



Merchants Quay Ireland
Homeless & Drugs Services

*Submission to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local
Government.*

Introduction

Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI) is a national organisation that helps people who are homeless and those caught in addiction. We provide frontline services, practical supports, pathways towards recovery and innovative responses to the issues of drug use and homelessness in Ireland.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the reports from the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and the Homelessness Inter-Agency Group. MQI works closely with both organisations in the provision of our services.

Housing Policy

MQI has consistently raised concerns that the cohort who access our services – single people, homeless, with complex needs – are being left behind by current housing and homeless policy. This is supported by both reports.

The DRHE report also identifies the delivery of single unit social housing accommodation as critical in addressing the needs of single people experiencing homelessness. The Inter-Agency Report states that “an increased supply of one-bed apartments needs to be urgently addressed by local authorities as part of social housing delivery programmes to ensure that appropriate accommodation is available for Housing First candidates and the wider population of single adults requiring this type of accommodation”.¹

Our concern is that with the prioritisation of families in the Government’s housing policy, single people - particularly those with mental health or addiction issues - are pushed ever further down the housing queue. In line with the Homelessness Inter-Agency’s report to the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and the DRHE report, Merchants Quay Ireland believe that there is an urgent need to increase the supply of one-bed apartments to meet the demand of the population who requires this type of accommodation.

On Housing First, Merchants Quay Ireland welcomes the publication of the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018-2021, in particular the expansion of the model to meet the needs of people exiting prison. International research on Housing First has shown the

¹ Homelessness Inter-Agency Group (2018) Report to the Minister for Housing, Planning, and Local Government, p35 [online] Available from: https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_inter-agency_group_-_report_to_minister_for_housing_planning_and_local_government.pdf.

model to be effective in delivering sustained exits from homelessness for people who are long-term homeless, including people with complex needs.²

The Housing First National Implementation Plan sets ambitious targets for 2018-2021, and as such, would require significant investment in wrap-around services, such as healthcare and treatment supports for people with complex needs. In particular, Merchants Quay Ireland would advocate for increasing the level of drug treatment services in Ireland, such as the number of rehabilitation and detox beds, as well as increasing opioid substitution treatment options. Increasing drug treatment has shown to be cost-effective, with a UK study showing that for every £1 invested in drug treatment saved £2.50 in costs to society –an overwhelmingly cost-effective return of 2.5 times, or 250%.³

The Dublin Region Homeless Executive report cites that over 220 housing first tenancies have been established to date.⁴ On the Rebuilding Ireland website, it is cited that there has been only 192 tenancies established. This discrepancy is concerning, and needs to be rectified so that reliable data is available. In the Rebuilding Ireland strategy for addressing homelessness, a target tripling the number of Housing First tenancies to 300 was set for 2017. Taking into consideration the discrepancy in figures by the DRHE report and the Rebuilding Ireland website figure on Housing First tenancies, either of these used as a comparable figure with the target shows that this objective was not met in the time outlined.

Underpinning much of what is discussed on both reports are the considerable difficulties encountered by those accessing the private rental market. The dysfunction of the private rental market is having knock-on effects, in particular on Housing Assistance Payment, the Government’s primary method of ensuring people exit homelessness.

The Homelessness Inter-Agency Group correctly notes “it is critical that there is strong regulation of [the private rented sector], including ensuring compliances with the limits in Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs)”.⁵ The instability associated with the private rented sector – perceived or otherwise – is acting as a barrier to uptake of HAP.

² Tsemberis, S. and Asmussen, S. (1999). From Streets to Homes: The Pathways to Housing Consumer Preference Supported Housing Model. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 17(1-2), pp.113-131.

³ Public Health England. (2018). Alcohol and drug prevention, treatment and recovery: why invest?

⁴ Dublin Region Homeless Executive. (2018). Report to Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, p.7 [online] Available at: <http://rebuildingireland.ie/install/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Report-of-DRHE-to-Department-of-Housing-Planning-Local-Government.pdf> [Accessed 11 Oct. 18].

⁵ Homelessness Inter-Agency Group (2018) Report to the Minister for Housing, Planning, and Local Government, p20 [online] Available from: https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_inter-agency_group_-_report_to_minister_for_housing_planning_and_local_government.pdf

According to DRHE figures, 45% of families who presented as homeless did so due to problems in the Private Rented Sector. The most common specified type of Notice of Termination given is the property to be sold, with tenant rent difficulties or arrears the next most commonly identified.⁶ The most recent statistics published by the Residential Tenancies Board found that 29% of disputes – the largest single proportion - in 2018 Q1 were related to rent arrears, with 20% in relation to invalid notice of termination.⁷ Furthermore, as analysis from the Simon Community has shown, only 6% of properties available to rent were within Rent Supplement/HAP limits. Within the time frame studied, out of an average of 199 properties available for rent in Dublin City Centre, the Simon Community found just one property for rent within HAP limits.⁸

A report by the Citizens Information Board highlighted similar concerns, as well as the issue of landlords, given current demand levels, being averse to taking HAP recipients.⁹ Given this experience of the private rented sector among those who are homeless, the reticence to move onto HAP is understandable. Alongside stronger regulation in the private rented sector, more regular reviews of maximum rent limits in Rent Supplement/HAP and social housing income limits may go some way to ameliorating these problems.

It is therefore concerning that the Government’s reliance on HAP and private sector appears to be increasing. Since 2016, the private rental sector’s role in social housing has increased from 74.2% to 75.4%. 68.2% of “social housing solutions” were completed through the HAP scheme, with 7% completed through new builds.¹⁰ According to the 2018 Q2 statistics on social housing delivery, 487 new builds were completed by local authorities, compared to 612 acquisitions.¹¹ A concern is that this reliance on the private sector, alongside lack of local authority builds, continues to have an inflationary effect on property prices.

Care Leavers and LGBTI homelessness

Within this context, we are seeing certain groups in particular struggle to obtain housing. In response to increasing numbers of young people becoming homeless, Merchants Quay

⁶ Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2017) Analysis Of The Newly Homeless Families Accommodated By Dublin’s Homeless Services During 2016, p.13 [online] <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Analysis-of-the-newly-homeless-families-accomodated-by-Dublins-homeless-services-during-2016.pdf>

⁷ Residential Tenancies Board (2018) 2018 Summary Key Findings Q1. [online] Available from:

https://onestopshop.rtb.ie/images/uploads/Comms%20and%20Research/Dispute_Resolution_Statistics_%282018_Q1%29.pdf

⁸ Simon Community (2018) Locked Out of the Market XI The Gap between Rent Supplement/HAP Limits and Market Rents.

⁹ Citizens Information Board (2017) Housing Assistance Payment – The Experience of Citizens Information Services.

¹⁰ The Irish Times, Only 4% of new social houses built by local authorities. 27 September 2018. Available from:

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/only-4-of-new-social-houses-built-by-local-authorities-1.3643509>

¹¹ Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government (2018). Social Housing Construction Projects Status Report Q2 2018. Available from: <http://rebuildingireland.ie/install/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Full-Construction-Status-report-Q2-2018.pdf>

Ireland employed a Young Person Support Worker (YPSW) to work specifically with 18-25 year olds in 2014, and have since employed a second YPSW to keep up with the demand for our services. In 2017, our YPSW worked with 172 young people, with 42% of these young people exiting care into homelessness. Little research currently exists on youth homelessness in Ireland, particularly young people exiting care into homelessness or LGBTI homelessness. Both young care leavers and LGBTI youth are disproportionately represented in homeless statistics. MQI believe that there is an urgent need to provide relevant and up-to-date data on the number of young people leaving care into homeless and their needs, which is something neither report goes into detail on.

Homelessness, health, and addiction

Another concern for MQI – and one highlighted in the DRHE report – is the health needs of people in long and short term emergency accommodation. This is borne out by MQI’s own statistics for 2017, which, compared to the previous year, saw a 55% increase in the number of people using our GP service, and a 33% increase in the number of people being supported by our mental health team. As the housing crisis continues and the risk of long-term homelessness increases, the impact on the physical and health of the individual also increases.

People who are homeless and caught in addiction are at an increased risk of having poor mental and physical health. While average life expectancy for the general population in Ireland is 81 years, people who are homeless have a life expectancy of 42 years.¹² One report found that half of those surveyed said homelessness sparked their mental ill-health.¹³ Latest figures published by National Self-Harm Registry, showed that while self-harm amongst the general population decreased in 2017, there was a rise of 13% amongst people who are homeless.¹⁴

From the above figures, it is evident the housing and homeless crisis is having a negative impact on the mental and physical health of people trapped in homelessness. Merchants Quay Ireland agree with the report by the Homelessness Inter-Agency on the need to continue to develop healthcare and mental health services for people who are homeless, failing to do so would only exasperate the negative implications of homelessness.

¹² <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/2017-BODH-JI-Mortality-Amongst-the-Homeless-ISM-Dublin.pdf>

¹³ Murphy, R., Mitchell, K. and McDaid, S. (2017). Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience. [online] Available at: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Homelessness-and-mental-health-report.pdf> [Accessed 8 Oct. 18].

¹⁴ Griffin, E, Dillon, CB, McTernan, N, Arensman, E, Williamson, E, Perry, JJ, Corcoran, P, (2018). National Self-Harm Registry Ireland Annual Report 2017. Cork: National Suicide Research Foundation, p.18.

Figures released by the Health Research Board showed that the proportion of people being treated for problematic drug use who are homeless jumped from 5.1% in 2010 to 9.6% in 2016. The number of new cases presenting for addiction treatment who are homeless has more than doubled from 2010-2016. Last year, 170 people were admitted to MQI's residential rehabilitation and detox services, while receiving over 950 referrals for people seeking treatment. In addition to this, nearly 50% of people entering treatment were homeless on admission.

While MQI provides aftercare housing for people leaving rehabilitation, there is not enough accommodation to meet the current demand. We have concerns about the number of people exiting from rehabilitation into homelessness. Many people who have made the effort of going through detox and rehabilitation are also finding themselves unable to obtain accommodation after completing treatment, putting their recovery at risk. The DRHE report correctly identifies the need for additional step down facilities. MQI believes that those who have gone through rehabilitation should be housed as a priority.

Data and Research

The current figures released by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government shows that there are 5,834 adults and 3,693 in emergency accommodation. However, Merchants Quay Ireland believe that this does not provide a full picture of the extent of the homeless crisis. Notwithstanding the questionable re-categorisation methods of the homeless figures, Merchants Quay Ireland believe that a number of homeless groups are excluded from the Department's figures, such as the;

- 110 rough sleepers ¹⁵
- 55 people on average staying in MQI's Night Café each night
- 1,460 women and 2,190 children in domestic violence shelters ¹⁶
- 5,446 people in direct provision and others ¹⁷

With these taken into consideration, the total number of people homeless in Ireland is 18,788.

¹⁵ Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2018) Spring Count on Rough Sleeping.

¹⁶ Safe Ireland. (2016). National Domestic Violence Service Statistics. [online] Available at: https://www.safeireland.ie/policy-publications/#dfliip-df_5075/1/ [Accessed 8 Oct. 18].

¹⁷ Reception and Integration Agency. (2018). Monthly Report July 2018. [online] Available at: <http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/RIA%20Monthly%20Report%2007-2018.pdf/Files/RIA%20Monthly%20Report%2007-2018.pdf> [Accessed 8 Oct. 2018]

Furthermore, the rough sleeper count takes place bi-annually, however MQI believe that this should be increased quarterly, and should be expanded to other counties. This would provide more up-to-date and relevant data on the levels of rough sleeping and the extent of rough sleeping around the state.

While the Homelessness Inter-Agency's report cites the need for research, it does not specify in what areas of homelessness. There are a number of groups in homelessness, such as care leavers, the LGBTI community, women, people in addiction, children, and migrants, all of which require specific research so that there is credible and reliable data. This will undoubtedly help services in responding to the unique needs of these homeless populations.

About Merchants Quay Ireland

Merchants Quay Ireland is a leading Irish charity working with people who are homeless and in addiction. The organisation provides services ranging from open access crisis intervention and health promotion services to day-support programmes, educational programmes, vocational training, residential treatment, detox and prison counselling. www.mqi.ie

Merchants Quay Ireland Statistics for 2017

- MQI's Riverbank Centre provided 107,504 meals to people who are homeless.
- 172 people aged between 18 – 25 were supported by MQI's Young Person Support Worker to move on from crisis and onto a positive pathway in life.
- 419 people were supported by our mental health team, a 33% increase on 2016
- There were 1,001 nursing interventions carried out in 2017, helping with wound care, blood testing, medication management and much more.
- The GP service had 6,102 appointments, helping people with a variety of acute and chronic illnesses, a 55% increase on 2016.
- 629 people visited MQI's dentist in 2017, getting treatment for painful ailments like toothaches and infections.
- 148 people attended the chiropodist, who helped ease many of the foot pains that come with walking for extended periods.
- 2,583 people attend the Health Promotion Unit in 2017, where they learned how to minimise the risks of drug use and were provided the option of a pathway into treatment.

- 2,547 prisoners accessed the National Prison-Based Addiction Counselling Service, with the MQI team delivering 10,252 one-to-one counselling sessions.
- In the Midlands, MQI provided drug and alcohol treatment support to 460 people.
- Through MQI's detox and rehabilitation services, MQI provided accessible treatment for 170 people who wished to become drug-free.