"No!". – Anna*

The challenge of finding suitable accommodation was a significant issue for Niall too. He struggled to secure suitable, affordable accommodation after a domestic issue with his partner.

> *[That's] how I ended up homeless, because I couldn't find anywhere else to live. I did try but the price of everything started to go up and I'm not working. So, I ended up homeless. – Niall*

The quality of accommodation also factored into others experiences. For Patrick, who was living in a caravan with his partner and young child, the quality of his accommodation was the primary reason for him presenting to SCC as homeless. He described his time living in the caravan as being

> *Very difficult. Freezing cold… It was bad. It was hard. – Patrick*

Maria described her landlord as very neglectful of the rented property while she was there.

> *What I was living in was vile. I mean absolutely vile… I was there for just four years, and I left with nothing of those four years. Absolutely nothing… I should have left that house with a lot of stuff, and I left it with absolutely nothing. I got a skip and I filled it with everything that was in the house. You couldn't salvage anything out of it, the house was that bad. – Maria*

Of all the issues that arose during the interviews, that of tenancy termination emerged as the most common primary factor leading to homelessness. Research from Threshold has long established the issue of security of tenure as the dominating issue for tenants in the private rented sector. According to their own data, tenancy terminations made up close to one-in-three of the queries dealt with in the first three months of 2022.[60]

Maria spoke of her difficulty in getting help from service providers when she contacted them on foot of her tenancy termination, and the difficulty she encountered in trying to find affordable accommodation in the town.

> *Three, four weeks before I left the house, I was like "I'm homeless, I need help like." So, they said to me, they weren't in a position to help me and so I went from family, to family, to family and I'm homeless nearly a year now. – Maria*

For James, his eviction from his rented property was unexpected. He had been renting a private property sourced for him by an addiction and suicide counselling service. He had been living there for over 18 months and was in receipt of HAP. Following in-patient treatment for addiction, James returned to his home to find he had been evicted. James couch-surfed and slept rough for months before becoming a resident in one of the homeless hostels in Sligo.

[60] Threshold's Quarterly Impact Report Q1 2022

> *[I] went to put the key in the front door and the key wouldn't work… I was left standing on the street with two loads of bags that I had that I brought from when I was in the treatment centre. Nowhere to go… In complete crisis. – James*

Emma, too, found herself facing eviction after several disagreements with her landlord.

> *Because I had my sons there in the pandemic the landlord wasn't happy. He was a bit of a control freak if you ask me. [He] just kept watching everything I did like, and he didn't want [my] boys there, and didn't want me there, because I wouldn't get rid of the sons... I just felt then the way he was behaving [with] me and no one else… Like it was not normal for a landlord to treat anyone like that if you're doing nothing wrong. – Emma*

She was finally told to leave the property after intervening in a dispute between her adult children. Because Emma had been homeless before, she knew to phone the Council immediately to let them know that she had no secure accommodation available to her. She has been unable to secure private rented accommodation since due to supply and affordability issues.

Fiona and Michael had a similar experience with their landlord issuing a notice of termination after finding out that Michael had spent a period of time in prison.

> *[The landlord] said, "I don't want you guys in the home. You have a week to leave that home." I said, "One week? You're crazy!" – Michael*

Covid-19 legislation at the time prohibited evictions and they stayed in the property for an additional 12 months. Due to the low supply of rental accommodation and high rents, they were unable to secure a new tenancy and ended up couch-surfing for a period and living in a tent for three months before being allocated a place in a homeless hostel.

2. Relationship / Marital or Family Breakdown

Research from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive shows that 44% of respondents to a survey reported family circumstances as the main reason for homelessness - with one-quarter reporting a relationship breakdown with a parent, and just under a third reporting a relationship breakdown with a partner (or person other than a parent or partner), as causing homelessness.[61] Along with issues of supply and affordability, this emerged as one of the most common reasons for homelessness amongst the interviewed service users.

Four (n=4) service users indicated that the primary reason they are now living in emergency accommodation was because of a relationship or marital breakdown. This was also a contributory factor for four other service users – with half of the interviewees in total impacted by a relationship/marital breakdown.

After an abusive marriage, Claire turned to her family for support before needing to avail of the supports of the Domestic Violence Advocacy Service (DVAS). As a result of her marital and family breakdown Claire was moved between five refuges in two months, and spent 10 months in prison before eventually moving into one of the emergency hostels in Sligo.

Adam noted a recurring trend of moving in with partners and then having to leave when things failed to work out. For Adam, who has never lived in secure accommodation of his own, this means that he has frequently rotated in and out of emergency accommodation all of his adult life.

> *I've been in and out of rented accommodation but usually I move in with like a woman or something. And then when things go, just mess up, it's usually me who has to leave… And its always been like that… But I really can't do that this time… I'd rather sit here for 10 years if I have to until I get my own place. – Adam*

[61] Burmanje, J. (2021). Social Impacts Assessment Series - Homeless Services, IGEES Unit & Housing Vote, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Family breakdowns are also a common contributory factor to homelessness. Sophie indicated this to be a primary reason for her presenting to the Council as homeless.

> *When I got married, my partner moved in with me, and I'm staying with my mom. And overtime, the two of them didn't really got along… So, she wanted us out. – Sophie*

For Daniel, his marital and subsequent family breakdown were intrinsically linked to his current situation. Following a dispute, Daniel's wife asked him to leave, and the family turned against him.

> *She told me they didn't want me; they didn't need me anymore… I went back up one evening just to see, you know, and she said "No, I don't want you back. You're not coming back here."… I had a choice to make, and I made it. After 52 years I said, "So, that's the end of it." – Daniel*

3. Substance Misuse and Mental Health

In the first Irish study undertaken to examine the nature, extent, and context of drug use amongst the homeless population it was found that, for many (87%), drug use initiated prior to becoming homeless, and for the minority, drug use emerged as a consequence of their homelessness situation.[62] To suggest that substance misuse, or mental health issues are primary causes of homelessness would be to simplify the complex relationship and the interaction of the various personal and societal/structural factors that are usually at play.

Alcohol and drug addictions were important contributory factors for a number of the service users in this research. Drug addiction was a long-term issue for Paul and he spent many years living in various emergency accommodations around Ireland and Sligo.

Family disputes meant he had to leave his private rented property and return to emergency accommodation. It was after this that Paul was eventually permanently homed by Housing First.

> *I gave up my place because I went back on heroin… I wasn't homeless. I just gave up. – Paul*

James has sought and received support for his alcoholism in the past, but it continues to impact his life. It was on his return to Sligo, from a short spell of in-patient rehabilitation, that he found that the locks on his home had been changed. Without any warning, James found himself with no idea where to go, or who to turn to. James acknowledges the role that alcohol has played in his life in the past few years –

> *My addiction has left me down this road. My actions, through my addiction, has left me down this road. – James*

Comorbidity between substance misuse and mental health are common for those experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness. The same 2005 research from the National Advisory Committee on Drugs[63] found that problematic drinkers were significantly more likely to report having a psychiatric concern than their non-problematic drinking counterparts. The findings from 2017 research from Mental Health Reform reiterates the well-established interdependence between homelessness, complex trauma, mental health difficulties and substance misuse.[64]

Almost all interviewees spoke of mental health issues arising from, or becoming exacerbated in the lead up to, or in the aftermath of, becoming homeless. The indicators in the Table above are for those for whom mental health issues were considered to have been a substantive contributory factor to a service user becoming and remaining homeless. The services users who are linked with mental health issues in the Table are those who explicitly stated that they are currently, or had in the past, availed of mental health services in Sligo.

[62] Lawless, M. and C. Corr (2005). Drug Use Among the Homeless Population in Ireland, National Advisory Committee on Drugs

[63] Lawless, M. and C. Corr (2005). Drug Use Among the Homeless Population in Ireland, National Advisory Committee on Drugs

[64] Murphy, R., K. Mitchell and S. McDaid (2017). Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience, Mental Health Reform, Dublin Simon Community and St. Stephen's Green Trust://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Homelessness-and-mental-health-report.pdf

Even for those for whom mental health was not identified as a significant contributory factor to their current situation - they too spoke of the mental health challenges associated with the threat of becoming homeless and living in emergency accommodation.

Amongst those interviewed, there appears to be a link between mental health, substance misuse, and marital/relationship breakdown. Claire's story illustrates this link. Following the breakdown of her marriage; needing to leave the family home for her own safety; and being moved between several refuges and homeless hostels in a short period of time, Claire felt completely isolated from her family and friends and turned to alcohol and crime. Over that period of instability, Claire spoke of needing to use mental health services.

> *[Being moved between five refuges in two months] was bad for my mental health. I ended up in the mental institution in Sligo three times [in one year]. And that wasn't something that I wanted to do. I was assessed twice by the guards. Then a third time I went voluntarily, because it was either that or go back to prison… The third time, my mental health was hitting the roof. – Claire*

For William, like many others, it was the culmination of several factors that eventually led to him living in emergency accommodation. However, it was the death of a number of close family members and friends that led to an initial breakdown and depression, and subsequently alcoholism. William left his family home to receive treatment but within a short number of months he realised that he was running out of money. It was only while in hospital, receiving treatment for a separate issue, that he was put in touch with a hospital discharge worker who facilitated his move from hospital to an emergency hostel.

> *I did tell [the hospital staff] that I was struggling because I was coming towards the end of the money I had. And there was probably a month or a few weeks before I was down to zilch… I felt I'd come back and be on the streets… But I was very lucky because… I thought I'd be in a sleeping bag. – William*

4. State Care / Prison

The Government, in the Housing for All plan, has committed to developing a Youth Homelessness Strategy for people aged 18-24 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Young people leaving State care or those on the margins of care are considered to be at a higher risk of homelessness.[65] EPIC determined that many young people move frequently after leaving care, with the instability of accommodation linked to the likelihood of homelessness.[66]

Only one of the 14 interviewees spoke of a history in State child care. Adam spoke openly of how his childhood experience in the care system has impacted the unstable living environment he finds himself in today. Adam has yo-yoed in and out of the private rented sector and emergency accommodation since leaving State child care.

> *I grew up in foster care… And at 18 I got kicked out of the foster home and went straight into [an emergency hostel]. So, I've been in that since literally my 18th birthday… Don't get me wrong, I've had numerous chances, but never social housing. I've never had my own house… And it's always been like that, you know. I've never had somewhere for myself, ever, since I was born… It's just a vicious cycle. It's something I can't get out of. – Adam*

Three (n=3) of the 14 service users referred to time spent in prison. The relationship between prison and homelessness is a complex one, with homelessness considered to be both a cause and a consequence of imprisonment.[67] As is broadly the case with pathways into homelessness, for both categories of people – those for whom being homeless led to crime and imprisonment and those for whom being imprisoned led to homelessness – other contributory factors, such as histories of residential child-care, family dysfunction or breakdown, mental ill-health and substance misuse or addiction, were also identified.

[65] Submission to the Youth Homelessness Strategy Consultation, Focus Ireland, 2022
[66] Daly, F. (2012). 'My Voice has to be Heard" Research on Outcomes for Young People Leaving Care in North Dublin, Empowering People in Care (EPIC)
[67] Hickey, C. (2002). Crime & Homelessness, Focus Ireland and PACE

5.2 Concluding Remarks

The analysis shows that personal factors, such as family/marital breakdown and substance misuse, remain important pathways for people into homelessness. Inadequate supply, tenancy insecurity, and affordability in the private rented sector also plays an important role in individuals and families ending up in homelessness services in Sligo.

Almost all service users were impacted, to some extent by the dysfunction in the housing market and this is a trend that has been borne out over the past decade. From their vantage point, service providers have observed a shift in the types of individuals and families they are now supporting.

> *I don't have a stereotype now. I don't have a mould that anyone is fitting into, because we have people of all nationalities, of backgrounds, of all parts of the income spectrum. There's people with disabilities. There's people with mental health issues. There are people with no social problems, [that don't] have a bad history or failed tenancy, but people that have good references ready to go… it's inexplicable how this is all going to be sorted. – SP 3*

In Sligo at least, there appears to have been a shift in recent years with a greater number of professionals seeking support to find affordable rental properties.

> *What we would have always seen is families generally on social welfare, on HAP, on housing lists, looking for properties. Over the last two years, and specifically through Covid-19, and in Sligo because the rental market has gone so high, we would often be getting calls from professionals who have money, could have two or three months rent waiting ready to go, money no issue, but there's absolutely just no houses… That's a real indicator of just how bad things are. – SP 5*

Without significant changes in the housing market, through the provision of affordable rental properties at scale, and the strengthening of tenancy security, it is likely that the numbers of individuals and families, impacted by tenancy insecurity and the rising cost of living, requiring homeless prevention or homeless supports will continue to rise.

6. SWOT Analysis

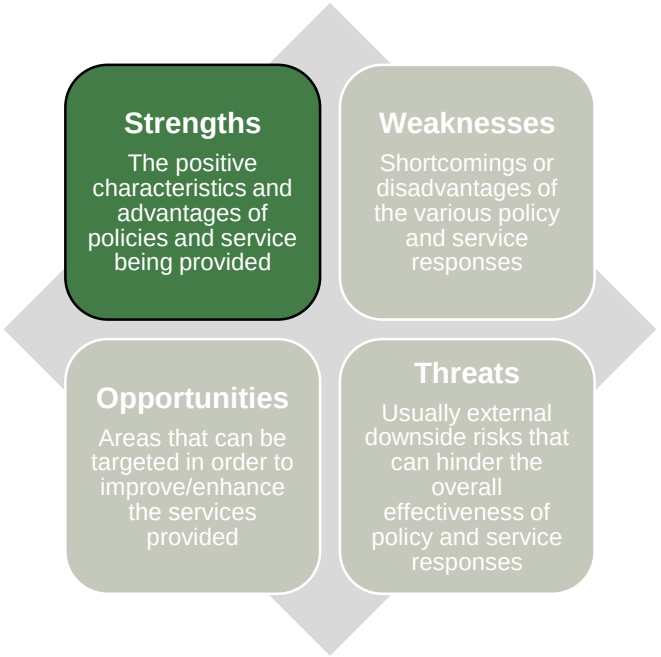
A SWOT analysis is an evaluation technique which involves identifying internal and external factors which are considered to be influential over an entity's (e.g., a business, non-profit, government) current performance and future prospects. In this Section, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of homeless services in Sligo are highlighted.

In conducting the SWOT analysis, insights from interviews with service users, and service providers, were considered in the context of the four core components:

A SWOT analysis can be a powerful tool to inform recommendations and strategies by leveraging strengths and opportunities to overcome weaknesses and threats. The insights of service users and providers are an important component of this exercise. Service users are considered to be at the frontline of service provision and their journey through homelessness is directly linked to, and impacted by, the various strengths and weaknesses of the services available.

Reoccurring themes that emerged from the service user and service provider interviews inform the findings outlined in the remainder of this Section.

6.1 Strengths



Under the SWOT methodology, strengths capture the positive characteristics and advantages of the service being provided and are typically framed by (i) what the service does well, and (ii) what others (external to the service provider) see as the strengths of the service.

By the very nature of this research, informed primarily through interviews with service users who are either currently, or were recently, living in emergency accommodation, identifiable strengths are limited. Relative to the weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified, a small number of reoccurring themes, in particular around staff and service provision (from the users' perspective), and housing teams and the roll out of Housing First (from the providers' perspective) were identified and are discussed here.

> *I would be lost without this place. It saved my life.*
> *- Claire*

When asked what they consider to be currently working well in the system, service users pointed primarily towards the support they have received from the staff members of SSSC, Focus Ireland, North-West Simon Community, and the Housing Section of SCC. Users spoke of coming into contact with service providers while at a very low ebb in their lives and, in general, they found comfort in the support provided by staff. Service users acknowledged the hard work and commitment of staff members, particularly under the trying circumstances of the housing crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

There was broad recognition that the emergency accommodation provided acts as a lifeline for many who find themselves without a home, and a second family for those who have been living there for an extended period.

> *Since I became homeless? I think to be honest with you, it's like a new family, so far. I'm happy with everything. – Daniel*

From the service providers perspective, there was acknowledgement of the important work done by the staff of the various emergency hostels in Sligo, especially in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *The hostels have been fairly responsive [to Covid-19] alright… they really have shown their metal... Because I think, at their heart, they are looking at the person. That's what it's about for them, the management, and staff in the hostels certainly…. They have a sense of core values that are there that are fundamentally about the individual's wellbeing – SP 7*

When asked about the strengths in the system, or what is currently working well, providers spoke of the Homeless Action Team which brings together statutory and voluntary groups working with homeless people.

The Housing Action Team, chaired by the Housing Section of SCC, meets regularly *'to assess individual cases and to adopt approaches to best support and assist homeless individuals or those at risk of becoming homeless and to put in place support services for them*.'[68] According to service providers, the team is useful in terms of understanding capacity, identifying additional needs, and tracking certain homeless individuals/families through the system.

Another service provider spoke of the creation of the National Homeless Action Committee at the end of 2021.[69]

> *In terms of oversight of what's happening nationally, is a good thing because it allows… the challenges and opportunities, and threats, that are evident at the local area, to come to the table at a national level in a more co-ordinated way. [The committee] can look at a global response in the way [issues] are presenting, because if they come up in Donegal, they may have come up in Kerry… That openness to the transfer of learning is one that is very useful. – SP 7*

All eight (n=8) service provider interviewees highlighted the positive changes, fuelled by the pandemic, that have improved the way services are delivered. Not only were lines of communication within, and between service providers enhanced but the move on-line has also greatly improved the ability of people to seek and receive support.

> *One of the things that improved at the beginning of Covid-19 was that people communicated a lot more flexibly, and it was possible to pick up the phone and speak to almost anybody in the country… There was a lot of co-operation between different agencies. – SP 1*

> *Within our own service there was a huge investment in technology and newer ways of working, which was really, really beneficial… There's a lot of hybrid working with clients as well. So, less travelling, probably fitting in more people throughout the working day because of less travel, and [the service] becomes a lot more available for people as well when it's online. And I think the general consensus, even from our service users, is that has been a really good initiative. – SP 2*

Perhaps the greatest strength of homeless service provision in recent years has been the introduction of Housing First (Section 4.2). The Housing First plan has proven successful in reducing the numbers of long-term homeless individuals across Ireland since its introduction in 2018. Service provider interviewees spoke highly of the scheme and, notwithstanding the challenges posed by the lack of one-bed units, its role in successfully supporting long-term homeless people to live in permanent, secure accommodation has been an important one.

The basis of the Housing First plan is the provision of a stable, permanent home as a first step in accessing support for mental, physical, social, and other issues. The Irish scheme currently focuses primarily on vulnerable single individuals who have accessed homeless services either consistently or intermittently over a long period of time. The benefits of this 'housing-led' approach to homelessness is one championed by service providers.

> *The other thing I really like about the [Housing First] model is there is this de-emphasising on people having to meet certain criteria before they get the accommodation. It's much more about accepting… you're not going to get anywhere until you have a roof over your head and then you can start to build things up again. [This] is a big culture change across services. You know, we're used to saying, "this person isn't deserving accommodation because of their bad behaviour." – SP 1*

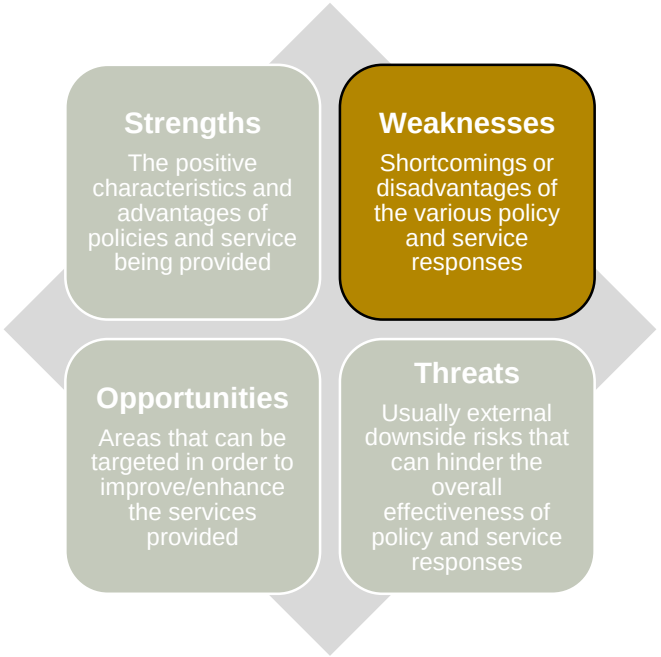
Given its success, some service providers called for the expansion of the Housing First model to capture as many homeless people, in all areas of the country, as is financially possible.

> *More initiatives like Housing First for couples rather than just single persons. And even there is issues around youth homelessness. They don't really fit into that Housing First adult cohort. There's a whole issue around how you deal with that whole clientele. We're lucky in Sligo, we probably don't have too many young homeless, but it is an issue, a huge issue in bigger cities – SP 4*

Further benefits of the Housing First model are discussed in Section 6.3.4.

[68] Sligo County Council, Annual Report 2020
[69] National Homeless Action Committee, Department of Housing, Local government and Heritage

6.2 Weaknesses



Under the SWOT methodology, weaknesses are considered to be the issues that stop a service from performing at the optimum level. When applied to the provision of homelessness services, the weaknesses discussed hereafter are the ones which were most commonly raised by interviewees, and the ones which are considered to most negatively impact (i) the provision of supports and services to service users and (ii) the experience of service users as they navigate through the system.

During the interview process, both services users and providers were asked to consider if the current provision of services is meeting the needs of service users, and what are the factors that are impeding the way in which services are delivered.

Identified weaknesses centre on the supply of private rented properties and social housing; affordability in the private rented sector; and the limitations of HAP in a market of high rents and low supply. Linked to this, service users expressed frustration at the duration of time they have spent in emergency accommodation, with the majority having lived in a hostel or B&B setting for more than 12 months. Communication, and the perceived lack thereof, was one of the most common factors raised by service users. Themes of confusion on who to turn to for help on first becoming homeless, and a sense of isolation and feeling lost within the system were raised in almost all service user interviews.

The most common factors raised by both service users and providers are discussed below.

6.2.1 Supply, Affordability, HAP

> *There's nothing to rent. If there is, [it's] very expensive.*
> *- Fiona*

The general dysfunction in Ireland's housing market is considered by service users and providers to be the leading issue negatively impacting (i) peoples' ability to source suitable and affordable private rented accommodation and (ii) service providers ability to effectively support people requiring homelessness supports.

This section is divided into two parts – the first will address service users and providers concerns of private rented and social housing supply in Sligo, and the second will address concerns of affordability, and the knock-on impact of rising private rents on the efficacy of the HAP scheme.

Housing Supply

13 of the 14 service users interviewed spoke directly on, or alluded to, the chronic shortage of affordable rental supply in Sligo and surrounding areas. The only interviewee not to mention the issue was Paul, who was rehomed with Housing First two years ago.

There is considerable frustration over the lack of private rented accommodation in Sligo amongst all service users interviewed. Maria's experience of looking for accommodation for her and her children echoes the sentiment of the stories told by others –

> *I have emailed I don't know how many houses a week. I email whatever is up there [online]. It doesn't matter where it is… When you get to that point, when you're so desperate, you don't care where it is, as long as you have a roof over your head… But you know, in the back your head is it even worth my time?… I've got a few messages back… "If it's not gone, I'll get back to you." But half of them don't get back to you. – Maria*

Many service users felt that factors such as being unemployed; on a social welfare payment; in receipt of HAP; from a traveller background; or currently living in emergency accommodation have hindered their ability to secure rented accommodation. Because of this, there was a clear preference amongst those interviewed for permanent, secure social housing over returning to private rented accommodation.

Although there is a preference for social housing, the waiting list is long (c. 1,500 gross, as of 31 December 2021) and the supply of social housing available to SCC is constricted. Single service users with no dependent children, especially, spoke of a sense of hopelessness when it comes to ever being afforded the security of a social home.

All eight (n=8) service providers had equal concern over the lack of private rented accommodation in Sligo to meet the growing demand. The issue of supply was viewed as the number one driver of homelessness, with concern especially for the provision of single person units. Without an adequate provision of affordable one-bed units it is unlikely that single people in homeless accommodation will be able to find a home in the short- to medium-term, or that the targets of Housing First will be met.

> *There's such a shortage of one-beds… Who's not getting them is the general single people who just require a one-bed. When are they ever going to be housed if of [every two new one-bed units] one goes to disabilities, one will go to Housing First? Those single individuals are never getting seen to. – SP 5*

In an attempt to understand the supply issues in Sligo, service providers pointed towards the impact that HAP has had on the availability of private rented accommodation in the area.

> *Different governments, in their wisdom, decided that we would rely on private rented accommodation to sort out the housing shortage. That's hugely impacted on the level, and type, of tenancies that we've had. There's much more instability now for people and there's a huge effect of discrimination and cherry-picking. – SP 3*

Concern around the supply of social housing, in the context of a growing housing list, was also raised by service providers. Although some interviewees welcomed the fact that a number of housing projects are currently in train in Sligo town, from planning permission stage onwards, the slow pace at which social housing will be delivered from these projects was acknowledged.

The first hand experience of both service users and providers demonstrates the extent of the crisis in Ireland's housing market. Issues around supply and affordability have now led to a situation where service providers are struggling to deal with the demand for emergency accommodation. And so, not only does the supply of affordable private rented accommodation need to be addressed, but also the supply of suitable emergency accommodation (discussed further in Section 6.3.4).

> *There's constantly a bed-flow problem, that there's not enough beds. There's not enough B&Bs and hotels… That's a huge problem. You're always trying to manage the resources that you have and we're competing with each other for the resources all the time – SP 6*

The overall result has been a sharp contraction in the supply of emergency accommodation as demand for homelessness services grows.

Affordability and HAP

Intrinsically linked to the chronic shortage of private rented accommodation, is the upward trend in private rental prices and, as a result, a reduction in the efficacy of the HAP scheme. All 13 service users interviewed (excluding the service users in Housing First) were in receipt of a social welfare payment as their main source of income, further adding to the challenges of affording current market rents.

The inadequacy of HAP in the context of current market rents was noted by all service provider interviewees. One service provider noted that the issue of affordability and a financial aspect to homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon.

> *There's certainly an element of a financial aspect to homelessness now that was never there before. I mean people came into homelessness because other problems were causing them to do it, but it wasn't because they couldn't financially afford to live in a house… What's definitely there is if someone does end up homeless, financially they cannot get back out of it, and that's a huge issue. – SP 5*

While legislative changes have been made to the scheme (Section 4.2), HAP rent limits are now far below market rents and recipients find themselves in a situation of having to 'top-up' the rent paid to their landlord, which can be an unsustainable exercise for those on fixed incomes.

From the service providers perspective too there is a frustration that current HAP limits are not adequate, with all eight interviewees flagging it as a significant issue.

> *We've been corresponding with the Department, probably for the last 16-18 months at this stage, to try and get them to revise [the HAP rent limits]… It's obviously very clear to anyone involved in housing, in Local Authorities, that it presents a huge problem. – SP 4*

For single people, the issue of affordability with the HAP scheme is further compounded. Single people (without dependent children) typically compete with couples (without dependent children) for similar sized, one-bed apartments. However, under the current HAP system, rent limits for single people are lower than for couples. This leaves single people competing for properties with couples who typically have twice the income level, and are in receipt of a higher HAP payment. The Government has signalled that it is planning to expand the couple's HAP rate to single people however there is no timeline on when this change will be introduced.[70]

> *[It's] very tough on my own. For a single person, it's really hard. It's hard for a couple, I can imagine, especially now. But as a single person, it is really tough. – Niall*

Discrimination against HAP recipients was also flagged by service users. The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 has made it unlawful to discriminate against someone in receipt of a housing support however, service users interviewees spoke of HAP discrimination in relation to sourcing private accommodation. While it is difficult to pin down the exact reasons for not securing private rented accommodation, a majority (n=12) of those interviewed spoke of the perceived difficulty of securing accommodation once the landlord found out they were in receipt of HAP.

[70] FEANTSA Policy Conference 2022

6.2.2 Duration of Time in Emergency Accommodation

> *It' s very slow getting people out of here.*
> *- Emma*

A direct consequence of the issues raised in Section 6.2.1, is that service users are finding themselves living in emergency accommodation for longer durations. The majority (n=11) of the service users commented on, or alluded to, the length of time they have been, or are likely to be, in emergency accommodation. At the time of the interviews, all but three service users had lived in a hostel or B&B for longer than three months, and typically longer than 12 months (n=9).

Research has demonstrated the significant negative impact that living in emergency accommodation for longer than three – six months can have on physical and mental well-being. Issues related to limited infrastructure and adverse social experiences for those residing in accommodation not specifically designed for medium- to long-term living has been found to have a detrimental effect, especially on children.[71] A 2021 report from Dublin Simon Community found that 67% of single adults were spending more than six months in emergency accommodation in Dublin – a trend which can lead to social isolation and regression in respect of the skills required to live independently.[72]

Service users describe the journey out of homelessness as being 'very slow', with many feeling that they've been "forgotten about" and "lost" in the system. Others spoke with a despair that comes with the isolation of living in emergency accommodation.

> *Once you have a roof over your head, they think you're housed. We're not housed here… Sitting here not knowing how long you're going to be sitting here. There [are] people here years, in a place that's only supposed to be for three months. I'm sure this is happening all over the country. – Adam*

Service providers acknowledge that hostels and B&Bs are inadequate for long-term emergency accommodation and fear that the longer the fundamental issues in the housing sector are left unaddressed, the more difficult it will be for people to move out of homelessness and back to living independently in their own home.

> *For all sorts of reasons, I now believe hostels don't work. We infantilise people… Hostels create long-term homeless people. We bring them in and whatever few skills they have we spend our time taking it away from them, making them less and less resilient, and less and less able to survive on their own. – SP 5*

Addressing the supply of affordable private rented accommodation more generally will not only act to prevent homelessness in the first instance but also enhance options for those living in emergency accommodation to return to living independently more quickly.

> *There certainly needs to be more emergency accommodation but there has to be [moving-on] options because then all you're going to do is fill the emergency accommodation or hubs with the families and they're going to be left there… There needs to be a plan of follow through with if somebody goes in there for six months, what's the plan to move them out in six months' time. – SP 3*

[71] S. Stamp (2017), The Experiences of Newly Homeless Families Accommodated by Dublin's Homeless Services in August 2015, Dublin Regional Homeless Executive
[72] Dublin Simon Community (June 2021), Response to Homeless Report May 2021

6.2.3 Lack of Communication and Information

> *What turn do I take? And where do I go for advice? Who do I ask?*
> *- James*

One of the most common issues raised by service users (n=13) related to a perceived lack of information and communication from all service providers. Several interviewees (n=3) spoke of not knowing who to turn to on initially becoming homeless, while almost all (n=9) referenced a perceived lack of communication from SCC and other service providers once placed in emergency accommodation. Linked to the aforementioned weaknesses, service users talked about having no idea of who to contact, feeling like they are receiving no support, and feeling isolated and forgotten about in the system.

> *I didn't actually know where to go or what to do… I never felt as frightened in all my life… It's not even to get one foot on the ladder, it's just even to get hold of a ladder. – James*

A number of service users (n=4) spoke of the stress and worry associated with trying to secure support from service providers. For these interviewees, there was confusion and frustration over why they were not eligible for support, and the types of information required in order to receive report.

> *My hands were tied, it was very hard for me to actually prove that I couldn't go back [to my family home]. – Fiona*

While almost all (n=12) service users recognise the challenges in the housing system and the additional pressures these place on service providers, there is a sense amongst service users that adequate information and communication around how certain decisions are made, or why certain services are offered or with-held, would improve their understanding of the various steps that need to be followed to receive support.

From the service providers perspective, the increasing demand and pressure for homeless services means they need to be able to support the most vulnerable of individuals and families.

> *That's the most common point on which we differ, between service user and service provider, because where they might think everyone's entitled to their own home, the bottom line is, these days, we simply can't cater for everyone's needs… – SP 3*

Communication between service users and providers appears to weaken further when people are placed in emergency accommodation. This was broadly captured in Section 6.2.2, with service users feeling isolated and forgotten about the longer they are in the system. The perceived lack of communication between service users and providers was one echoed across all service user interviews (n=13).

> *This is the first time I talked to anyone about this service in 11 years. There should be at least someone in here talking to me about this at least once a year. Once in 11 years? 10 years with nothing. – Adam*

At the time of interview, three (n=3) service users had either recently moved into, or were waiting to move into, social housing. They mentioned that even through that process, of transitioning from emergency accommodation to social housing, there was a lack of communication around timeframes etc. which caused additional stress and worry.

Service provider interviewees noted that the homeless system can be overwhelming and confusing when first encountered, and acknowledge that the current system of communication can be improved, noting that the increase in demand for services has reduced the capacity to maintain regular contact with service users.

> *Aspirational, in the past, would be that we'd be contacting someone every week or every couple of weeks. That's not happening now because of the sheer number... I'm conscious that we're keeping our files active for people… Every six months their housing application has to be updated… We're just not getting to do everything that we need to do for everyone these days and it is regrettable… We like to keep in touch with people because we like to be familiar with them so that we can recommend them for a particular type of accommodation… It's hateful to have that meeting and sit there and say "Sorry, I just don't have any update for you." – SP 3*

6.3 Opportunities

Having identified the key strengths and weakness in homelessness services, this Section of the report focuses on the range of opportunities identified by both service users and providers. In a SWOT analysis, opportunities are largely informed by the existing strengths and weakness, along with other internal and external initiatives that will improve the quality of service and supports.

During the interview process, both services users and providers were asked to consider if homeless services in Sligo are adequate, and what one change they think could significantly improve the quality of services delivered to service users and the experience for homeless people living in emergency accommodation.

Addressing the weaknesses identified in Section 6.2, the first two opportunities focus on

1. The supply of housing, affordability and HAP, and
2. Improved communication and information

Other opportunities, based on reoccurring themes raised in stakeholder interviews, include

3. Improved homelessness supports; and
4. Review of Ireland's homelessness and emergency accommodation strategy.

These opportunities are discussed in this Section of the report.

6.3.1 Supply, Affordability, HAP

> *Their plan for the next three to five years needs to be housing. Full stop. In this town, it needs to be housing.*
> *- Adam*

While Section 6.2.1 focused on the issues of supply and affordability as they currently exist in the market, this Section will focus on what service users and providers consider to be the most important initiatives for meaningful change. Opportunities for change are discussed under the headings of (i) housing supply, and (ii) affordability and HAP.

Housing Supply

There was consensus amongst all service users and providers that housing supply is the most important issue that needs to be tackled immediately.

> *We have reached a situation where the Government has no option… I think they're at the point now where they're going to have to make courageous decisions… [the Government] have no choice at this stage but to produce housing at pace as they've never done before… We have to produce housing at a far faster rate than has ever been done before in this country and we just don't have an option. – SP 8*

Although there are plans, under Housing for All, to deliver up to 30,000 new homes per year, the supply of affordable housing in the current market will be critical if the plan is to address issues such as affordability and homelessness in a meaningful way.

As already noted, the challenge faced by single people with no dependent children is significant in terms of affordability and the availability of private rented accommodation. Service users and service providers interviewees referred to the need for greater diversity in the type of accommodation that is brought to the market i.e., increase the number of one-bed units. Service providers also noted the challenge for Housing First without an adequate supply of one-bedroom homes.

> *I think part of the problem was the Development Plan didn't have clear provision for one-beds but that's changing and we now have an acceptance by the planners that one-beds must be provided and any more discussions with developers you're telling them, "You need to provide one beds." – SP 4*

The current undersupply of social housing was also raised by the majority of service users and providers. With respect to this, there is a plan to supply 500 new social homes, between the local authority and AHBs which, if delivered, could have a significant impact on social housing waiting lists in the region.

> *[Stock] is going to improve because we have a new homeless delivery plan for over 500 houses in the next five years. So that'll probably treble, quadruple, our output on the previous five years… It would help considerably. It would be a considerably help to reducing the numbers on the [social housing] list. – SP 4*

The return of vacant properties to the housing markets was also raised by a small number of service users (n=3) and service providers as a means to improve supply in the short- to medium- term. Data from GeoDirectory[73] Q4 2021 shows that the current level of residential vacancy in Sligo stands at 9.5%, compared to a 4.4% national average. The vacancy rates are higher in Donegal (10%) and Leitrim (13%) meaning the scope for these properties to address the housing shortage in the Nort-West Region may be significant.

SCC highlighted, however, the challenges associated with certain policies already in place to improve the supply of housing stock. For example, as part of the Vacant Home Scheme, the Buy and Renew Scheme (BRS) supports local authorities in 'purchasing and renewing housing units in need of repair', making them available for social housing.[74]

> *You can do this 'Buy and Renew' but at the end of the day you have to have someone that's willing to sell to you. It's very easy for the Government to say, "Oh, there are all these vacant properties out here." But if you don't have a willing seller… and there can be reasons for that, obviously… That's a challenge, that's one of the challenges absolutely. – SP 4*

[73] Residential Buildings Report, Q4 2021, GeoDirectory
[74] For more detail see, Vacant Home Scheme.

Affordability and HAP

The low levels of supply of private rented accommodation has had a knock-on effect on affordability in the market. In an attempt to improve enforcement or rent controls, one service provider called for the introduction of a rent register as a tool to track rent setting and affordability within RPZs. Threshold have called for a similar tool to be introduced, similar to the Property Price Register.[75] Their contention, echoing the findings of the ESRI (Section 4), is that without such a mechanism, rents are de facto decontrolled between tenancies, meaning that rent certainty measures (i.e. RPZs) in practice can only fully protect sitting tenants.

At the time of the interviews, one of the most common issues raised regarding affordability was the rising disparity between market rents and HAP rent limits. As of July 2022, local authorities now have greater flexibility to increase rent limits on a case-by-case basis, however baseline HAP rent limits remain unchanged since 2016.

> *[The Government] simply have to move away from the idea of being worried of increasing HAP because it might adversely effect the rental market. That's just not sustainable any longer. We can't go on and think that current HAP rates are going to remain. – SP 8*

Aside from the challenges posed by HAP rent limits, service providers also spoke on recipients behalf in terms of the cumbersome application process and the implications for renters. Refinement of the process, and greater links between Government departments may help to streamline the process.

The length of time to process HAP applications is protracted and leaves already vulnerable renters in a difficult situation with their current, or perspective, landlord with respect to the timely payment of rent. Service user Anna spoke of her experience and the fears she had of losing her tenancy as a direct consequence of the lengthy process.

> *It took three months for the HAP to kick in and during that first three months, I had to pay €900 out of my pocket… It got to the stage where the landlord, where he was getting pissed off with me… I'd hand in one piece of paper. They'd want two more. I'd hand in two pieces of paper. They'd want four of them… It just seemed to be delay, after delay, after delay.. My landlord actually threatened to kick me out. – Anna*

Aligned with the call for greater supply of social housing, a 2021 report from SVP[76] compared the costs of HAP provision in Ireland to the cost of building new local authority housing. SVP note that the approximate €1 billion per annum required to fund the HAP scheme is equivalent to local authorities and AHBs direct building approximately 55,000 social housing units over a ten-year period, and 165,000 units over a 30-year period.

Since it's inception in 2016, HAP has supported tens of thousands of households living in private rented accommodation. However, discussions with homeless service users and providers as part of this research indicates there is significant scope to improve the scheme and strengthen its overall role in supporting recipients. A focused redirection of costs in the way proposed in the SVP report, could also result in a considerable contribution made to the stock of social housing and the targets already committed under the Housing for All plan of 9,500 new social housing units per annum out to 2026.

Recommendations

- Greater focus on the provision of affordable cost rental accommodation and social housing, under the Housing for All plan, as well as greater urgency in bringing vacant properties back to the market, to ensure that supply and affordability pressures in the private rented sector are adequately addressed.
- Establish a 'rent register' to monitor and enforce the application of RPZ rules between tenancies.
- Review and revise HAP rent limits for all cohorts, and the HAP scheme in general (e.g. application process and approval timeframe) in order to ensure it is fit for purpose.

[75] Threshold, Housing for All Submission, 2021

[76] Combating Housing Exclusion in Ireland: Can 'Housing for All' Deliver for the People SVP Assists?, SVP, September 2021

6.3.2 Greater Communication and Information

> *Even to keep me informed and say… "We are working behind the scenes."… rather than leave me sitting here wondering.*
> *- Anna*

From the point of view of service users, there appears to be a significant breakdown in communication with service providers at all stages of the homelessness journey. As previously illustrated in Section 6.2.3, service users spoke openly about their feelings of isolation and fear while living in emergency accommodation due, in part, to a lack of information.

Following on from Section 6.2.3, this analysis shows that even minor changes in the way in which service providers communicate with service users could have a significantly positive impact. Changes in terms of frequency and clarity of communication are important. Niall's story of struggling to find private rented accommodation, while living in emergency accommodation, highlights the disconnect that some service users feel in terms of fully understanding the supports and services available to them on entering the homeless system.

> *Before [this emergency hostel] came up, I had a guy, he worked in the hospital actually, but he used to come and collect my rent. And I was looking for somewhere to live at the time. And he said, "How are you getting on with finding somewhere to live?" I said, "I can't find anything." and he said to me "Well, I'm supposed to be helping you." It was the first time we'd ever met. It was only because I said I'm finding [it hard] to find somewhere. He said, "I'm supposed to be helping you but there isn't anything out there at the moment." And that stayed with me even now. – Niall*

The majority of service user interviewees (n=11) called for greater communication with service providers, particularly with SCC. The sense, from service users, is that a regular 'check-in' phone call would give some reassurance that they have not been forgotten about and that they are not alone in trying to source accommodation.

> *If they were to… give you a call or reach out… and just say, "Look, we still have your application open. We're still looking for houses, nothing has come up yet." It would kind of… put your mind at ease a little bit. – Sophie*

From the service providers perspective, there is scope to improve communication methods, and the idea of more clearly signposting the pathways through homelessness services was identified as a need for users.

> *I think the information sharing piece needs to be better co-ordinated in terms of making sure, "Here are the pathways."… A very clear pathway so that if somebody was presenting to them in terms of this issue, "OK, there's the pathway, there's the next step in the process." That's something that needs to be developed… and made available to people who are homeless. – SP 7*

While provisions are currently in place to achieve this objective i.e., PASS+, through its Referral, Assessment, and Care Planning processes, service users appear to have little or no awareness of these. A roadmap could be an effective tool in setting out the provisions already in place, and should be a key objective of the forthcoming Regional Homeless Action Plan. The roadmap should detail every stage of a service users journey through the system, from their first meeting with the Council; the expected duration of stay in emergency accommodation; and the expected outcome. The Pathway should also include important contact information for the various service providers in Sligo; each service providers function and role within the system; level of communication that users should expect from providers; and the service users rights and responsibilities while living in emergency accommodation. The creation of such a plan may be one which would see the pathway explained, and services re-offered, at various stages of a service user's journey. Paul's situation, living in Housing First, illustrates this potential need to frequently reiterate the services available to service users.

> *I don't receive anything. Nothing at all. But then again, I don't know whether that's been through my stubbornness as well. I don't know whether I've been asked. Not that I can think of. – Paul*

Across all emergency accommodation types, service users referenced a frustration that their needs are not being acknowledged or addressed. For some, this relates to the communication pathways with service providers in general (discussed in Section 6.2.3), while for others it relates to communication pathways with staff members. The latter was particularly the case for those service user interviewees living in emergency hostels.

In terms of complaints, a 2019 report from ICON [77], examined the rights and responsibilities of people in emergency accommodation and the accessibility of a complaints system. Their survey showed that 18% of respondents stated they knew their rights versus 46% who stated that they knew their responsibilities. The report concludes that this may suggest that homeless services operate from the pretence of 'governing and regulating behaviour', rather than from a 'holistic, rights-based approach'.

The survey also established that the majority of respondents would not feel comfortable making a complaint but where a complaint is made, the preferred form is verbally to the management of the emergency accommodation (42%), followed by verbally to the resident's key worker (34%), and verbally to the local council (31%). The report concludes that while the National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services (NQSF) in Ireland[78] will improve knowledge, a rights awareness campaign combined with the introduction of a complaints log for verbal as well as written complaints could significantly mitigate aggravating factors of not feeling listened to or understood.

More generally, service user interviewees spoke to the potential benefit to their well-being and mental health of improved communication and engagement with staff members. A series of research papers from FEANTSA looked at the various ways that empowerment can improve circumstances for homeless people in this respect.[79] Acknowledging the fact that homeless people often suffer institutionalisation, stigmatisation, and discrimination, the paper posits that 'feeling heard and respected as an equally important and valuable person' can sometimes be as important than the actual provision of homeless supports.

In this context, the FEANTSA report highlights the importance of creating an 'empowerment strategy' that focus' on, for example, treating people with dignity and respect; being aware of power relations; ensuring a user friendly and pleasant environment; strengthening social networks; creating opportunities etc. The development of such a strategy or framework should be done in collaboration with service users, management, and frontline staff, re-assessed regularly, and could be made available as part of a 'welcome-pack' that outlines service users' rights, responsibilities, available services, and complaint procedures.

[77] Understanding Rights and Responsibilities in Emergency Accommodation, 2019, ICON
[78] National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland, 2019, Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Dublin Region Homeless Executive
[79] Empowering Ways of Working: Empowerment for People Using Homeless Services in Europe. FEANTSA, 2009

In terms of inter-agency communication, examples did arise during interviews to suggest that certain relationships could be strengthened to the benefit of the whole system. One example is the relationship between the Gardaí and service providers. Two service users (n=2) spoke of their experience sleeping in their car before SCC provided them with emergency accommodation. In both instances the Gardaí intervened but, according to both interviewees, no guidance in terms of homeless supports were provided at the time.

One service provider also spoke of the opportunity to strengthen collaboration with privately run mental health and addiction service providers in Sligo. Although the numbers are considered relatively small, the service provider spoke of circumstances where a person leaves in-patient mental health or addiction treatment with no fixed abode. Greater communication and collaboration here, in terms of ensuring a person is returning to a safe and secure residence after their treatment, may be an opportunity to build on.

Recommendations

- Establish a regular 'check-in' system between SCC and service users living in emergency accommodation on a weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly basis, providing a brief update on the service user's case.
- Develop and implement a 'Pathway Through Homelessness' for users, detailing every stage of a service users journey through the system, as well as the provisions and protections currently in place (i.e., PASS+ and NQSF) .
- Run a rights awareness campaign targeted at those living in emergency accommodation, and introduce a complaints log for verbal and written complaints (specifically for those living in emergency hostels).
- Establish an 'empowerment strategy' with focus on improving relationships and communication pathways between service users and staff in emergency hostels.
- Strengthen communication and collaboration between homeless service providers and other bodies (e.g. mental health services, Gardaí) to ensure that all individuals without a home, or those at risk of homelessness, are aware of the services available to them.

6.3.3. Improved Homelessness Supports

> *This service is exhausted. It's clearly exhausted. There's no major funding that I can see comes to homeless shelters.*
> *- James*

Aligned with the call for greater communication and information, the majority (n=12) of service users spoke of the need for additional supports and advice to assist them through the homelessness journey. The types of additional services called for by both service users and providers, focused on the role of key workers and/or peer support; the provision of counselling services for all people living in emergency accommodation; improved supports for rough sleepers with the creation of a 'one-stop-shop' in Sligo; and the need for a review of Ireland's homelessness and emergency accommodation strategy.

The Role of Key Workers / Peer Support

The role of the key worker was predominantly brought up by those living in emergency hostels in Sligo. On entering emergency accommodation, individuals are linked in with the key worker who sets out a plan in terms of determining why they became homelessness, and the steps required to return to private rented accommodation. From the perspective of these service users, there is scope to either strengthen this role or introduce a advocate role in conjunction with the key workers role.

> *I think [an advocate] would be important. At least if you had an advocate who could speak on your behalf, explain your situation to [service providers], they might have more education and experience rather than you just listening and it falls on deaf ears. At least if you have someone fighting your corner then [service providers] know that you mean business. The more support you get, the better. – Claire*

While entities such as Threshold, Focus Ireland, and North-West Simon Community etc., take on an advocacy role for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, understanding the lived experience of homeless people may help to inform the types of services required to support people.

In that respect, the role of a peer support worker was also brought up by both service users and providers. On the service users side, one interviewee mentioned the benefit that could be gained from talking to other people in the same situation as them, to learn what steps they took, and what services worked for them. Service providers spoke of the potential for service user involvement and feedback in informing the service that is provided.

> *Staff have no insight into what any of that is like, unless you've actually lived in [a] hostel… We don't really understand that kind of insecurity, and that kind of anxiety that must go with [living there]… That is the value of having [a peer support worker], that they can give us a view of what it was like to have to suffer under a rule like that. I think there's a lot of value in [it]. – SP 5*

> *[For service users] to have someone to go to that understands where [they're] coming from. A peer support perspective, of having someone who has had similar issues whether it's peer support in mental health, or homeless services, but just having someone who could work in the same capacity, or alongside a similar role [as an advocate] but has experienced mental health services, or experienced homelessness. – SP 5*

Consideration would need to be given as to what a peer support or an advocacy role would look like for Sligo homelessness services. For any such service there will need to be clear, professional boundaries in place, and training to ensure protections from trauma for both parties.

Recommendations

- Ensure that a designated key worker or advocate, with an appropriate work load, is assigned to each individual and family that enters emergency accommodation, for the duration of time they live in emergency accommodation.
- Introduce a peer support worker to vocalise the experience and needs of homeless people.

Mental Health Supports for Adults and Children

All 14 service users spoke of the challenging conditions they have had to live in in emergency accommodation, often for years, and the knock on consequences on mental and physical health. The stress and worry associated with being homeless is further compounded for those who have dependent children.

> *I try to stay out of [the B&B] as much as I can. And then go back just before the kids are tired enough to go to sleep. It's not really fair having them confined to one room. – Maria*

Anna expressed concerns over the mental health supports available to children who are living in emergency accommodation. From her own experience, she feels that more can and should be done to support children through the system. This sentiment was echoed by other parents who were interviewed.

> *It's hard enough to get teenagers to engage in anything anyways, but putting a teenager in a B&B situation, where the only place you have to sit is on the bed… It's almost like a recipe for depression… Even if someone was to come to the B&B, once a week, and play with the children, with the parents there and whatnot, and just suss out what their needs are. – Anna*

One service provider spoke to the benefits that have come with the introduction of a clinical nurse specialist in emergency hostels, and the potential benefits of similar services for homeless families.

> *We had a lot of patients who became unwell [in the emergency hostels]. That's where the role of a clinical nurse specialist evolved for homelessness… It's actually had an impact because the number of people with 'No Fixed Abode' being admitted to our unit has reduced... You're attempting to look after very vulnerable people and often there's children involved as well so you have a TUSLA element to it as well… We know this is where the demand is rising at the moment. – SP 2*

Recommendation

- Introduce a 'mental health needs assessment' for homeless families entering emergency accommodation.

Improved Supports for Rough Sleepers / 'One-Stop-Shop'

Service users (particularly single interviewees living in emergency hostels) and service providers spoke of the need to upgrade the services and supports available for rough sleepers. James gave an honest account of his time sleeping on the streets of Sligo -

> *When you're living on the streets, and you're walking around, where do you go to get a hot cup of soup or a bite to eat, a sandwich? I have done days with no food… At four o'clock in the morning when I'm freezing cold, and I might have three or four layers on me, nothing to eat for a few days, dehydrated.... That's what homelessness is. Standing in doorways of the shopping centres in town to get the heat. Nowhere to wash. – James*

Given the chaotic nature of homelessness and rough sleeping, a number of service providers (n=3) spoke of the potential benefit of a 'day centre' or 'one-stop-shop' for homeless people in Sligo.

> *Kind of like a day centre… and the solicitor would come on a Tuesday, the GP would come on the Wednesday. They would give food there and there would be activities. A place that people could come to that all the services came into as well. It just seems to be a better way of catching people rather than saying to people they have to go to an appointment at 11am on a Thursday and they don't turn up. I think something like that in Sligo would be useful… A drop-in centre. – SP 1*

> *From the perspective of rough sleepers, I think it would be great to have some sort of facility out there for somebody to be able to wash their sleeping bags, wash their clothes. Have a shower. Just somewhere where they can get basic hygiene met. – SP 5*

The provision of basic services for rough sleepers is something currently under consideration by SCC in their revised Homeless Action Plan, with a target of introducing such a service before the end of 2022.

Recommendation

- Establish a 'One-Stop-Shop' in Sligo for homeless people and rough sleepers, to include, for example, a GP service, legal service, washing and laundry facilities, children's activities, employment and training opportunities etc.

Case Study I: One Stop Homeless Services Centre and Housing

"A welcoming and inclusive Services Centre and Day Centre for persons experiencing homelessness"

The Louisiana Chronically Homeless Assistance and Treatment Services (LaCHATS) One Stop Homeless Services Centre represents an innovative approach to providing a full range of 'continuum of care' support services to homeless people, and those at risk of becoming homeless. The Centre incorporates 36 units of permanent supportive housing within the facility's campus.

LaCHATS opened under the umbrella of the Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless (CAAH), a coalition of 35 service providers whose membership provides emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing for people and families experiencing chronic homelessness and for people who experience a range of disabilities.

Opened: 10 November 2011

Location: Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

Owner/Developer: Gulf Coast Housing Partnership

Partner: CAAH and Society of Saint Vincent DePaul of Baton Rouge

Units: 36

Budget: $8.4 million

The Aim:
For formerly homeless residents to not only have a clean, safe living environment; but to also benefit from easy access to all necessary support services as they move toward independence.

The Challenge:
Recognizing that a robust behavioural health component is crucial to rehouse people experiencing homelessness and to end homelessness.

Services available, both to residents and day population include, but are not limited to,

- On-site primary medical, dental and pharmacy services
- Outreach and case management
- Substance user and behavioural health services, mental health screenings
- Employment assistance and vocational training; life skills development; 'home address' for job applicants
- Legal services for disability determination and mainstream resource enrolment assistance
- Day centre services – showers, laundry, phone, mail and compute access
- Housing First and rapid rehousing services

Between Jan 2021 and Mar 2022 'One Stop' supported 5,800 guests. It supports 130 people daily

See One Stop, Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless, Community Housing Capital and One Stop Homeless Services Centre & Housing, Gulf Coast Housing Partnership (GCHP)

Improved Employment and Training Opportunities

Research has long shown that the homeless population in general faces a variety of barriers and obstacles to employment. Factors that can impede this cohort from securing employment tend to include lack of experience, and physical or mental health issues.[80] Negative stereotypes of a homeless job seekers capability, reliability, and ability to integrate into the workplace are additional barriers that can be hard to overcome.[81]

A 2012 report from Cork Simon Community found a pattern of deep disadvantage and lack of confidence for homeless people hoping to return to work.[82] More recently Cork Simon Community undertook a large scale study which tracked the experience of 18 people as they moved into employment with support from Cork Simon. Their initial study found that returning to work while living in emergency accommodation posed a significant challenge with 'sleep disturbance' and 'lack of peace to process the day' noted.[83] Their follow-up report one year later[84] noted, however, a longer term positive impact of employment in supporting people out of homelessness and in rebuilding their lives.

The sentiment of homeless people wanting to return to the workforce but feeling hindered by their current situation was a common one amongst service users and raised specifically by six interviewees (n=6). One service user spoke of the frustration of trying to secure employment as an older person, despite 40+ years of experience, and feeling discriminated against due to their current circumstances. Three other interviewees spoke of their desire to return to education/employment but felt that their life was in too much turbulence and/or they were restricted by the cost of childcare available to them.

Only one service user (n=1) was in employment at the time of their interview. Although working part-time, the service user noted the significant positive impact the job has had on their physical and mental wellbeing.

[80] Overcoming Employment Barriers for Populations Experiencing Homelessness, The Homeless Hub, 2014
[81] Ending Chronic Homelessness Through Employment and Housing, Chronic Homelessness Employment Technical Assistance Centre, 2008
[82] Working it Out: A Report on the Barriers to Employment Faced by People who are Homeless, Cork Simon Community, 2012
[83] A Working Life: The Early Days. Motivations, Challenges and Change for People with Experience of Homelessness when Moving into Employment, Cork Simon Community, October 2019
[84] A Working Life: The Continuing Journey. Challenges and Achievements for People Working to Leave Homelessness Behind, Cork Simon Community, September 2020

As demonstrated in Case Study I, job and training opportunities could be provided within the context of the one-stop-shop, providing support, for example with CVs, and linking in with perspective employers.

> *If you want to look at homeless people, often the opportunities don't exist for work as well and that's really important… It gives them a function, it gives them a role, it gives them entitlement from the Department of Social Protection as well and that's really, really important… That's why I think the whole idea of supported accommodation for people, that they hold on to that address, even with support. It's when they lose that address, you lose everything when you lose your address. – SP 2*

Recommendation

- Through the 'One-Stop-Shop' model, employment and training opportunities should be provided to homeless people, including links with local employers, and supports for those with dependent children to return to employment and/or education.

6.3.4 Review of Ireland's Homelessness and Emergency Accommodation Strategy

> *And while the B&B is lovely, it does not suit our needs, by any shape or form.*
> *- Anna*

Review of Ireland's Homelessness Strategy

The issue of homelessness prevention is an important one when discussing opportunities for change in homelessness services. Homelessness prevention can take many forms and is typically most successful when implemented as part of an integrated homelessness strategy.

A 2019 report from the Simon Community of Ireland[85] notes that while homelessness prevention can appear complex, it essentially falls under one of two headings

1. Services that can help stop eviction, and
2. Services that intervene when there is a clear risk of homelessness, in advance of homelessness actually occurring.

In the first instance, homelessness prevention can take the form of early intervention, before an individual or family loses their home. Here, advocacy groups, such as Threshold, play an important role in acting on behalf of an individual or family who is at risk of losing their tenancy. Since 2014, Threshold has offered a Tenancy Protection Service, providing practical support for households at risk of homelessness, centred on advice, advocacy and support. In the first three months of 2022, Threshold's Tenancy Protection Service prevented over 2,500 adults and children from entering homelessness. In each of these cases, households were either able to stay in their homes (e.g., via an increase in housing support payment), or were supported to secure alternative housing.[86]

In terms of homeless prevention policy, service providers in this research spoke of the positive impact that certain emergency measures, introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, had on the overall prevention of homelessness during the pandemic period, and the way in which homeless services were delivered.

Increased communication and collaboration at a State level led to the introduction of important moratoriums on evictions and rent increases – two initiatives that contributed positively to a reduction in homelessness numbers in the early stages of the pandemic.

The Residential Tenancies Act 2020[87] introduced a temporary prohibition on tenancy terminations during the Covid-19 pandemic, applicable when 'Level 5' restrictions were in place. While a notice of termination could still be issued during these periods of emergency, it could not take effect until after the expiry of the emergency period, plus an extra 10-day grace period.

The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020[88] introduced further protections for renters who were financially impacted by the pandemic and at increased risk of losing their tenancy due to arrears. This, and the revised Residential Tenancies (no.2) Act[89], saw protections in place for tenants in arrears from 1 August 2020 to 12 January 2022. These protections meant that for tenants who could prove that they had been financially impacted by the pandemic, any notice of termination for rent arrears could not expire before 13 January 2022.

At the same time as the prohibition on evictions, the Government also introduced a rent freeze, initially for a period of three months from 27 March 2020, and later extended to 20 July 2020.[90] Under this rent freeze, valid notices of rent increases could not take effect until the emergency period was over, and could not be backdated.

[85] Pleace, N. (2019), Preventing Homelessness: A review of the International Evidence. University of York and Simon Communities of Ireland
[86] Threshold's Quarterly Impact Report Q1 2022

[87] The Residential Tenancies Act 2020 - What this Means for Landlords and tenants
[88] The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 - What this Means for Landlords and Tenants
[89] Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021
[90] Ahern, D. and R. Suryapratim (2020). Law and Policy Response to Covid-19 in Ireland: Supporting Individuals, Communities, Business and the Economy, Covid-19 Legal Observatory, Trinity College Dublin

Research and data has subsequently shown the positive impact that these policy changes had on homelessness in Ireland. In March 2020 there were 6,550 homeless adults in Ireland, 1,488 homeless families, and 3,355 homeless children. By March 2021, with the ban on evictions in place, the number of homeless had dropped to 5,894 adults; 913 families; and 2,166 dependent children.[91]

Service provider interviewees spoke of the importance of the eviction and rent increase moratoriums, which allowed them 'to take a breath', and facilitated early intervention and eviction prevention.

> *And in the absence of some of the Covid-19 restrictions… the situation could have been a whole lot worse for a whole lot of people. There was huge benefit because it allowed us to deal with people, support people, and then treat people in accommodation without the risk of losing their tenancy. – SP 2*

In the months since the moratorium on evictions was lifted, homelessness has risen steadily. As of June 2022 there were 7,421 homeless adults; 1,385 homeless families; and 3,071 homeless dependent children in the State. According to one service provider, the lifting of the moratoriums has seen the situation 'return to normal', but with the added challenge of even fewer homes available than pre-Covid-19.

> *We had a time when notices of termination were not allowed and we were actually able to take a breath… But then it starts again… You're on this revolving door situation with people that you've seen a couple of months ago… and saying, "It's OK, you're qualified for HAP. Go and have a look around, find some accommodation… you should be able to find something." We can't say that now. We have no confidence that private rented is going to be found by any of the people that come to us now, except they're looking for less popular, rural towns…. I just think normal service has resumed now… but with less supply and higher rent costs. – SP 3*

All service providers who contributed to this study agreed that these policies played a significant role in reducing the number of people becoming homeless and improving the provision of homeliness services during the pandemic, and see merit in re-introducing similar measures for a defined period of time to help deal with the ongoing crisis.

[91] Homeless Data June 2022, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Where homelessness occurs without warning, or before prevention measures can be successfully implemented, 'rapid re-housing' services are important to end homelessness quickly. And where households require longer-term supports, integration with health, drug, alcohol, mental health, and other services can help preventative services to maintain accommodation (i.e., Housing First model).

The role of rapid-rehousing is important for reducing the negative impacts of homelessness in situations where homelessness can not be prevented. Rapid re-housing is typically defined as short-term rental assistance and services that facilitate people to obtain housing quickly, increase self-sufficiency, and stay housed.[92] Housing First type models too have an important function in an integrated homelessness strategy, and homeless prevention. As highlighted by some service providers, the use of traditional private emergency accommodation could be replaced with supported accommodation or a Housing First type model for families, young people, and couples.

> *Designated accommodation with a full wrap around service… I know we're trying that with Housing First but I think we need more of it… Sometimes people with mental health issues often need that support to live independently and it's a fine balance between supporting somebody and actually removing all their autonomy as well. And that's where the model of Housing First is very, very useful. Allowing people to fail, learn and move on is so important. – SP1*

Case Study II demonstrates the effective use of rapid-rehousing and permanent supportive housing (Housing First) in reducing overall levels of homelessness. The Homeless Services Coordinated Access model, as applied in Alberta, Canada, is a process of allocating vulnerable individuals and families to appropriate emergency accommodation and permanent housing, based on 'data-informed decision-making'. There are different models of Coordinated Access but at the core of the model is the implementation of a consistent process across service providers in the community.

[92] Rapid Rehousing definition, National Alliance to End Homelessness. Accurate as of 20 July 2022.

Case Study II: Homeless Services Coordinated Access Process

A Coordinated Access System, in use in the US and Canada, is a process by which individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness are directed to community-level 'access points' where trained workers use a Common Assessment Tool to evaluate the individual or family's depth of need, prioritize them for housing support services, and then help to match them to available housing focused interventions. It includes the following elements -

Standardised Tools & Practices
Consistent process to identify appropriate housing interventions

Streamlined Access & Referral
Fair and Equitable

Continual Improvement
Data-informed decision-making

Community-wide Prioritisation
Identify housing for people with the highest needs

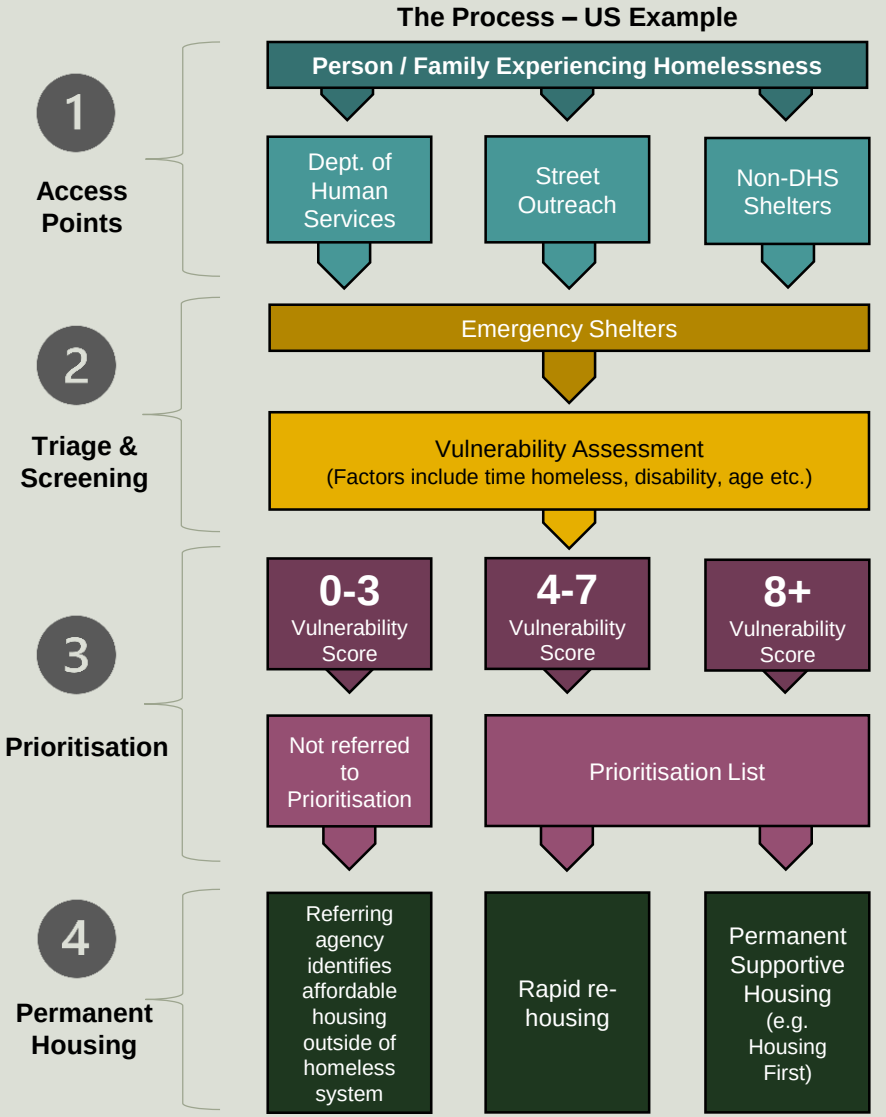
The Goals

- Improve speed, accuracy and consistency in screening, targeting, and intake.
- Decrease the length of time persons experience homelessness.
- Reduce the rate of returns to homelessness.
- Increase successful placements into and retention of permanent housing.

The Benefits

- Collaboration of homeless service providers and other essential community stakeholders creates the culture needed to help end homelessness.
- Connecting supportive services with those who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

See Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, Government of Canada and Coordinated Entry, Partners Ending Homelessness



This data-driven approach, along with policies such as Housing First, allowed areas like Medicine Hat[93], Alberta, Canada, become the first city in Canada to achieve 'functional zero'[94] chronic homelessness. This achievement came on foot of the city's 2015 success of ending homelessness i.e., no one experiences homelessness for more than 10 days before they have access to stable housing and the supports needed to maintain it. Since the city started working on this initiative in 2009 shelter use has been reduced by 64% overall.

Homelessness prevention may be further facilitated through enhanced levels of tenancy sustainment which could help to prevent re-occurring homelessness amongst certain cohorts who can not currently avail of Housing First. Such supports would be provided to individuals and families when they exit emergency accommodation, and could potentially be provided through a Housing First type model.

> *I think more support [is needed], more actual physical support for people who are living in homeless [accommodation]. In my opinion, success is predicated on someone actually holding down accommodation, actually remaining in accommodation. Social accommodation is one thing, but people living independently, with or without support, I think is the essence of how we resolve the issues that we have with homelessness. We know that people in homelessness, a lot of them, find themselves suffering with mental health and addiction and I think the models like Housing First demonstrate that there's evidence to suggest that it does a good job. And with the right supports people can sustain their accommodation… I think we probably need to have more. – SP 2*

The 2019 report from Simon Communities of Ireland suggests that the same tenancy sustainment services which provide supports and advice to prevent housing loss (e.g., Threshold's Tenancy Protection Service) could also provide the same support as part of a rapid re-housing, or Housing First type model, ensuring that households have access to any necessary support and treatment required to help sustain their tenancy.[95]

[93] See The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness for more information.
[94] Functional zero means that there are three or less individuals experiencing chronic homelessness in the community for three consecutive months.
[95] Pleace, N. (2019), Preventing Homelessness: A review of the International Evidence. University of York and Simon Communities of Ireland

Case Study II demonstrates what can be achieved when a consistent and all-encompassing definition of homelessness is applied and data/information is collated on that basis. Before such an approach to homelessness and prevention could be implemented in Ireland, fundamental changes are required to the homeless system in terms of ensuring that a consistent definition of homelessness is used to determine a persons need and consistent data is captured across local authorities to track homeless service demand.

The Government currently publish monthly data on individuals and families living in emergency accommodation but there is still no official data on homelessness in Ireland. The figures published by the Government do not capture those staying temporarily with family or friends; those who are rough sleeping; those residing in domestic violence refuges; those families temporality living in local authority housing; or those in direct provision. Without a true indication of the level of the homelessness issue in Ireland, setting policy objectives and targets to reduce and eliminate it may prove futile.

The Housing Act, 1988[96], provides the legal definition of homelessness in Ireland:

> *2. A person shall be regarded by a housing authority as being homeless for the purposes of this Act if—*
>
> *(a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who normally resides with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or*
>
> *(b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a), and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources.*

This long-standing definition of homelessness captures only those who are considered 'roofless' or 'houseless' and fails to adequately capture those living in 'insecure' or 'inadequate' housing. Such a definition leaves significant gaps in capturing who is eligible for homeless services. Transitioning to an inclusive definition, such as the ETHOS[97] definition, reflects more broadly an individuals experience of homelessness, and would allow greater flexibility in terms of the allocation of appropriate services to those at highest risk of homelessness.

[96] Housing Act, 1988
[97] European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS)

Review of Ireland's Emergency Accommodation Strategy

As it stands, the service users and providers interviewed for this research consider the provision of emergency accommodation in Sligo, and nationally, to be inadequate. The system currently in place in Sligo sees individuals and couples (with no dependent children) typically housed in hostels, while families are typically housed in B&Bs or hotels.

Service users spoke of the challenges of living in emergency accommodation for long periods of time, referring to the lack of privacy, a lack of kitchen facilities, and having to share bathrooms, bedrooms, and living rooms. In many cases, the only privacy afforded to service users is in their own room.

> *It's almost like I'm back in isolation from COVID-19 when we were locked down, because we can't leave. We've nowhere to go…. If the weather's good, we can go to the park or the beaches, but if it's raining, we're stuck in one room… My kids are isolated from their friends, their cousins, because we can't have anyone over at the B&B to protect others identities… I just don't feel that I have privacy… Not just from [the owner] but even to have privacy not to have to get dressed or undressed in front of my children. – Anna*

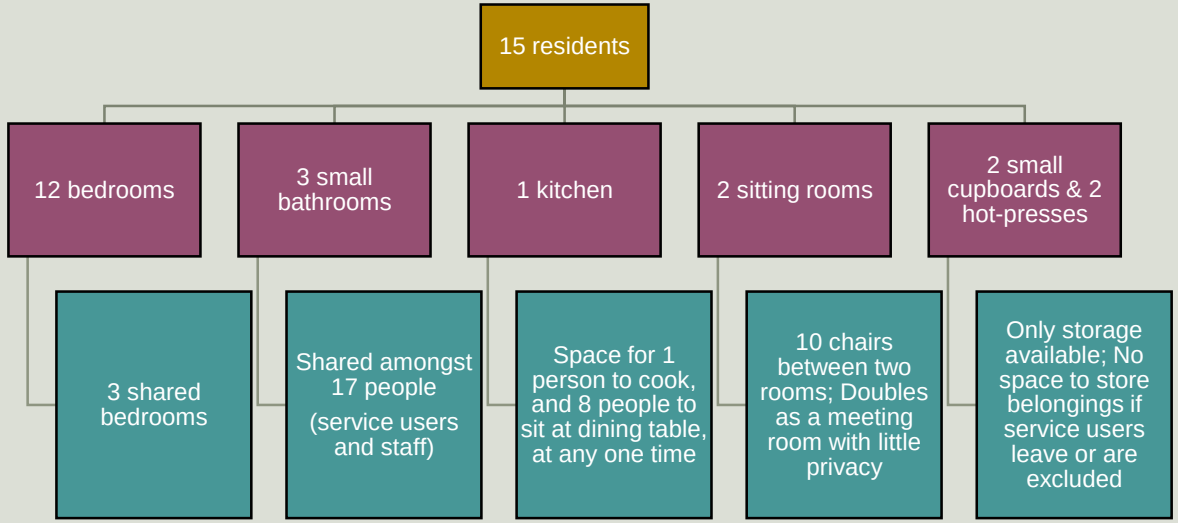
Service users living in emergency hostels, in particular, spoke of the standard of their emergency accommodation with one service user describing it as being "too cold", with "too many drafts" and "mould in the corners of the bathrooms". As an example of the suitability of the current stock of emergency accommodation in Sligo, Case Study III focuses on Maryville Hostel and outlines the history of the building, its capacity, maintenance costs and facilities. The Case Study demonstrates the extent to which some emergency accommodation in Sligo is not fit for purpose and requires significant levels of investment.

The need to move away from private emergency accommodation, such as hostels, B&Bs and hotels, was noted by service providers. One service provider spoke of the positive case studies that arose from the use of student accommodation during the pandemic.

Case Study III: Maryville Emergency Hostel

History

The original structure was built in c. 1930s as a family home. It was abandoned in the late 1960s and after a period of dereliction was acquired by SSSC in 1989, refurbished, and opened as a homeless hostel in 1990.



Required maintenance over the past four years – c. €38,000

- c. €10,000 on the kitchen
- c. €15,000 on new fire alarm and emergency lighting
- c. €6,000 on two new oil-fired burners
- c. €7,000 to refurbish the main sitting room and installation of a solid fuel stove

Required maintenance in the coming years

- c. €50,000 on the replacement of all windows and doors which are no longer air tight or thermally efficient.

General Maintenance Budget

- €7,000 annually

> *During Covid… [the Council] used student accommodation and it worked so well. And people did move on from there because… they were giving them comfortable accommodation, they had access to things like a kitchen, but not that comfortable that you'd make a life there… And the reason they stopped using them is because students returned... And there was single people put into that accommodation too… those student type accommodations that are far more suitable for six to nine months, or six months to a year. – SP 5*

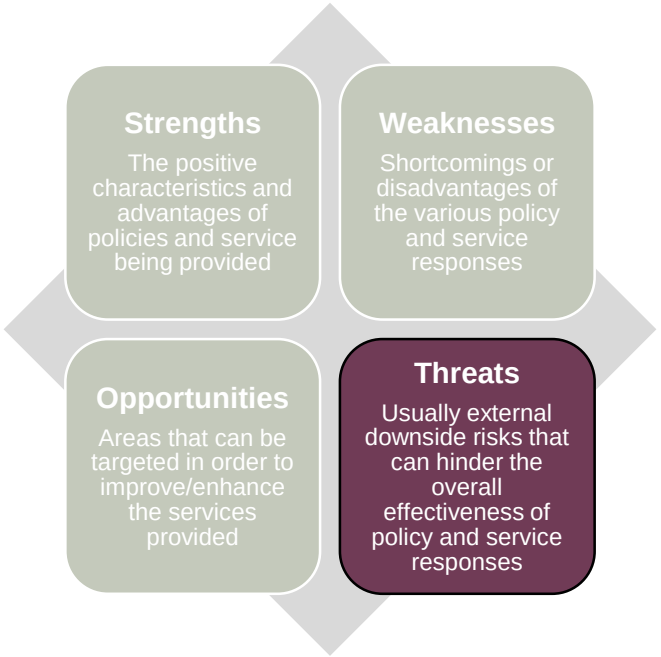
One service user also considered the role that supported independent living hubs could have for certain homeless cohorts. The use of emergency accommodation hubs was first introduced under the 2016 Rebuilding Ireland plan with a focus on providing 'supported temporary accommodation' for families in particular. While there is merit in this type of supported accommodation, a 2017 report from IHREC highlighted the risk of such accommodation types in institutionalising and normalising homelessness.[98] Strong protocols would be required to ensure that such hubs would only be used on a short-term basis to avoid the social exclusion that has emerged with the current use of B&B's, hotels, and hostels.

Recommendations

- Consideration should be given to the short-term re-introduction of the eviction moratorium until the current level of homelessness returns to a 'manageable' level.
- Move away from communal hostel and B&B type emergency accommodation settings, towards a Housing First type model for single people, young people, couples and families that promotes secure independent living, and provides wrap around services where required.
- Establish a consistent definition of homelessness that captures all types of homelessness and is applied uniformly across all service providers.
- Undertake a nationwide review of the current stock of emergency accommodation to ensure minimum health and safety standards are upheld, and that accommodation-types are fit for purpose. Review budget allocations, were applicable, to ensure that minimum standards can be maintained.

[98] The Provision of Emergency Accommodation to Families Experiencing Homelessness, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, July 2017

6.4 Threats



Having identified the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in Ireland's homelessness services, this Section of the report focuses on broader national and international factors that may impact homelessness services in the short- to medium-term. These threats, or external downside risks, are informed by national and global trends, and forecasts.

Broadly, the factors which hold the greatest threat for the housing market, homelessness, and the provision of homelessness services are (ii) the rising cost-of-construction, (ii) the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis, and (iii) the rising cost-of-living. Each of these threats are briefly discussed hereafter.

Rising Cost of Construction

The reopening of building sites in 2021 brought with it a wave of cost inflation and supply chain issues. Recent research from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI) showed that national construction tender prices increased by 6% in the second half of 2021, driven by post-Covid pent-up demand, supply chain issues, labour shortages, and exceptional material price increases. This followed a 7% increase in the first half of 2021.[99]

The rapid increase in material and energy costs has put the delivery of many critical projects at risk, including the delivery of public and private sector projects under the Housing for All plan. The SCSI, in a separate report, determined that the total cost of delivering a two-bedroom, standard spec, medium-rise suburban apartment is now €440,000, an increase of 14% on pre-Covid costs.[100] This means that for the project to be viable, the sale price would need to be in excess of €440,000.

The Government has reaffirmed their Housing for All targets despite the rising cost of construction inflation and increased economic uncertainty.[101] With such significant inflation, however, the Governments roll in bridging the viability gap will likely grow.

Some provision has already been made for apartment owner-occupier buyers through the Croí Cónaithe scheme which will see developers subsidised by between €25,000 and €144,000 per unit to address the viability gap.[102] In May 2022, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform announced additional measures to address the impact of construction material price inflation on public works projects contained in the National Development Plan 2021-2030. An 'inflation co-operation framework' will see additional inflationary costs apportioned between public bodies and contractors with the State bearing up to 70% of the additional costs.[103] To date there have been no similar commitments to ensure the viability and delivery of social housing and cost-rental targets.

[99] Tender Price Index, April 2022, Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland
[100] The Real Costs of New Apartment Delivery - Analysis of Apartment Development Costs and Viability, Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, RICS
[101] Housing for All: Q1 2022 Progress Report
[102] Croí Cónaithe (Cities) Scheme, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
[103] Inflation Co-Operation Framework, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Ukrainian Humanitarian Crisis

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022, Ireland has committed to supporting tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. It is understood that it will cost €2.5 billion to support up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees in Ireland. With over 35,000 Ukrainians[104] already seeking refuge in Ireland, and no cap on the number that may arrive, pressures on services such as education and health are likely to increase, along with pressure on providing sustainable medium- and long-term accommodation.

While there was no discernible impact on homelessness from the humanitarian crisis at the time of this study, homeless service providers spoke of the potential positives and negatives associated with the additional pressure likely to come on housing. There was fear that homeless people currently living in emergency accommodation may be 'pushed to the back of the que' as Ukrainian refugees are given priority and also some hope that the initiatives brought in to support Ukrainian refugees could also be used to support Ireland's homeless population.

> *I'm not sure there's going to be progress, that's what I'm sceptical about. I would like to think that, but I don't think there's been enough thought and planning in it… We have a huge homelessness and housing issue and then we're… inviting in more people, as we should, but there should be more planning on where these families are going to be in six, nine, 12 months. – SP 6*

> *I'd say [homeless being forgotten about] is a grave concern in the sector and for the people dealing with homeless provision. Absolutely, it's a serious concern because as it is at the moment, I think that's probably happening… there is talk that they are using emergency accommodation in some counties... But I think what is going to influence homelessness over the next 12 months is what's happening in Ukraine, and I think we can piggyback on that because they can't leave homelessness now… Certainly I'm looking forward to seeing what proposal [the Government] have in mind for housing for Ukrainians because certainly that is something that could be a benefit for homeless. We have sites, and it's all about procurement. If the Government come along with an initiative now to procure these we'd certainly be looking to piggyback to see can we do something similar for homeless services. – SP 4*

[104] Arrivals from Ukraine in Ireland, Series 2, CSO

Rising Cost of Living

While economic growth in Ireland remained strong during the pandemic, thanks to the plethora of financial supports introduced to assist individuals and businesses through the worst of the crisis, factors have since emerged that may impact the level of growth for Ireland in the short- to medium-term. The Central Bank, in their Quarterly Bulletin (Q2 2022), revised downwards their economic forecasts, and while still robust relative to other European economies, higher inflation and uncertainty caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine are impacting the outlook.[105]

The rising cost of living is a significant challenge and has consequences for how people live day-to-day with reduced purchasing power. Economies beyond Ireland have been challenged with the same inflationary problems, with the UK and US[106] both taking steps to increase interest rates to reign in inflation, where inflation stands at 9.4% and 9.1% respectively. Euro Area inflation is 8.9%, as of July 2022.[107]

Currently, the rising cost-of-living, predominantly through the rise in energy and house/rent prices, is placing significant financial strain on certain cohorts of society. This is broadly reflected in the rising homelessness figures.

With individuals and families already under significant strain with regard to rental costs and the cost-of-living, and in an economy with an already dysfunctional housing market, a continued increase in inflation, and/or the threat of a recession may have long-lasting and devesting effects for the most vulnerable in society.

[105] Quarterly Bulletin No. 2 2022, Central Bank of Ireland.
[106] Bank of England - Monetary Policy Summary; US Federal Reserve - Monetary Policy Implementation.
[107] UK Consumer Price Index, Office of National Statistics, June 2022; US Consumer Price Index, Bureau of Labour Statistics, April 2022; Euro Area Consumer Price Index, Eurostat, July 2022

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The SWOT analysis presented here demonstrates the extent to which homeless services in Sligo can be improved. While certain strengths in the system were identified by service users and providers, they are limited and are outweighed by weaknesses and challenges.

Where weaknesses do exist, however, there equally exists opportunities to improve the overall homeless service provision for users. The opportunities identified in this research range from those that must be implemented at a national level (e.g., supply, affordability, funding), to those that are considered within the gift of SCC, SSSC, and other service providers, to address and help mitigate issues in the system.

- ✓ At a national level, the supply of affordable private rented accommodation needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. While supply in general is welcome, issues around affordability and blockages within the system will only be addressed through the provision of a range of accommodation types, including one-bed units, at affordable prices.
- ✓ Similarly, the introduction at a national level of a 'rent register' would greatly enhance the level of protection afforded to sitting and future tenants, and help to enforce RPZ rules.
- ✓ The over-reliance on the HAP system, as a means of social housing, needs to be reviewed and assessed. The scheme has placed additional undue pressures on the private rented sector and recipients typically pay 'top-ups' to their landlords to compensate for inadequate HAP rent limits that no longer reflect current market rents. Both service users and providers have called for revisions to be made to the HAP scheme and for greater emphasis to be placed on the supply of new social housing to reduce reliance on private rented accommodation to meet social housing needs.
- ✓ From the service users perspective, communication from service providers needs to be improved. In a system where service users can quickly feel lost and isolated, there is scope for SCC and other service providers to review their methods of communication. On entering the system, service users should be provided with a clear pathway through the system, and details on the range of services available to them. This pathway may include explicitly mapping out the various stages and timelines that service users may expect as they await more secure, permeant housing arrangements. Aligned with this, greater clarity around the role and function of the Council as a homeless service provider, and a system of regular 'check-ins' from service providers, may help to appease service users frustrations.
- ✓ Previous research has shown that homeless people are typically more aware of their responsibilities when living in emergency accommodation, than their rights. SCC, in collaboration with other service providers in the region, should run a rights awareness campaign targeted at those living in emergency accommodation to ensure that service users are aware of the protections in place for them. Similarly, the creation of an 'empowerment strategy' for those living in emergency hostels could help to improve the relationship between service users and staff.
- ✓ This research shows that there is scope to improve the types of supports available to service users. The role of a key worker or peer support worker emerged as an important one in terms of vocalising the experience and needs of homeless people. The addition of such a role on the Housing Action Team, for example, could lead to more focused targets and positive outcomes for service users. Consideration should be given to what this role might look like in the context of the services already in place in Sligo.
- ✓ The link between mental health and homelessness is an important one. While the role of the clinical nurse specialist has had a positive impact for the residents in emergency hostels, there appears to be a gap in mental health provision for families and children in the system. This may warrant further exploration in terms of the type and adequacy of services already in place, and how users are linked in with services.

- ✓ Service users and providers spoke of the opportunity to establish a 'One-Stop-Shop' in Sligo. Such an offering could greatly benefit (i) rough sleepers specifically through the provision of cleaning facilities and hot meals and (ii) the entire local homeless population through the provision of physical and mental health services, legal services, employment and training opportunities etc.
- ✓ At a national level, consideration should be given to the short-term reintroduction of the eviction moratorium. Empirical evidence shows the extent to which these initiatives positively impacted homelessness figures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their reintroduction, for a defined period of time, may help to alleviate pressures in the system and bring homelessness back to a more 'manageable' level for service providers.
- ✓ A holistic review of the provision of emergency accommodation in general is an important next step for service provision in Sligo. Both service users and providers spoke of the inadequacy of the current stock of emergency accommodation, and the negative impacts on physical and mental health of living in hostel and B&B settings for extended periods of time. This research shows that there is broad consensus for the expansion of a Housing First type model beyond its use for single individuals. With adequate funding, the tried-and-tested model of Housing First, with associated wrap around services where required, could play an important role in addressing youth, couple, and family homelessness. Fully understanding the demand for emergency accommodation will be important in informing any new plan for emergency accommodation in Sligo. Broadening the definition of homelessness beyond what is currently defined in Irish legislation will also more accurately reflect the true number of people who are without a secure, adequate home.
- ✓ At a local level, each homeless service provider should undertake a review of their emergency accommodation to ensure that it meets minimum health and safety standards and that it is fit for purpose. Where applicable, a review by SCC of budget allocations to homeless service providers should be undertaken to ensure that minimum standards can be maintained.
- ✓ In the short- to medium-term, threats beyond the control of service providers, and the Government, may act to hamper the extent to which positive changes can be enacted in the provision of homelessness services. Notwithstanding the issues facing the Government from the rising cost of living, of equal concern is the potential impact that the rising cost of construction and the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis may have on the housing sector in Ireland. In the first instance, a continued upward trend in the cost of construction could see important private and State-led housing developments come to a halt as developers negotiate the implications of rising costs. For the latter, Ireland's commitment to support Ukrainian refuges will likely see additional pressures placed on an already squeezed private rented sector and allocation of social housing. The Government will need to mitigate these threats, in so far as is possible, to ensure that the depth of the housing and homelessness crisis is not further worsened.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Over the past decade, issues of supply and affordability have epitomised the Irish housing market and the private rented sector in particular. The knock-on impact on individuals and families has been a rise in tenancy insecurity, financial distress, and homelessness.

The objective of this research was to identify the main pathways into homelessness for people living in Sligo and to identify gaps in the provision of services there. Since Housing First was first rolled out in Sligo over two years ago, the number of chronic homeless individuals has reduced significantly. However, emergency accommodation still remains at or above capacity.

This research shows that while the issues that would have been traditionally identified as the reasons for a household presenting as homeless, issues around marital/family breakdown and substance abuse, still exist, structural issues relating to the housing sector – tenancy terminations, lack of supply, and affordability, that are beyond the control of individual households – are being more readily identified as the key determinant of whether a household in crisis proceeds into homelessness. This sense that matters are well beyond the control of either the household or their support services is piling yet more stress on the shoulders of people who are already experiencing the trauma of having to accept that the family or individual was in need of support homelessness services.

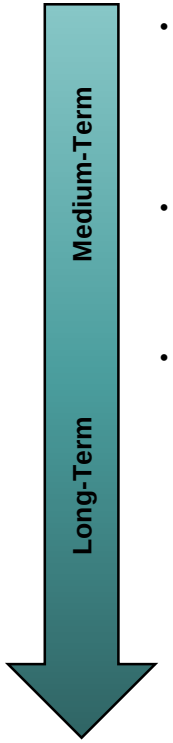
Strengths, or positives, in the current system are few and far between, and there is clear evidence that a fundamental shift in philosophy around homelessness is required, at both a local and national level, if the problem is be addressed in a meaningful manner. The long-standing view that people 'need to be ready' for housing is now being replaced with the hypothesis that the provision of secure, affordable housing is the critical first-step to recovery and independent living.

The insights and experiences of service users and service providers have greatly informed the range of recommendations that are outlined here. Short-, medium-, and long-term recommendation are presented, with important changes and opportunities identified at a local level, all the way to policy changes required at a national level.

Short-term recommendation are those that are considered to be implementable within the next six months or so; medium-term recommendations may be implemented within six to 18 months, while longer-term recommendations may take 18+ months to implement successfully.

Housing Supply, Affordability, HAP, and Security of Tenure

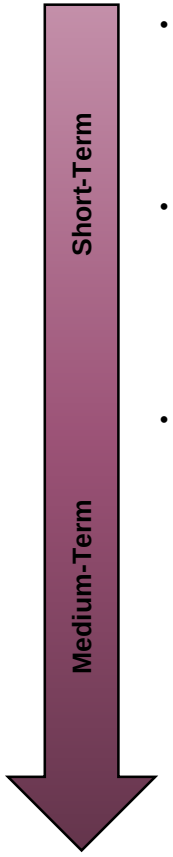
This research clearly illustrates the extent to which housing shortages, affordability and security of tenure are impacting private renters and homeless people. There are a number of measures that should be introduced to alleviate these issues.



- A review and revision of the ***HAP rent limits*** in line with market rents is urgently required. For the scheme to successfully act as an alternative to social housing, there must be measures in place to ensure greater security for tenants. The HAP scheme, more broadly, must also be reviewed to ensure that it is fit for purpose.
- The creation of a ***'rent register'*** to enforce and track the application of RPZ rules by landlords will help to address affordability and ensure that rent certainty measures equally protect perspective as well as sitting tenants.
- The Government has already fallen far short of the **housing supply** targets it set for 2022, while the demand for affordable housing not just for those experiencing homelessness has continued to grow. It is clear that the existing targets for increasing the supply of affordable private rented, and new build social housing, outlined in "Housing for All" need to increase significantly in light of both the rapidly increasing cost of construction and the rising rents being demanded by the market. Government can rapidly improve supply and affordability in the market by bringing in additional measures to significantly enhance the provision of cost rental accommodation, and place much greater emphasis on bringing vacant social and private properties into use by either increasing funding allocations or by prioritising expenditure on refurbishment over spending on new builds.

Communication and Information

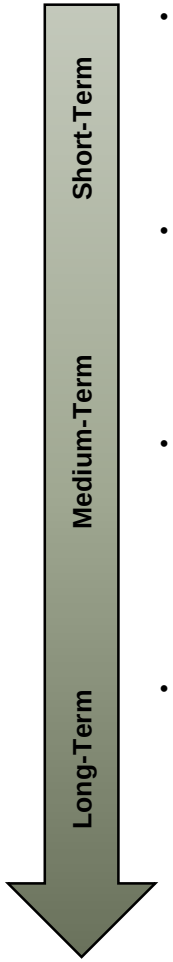
The service user experience of homelessness, as detailed in this report, is one of isolation, and feeling lost in the system. There is scope to improve the level of communication and information between service users and providers with small changes likely to have a significant impact on the experience for service users.



- SCC should work together with other homeless service providers to establish a ***'check-in' system*** with service users living in emergency accommodation on a weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly basis. These SCC 'check-ins' could be over the phone, or in-person, and should provide a brief update of the services users case.
- To further strengthen the relationship between service users and staff members in emergency hostels, SSSC should establish an ***'empowerment strategy'*** setting out, for example, clear communication pathways and dispute/complaint resolution procedures. This strategy should be updated on a regular basis and made available as part of a 'welcome-pack' for residents.
- SCC along with other homeless, mental health, and addiction service providers should work together to develop and implement a ***'Pathway through Homelessness'*** document for users. This roadmap should be a key objective of the forthcoming Regional Homeless Action Plan detailing every stage of a service users journey through the system, from their first meeting with the Council; the expected duration of stay in emergency accommodation; and the expected outcome (e.g., Housing First, HAP assisted accommodation, social housing etc.). The Pathway should also include important contact information for the various service providers in Sligo; each service providers function and role within the system; the service users rights and responsibilities while living in emergency accommodation, and the types of services and level of communication that users should expect from providers. Such an initiative could be jointly funded as a partnership approach from all homeless service providers.

Improved Homelessness Supports

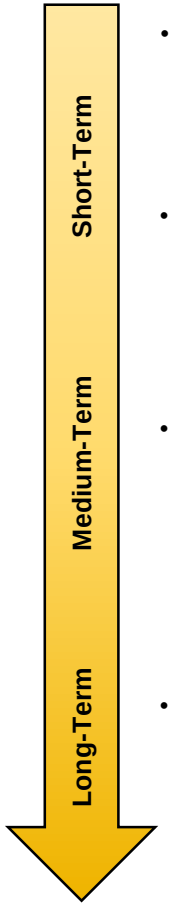
A range of services have been identified through this research that, if implemented, would significantly add to and strengthen the supports and services already in place.



- SCC should ensure that a designated ***key worker***, with an appropriate work load, is assigned to each individual and family that enters emergency accommodation, for the duration of time they live in emergency accommodation. Such a role will improve the level of communication between service user and provider, and help to reduce isolation and mental health strain.
- The introduction of a ***peer support worker*** to the Homeless Action Team could be important in terms of vocalising the experience and needs of homeless people. Such a role currently does not exist as part of the Homeless Action Team and consideration should be given to what this role might look like in practice, in the context of the services already in place in Sligo.
- ***Mental health*** and homelessness are intrinsically linked. The role of the clinical nurse specialist in emergency hostels has proved a vital component in addressing mental health issues at an early stage. Similar provision should be considered/strengthened for homeless families through, for example, a 'mental health needs assessment' on first entering emergency accommodation. Collaboration between SCC, HSE, and Tusla would be required for such an initiative.
- The provision of a ***'One-Stop-Shop'*** in Sligo town for homeless people and rough sleepers will create a situation where services come to those who need them rather than individuals and families having to seek them out. Such a development could include a GP service, legal service, washing and laundry facilities, children's activities, employment and training opportunities etc. A separate cost-benefit analysis should be undertaken to review the various funding options for the 'One-Stop-Shop' but one model may see SCC lead the project in partnership with other homeless agencies in the region.

Review of Ireland's Homelessness and Emergency Accommodation Strategy

Short-, medium-, and long-term goals have been identified to strengthen Ireland's homelessness and emergency accommodation strategy. These include targeted prevention measures, improved funding allocation, with an emphasis on the important role of Housing First type models in addressing homelessness. A move towards a more comprehensive definition of homelessness and improved data collection will mark an important first step in improving service provision.



- As a homeless prevention measure, the reintroduction of the ***moratorium on evictions*** for a defined period of time will take significant pressure off service providers, and the housing market more generally. The use of a moratorium during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the positive impact such a policy can have in the preventing homelessness.
- A review of the current stock of emergency accommodation in each local authority should be undertaken to ensure that minimum health and safety standards are upheld. Review **budget allocations** (at a national and local authority level) to various homeless service providers to ensure that they accurately reflect the cost of maintaining minimum health and safety standards.
- Accurate and timely data on the numbers and type of persons/families that are homeless or living in insecure or inadequate housing is required. Transition towards the ETHOS ***definition of homelessness***, applied uniformly across all service providers, will not only more accurately reflect the scale of the homelessness crisis, but also inform the most appropriate types of services and housing options required to address the problem. Such an initiative would need to be rolled out nationally but could be trialled by SCC as a case study to demonstrate its efficacy.
- Nationally, the provision of emergency accommodation should move away from communal hostel and B&B type settings towards a model that promotes secure independent living, and provides wrap around services where required. This may look like a ***Housing First type model***, expanded to include young people, couples, and families. The most appropriate model would be largely informed through the collection of timely data as detailed above.