

Housing First Conference Report



Mansion House – Friday, 6th February 2009
What would happen If We Just Gave Homeless People a Home?

New thinking on how to address the problem of Homelessness is emerging from major cities across the world. “Cut through the red tape – give them a house with adequate supports – and not only does it work – it saves a load of money in the process.” This, in essence, is the **Housing First approach**.

The Oak Room in the Mansion was full to capacity on the morning of Friday, 6th March 2009 in anticipation of a presentation by Dutch Psychiatrist and Homeless Campaigner Rokus Loopik. Unfortunately, due to adverse weather conditions, Mr Loopik was unable to attend in person. However, he gave his presentation with the aid of web-conferencing, which was facilitated by members of the Homeless Focus Group of the Dublin Community Forum.

85 health-care professionals, policy makers and homeless Individuals all shared the Lord Mayor, Cllr Eibhlin Byrne’s hospitality to explore the potential for this new and challenging approach to Homelessness that is having an impressive impact in Major Cities around the world including New York and Amsterdam.

Housing First offers homeless individuals (especially those with psychiatric or addiction related difficulties) the opportunity to move directly into a Social Housing unit rather than having to work their way through a maze of Emergency Hostels and Transitional Housing. It invests directly in the individual and allows them the scope and support to step almost directly into independent living. It allows them the scope to succeed – and to fail – without the judgment that condemns them to an endless cycle of rough sleeping and emergency accommodation.

Rokus Loopik, a Social Psychiatrist from Holland, in his presentation on **Housing First** stated that, “the costs for society are outrageous when we are applying solutions that we know don’t work. People think that giving away homes is expensive but **Housing First** is not only cost effective, it is also the clever thing to do. It is all about giving Love, Respect and the Trust that we do believe that people can live lives as any other citizen.”

A recent Review and Evaluation of the work of the Dublin Homeless Agency published in December 2008, recommended the full adoption of a **Housing First** approach. Such a move would be a dramatic change of policy and could have serious implications for organisations currently offering Transitional Housing and other related Homeless Services.

The Evaluation found that 69% of those accessing Homeless Services would be suitable for housing in private or social housing accommodation with varying degrees of support. The Evaluation acknowledged that too few people were moving from Emergency Accommodation to Transitional Housing – and from Homeless Service Accommodation to Mainstream Supported Housing (*Homeless Agency Submission to Government – December 2008 page 10*).

The Homeless Services review also calls for a reconfiguration of Homeless and Housing Services to ensure the necessary provision of services on a local level. This includes core aspects of existing services - the Homeless Person's Unit, the Night Bus and the Emergency Phone Line.

Speaking at the opening of the **Housing First Conference**, Lord Mayor, Cllr Eibhlin Byrne said, "I am pleased to host this Conference. It is important that we hear all voices committed to solving homelessness in our city. We owe it to those people without a home to explore every possible avenue and ensure that they are not forgotten in these difficult economic times."

The Homeless Focus Group of the Dublin City Community Forum, who organised the event, is anxious that the Homeless Agency's undertaking to eliminate rough sleeping by next year cannot be achieved unless there is a speedy implementation of radical policies such as **Housing First**. The Homeless Focus Group is working with Rokus Loopik and Dr Sam J. Tsemberis (the originator of **Housing First**) to develop a set of international indicators that can be used to verify whether a project is genuine **Housing First**.

Brendan Dowling, Chair of the Homeless Focus Group, said, "We have to be brave and challenge a few sacred cows if we are to meet the 2010 deadline of eliminating rough sleeping. There are too many comfort zones within the Homeless Services. Too many organizations have cut out a niche for themselves that depends upon homeless individuals needing their services. We should be rewarding these organisations if they can eliminate the need for their Service – not perpetuating it."

Dr Jogin Thakore, Clinical Director at St Vincent's Hospital in Fairview, who sat on the panel for the event stressed the need for adequate support services following the securing of accommodation. "When it comes to the mentally ill, it's not just a case of Housing First – but making that Housing last as well", he said.

Alice Leahy, Director and Co-Founder of Trust and member of Irish Human Rights Commission, said she wrote the following to the then Minister for Health in 1985, "Hostels and night shelters are clearly becoming dumping grounds as we prepare to empty hospitals, and I pose the question - who benefits from such action?" Today that question is even more relevant.

In his presentation, Rokus Loopik surprised some of the health-care professionals in attendance by suggesting that we need to get rid of the professional distance that we maintain with customers experiencing Homelessness and get close to them – love them. He also advised that, "if **Housing First** is to work in Ireland it is essential that it is not rolled out by existing services – it needs new thinking – new believers – those who are not afraid of people failing and who are expecting people to get 'better' before they deserve a home of their own."

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