



Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Simon Communities in Ireland

29th May 2018

1. Introduction

1.1. Thank you and about the Simon Communities: Thank you to the Committee and the Chairperson for inviting us here today. The Simon Communities are a network of communities, providing local responses to local needs and issues of homelessness all around the country based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East. People who are homeless and at risk are among the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society composed of a diverse group of people that include women, young people, families, those with complex mental and physical health needs and people with problematic drug and alcohol use. In March 2018 according to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) there were at least 9,681 people trapped in Emergency Accommodation including 1,517 families, 3,627 children and 3,715 adults without dependents in their care.¹ We welcome the opportunity to speak to you today to further highlight the significant barriers to education facing this vulnerable group.

1.2. The links between poor educational attainment and experiences of homelessness: State, academic and NGO research and statistics broadly illustrate the links between poor educational attainment and experiences of homelessness. According to Census 2016, 38% of those enumerated as homeless that had ceased full time education did not have an educational qualification beyond lower secondary with only 26% of this cohort educated to primary level only. The impact of such low levels of educational attainment is captured by the 2016 CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). SILC data shows that individuals with lower levels of educational attainment had progressively lower incomes across the eight income categories analysed and ranked highest in terms of the three primary poverty indices. A study by the Partnership for Health Equity '*Homelessness An Unhealthy State*' illustrates the lack of educational supports for people experiencing homelessness with only 1% of 570 study participants in receipt of back-to-education allowance (BETA) payment.² A 2012 study by Cork Simon Community '*Working it Out – Barriers to Education and Employment*' involving 91 Cork Simon Community residents found that 65% of respondents had left school before completing the leaving cert with 13% attaining only primary education or below.³ Thirty-five percent of respondents had low literacy levels with 85% of this cohort being early school leavers. A 2014 study, '*Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*' offers an important insight into the educational pathways and experiences of young people who are experiencing homelessness.⁴ Thirty-one of 40 study participants had left school prior to completing their secondary education.

¹ DHPLG, Homelessness Report March 2018, http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_march_2018.pdf.

² Partnership for Health Equity, '*Homelessness An Unhealthy State: Health status, risk behaviours, and service utilisation among homeless people in two Irish cities*', April 2015, P. 25, <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24541/1/Homelessness.pdf>.

³ Cork Simon Community, '*Working it Out – Barriers to Education and Employment*', October 2012, P.2, <http://www.corksion.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Working-It-Out-A-report-on-the-barriers-to-employment-faced-by-people-who-are-homeless.-October-2012.pdf>.

⁴ Mayock P et al, '*Young People Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*', <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mayock-Parker-and-Murphy-2014-Young-People-Homelessness-and-Housing-Exclusion-EXEC-SUMMARY.pdf>.

2. Government Commitments – Education and Homelessness

2.1. Fragmented Government Strategies: Relevant Government strategies are not working to reverse trends highlighted by these statistics. The *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019* does not explicitly include people experiencing homelessness as a named target group, and considers homelessness a dispositional or individual barrier and not a structural barrier. *Rebuilding Ireland – Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (2016)* contains a number of actions relating to the educational needs of children trapped in emergency accommodation including access to early-years services, school completion programmes, access to free public transport for family travel and for school journeys. Given the 55% increase in childhood homelessness since the launch of *Rebuilding Ireland* questions must be raised regarding the availability and staffing of these vital support services. The national policy framework for children and young people, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF)* contains broad recognition of the challenges facing early school-leavers, a cohort that is over represented in the homeless population. This recognition is matched with appropriate commitments but does not name young people experiencing homelessness as a named target-group in this regard. The DHPLG had made homelessness its cross-sectoral priority for 2016 following discussion with the Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) Advisory Council but additional education focussed commitments under this approach mirror existing commitments contained in *Rebuilding Ireland*. It is clear that the primary Government strategies concerning young people and people experiencing homelessness are together inadequate in tackling the known and perceived barriers to education facing this vulnerable cohort.

3. Barriers to education for people experiencing homelessness

3.1. Summary of barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness: People experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to educational attainment. These structural barriers serve to compound the experience of homelessness preventing access to a vital pathway and transition out of homelessness. The primary barriers identified across recent research include the following:

- Learning difficulties, limited basic literacy and numeracy skills.
 - High rates of early school-leaving and low levels of qualifications.
 - The lack of active mentoring for Further Education and Training (FET) participants during and after the completion of FET programmes as a means of addressing cultural barriers and the lack of social mobility.
 - Having to abandon educational goals to receive better financial and welfare supports leading to poverty and unemployment traps.
 - The lack of affordable childcare services for parents.
 - Participants in the Living in Limbo study also cited that having no fixed address or stable accommodation at various times, including unstable returns to the family home, diminished their ability to (re)engage with education and training programmes.
 - The chaotic, unsettling and transient nature of hostel environments.
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4. Recommendations for change

4.1. Summary of recommendations to break down barriers to education: Access to education provides multifaceted protection - preventing housing instability and homelessness whilst being an important element in supporting people to leave homelessness and housing instability behind. Educational attainment is a necessary pathway to transition to employment, financial independence and housing security. In this regard, some of the recommendations we hope to discuss today are as follows:

- Expanding housing first targets with person-centred education and employment supports that are cognisant of the recognised barriers to education faced by people experiencing homelessness.
- The reassessment of *Rebuilding Ireland* educational and school supports and targets aimed at children and families in Emergency Accommodation.
- Educational supports for young people between the ages of 18 to 26 who are experiencing homelessness given the impact of early school leaving on this cohort.
- Access to the Back to Education Allowance Scheme for all adults experiencing homelessness.
- Increased childcare supports for all parents seeking to return to education and training.
- Active inclusion of people experiencing homelessness in existing Back to Work and Education and Training Programmes.
- Increased access to secure and quality employment on completion of study or training programmes.

About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities in Ireland are a network of eight regionally based independent Simon Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West and the South East that share common values and ethos in tackling all forms of homelessness throughout Ireland, supported by a National Office. The Simon Communities have been providing services in Ireland for over 45 years. The Simon Communities deliver support and service to over 11,000 individuals and families throughout Ireland who experience – or are at risk of – homelessness every year.

Whatever the issue, for as long as we are needed, Simon's door is always open. For more information please visit

Services include:

- Housing provision, tenancy sustainment & settlement services, housing advice & information services helping people to make the move out of homelessness & working with households at risk;
- Specialist health & treatment services addressing some of the issues which may have contributed to homeless occurring or may be a consequence;
- Emergency accommodation & support providing people with a place of welcome, warmth & safety;
- Soup runs & rough sleeper teams who are often the first point of contact for people sleeping rough.

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