



Homeless problem prompts calls for action

With begging visibly on the increase in Dublin, voluntary agencies want the government to counteract the problem with decisive measures.

Nicola Cooke reports

Homelessness and street begging is on the increase in Dublin city centre, with the Dublin Simon Community reporting rises in its figures every quarter over the past two years.

Dublin Simon has two shelters in the city centre catering for almost 50 people, and these are generally full every night. It also has 23 beds for detox and rehab, for which there is a waiting list.

Its chief executive, Sam McGuinness, said that the numbers of homeless increased last year. "In 2009, 2,450 people accessed all our services, and in the first six months of 2010, we had already worked with over 1,800 people," said McGuinness.

"Visibly, there appear to be more people around the streets. Our rough-sleeper team is out dealing with these people every night, and the last count we did found 70 people sleeping homeless in Dublin city centre."

He said that up to 60 per cent of those who used its services had a physical disability, and one in four had mental health issues.

"Some entrenched rough sleepers do not want to go into a hostel, for numerous reasons. They might not feel safe or there [may] not [be] enough single rooms.

This year, we do have the capacity to take people who want to come in, but there is a famine in terms of housing to move our service users into. Almost

one in three of those who use our shelters have been homeless for over five years.

"The government committed to end rough-sleeping in 2010, and this has not materialised. The problem will persist unless these people have a place to move on to. It's not about a shortage of money – there have been enhanced leasing options for houses – it's about the properties caught up in Nama or that the banks don't want sold on because they have some issue with them."

Roughan McNamara, spokesman for Focus Ireland, said the organisation was critical of the government's failure to deliver vital housing.

He said all the voluntary sector agencies had been involved in a service reconfiguration to "reduce the number of emergency responses to the needs of people" who were homeless, and instead focus resources on supporting those who were previously homeless to settle into a permanent home.

"But the promised flow of new homes has, in fact, been just a trickle. In light of this, the high level of demand for this service comes as no surprise," McNamara said.

The Homeless Agency and Dublin City Council (DCC) also provide emergency shelter accommodation in Dublin city centre.

There are six such facilities in Dublin 1 and 2 that cater for almost 200 people, while seven others in Dublin 7 and 8

provide refuge for almost 300 more. Of a combined capacity of almost 500, around 20 beds per night are free, according to the Homeless Agency.

Its research last year showed that most adults in homeless services (84 per cent) were Irish nationals, and 16 per cent were foreign nationals.

Around 80 per cent of homeless people that use these services are men. Roughly two-thirds of the men who use the services are aged between 25 and 45.

Meanwhile, the concentration of drug treatment facilities in the city centre is causing concern to traders and businesses.

Representative organisations believe there is an overload of these centres in Dublin 1 and 2, leading to more drug users congregating in these areas to beg.

According to Health Service Executive figures, 4,085 people are attending for methadone treatment in clinical facilities in Dublin's four local authority areas, and Dublin city centre clinics cater for 1,172 of these, with six city centre facilities concentrated in a small area.

Richard Guiney, chief executive of Dublin City Business Improvement District, said the current situation was "an enormous issue".

"The spectre of people sleeping in doorways, and others with paper cups held out, is doing us no favours. I understand from Dublin Tourism that the issue has registered on their feedback

surveys from tourists.

"There are two types of people on the streets: one group which is genuinely in need of help, many of whom have addiction issues, and another group which doesn't," said Guiney.

"We know from our street ambassadors that some people travel in the early morning and pitch up to beg. In the case of organised begging, they are dropped off in various locations and many have to hand over their money afterwards.

"This is abuse, and also needs to be outlawed under the public order vagrancy legislation.

"These new laws can't come quick enough and, while they outlaw begging near a commercial premises, we also need to include public buildings and bus and Luas stops, so that tourists and others aren't harassed there too."

Dublin City Business Association (DCBA) chief executive Tom Coffey said that the policy of housing drug treatment services in the city centre was a regressive one, allowing drug dealers to mingle easily with city crowds.

"We need to pursue a successful system like the Dutch authorities, who brought the addiction services out to industrial estates where the drug pushers could be exposed and would not follow their victims," he said. "DCBA, Galway Business Association and Cork Business Association have been lobbying the government about this."



Homeless numbers are rising in central Dublin