

*The Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST):
An Interagency Initiative to Reduce Reoffending through Improved
Accommodation and Social Inclusion of Offenders*

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Summary Elsewhere in this journal, Dr. Mairead Seymour describes and discusses some of the practice issues that probation officers have to address in work with homeless offenders. The present paper outlines the relevant context and background to the work of the Probation & Welfare Service in relation to offender accommodation and sets out government policy in the area of homelessness, with specific reference to its impact on offenders. It then describes the development of the Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST) as a specific initiative in this area. The experience of the project so far and future possibilities are also considered. Finally, some current and emerging strategic issues are identified, for future consideration. The discussion is confined here to adult offenders (18 years of age and older). Although they face similar challenges, service responses to those under eighteen are covered by separate policy and structures.

Keywords Homelessness, offender accommodation, supported housing, social inclusion, reduced reoffending, risk factors.

Introduction

On any day, there are something approaching 5,500 persons under the supervision of the Probation & Welfare Service (PWS) in the community and up to 3,200 persons in the custody of the Irish Prison Service (IPS). A relatively small but significant percentage of these people at any time may be homeless or at risk of homelessness. Lack of adequate or appropriate accommodation and associated difficulties are risk factors for offending and vice versa (Seymour & Costello, 2004). The Expert Group on the PWS (1999, 52) pointed out that ‘The Criminal Justice Administration Act, 1914 first established provisions for a residence requirement to be included in a Probation Order.’ The report also set out some of the conditions under which specialised offender hostels are more likely to be successful in reducing offending and recommended enhanced roles for such facilities and the development of designated bail hostels. Offenders in the community are often among those who experience social exclusion most. This marginalisation is likely to be further exacerbated where an offender is homeless. In particular, offenders returning to the community from penal custody have been identified as one of the groups specifically at risk of homelessness and attendant problems. The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) Report on Reintegration of Prisoners (NESF, 2002, section 6.15; 88-89) acknowledged that:

Accommodation issues are complex for this group. They may not be able to return to the community from which they came or may have lost contact with their family, for example. Moreover, if they were on a social housing waiting list prior to committal, it is unlikely that they have been allowed to stay on the list and will have to reapply on release. They are also unlikely to have adequate financial resources to pay the market rate for private-rented accommodation. Even if this is not a problem, they may still experience difficulties in getting a landlord to accept them as tenants. Within the ex-prisoner cohort, particular groups whose accommodation needs are particularly severe include: women, sex offenders, single people generally and those with a history of substance abuse.

There are a variety of routes by which people may become homeless. There needs to be a similarly wide range of options available to prevent and redress homelessness, as well as offending, among offenders. Accommodation facilities and other services are already in place in a number of areas for those offenders who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Recent policy documents (see below) have identified a need to ensure that such services and interventions are delivered in a co-ordinated, coherent and integrated way. Where vulnerable groups of persons are concerned, including certain categories of offender, accommodation in itself may be unlikely to resolve the problems faced by the individual. In addition to the provision of appropriate accommodation and support services, specialised interventions focusing on addressing offending behaviour and related issues are required. Duplication must also be avoided across service provision.

Definition of Homelessness

The official definition is set out in Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1988:

"A person shall be regarded 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, 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."

Homelessness can thus affect a wide range of individual citizens, including offenders in the community, as well as in custody.

Government Policy and Strategy on Homelessness

The Government has formulated a strategy for a comprehensive response to homelessness, incorporating the broad spectrum of matters relating to this issue including accommodation, health and welfare, education and preventative measures. This strategy is set out primarily in the two documents: *Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy*, (Government of Ireland, 2000) – hereafter referred to as ‘the integrated strategy’ – and the *Homeless Preventative Strategy*, (Government of Ireland, 2002) – hereafter referred to as ‘the preventative strategy.’ The response of the PWS to homelessness and related issues, as they impact on offenders within the wider community, is fundamentally informed by and founded on these two strategies, as well as being set in the context of the mission, strategies and business plans of the Service itself (PWS, 2001) and those of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR, 2003). The NESF Report on the *Re-integration of Prisoners* (NESF, 2002) has also made an important contribution to the approach taken in this area of work.

Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy

The integrated strategy, which might be described as the foundation strategy on homelessness, is predicated on the definition of homelessness as set out in Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1988. It set out a framework within which homelessness was to be addressed by a uniform approach and co-ordinated manner throughout the country. This overarching national strategy is overseen and co-ordinated by the Cross

Department Team on Homelessness (CDTH), led by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and including representatives of the PWS and IPS. At local level, local authorities were to convene homeless fora in their areas. These fora would assess local need and co-ordinate local/county responses to homelessness. In the greater Dublin area, the Homeless Agency fulfils this co-ordination role across the four Dublin local authority areas.

Statutory Responsibility

The integrated strategy recognises that the needs of individual homeless persons cross a number of organisational boundaries. Rather than placing statutory responsibility exclusively on either local authorities or health boards, the CDTH in drafting the strategy, concluded that what was required was a clarification of responsibilities of both primary statutory agencies, and the provision of services to discharge those responsibilities in an appropriate manner. The strategy (p30) recognises that:

both local authorities and health boards have key central roles in meeting the needs of the homeless, and that their involvement in this area should be on a joint basis along with the voluntary bodies.

The strategy (Section 6.2 p30), accordingly, clarified the roles of these statutory bodies as follows:

The responsibilities of the two sets of agencies will jointly cover the range of main needs of the homeless. Local Authorities will have responsibility for the provision of emergency hostel and temporary accommodation for homeless persons as part of their overall housing responsibility; health boards will be responsible for the health and in-house care needs of homeless persons.

The question of whether it may be desirable to amend statutory provisions to reflect this division of responsibilities may well be a matter to be considered in the future.

Funding for Homeless Projects

The integrated strategy (Section 10.3.2 p53) clarified the position in relation to the funding of services provided by voluntary bodies, in particular the provision of accommodation for homeless persons, stating that:

It is important that additional services are developed and supported. Accordingly, the Department of the Environment and Local Government, through local authorities, will fund the cost of settlement and outreach workers. With regard to accommodation, the Department of the Environment and Local Government will fund the cost of providing additional accommodation and the Department of Health and Children, through the health boards, will fund the cost of providing care, including in-house care.

No differentiation is made between any groups or categories of citizen that may benefit from such service provision (including offenders).

Prevention of Homelessness

The integrated strategy (Section 2.2 p7) recognised that: those leaving institutional care, be it custodial or health related are one of the principal groups at risk of becoming homeless.

One of the strategy's key recommendations is the need for preventative strategies targeting at-risk groups, such as those leaving custody. The document also refers to the need to develop and implement procedures to prevent homelessness amongst these groups. This objective was developed further in the preventative strategy, published in 2002.

The Integrated Strategy and the PWS

The integrated strategy set out two specific actions to be taken by the PWS to address homelessness among offenders:

- (a) Prevention of Homelessness; Action 1: Prevention strategies, targeting at risk groups, is an essential requirement for those leaving custodial or health related care and procedures will be developed and implemented to target prevention of homelessness amongst these groups. (p56)
- (a) Accommodation; Action 15: Prison management and the Probation and Welfare Service will, through sentence management and a pre-release process, ensure that appropriate accommodation is available to prisoners on release. Where a situation does arise where a prisoner is being released but is without accommodation, prior arrangements will be made to ensure that appropriate emergency accommodation is accessed. (section 7.5, p39 and p58)

Probation and Welfare Officers are assigned to all penal institutions in the IPS estate. Their work involves undertaking risk assessments and other evaluations on prisoners, addressing offending behaviour and related issues, as well as assisting individuals to prepare for release, including assisting in the identification of accommodation need and related issues, and where necessary, taking steps to reduce the risk of homelessness on release. This work includes making referrals to appropriate accommodation and other (e.g. housing support, training and education, health, psychiatric and addiction) service providers. The PWS is co-operating with IPS management in the development of an integrated system of positive sentence management (PSM). This will include due consideration of accommodation issues, homelessness prevention and related matters at all stages of the sentence planning and preparation for integration process. The implementation of PSM will go a significant way to addressing structural or systemic factors contributing to homelessness among prisoners.

The PWS already provides financial and other support to a number of community and voluntary bodies around the country that provide accommodation for adult offenders (male and female). In addition, three probation residences for younger male offenders (under 18 year olds) are directly funded by the Service. These are located in Dublin, Cork and Waterford. The PWS and HOST, in co-operation with others (especially the IPS) are involved in a range of initiatives to ensure that those being released from custody have appropriate accommodation on release. These include the development of assessment and referral protocols to house targeted numbers of offenders leaving custody in accommodation from local authority housing stock, as well as in supported transitional or long-term accommodation provided by voluntary organisations.

HOST is also working to maximise existing links and contacts with agencies such as (Health Board) Homeless Persons Units, Multidisciplinary Homeless Teams, (local authority) housing departments, settlement teams and so on, as well as strengthening links with non-statutory organisations working with ex-prisoners in the community. PWS area managers around the country are involved in working with local authority convened homeless fora (including the drafting and implementation of homelessness strategies

appropriate for each local authority's area). Where positive initiatives are pioneered in one location, these will be replicated in other locations as appropriate.

Homeless Preventative Strategy

The preventative strategy makes particular reference to difficulties facing people leaving institutional care, including those leaving penal custody. It is an important element of the Government's overall strategy on tackling homelessness that strategies and services are put in place where possible to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. A significant theme throughout the preventative strategy is the need to ensure that no one is released or discharged from state care without the appropriate measures in place to ensure that they have a suitable place to live with the necessary supports, if needed. This document (p10) recognises the present policy of the Service, which:

is centred around co-operation with and utilising the services provided by the local authorities and the health boards.

The document reiterates the respective responsibilities of both local authorities and health boards vis-à-vis the provision of accommodation for homeless adults and the provision of health and care needs, and confirms the funding arrangements in relation to the operational costs of providing accommodation for homeless adults i.e.:

the Department of the Environment and Local Government, through local authorities fund the non-care elements such as the salaries of non-care staff, heating, lighting, maintenance and upkeep, fixtures and fittings etc, as well as settlement and outreach staff. The Department of Health and Children, through health boards, fund the salaries of care and welfare staff involved in providing in-house care, while also meeting the health and welfare needs of homeless adults. (p6)

The Preventative Strategy and the PWS

The preventative strategy also recommended specific actions in relation to homeless adult offenders to be undertaken by the PWS and IPS including:

- (a) Action1: A specialist unit will be established by the Probation and Welfare Service to deal with offenders who are homeless and additional staff will be provided to assist offenders who are homeless.
- (b) Action 2: The Prison Service, together with the Probation and Welfare Service, will build and operate transitional housing units as part of their overall strategy for preparing offenders for release. Approval has been given for facilities in Limerick and Cork.

The multi-agency accommodation directorate was established in mid-2002 in the form of HOST (see below). It was intended that the transitional housing units referred to in the preventative strategy would be used for short periods either pre-release or immediately post-release until the prisoners in question secure more permanent accommodation. As well as those referred to in the preventative strategy, the NESF (2002) noted that a similar unit was planned for Mountjoy Prison in Dublin as part of the refurbishment of that complex. The latter may be reconsidered in the light of the possible relocation of the Mountjoy complex in line with recent Ministerial statements. Similarly, advancement of the transitional units in general has been delayed as a result of financial considerations and consideration of the possible redevelopment of a number of existing penal institutions. HOST and the PWS continue to work closely

with the IPS and other partner bodies in relation to these and other projects. It will be important to ensure that such projects proceed in a strategically planned way, on the basis of identified need, and that appropriate referral and support mechanisms are put in place, which will reflect best practice and adequately address the needs of all concerned, especially service users.

Establishment and Development of HOST

HOST was established in 2002 with Ministerial approval, on foot of the integrated and preventative strategies. The establishment of this small unit was also recommended in the NESF Report No.22 (NESF, 2002). HOST is a PWS led initiative, with an Assistant Principal Probation & Welfare Officer (APPWO) as Director, as well as a Senior Probation & Welfare Officer (SPWO), a senior administrative official on secondment to HOST from Dublin City Council (DCC) and two PWS administrative posts. The secondment from DCC has been with the support of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG). Effective, dedicated interagency liaison links have been developed with the IPS, and in particular with that Service's Regimes Directorate, as well as with local prison management, at governor and other levels. In particular, the link with Regimes Directorate has been through the nomination by IPS management of a senior Directorate official to liaise with HOST. Other stakeholders involved in the provision of accommodation and related services to offenders have welcomed the establishment of HOST. HOST's three-year strategy (2004-2007) was published in April this year (HOST, 2004). The unit is represented on the Cross-Department Team on Homelessness (CDTH), the (DJELR) Co-ordinating Group on Offender Integration (COGOI), the Board of the Homeless Agency (Dublin), and the (Dublin) Youth Homeless Forum.

The Work

HOST has a national remit. Its mission is:

To prevent and minimise homelessness among offenders by working in effective partnership with statutory and non-statutory bodies, thus contributing to reducing reoffending, promoting community safety and social inclusion. (HOST, 2004; 5)

To this end, HOST works to co-ordinate, on an interagency basis, strategies and interventions to prevent and eliminate homelessness and the risk of homelessness among offenders in the community and in custody, and by improving offender access to accommodation and services. HOST is a focal point for this integration and co-ordination between and among the various agencies and organisations concerned with homelessness as it impinges on offenders, as well as being in a position to influence the development of policy and best practice in this area. Some of this is done strategically, through bodies such as COGOI, the CDTH or the Homeless Agency. More operational initiatives include the drafting and negotiation of practice standards for probation residences for young offenders.

As well as providing a focal point and ensuring a co-ordinated, strategic approach to addressing homelessness as it impacts on offenders, HOST is active in identifying and redressing gaps in current accommodation and service provision, promoting best practice and appropriate interagency links, research, enhancement of data gathering and management information systems, as well as identification and sourcing appropriate accommodation for offenders. A range of HOST led projects are helping to develop improved access to accommodation for offenders in the social (local authority), voluntary (transitional/supported) and the private rented sectors. Support is also provided to local Service and inter-agency initiatives and to piloting specific interventions or projects with a view to subsequent replication more widely where possible. All this is undertaken to improve the quality of supervision of offenders and

to add value to the services provided by our partner agencies. In this way, public safety is enhanced by maximising the impact of pro-social protective factors including access to appropriate accommodation, thereby reducing risk of reoffending.

Offenders at risk of homelessness, whether in custody or in the community, do not constitute a homogenous group. Consequently, specific actions are directed towards ensuring the availability of appropriate accommodation for identifiable sub-categories that may present particular challenges. These include those on remand or serving short sentences, sex offenders, women offenders, young people, those who have been either continuously or repeatedly homeless over a long period of time, persons serving long (including life) sentences, and those with substance abuse or mental health issues. HOST is currently working on a number of relevant initiatives in this respect. There are proven benefits, as well as challenges, associated with the multi-agency team approach in addressing homelessness at both strategic and practice levels. Experience has also shown that this is a labour-intensive process, but one which can lead to improved co-ordination and integration of services and the development of best practice, which can then be replicated and embedded across and within organisations.

Challenging Issues

The following list (Table 1) includes some of the issues likely to have an impact on the nature and direction of probation work in relation to offender accommodation and homelessness, particularly at interagency level:

Table 1: Some Challenges and Dilemmas Facing HOST, the PWS and Others in Addressing Offender Homelessness

Question or Issue	Manifestation
Defining 'homeless' and 'offender'	Both definitions frequently contested, with implications as to what bodies responsible for service provision, funding etc.
Numbers	Statistics on homelessness generally, as well as in relation to homeless offenders, disputed. Need for improved data collection – to show prevalence, incidence and flows/trends.
The offender agenda	Sometimes offenders not on general service provision agenda, or if they are, seen as a PWS/IPS/DJELR 'problem.'
Emphasis on 'prevention' of homelessness among offenders	This presumes that prior to becoming classified as offenders, the individuals in question had stable housing. This is not the case with a proportion of offenders, who are already homeless when in contact with the justice system.
'Buildings' versus 'services'	The response to homeless offenders can be for new accommodation provision, rather than ensuring access as much as possible to existing provision.
Territorialism	This can operate in both directions, with services inclined to want to hold on to preferred areas of work, while inclined to shed others.
'Cherry picking'	Perception that some services may set unrealistic access criteria, which serve to deny access to 'difficult' populations, including offenders – especially those with other challenging presentations (e.g. mental illness, drug abuse etc).
Fragmentation of services and funding	Need for improved interagency communication and co-operation, beginning with statutory sector. Also, new services should not be approved without comprehensive funding package (capital and current) being in place.
Local versus national control	Tension between move towards more centralised control of operations, while maintaining scope for local initiatives.
Role clarification, specialist versus generalist services	Especially for the PWS (and other justice agencies) – to what extent to be involved in social inclusion and general 'welfare' provision for offenders, as opposed to focus on more clearly 'core' business.

A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of the present paper. It is hoped that most if not all of those included in Table 1 are self-explanatory and listing them may serve to stimulate ongoing debate and progress. The list of issues in Table 1 is also not exhaustive. As well as these, the work of HOST and others working to alleviate offender homelessness is subject to a range of influences faced by all human services, many of them internal organisational and strategic issues. These include ongoing resourcing (including budgetary and human resource) challenges, increased focus on value for money, research and evaluation of programmes for more effective practice, evidence based interventions and development of best practice, service standards and service level agreements. In addition, the national and local homeless strategies described above are due for review and renewal over the coming year. This process will provide an opportunity for HOST and the PWS to influence their development for the further improvement of service delivery to offenders and on behalf of all our customers.

Conclusion

The development of the homeless strategies and the measures put in place to address offender homelessness have provided unique opportunities for improved interagency co-operation and co-ordination in this endeavour. The PWS and its partner agencies have responded positively to the challenges, resulting, inter alia, in the establishment of HOST and in offender issues being considered and processed on the accommodation agenda, nationally and locally. According to Rungay (2003, 198):

The partnership ideal has spread beyond the strict concerns of crime control to affect other areas of social policy with similar implications for the probation service... planning and delivery of social housing by multi-agency consortia through an integrated funding system... is of particular interest for the probation service in so far as it combines the social welfare intention to support vulnerable people with the potential for enhancing the role of housing organisations in reduction of neighbourhood disorder and anti-social behaviour. It thus throws the dual role of the Probation Service into sharp relief.

The PWS has a long history of co-operation with other agencies, especially the IPS, but including Local Authorities, Health Boards and voluntary organisations, in the integration and resettlement of offenders in the community. Considerable commitment to addressing homelessness, specifically offender homelessness, has been evidenced by the generation and implementation of the homeless strategies and the establishment of HOST. The work of HOST, since its establishment, has gone some way to consolidating and strengthening the existing foundations of interagency working in this area. As well as improving interagency co-ordination in this jurisdiction, there may well be opportunities for further development in addressing offender accommodation issues through cross-border strategic, policy and operational co-operation.

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful to the other members of HOST, particularly Aidan Connolly, for their contribution to the preparation of this article.

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