

VIEW

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HOMELESSNESS

CRISIS



Across the UK three million working families are just one paycheck away from losing their home

Supported by Simon Community NI and Choice Housing

Crisis must not become a catastrophe

Policymakers and stakeholders discussed housing priorities at a conference in Belfast recently.

Nichola Mallon gave an impassioned plea to tackle homelessness; as an MLA she introduced a Private Member's Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which would have placed a statutory duty on all government departments to tackle homelessness but the bill fell with the collapse of the Assembly in January.

Her sense of disappointment that the bill did not become law was palpable.

Placing a statutory duty on each government department, in our view, could have helped decision-makers to 'join the dots' on homelessness and find a solution to what our guest editor Jim Dennison of Simon Community NI calls a "crisis".



By Una Murphy
VIEWdigital publisher
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Three years ago Kenny was on the front cover of VIEW magazine. He had been homeless from an early age; VIEW editor Brian Pelan caught up with him to find how he turned his life around. He now has his own front door key, a home for himself and his family.

People like Kenny should be part of the conversations with policy-makers and stakeholders because homeless people are not just statistics.

Reports show that there are close to 12,000 homeless in Northern Ireland, only 3,000 new homes were built here this year and there are 20,000 vacant homes.

More needs to be done by decision-makers. They must 'join the dots' before the homelessness crisis becomes a catastrophe.



Spotlight on social affairs

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Editorial

VIEW, an independent social affairs
magazine in Northern Ireland



By guest editor,
Jim Dennison,
Chief Executive,
Simon Community NI

Very often the word ‘crisis’ is over-used. Sometimes it is used to overstate something which is a problem. I have stated for some time now – as others have who work to end homelessness – that we are in a homeless crisis. I don’t use that word lightly.

The literal definition of crisis is ‘a time of intense difficulty or danger’. Make no mistake; the issue of homelessness is getting worse here. More and more individuals are finding themselves homeless or becoming increasingly susceptible to the risk of it. During the period of the last public government-sponsored Homelessness Strategy (2012-2017), we have seen a 13 per cent rise in the numbers of those who are officially accepted as being homeless from 9,000 to 11,200, since the life of the strategy.

In that same five-year period, we have also seen Northern Ireland as a whole experiencing greater debt, less access to disposable income, have fewer savings and this has, in part, been responsible for an ever-worrying trend of house repossession and tenancy eviction.

We have growing and well-documented issues with an increase in those suffering from mental ill health and addictions. For all of our talk of a newfound peace, we still have a government that operates (when it’s functioning at all) in a fragmented and siloed way. We have a housing waiting list that grows and currently sits at 40,000 households, yet we are building fewer than five per cent of the homes needed to accommodate these families and individuals.

We have a largely unregulated private rented sector, one that is not sympathetic or overly accessible to individuals who are reliant on social welfare support. All of these things are huge problems in their own right. All of these problems cause



Recent budget cuts to support homeless services – and the threat of further cuts – in a time of growing demand for these services could have a catastrophic effect on how we tackle homelessness

homelessness. All of these problems are hard to address. So, if we think of ‘crisis’ being a period of intense difficulty, the use of that word is appropriate.

We are also living in a very dangerous time and again I use that word with some caution, yet justification. Indications from England, Scotland and Wales clearly show that welfare reform is having a very detrimental effect on those people who need support. Welfare reform changes loom large in Northern Ireland and we can reasonably speculate that the outworking of that will not be good for those who are potentially the most vulnerable or marginalised in our society.

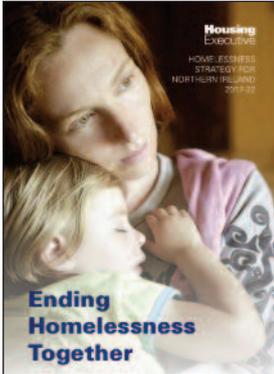
Recent budget cuts to support homeless services – and the threat of further cuts – in a time of growing demand for these services could have a catastrophic effect on how we tackle homelessness.

A recent academic estimation of hidden homelessness, i.e. those who are technically homeless but have not declared themselves as being so, indicates that there could be as many as 136,000 adults currently in that position. If these three things don’t describe what could be dangerous to people’s lives and welfare I don’t know what can.

I want to focus on the current crisis but it’s important that I end on a positive note. This crisis is fixable. People here have an enormous amount of tenacity and goodwill to those who need help. We have the creativity for problem-solving and can be innovative when we need to be.

With this kind of commitment and – if underpinned with proper strategic political commitment, adequate resources and openness about the size and scale of the problem – we could collectively end homelessness. We should never lose sight of that nor give up striving towards it.

the **BIG** interview



VIEW editor Brian Pelan talks to Clark Bailie, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, about their Homelessness Strategy for 2017-2022 and other related issues, including the Supporting People budget

Question: What weaknesses were there in the 2012-17 Homelessness Strategy or do you see it as producing a successful outcome.

Answer: We asked the University of York to look at that strategy and see how well or not we'd done. Looking down at my notes I think there were 38 strategy actions and they said 31 had been completed and six had been partially completed. If you look at what we were trying to do before and what we want to do going into the future I think the big difference is a much greater emphasis on prevention. We think that the last strategy was, by and large, a successful one. Obviously it creates a good foundation to move on to the future.

Q: Will the new Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-22 significantly reduce homelessness? By how much?

A: We're all committed to trying to eliminate homelessness. I think that's aspirational. But we can all certainly do our best to work towards it. We haven't set specific targets yet.

Q: Have you carried out a rigorous equality assessment of your homelessness strategy? Are the results of it freely available to the public?

A: Certainly we've met our obligations in terms of consultation. We're looking at the impact – but yes, that information should be freely available.

Q: Would you like the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to start building homes again? Is there a budget for it?



I don't think it's any secret that our board would love to get back into building houses, but not to compete, but to supplement and complement

A: We're currently the main provider of social housing with our 87,000 properties. We're the majority landlord in social housing. We certainly would have aspirations to play our part to increase the supply of social housing and extending choice. The issue we have is primarily one of funding. As the regional housing authority, our responsibility is to administer the housing association grant on behalf of the Department for Communities, so we have a role to play in terms of assessing the need for new social housing developments. I don't think it's any secret that our board would love to get back into building houses, but not to compete – but to supplement and complement. There would be issues around funding.

Q: What are your views on the Housing First policy and should increased resources be devoted towards it?

I know DePaul have done really good work around this and it does seem to offer a more successful model for certain groups. The idea of putting someone into a house or home and giving them that wraparound support I think would certainly give that individual a lot more confidence and a lot more support. I would like this supported. I would like to see how we can reconfigure and allocate our funding to allow us to look at that and even more innovative solutions. I can see a role for it in certain circumstances, but we have to go back and see how we can fund these new developments.

Q: How will welfare reforms (including the recent introduction of Universal Credit into Northern Ireland) impact upon your efforts to combat the problem of homelessness?

A: We know from research that has been carried out in England in particular and there's also a Wales audit office report which looked at the early implementation of welfare reform in Wales, that there seems to be an increase in arrears and an increase in evictions and that's something that we're very much focused on. I think we're grateful that we have the mitigation in place but we're looking to see, based on what we can gather from research and experience in other parts of the UK, what's likely to happen when the mitigation comes to an end, if indeed it does come to an end.

Q: Would you appeal for Universal Credit to be halted?

A: Well our statutory responsibility is to



Clark Bailie: “We are absolutely committed to the Supporting People budget”

administer a housing benefits system and to look to manage as best as we possibly can the transition from housing benefit to the housing component of Universal Credit. And as a non-departmental public body, I don't think it would be appropriate for me to call for it to be halted.

Q: There was a dispute recently over a cut in the Supporting People budget. Is the Housing Executive still committed to supporting it and do you envisage an increase in their budget?

A: We are absolutely committed to the Supporting People budget, as is the Department for Communities. The budget for Supporting People is £72.8 million. As I've explained on several occasions now, we were faced with a situation where there were unavoidable cost pressures within the Supporting People budget, the reintroduction of special needs management allowance, the growth of schemes from pipeline schemes that were approved in previous years that are now coming to maturity. We had a really difficult decision to make if we were to remain within the overall budget. And as accounting officer I have certain obligations in that regard in that how can we best reconfigure allocations to stay within the budget. We decided that we wanted to protect floating support because we see that as a really important aspect of the Supporting People program. I did with a heavy heart write out to the colleagues in the various supporting organisations and confirm to them that we would have to reduce the non-floating support bit of their budget this year. At the same time I did say that I would take every opportunity during the year to submit requests for additional funding, and when we set our original budget at the beginning of the



I would love to be able to say that I'm expecting an increase for the Supporting People budget but that would be unrealistic and dishonest

2017/18 year we did ask the Department for Communities for additional funding. At that time they weren't able to provide funding. I submitted an in year bid and I'm delighted to say our colleagues in the Department were able to find additional funding and that is now being allocated to Supporting People providers. As I told the Supporting People providers, that unfortunately is non-recurring funding. We will be working with the Department for Communities to see how we can confirm the allocation for next year. I really want to take this opportunity to assure everybody we have spent every single penny of that budget on Supporting People. I would love to be able to say that I'm expecting an increase but that would be unrealistic and dishonest. Certainly, I will present the best case I can

to try and secure additional funding but it's very much bound up in the state of government finances.

Q: What are your views on hostels? Do you envisage them still playing a key role in the years ahead?

A: We've a Supporting People programme and a homelessness program that has developed over quite a few years and maybe we've reached the point where we have to stop and say is this the way we want to do things in the future? I have quoted some research I have read with regard to Finland because Finland is very often put forward as an exemplar of how to deal with homelessness. We shouldn't have any sacred cows, we should be open to new ideas.

Q: What is your personal reaction if you come across someone on the streets who are homeless. Do you give them money?

A: I think my attitudes have changed, and maybe because of my transition from an accountant to a chief executive. I naturally relate to them on a human level, that because of circumstances which I'm sure weren't of their choosing, they find themselves in a position where they are sleeping rough on the street or they're begging during the day. I wouldn't give them money. The Housing Executive supported a campaign last year which was run by homelessness organisations, that said giving someone money with the best of intentions is actually allowing them to live on the street. What I would do is go back to my office and know that the work the Housing Executive is doing is aimed at trying to help people who find themselves in that situation.

A place of sanctuary as the winter approaches



Brian Pelan reports on his night visit to a soup kitchen in Belfast which provides food and warmth to those in need

It felt like I'd stepped out of Doc's DeLorean time car in the *Back to the Future* films and I had returned to the 1930s. But no. I was in Belfast on a Friday night in 2017 and I was about to visit a soup kitchen.

The city's streets were awash with heavy rain as I entered the building which is situated next to St Patrick's Church on Donegall Street.

The atmosphere was warm and friendly despite the bleak circumstances.

Volunteers bustled around as they catered to the homeless and those in need of food and someone to talk to.

A sausage stew simmered on the cooker and a large table was covered with cakes, buns, ham and salad rolls and chocolate biscuits. Large urns of coffee, tea and soup were stacked up and ready for use.

The incongruity of it all was striking as you were very aware that literally less than a mile away restaurant goers had their eyes intently fixed on menus as they decided which feast of food they would opt for, and gallons of craft beers, bottles of wine and cocktails were being consumed by thirsty revellers.

Paul McCusker, who has been working in the homeless sector for more than eight years and who volunteers in the soup kitchen, is a nurse and a SDLP councillor.

"To give myself a better idea of what it is like to be homeless in Belfast, I slept out on the streets in 2014 to try and raise awareness about the issue.

"I left my house on a Monday and I didn't return home until Thursday.

"It was a very tough experience. All I had was a sleeping bag. I slept in Donegall Place in the heart of the city. It was



Awareness: Paul McCusker

freezing during the night and I found it very hard to get heat into me. I just felt physically exhausted at the end of it and I was only on the streets for three days."

Paul added: "This soup kitchen has been running for six months. We're opened every Friday and Saturday – from 7pm to 11pm. An outreach team, run by Charlie McGarry from Rosemount House on the Antrim Road, delivers food, sleeping bags and warm clothes to those living on the streets of Belfast."

Paul said: "I have personally witnessed a big increase in homelessness, particularly amongst young people."

I asked Paul what he thought were the necessary steps to try and make a huge dent in the problem.

"Homelessness is not just a housing issue, it is also a health issue. We need a totally collaborative approach from the health authorities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to tackle the problem," replied Paul.

After a couple of hours in the soup kitchen where I chatted to some of the individuals who were using it, I headed out

onto the streets with three other members of an outreach team. Our car was packed full of provisions, including sleeping bags and hot drinks.

I found the experience deeply depressing as we encountered a number of people who were sleeping rough on the streets. One man I met, who obviously had a drink problem, embraced me warmly and asked me to say a prayer for him even though he said he didn't believe in religion. Of particular sadness was my encounter with three young women – all in their 20s and who were high on drugs. They were huddled together on a street corner and were basically living a hand to mouth situation on a daily basis.

We ended the night by meeting a man in his 60s who has been sleeping rough for more than 14 years. He has refused all offers to enter a hostel and now appears to be entrenched in his opposition to living in a home.

As the rain poured down, I knelt on the ground beside him and we chatted for a short time. His eyes twinkled and his voice was warm. But I couldn't help think about how long can a human being survive in such atrocious living conditions?

At the end of our night I was dropped off at Royal Avenue. I phoned for a taxi to bring me home. As I waited I instinctively searched in the pockets of my coat for my own front door key. It felt good to hold it.

• Rosemount provides accommodation for those seeking recovery from alcohol addiction, which may also include secondary drug addiction with associated health issues (www.rosemount-houselimited.org/)

COMMENT

Can we end homelessness in Northern Ireland?



Dr Beth Watt, a Senior Research Fellow at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, says we should not underestimate the scale of the task ahead in trying to reduce the homeless figures

This year saw the launch of a new five-year plan to 'end homelessness together' in Northern Ireland, making this a good moment to consider progress to date in tackling the issue, and the strategy's chance of success.

For the last five years, action on homelessness in Northern Ireland has been guided by the 2012-17 strategy, underpinned by a vision to eliminate long-term homelessness and rough sleeping. During this period, however, levels of official homelessness increased by 13 percent, and approaches to the Housing Executive for homelessness-related reasons remained stubbornly high. During the winter of 2015/16, a flurry of deaths on the streets of Belfast reinforced the most extreme human costs of homelessness for the most vulnerable.

The enduringly high levels of official homelessness in Northern Ireland are particularly striking when viewed in a UK context. Scotland and Wales have seen substantial declines over the last five years. Looking further back, very dramatic reductions in homelessness occurred in the 2000s in England, while in Northern Ireland homelessness was rising fast as a result of affordability pressures linked to the housing market boom across the island of Ireland.

Two central reasons why Northern Ireland has not seen the declines in homelessness witnessed elsewhere in the UK are worth highlighting.

First, the previous 2012-17 homelessness strategy failed on its own terms. The reasons for this are now clear, following the publication of an independent evaluation and the most recent Homelessness Monitor. There is a consensus that while the strategy's vision was right, its implementation fell short, meaning that progress was far slower than required. Substantial internal changes and staff turnover within the Housing Executive (which has statutory responsibility for homelessness) and a failure to achieve effective inter-departmental buy-in and coordination were key underlying challenges.

Second, while England, Wales, and more recently Scotland have all re-orientated statutory homelessness services towards a strong focus on



During the winter of 2015/16, a flurry of deaths on the streets of Belfast reinforced the most extreme human costs of homelessness for the most vulnerable

prevention, only now is Northern Ireland following suit via the role of the long-anticipated 'Housing Solutions and Support' approach. This model is inspired in part by Scotland's preventative 'Housing Options' model, associated with a fall in statutory homelessness of 20 per cent since 2010/11. It will see front line staff in Northern Ireland trained to take a problem-solving and holistic approach to addressing the needs of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, with advice on housing options provided rapidly, and case managers 'sticking with' more complex cases until homelessness is resolved and longer-term support in place to address wider needs.

This long-awaited shift towards a resolute focus on homelessness prevention, together with an attempt to learn the lessons of the last strategy, suggest reasons for some measure of cautious optimism that levels of homelessness might reduce – even substantially – over the five-year life of the new strategy. Indeed, a core focus of this

strategy is on establishing new delivery mechanisms, monitoring and oversight processes. Getting these aspects right early on will be key to success.

The task of substantially reducing homelessness in over the next five years is thus possible, as the wider UK experience demonstrates. But the Northern Irish context comes with its own unique set of challenges.

First, previous enthusiasm for the exceptionally well-evidenced Housing First model for responding to the needs of chronic rough sleepers (which unlike traditional models, focuses on providing immediate access to permanent housing and the support needed to maintain it), has been replaced by very weak commitments in this area in the 2017-22 Strategy. The likelihood of making substantial gains in addressing the needs of the very most vulnerable rough sleepers is lower than it might have been.

A second and major challenge is the implementation of welfare reform over the period of the new strategy. Significant increases in all measures of homelessness in England since 2010 clearly show the role of these cuts in driving up homelessness, particularly in the pressurised housing markets of the south of England. Although Northern Ireland will benefit from mitigation measures that are the envy of the rest of the UK till 2020, the impacts of cuts implemented before then, and most especially post-2020, amount to a very challenging context in which to prevent and reduce homelessness, let alone end it.

Third, the wider political context in Northern Ireland remains exceedingly challenging, characterised by political gridlock that has left Northern Ireland without a functioning Executive since January 2017. The resolution of this political impasse will undoubtedly have implications for responses to homelessness, in relation to budget allocations, the buy-in of the future Minister for Communities and wider Executive, and the next chapter in the Housing Executive's fortunes.

The next five years may, finally, see effective policy and interventions drive down homelessness in Northern Ireland, but there very clear reasons not to underestimate the scale of the task ahead.

COMMENT



Andy Burnham: “Our good work is hampered by the Government’s determination to continue the rollout of Universal Credit, a policy that will make the issues of homelessness and rough-sleeping dramatically worse.”

Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, tells **VIEW** why he is determined to end homelessness and rough sleeping in his city

Whilst homelessness and rough sleeping are issues that did not originate here in Greater Manchester, I am committed to tackling them with all those who want to help. That is why one of my first acts as Mayor was to create the Greater Manchester Mayor’s Homelessness Fund, to which I am donating 15 per cent of my salary every month.

The fund provides support to the organisations who are working with people sleeping rough. Private businesses, the voluntary sector and residents across the region have come together to join me in helping those in need. It is this spirit of generosity that inspires me to work even harder to help those whose voice is most often not heard.

Rough sleeping is the tip of the iceberg. It is the visible element of a massive social issue with many other human consequences lying beneath the surface; sofa surfing, insecure tenancies, families being forced to live in hotels. These are all signs that something is not working in our society. They are challenges that we are all committed to tackling, but we recognise that public money alone will not be sufficient.

In Greater Manchester, we have a legacy of giving and compassion that still resonates today. The ideas and morals of philanthropists like Joseph Whitworth and John Rylands, and social pioneers like Elizabeth Gaskell and Ernest Simon live on. And while societal challenges and the way

that we give have changed over the decades, that sense of community and civic pride and a desire to change things for the better remains.

As Mayor of Greater Manchester, I have been humbled by the compassion, community spirit and charity of local people. We don’t like the idea of people falling through the net – our values simply won’t allow it. It is by harnessing this passion and working across all sectors that we can create a real momentum and make a huge difference to so many.

There is good work already being done across Greater Manchester by our councils and others but with so many without a secure roof over their heads this work can only thrive if we push ourselves further and embrace a change to the way things are done.

Greater Manchester is receiving £3.8 million as part of a Government ‘trailblazer’ scheme in recognition of the ground-breaking work we are doing in this area, which will enable us to put in place real solutions to help people to get off the streets. This includes 24-hour hub-based services which will provide high quality support for people when they need it the most.

This is bolstered by a £1.8 million Social Impact Bond, which will use money provided by the private sector to help ensure that those coming off the streets are able to access support which will help them find employment, education or training, and enable them to access

specialist support services around mental health and addiction.

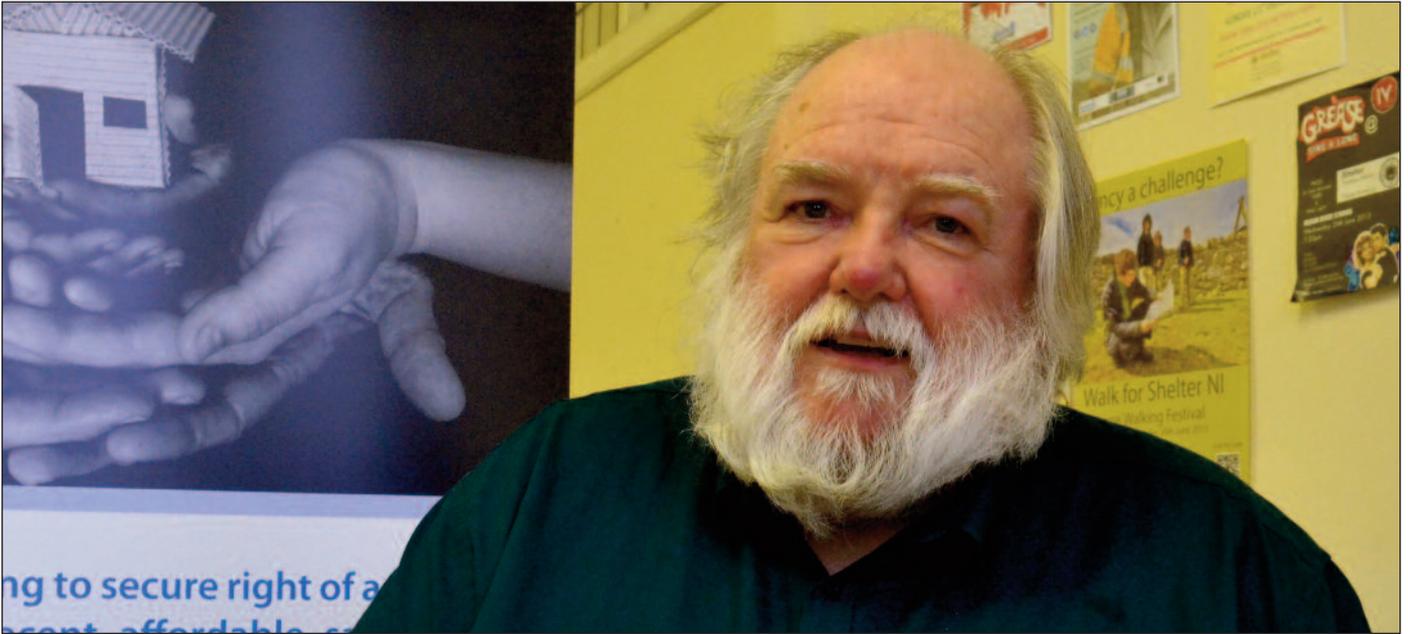
Work has also begun on ensuring homeless people who wish to be registered with their local GP practice can be. We are going to make sure that no patient is discharged from hospital straight back onto the street.

The Greater Manchester Homelessness Action Network is the bedrock of this work; a network of like-minded, passionate individuals who have offered their time, space and expertise to unravel these complex issues and co-produce our joint action plan to end rough sleeping by 2020, as well as reducing and preventing homelessness over the next 10 years.

But this good work is hampered by the Government’s determination to continue the rollout of Universal Credit, a policy that will make the issues of homelessness and rough-sleeping dramatically worse. My plea to government is clear: immediately halt the roll-out of this damaging benefit scheme.

Homelessness is a crisis that is unfolding on our doorsteps, in our communities. Everyone deserves a home to call their own and we should not – cannot – turn a blind eye.

In Greater Manchester, our eyes are wide open and it is this strength of compassion and generosity – which has seen more than £50,000 donated to the fund - that shows care, kindness and altruism is alive and well here.



Tony McQuillan hit out at the Universal Credit system which has been introduced into Northern Ireland

‘Shelter NI does not believe that the **private sector** is a panacea to tackling homelessness,

Tony McQuillan, Director of Shelter NI, didn’t pull any punches when it came to talking to **VIEW about the homelessness crisis**

I first met Tony McQuillan, Director of Shelter NI, at a housing conference in the La Mon Hotel, outside Belfast. He is a big man in every sense of the word, has a genial nature and is not afraid to voice his opinions about homelessness and what needs to be done to tackle it.

Shelter NI, according to its website, “was founded in 1980 and is a charity whose mission is to promote and facilitate the provision of sufficient, decent and affordable homes to end long-term homelessness and eliminate poor housing”.

Behind Tony’s bushy beard and twinkling eyes was a mind eager to engage and debate.

We sat in his office in the centre of Belfast. Over coffee and biscuits, ordered in specially for the occasion, I proceeded to fire off a number of questions to him.

Is the current Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s Homelessness Strategy a good model, I asked Tony.

“No,” he replied. “The previous strategy was better as it looked at a number of constituent groups, such as; LGBT, single people, older people, etc, and came up with a strategy to deal individually

with all those groups of people.

“Whereas this new strategy is more generic. Also the previous strategy had a commitment to end long-term homelessness by 2020. There is no mention of this in the new strategy.

“Also missing is an analysis of what they did and didn’t do in the previous five years.”

I asked Tony what did he think should be included in the new Homelessness Strategy. “We needed to continue with a model that looks at various groups and the impact of mental illness for example on them. There is also a huge omission when it comes to addressing the question of the supply of housing.”

Given the criticisms levelled at the NIHE, I asked Tony what is his organisation doing to tackle homelessness.

“We wear two hats,” he replied. “We have a campaigning side where we try to punch above our weight.”

Tony argued, that as he heads up a small organisation, their most effective approach is when they link up with other groups to campaign about homelessness.

“We also work with young people in Omagh to provide accommodation and

support. We also work with nearly 500 older people in Limavady, Derry, Magherafelt and Strabane.”

He widened our discussing by taking an opportunity to hit out at the “absolute nightmare” of the Universal Credit system and he also highlighted the stark difference between the concept of private housing and social housing.

“One is out to make money and the other is not,” said Tony.

“Shelter NI does not believe that the private sector is a panacea to tackling homelessness.”

I asked Tony does he give money to homeless people on the streets.

“It’s a good question,” he replied. “Personally I wouldn’t. I prefer to buy them a sandwich or a cup of tea or coffee.”

I ended the interview by asking Tony that if he had a magic wand when it came to the question of tackling homelessness, what would he do with it?

“I would want thousands of houses to be built. The wand would immediately build them.”

On that note I finished the interview. I had only scratched the surface. Tony, I felt, had a lot more to say.

COMMENT

Vital services under *increasing* pressure



Michael McDonnell, Chief Executive of Choice Housing, argues that his sector needs proper resourcing if it is to effectively address the homelessness crisis in Northern Ireland

Choice believes everybody should have a decent home. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, not everybody does and in the last year, almost 20,000 households presented themselves as homeless to the Housing Executive.

Worryingly, the problem is not reducing and this region has the highest comparative level of homelessness in the United Kingdom with more than 50 families or individuals declaring themselves homeless every day.

Service providers have been working with statutory partners to improve the response, but a prolonged funding freeze for the Supporting People Programme and a lack of suitable accommodation is inching more people towards homelessness.

The issue is in part about housing supply and that is something that quite specifically Choice can deal with and help to support. Housing associations play a vital role in providing affordable housing and increasing the supply of housing across all tenures.

There were more than 1,500 new social homes started last year and an ambition across our sector to go much further. Over the next five years Choice aims to build more than 2,500 new homes and will be broadening the type of homes and housing options we offer.

Providing housing and support for those who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness has always been an essential part of housing associations' work. Choice and our partners offer a range of supported housing that provides a safe place to stay for people who have been homeless or are at high risk of becoming homeless.

This includes housing and support for people who have been sleeping on our streets, including those with mental health problems or long-term drug or alcohol addiction, ex-offenders and young people. We have also formed partnerships with specialists who can deliver personalised support for individuals with a variety of needs covering health, debt



In an extremely uncertain budgetary environment, Choice and our many valued partners are working hard to deliver the homes and services needed across Northern Ireland

and employability.

This work is critical and focused towards enabling people to take better control of their lives and move into more appropriate long-term accommodation. At Choice, we also recognise our responsibility to ensure our customers have access to the right level of tenancy sustainment support that helps people to remain in their home. We take care to identify households who may be struggling to manage their tenancy and intervene early to help sustain their tenancy.

This is augmented with a number of community investment schemes that work with local people to help create thriving neighbourhoods.

In April, the Housing Executive launched its new Homelessness Strategy. This is to be welcomed as it recognises that the challenges ahead must be met with ambition and targeted resources if we are to realise the vision of 'ending homelessness together'.

However, the vital services that provide support to those without a home are coming under increasing pressure, as the numbers of people in need of support continues to rise.

A five per cent reduction in funding for the vital Supporting People Programme has been signalled for 2018/19. If this transpires – and we must continue to make the case for increased funding under this programme – then accommodation-based services currently offered by the voluntary and charitable sector will be at risk. And homelessness is likely to continue to increase.

In an extremely uncertain budgetary environment, Choice and our many valued partners are working hard to deliver the homes and services needed across Northern Ireland. We will continue to play our part and remain eager to do more. But if we are to really address the homelessness crisis, we will need proper resourcing and a policy imperative that commits to urgent action grounded in meaningful partnership working.



Do you **care enough** to help us?

Be part of something bigger and volunteer with Northern Ireland's leading homelessness charity, Simon Community NI.

We are a non-judgmental organisation that is committed to working with anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness, providing a vital service to individuals and families and work towards the benefit of the whole community.

We provide 369 warm beds every day of the year and manage 22 emergency and temporary-based accommodation projects across Northern Ireland.

Last year Simon Community NI has been fortunate enough to work with volunteers who have offered literally thousands of volunteer hours to help our organisation support the most vulnerable people in our society.

Moving forward and to help even more people, we will soon be launching our new five-year Volunteering Strategy across the whole organisation and would love to hear from passionate, committed, caring and enthusiastic people, from right across Northern Ireland.

We have a range of opportunities for volunteers to get involved with our work, to help in many areas; from working directly with our clients to taking part in our many fundraising and promotional activities.

How you can benefit

- Be part of a team dedicated to ending homelessness
- Get any necessary training you need

before beginning your role

- Learn new skills, build your CV and advance your career
- Ongoing support and opportunities for further training and development
- Out of office expense, including your travel expenses, will be covered
- Learn new skills which will last you a lifetime

• To find out more please visit our website simoncommunity.org or contact Rebekah McDonald, Volunteer Co-ordinator, Email: rebekahmcdonald@simoncommunity.org Tel: 028 9023 2882

• Our Freephone Helpline is available 24/7 every day of the year. Telephone: 0800 171 222

COMMENT

We need to talk about the hidden homeless



Professor Paddy Gray argues that getting onto the housing ladder is in reality a case of snakes and ladders because many of us will face multiple challenges throughout our lives

In May 2014 the Irish cabinet agreed an 80-point plan to tackle homelessness and eliminate it by 2016. I regularly visit Dublin and I don't see any evidence that homelessness has been eliminated. In fact it appears to be worse than ever.

And this is not just people sleeping on the streets. Spiralling house prices, soaring rents and the lack of affordable housing have left many living in overcrowded and intolerable conditions just to get a roof over their head. Definition is very important when we talk about homelessness. Rooflessness or houselessness is what it means to many.

Having a home means much more than shelter. In cities and towns across the UK and Ireland people are sharing accommodation involuntarily with little hope of getting on what is termed the 'housing ladder' given that prices are now beyond the reach of even those on reasonable incomes.

What do we mean when we say housing ladder? It suggests that households are climbing one when they get on it and the reference, of course, is owner occupation, which is another misleading concept as in most cases the bank owns the property not the occupier.

I was at a debate recently where research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation pointed out that we have multiple housing transitions in a lifetime, rather than a housing ladder. A housing ladder suggests a stable life but very few of us have such a luxury.

There is an assumption that nothing will be bad once you get on this imaginary structure. Sorry to disappoint you, but in a



Spiralling house prices, soaring rents and the lack of affordable housing have left many living in overcrowded and intolerable conditions just to get a roof over their head

normal lifecycle all sorts of bad things and unforeseen circumstances take place. We normally begin life living in a family but many do not even have this luxury. We begin adulthood as a single household then relationships are formed. Many of these last, many don't. Divorce and separation creates the need for more housing.

Then there is income. For some of us income will increase but again for many it will fluctuate and it can go down as well as up. Those in and out of jobs, redundancies, short-term contracts all affect what we can afford and where we live. Then, of course, there is health. People are living much longer but unfortunately health will deteriorate requiring the proper support to stay in our own homes.

Also as we get older and our family moves away we are left in housing that is larger than we need but our community links mean we don't want to move into smaller housing unless it is close by. So when we consider these and other scenarios in our multiple life transitions the housing ladder is more like snakes and ladders.

When we speak about homelessness we mean having a home with all of the security, privacy, and safety that a household should have. Living on the streets is one form of homelessness and is totally unacceptable but living in intolerable conditions, involuntarily sharing, living with the threat of violence within the home or from outside, living without adequate support are all equally unacceptable. There are many out there who are hidden from society but are equally homeless; the hidden homeless.



Brian Pelan talks to a young woman called Aine who has been homeless for the last five years during his recent visit to Dublin

The cold air gripped me as I walked past the iconic GPO building in O'Connell Street, Dublin, on a Monday night recently.

I've been a journalist for a long time now and whilst I have witnessed many shocking things, I was still totally transfixed by the scene I saw in front of me. More than 200 people, young and old, were being fed at a soup kitchen. Many were homeless and all of them had an urgent need for some food to try and ward off the effects of the bitter weather.

I doubt this is what socialist James Connolly and the other leaders of the Easter Rising in Dublin envisaged when the Proclamation was read out on the steps of the GPO in 1916!

The facts about homelessness in the Republic of Ireland are grim indeed. A recent Dublin Simon Community's impact report warned there will be 9,000 people homeless in Ireland by the end of 2018 and that there is a severe lack of health funding to meet these people's needs.

Data also published recently by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive showed that during the week of October 18 to October 25 there were 1,425 children in 677 families in emergency accommodation.

Earlier in the evening in Dublin, I visited a project called A Lending Hand. Volunteers from the group are on Dame Street in the middle of the city every Monday night where they offer free



Activist: Keira Gill

sandwiches, hot meals and sleeping bags (when available) to anyone living rough on the streets.

Organiser Keira Gill said: "We've been here about four years now and we feed around 250 people every Monday night. Every other night we help families in our local area. We will support anyone who is homeless or who are struggling with a range of issues such as finances.

"I used to be a very materialistic person but then I began to think that there has to be more to life than just wanting material things."

Kiera, who describes herself as "an activist", is a part of a support organisation called the Irish Housing Network.

She is also studying at Trinity University where she has embarked on a degree course in sociology and social policy. Her long-term plan is to help create her own "humanitarian hostel that treats people like humans".

"The figures concerning homelessness in the last few years frighten me. We need to have more rehab and addiction centres. Unfortunately, a lot of these places have been closed down in recent years due to funding cutbacks. We need to end the revolving door of homelessness."

Later in the evening, I spoke to a woman called Aine who told me she had been homeless for the last five years.

Thirty-two-year-old Aine said: "I became homeless after my landlord sold up." Even though Aine has a job, she told me that can't afford the rent for a home.

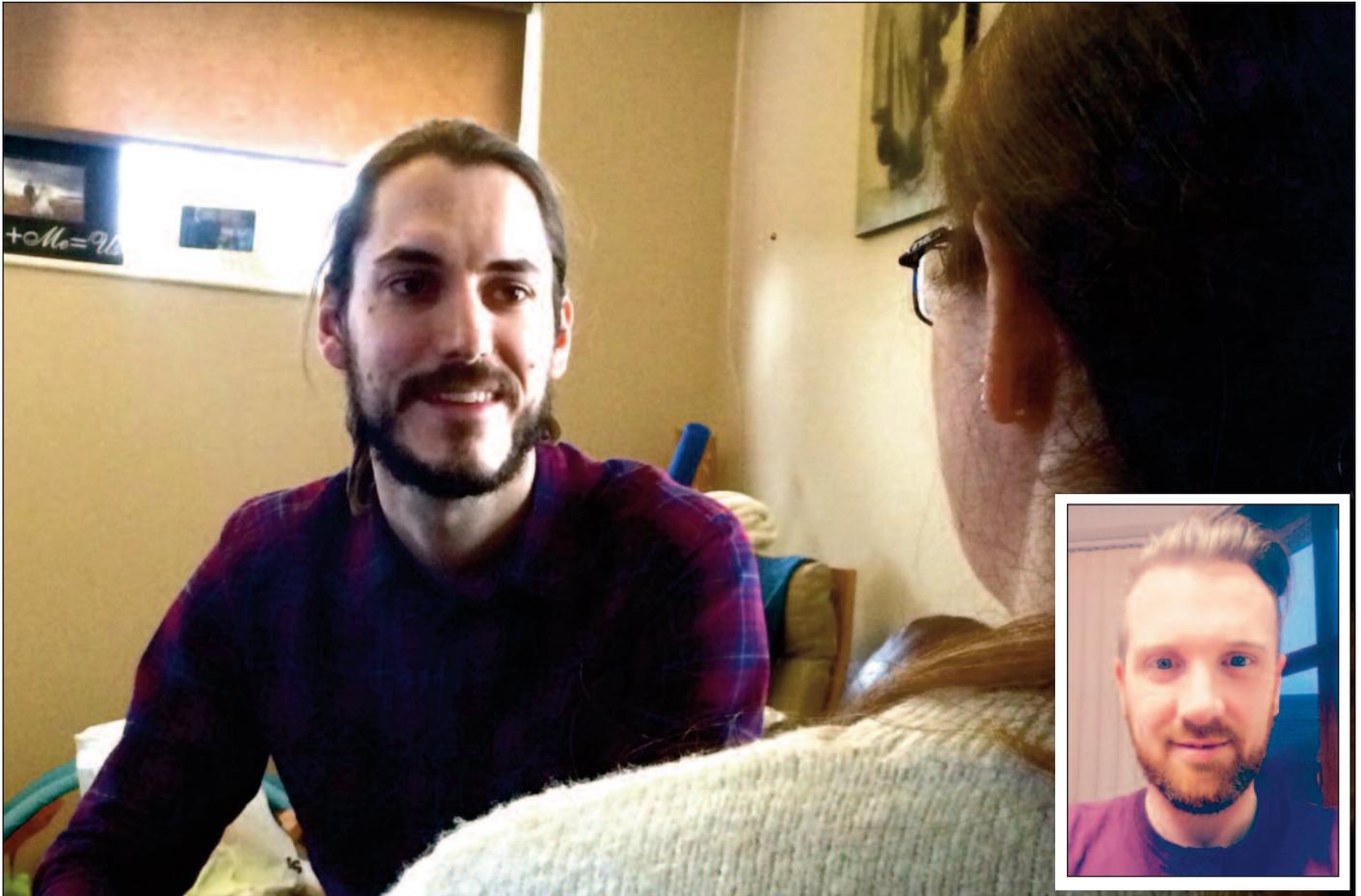
"I sleep anywhere and everywhere every night. A lot of the times I'm lucky enough and I get a sofa in a friend's or a relative's house. But people have their own lives and you can't stay there all the time."

She is studying at university for a degree in community and youth work. She ruled out staying in a hostel. "I wouldn't feel safe," said Aine.

She said that she works in the retail trade but that her wages were not very high. "I earn enough to be able to study but not enough to be able to pay rent also.

"I want to have my own place and not to keep moving on. I really lack stability at the moment."

And on that note of hope and sadness, Aine said goodbye to me and walked off into the night with her backpack on her shoulders and holding a carrier bag in her hands.



Helping the homeless: Simon outreach workers Daniel Saunders (above) and (inset) Derek McParland

‘The first step is to build up trust’

Against a background of around 100,000 people who are homeless in Northern Ireland, the Simon Community NI’s work extends well beyond the need to assist people in finding temporary accommodation and homes. The link between homelessness and other factors in society, such as family breakdowns, addiction and mental health, have been well documented.

One facet of our work is to support a range of clients in their local community. Two of our drug and alcohol outreach workers, Daniel Saunders and Derek McParland, work within the South East Trust area, alongside a range of statutory and voluntary organisations, to help support our clients with their individual needs.

Daniel, who moved from London to study at Queen’s University, has had many years’ voluntary experience working with homeless people. “After I left Queen’s I worked as an interior designer but, whereas I enjoyed the creative side of the job, I didn’t find it satisfying in the way that I had previously experienced when working with those in need. For me my job is about looking at the person rather than their circumstances.”

Like Daniel, Derek had experience of volunteering before joining

Simon Community NI. “I used to volunteer for The Samaritans which gave me a good grounding for entering a career where my skills and experience could be used to help others to turn their lives around.”

No two days are the same for Daniel and Derek, in the way that no two clients are the same. “One of our clients, before we met him, had been living in a tent, surviving on little food and two bottles of whiskey a day, said Derek. “He had little self-worth and confidence, and had given up. The first step in working with our clients, regardless of background or circumstances, is to build up trust. We are able to help people, but trust and communication are the cornerstones of turning lives around.

“Working with other agencies, such as the Community Addiction Team, the Benefits Office and the Housing Executive, and alongside the client, we created a pathway that led him to being able to live independently. At the same time as dealing with his housing needs, we worked together to ensure that he had the right support which enabled him to confront his alcohol addiction. We still maintain regular contact with the client to ensure he always has someone to reach out to.”

Not everyone is at the point where

they want to readily accept help, as Daniel explains. “We had a disabled, elderly client who was living independently in social housing with addiction issues. It was clear that the client was a danger to himself, but it took months, and many meetings, for us to convince him to accept help.

“As he had no family our aim was to move him to a supported living arrangement and help him to face his addiction issues. Today he is settled into supported accommodation where he has begun to interact with those living around him, and with the help of a local befriending service he is now able to regularly attend a gym, which he really enjoys.”

These clients represent only two of the many hundreds of people we come into contact with, help and support each day. As we are dealing with some of the most vulnerable people in society not all cases have a positive outcome, but the work of Daniel and Derek, alongside everyone in Simon Community NI, including our network of volunteers and supporters, ensures that when someone needs help, Northern Ireland’s leading and longest-serving homelessness charity will be on hand to make a difference each and every day.

100,000 adults in Northern Ireland have no home

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end homelessness**



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COMMENT

Why we need a Homelessness Bill



SDLP MLA Nichola Mallon, who represents North Belfast, says that the chronic issue of hidden homelessness is one of the biggest challenges facing our society today

I believe these five basic human needs are the key to living a full and balanced life: access to food, to education, healthcare, work and a home. I am convinced, as this is well evidenced, that access to a secure, suitable, good quality and affordable home is critical if all of these other basic needs are to be met.

Research shows that there is a strong correlation between homelessness and a multiplicity of mental and physical illness and substance misuse, as well as an inextricable link between homelessness and financial hardship.

Similarly, an individual in housing stress is significantly more likely to be involved in, or fall victim to a crime.

Yet, despite all of this evidence, government here continues to operate as if homelessness is simply an issue of rooflessness. It is not. Nor is there in my view, full acknowledgement and acceptance within and across government of the growing housing and homeless crisis here.

The chronic issue of hidden homelessness, whether it be sofa surfing, living in temporary or overcrowded accommodation, or living in fear of violence and the list goes on, is one of the biggest challenges facing our society today.

In my own constituency of North Belfast there are over 1,700 households living in housing stress, and with more and more households forced to pay the 'bedroom tax', not least come 2020, the lack of regulation in the private rented sector, and the severe lack of readily available suitable accommodation, homelessness is only set to rise.

The sheer number of constituents that present to constituency offices across the north in housing stress each day is relentless. More often than not, homelessness comes hand in hand with an array of other complex issues that collectively need addressed. Tempting as it may be to fix the obvious problem at hand, overlooking other deeper issues is simply to apply a plaster over a deep and deteriorating wound.



Tempting as it may be to fix the obvious problem at hand, overlooking other deeper issues is simply to apply a plaster over a deep and deteriorating wound

There is no satisfaction to share one example, from successfully pushing for medical assistance for a constituent with a respiratory disease, when the dampness in the home they will be returning to has still not been addressed, because it is only a matter of time before their health deteriorates all over again.

It was out of frustration at the futility of this disconnect and the pervading misconception among government departments that homelessness is simply rooflessness which led me to table a Private Member's Bill at the first opportunity after winning my Assembly seat in March 2016.

My rationale was that if change was to happen it had to be enshrined in legislation. My intention was, and it remains, to bring forward a piece of legislation which places a 'statutory duty' on all government departments to tackle homelessness.

Not only will this lead to a more holistic approach and collective coordinated solutions, it will also place this priority on a much firmer resource footing while delivering significant long-term savings in health, social security and justice related public expenditure to name just a few.

The motivation behind this bill, in addition to the future proofing element, savings and the fact that this approach is based on best practice, is the desire to restore the dignity and security that comes with having your own home and all that flows from that.

It is incumbent upon those of us that have been given a mandate to use our positions to bring about positive change for our citizens.

It was deeply frustrating to see this bill fall when the Assembly was collapsed in January this year.

However, I remain committed, and be there restoration of the devolved institutions or not, I will do all that I can to set this legislative process in motion again.

**‘We are facing
unprecedented
challenges,**



**Determined:
Ricky Rowledge**

VIEW put a number of questions to Ricky Rowledge, Chief Executive of the umbrella group Council for the Homeless, about its ongoing efforts to combat homelessness

Question: Are we winning the fight against homelessness?

Answer: No. There are a number of reasons why not. Some of them are structural reasons. We have lost a substantial proportion of affordable housing through the Right To Buy scheme. We need to look at a model of providing houses and then wrapping services around them.

Q: How effective has the Council for the Homeless been in tackling homelessness?

A: We have been very successful in representing our member organisations to ensure that homelessness has been kept on the political agenda.

Q: After the deaths of homeless people on the streets of Belfast, you said that more needed to be done to tackle mental ill health and addiction. Where any improvements made?

A: There have been better interventions in this area. The Public Health Agency has been listening. Last month it set up a task and finish group which is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland. This group is going to look at speeding up the pathways for people who are homeless.

Q: What do you think of the Northern Ireland Housing

Executive’s (NIHE) new Homelessness Strategy – 2017 to 2022?

A: I think that it is a good start. It has also recognised that it is a work in progress. We would have preferred it though to be more housing led. But we have also had a win in this document in that one of the actions coming out of it places a duty on the Department for Communities to have an interdepartmental action plan.

Q: Are your hands tied in any way because your main funder is the Northern Ireland Housing Executive?

A: No. I have a duty to this member organisation and to homeless people to ensure that their views, voices and interests are protected. I have no difficulty in doing this. It can, though, be a difficult tightrope to walk at times as we are facing unprecedented challenges in the sector at the moment.

Q: Where are we now in regard to the budget for Supporting People?

A: It’s a bit like a game of chess at the moment. The budget was reduced on March 31 this year by the NIHE without any consultation with the 100 providers who deliver Supporting People services. A campaign was launched to oppose this cut. The Department for Communities then agreed to release an additional £2.6 million in order to mitigate the cut. The budget is still £400,000 short, and secondly all

providers got a letter which said that the NIHE were giving money back but that providers would have to apply for the money. Although a condition was that the money would have to be spent before the end of March next year and it would have to be spent on those activities on the original bid that the money had been applied for.

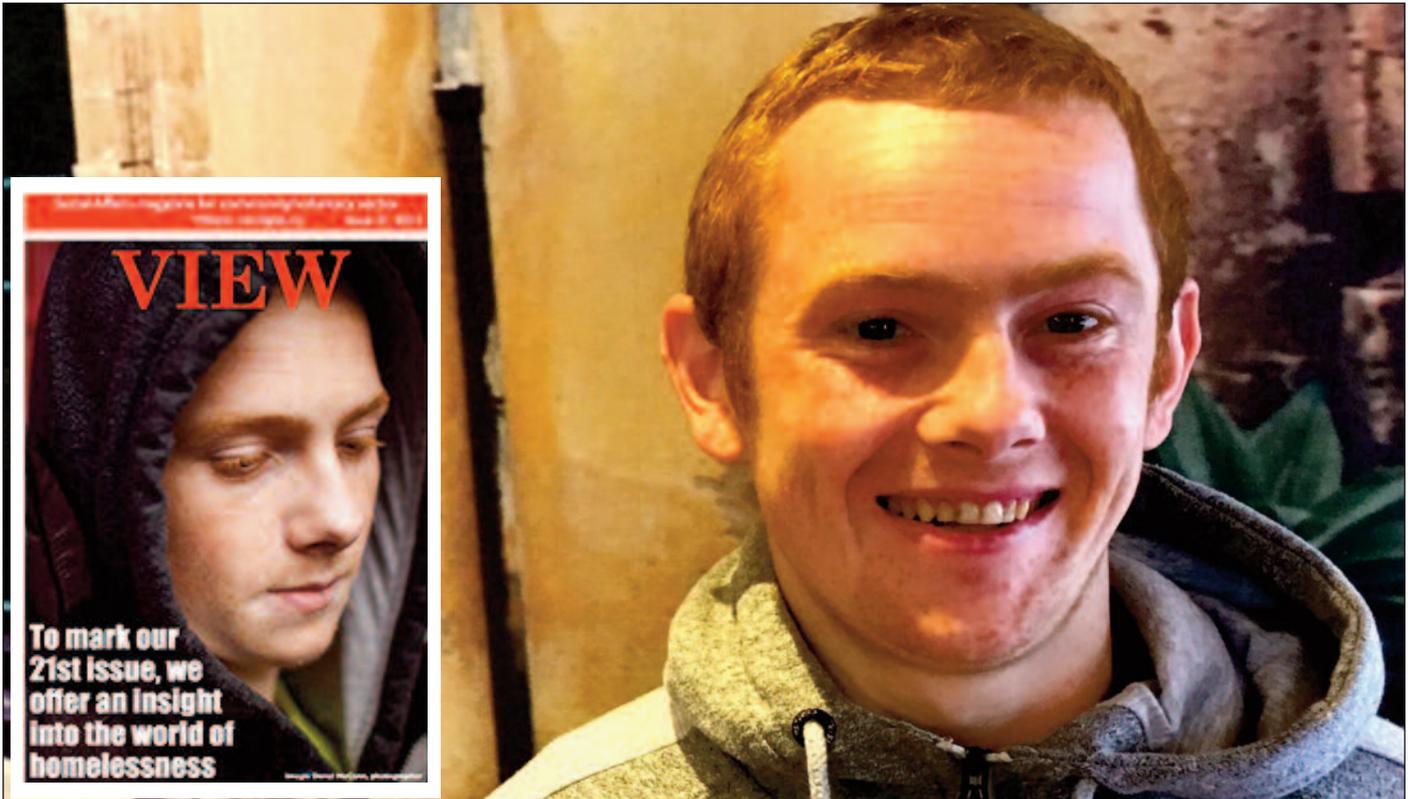
The problem is that some providers made cuts based on the lesser amount that they were going to get. Some providers closed down projects and paid off staff. Because of these decisions some of these providers will not be in a position to apply for the money.

Q: How does all this impact upon homelessness?

A: Homeless services more than any other type of client group are dependent on Supporting People funding. We have been particularly hit by this budget cut.

Q: And finally, do you think the current roll-out of Universal Credit in Northern Ireland will have a negative effect on the homelessness situation?

A: Absolutely. In London alone there has been a huge increase in rough sleeping because of the impact of Universal Credit. It will lead to people here not being able to pay their rent and also that landlords won’t take people who may be unable to pay rent.



SMILING: Kenny, who now has a partner, a child and his own house, and (inset) when he featured on the front cover of **VIEW** in 2014 when he was homeless

Kenny tells of his joy at finally having his own **front door** key

Brian Pelan talks to a young man about how his life has radically changed for the better since he had to survive without a home

It was three years ago when I first met Kenny. At the time he was homeless and living in a hostel.

He very bravely agreed to feature in our 2014 issue of VIEW that looked at homelessness. I was delighted to carry his story, alongside his friend James, in the magazine. We also used an image of Kenny on the front cover.

For this issue of VIEW I decided to contact Kenny and find out what his current situation was.

I am pleased to report that Kenny is no longer homeless. He is now living in a house, has his own front door key and he and his partner have a little boy, with another child on the way.

I meet Kenny recently in Belfast. Over a cup of coffee I asked him about his present situation and his thoughts about homelessness and how it affected his life.

"I've changed an awful lot since that photograph was taken," said Kenny.

"But that image of me speaks a thousand words. You can tell by looking at it that I was someone who was going through a difficult period. From 2012 to

2015 I was living in hostels. I really don't like thinking about that time. Homelessness nearly ruined me. I obviously had health problems when I was younger. Becoming homeless made those problems surface and made my problems a lot worse. Everything just deteriorated for me. It was a dark period in my life and it is something I never want to go back to.

"It makes my heart sink when ever I come across someone homeless now, especially when I see someone sitting in the rain because I know what that is like.

"I wouldn't wish that situation on my own worst enemy."

Kenny laughed openly as he talked about the sheer joy of having his own front door key.

He also has very strong views on what it was like to live in a hostel. "You were under all these rules," he said.

"You couldn't live your own life and you have very little stability."

He has fond memories of taking part in the Northern Ireland Homeless Street Football League and going to Chile in South America as part of it.

"I got an international cap for

representing Northern Ireland in the Homeless World Cup. That was a fantastic experience."

I asked Kenny for his views on what is needed to effectively tackle the problem of homelessness.

"I think we need to have classes in schools, which are delivered to pupils around 12 years of age, and which talk about topics such as homelessness," replied Kenny.

"My own problems started around the age of 12. Your pathway to being homeless can start very early in your life. We should try to nip these problems in the bud at an early age in children's lives. We also need much more support from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

"I've no regrets about being featured in VIEW. It helped to raise awareness about the issue of homelessness."

And on that positive note I ended my interview with Kenny. I also got to shake his partner's hand and meet their son.

I wish Kenny all the very best.

He has been through a very tough time and it was fantastic to see how his life had changed for the better.

COMMENT

Why support for *Housing First* is vital



Kerry Anthony, Chief Executive of Depaul, says the crux of the problem when it comes to tackling homelessness is a lack of affordable housing and an out of control rental market

There are many differences in the homeless sector in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, not least in how we count homelessness. In the Republic we now have over 8,300 individuals using emergency accommodation, including an over reliance on hotels to accommodate families.

The situation is also more acute in the Republic due to the number of people living in emergency accommodation and indeed rough sleeping. In some ways it's apples and oranges trying to make comparisons but certainly with what has been declared a 'national crisis' by many in the Republic, there are lessons to be learnt, particularly given the fragility of our circumstances in Northern Ireland

The crux of this complex issue is down to a lack of affordable housing and an out of control rental market. The Republic is finally emerging from recession, however the legacy of that recession has left the State with an inadequate social housing stock.

In 2007, the Irish Government allocated €3 billion to Housing, Planning, and Local Government. This dropped to less than €1 billion in 2014. Three years later, this failure to see what was most important during tough economic times has left us scrambling to plug a hole in our infrastructure. The housing budget is on the rise again with the Minister for Finance allocating €2.83 billion for 2018 towards trying to resolve the crisis.

A robust housing strategy is needed, with a commitment to building housing and social housing as a key component. Continued investment in housing through a recession is paramount and possibly the single biggest failing in the Republic in recent years.

A lack of Governmental leadership in planning and infrastructure is detrimental to housing and homelessness in any region. The identification of a minister with a specific focus on housing was also a significant move both to ensure that housing and homelessness are represented at key tables within the government, but also to ensure there is an ability to hold government to account by the sector and the public.



We need to protect our most vulnerable and we need to do this through the provision of high quality services

To see housing as an add on to other departments is not sufficient. If we had a functioning government in place at Stormont, one lesson from the Republic would be to recognise that housing and homelessness are not separate issues. Homelessness should be a key proponent of any housing strategy.

We also need to integrate our strategies, this happened too late in the day in the Republic after the crisis had hit and now we are on the back foot managing a crisis. Northern Ireland housing and homelessness strategies should be much more integrated, there should be an integrated strategy on the funding aligned to the strategy for homelessness.

Depaul is a proponent of Housing First as a policy and a pioneer of its delivery in Northern Ireland, whereby a person who is homeless with complex needs is placed in a secure home first with the appropriate wrap around supports. This model dispels the myth that a person has to 'earn' their right to a home by

working their way through a hostel system and being abstinent.

Over a four-year period Depaul has worked to support the accommodation of over 200 people with complex needs and who may previously have been considered unhouseable. In an independent review of the pilot of this service almost 80 per cent of those accommodated were still in their tenancy 12 months later. In the Republic there has been significant investment in Housing First as a model with limited investment in Northern Ireland.

Recently in the Republic the Minister has announced the move to appoint a National Director of Housing First, putting this policy front and centre. There is also an investment in the model from local authorities and health. In Northern Ireland there is a modest investment in this service and only through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The limited investment for health in homelessness in NI is disappointing.

Housing First has been accepted to some extent in Northern Ireland, but it needs to be fully embraced, with a regional strategy developed with adequate funding attached to it and championed by public servants.

Between 2009-2013 cuts were implemented by the Republic's HSE of 20 per cent by 2013. This has not been restored, leading to serious pressure of services providing support to those in need. The ability to attract and retain competent, caring staff has also been a challenge.

Funding to vital services are being cut in Northern Ireland through Supporting People, a programme which provides funding for a myriad of services and supports for providers in the homelessness sector. Cutting funding for Supporting People is counterproductive as independent research has shown that every £1 spent in Supporting People schemes saves £1.90 for other public services.

We need to protect our most vulnerable and we need to do this through the provision of high quality services, we must keep on fighting to protect and increase the Supporting People budget.

COMMENT

Homes are linked to our wellbeing



Professor Siobhan O'Neil from Ulster University argues how shame, failure and guilt are key features of the life crises that can precipitate suicide and how homelessness can bring all three

Our homes, and home ownership, are inextricably linked with our wellbeing, our sense of self and our journey through life. Moving out of the family home, leaving home to work or study, moving in with a partner, they all represent key milestones.

For many, the move away from home and eventually establishing our own home represents progress, success, and a meaningful life. Indeed in our culture the concept of home ownership is also vital.

Many barely question the legitimacy of the cultural drive to get on the housing ladder, viewing the mortgage (literally translated as 'death grip') as indicative of full participation in society. It is a lure that few resist, and many are railroaded into unmanageable debt that will, at best, plunge them into lifelong debt and tie them to unsuitable jobs and careers.

Sadly, Northern Ireland is peppered with half paid for houses with "owners" who have sacrificed many of the meaningful and important aspects of life, relationships, time with children, in order to pay for the buildings, which for them represent success, wealth and power.

Moving back into the parental home is for some regarded as the ultimate indication of failure, and yet this is increasingly common. In my analysis of 1,600 suicides in Northern Ireland there was an important blip in age and residence graph for men in their 30s and 40s. These were men, who had taken their own lives, after having moved back into the parental home following a relationship or marriage breakdown. Shame, failure and guilt are key features of the life crises that precipitate suicide. Homelessness can bring all three.

Housing transitions are sources of stress themselves; dealing with landlords, banks or solicitors, packing, and moving, and then getting to know a new area. All take their toll.

They are also associated with the life events that themselves lead to mental illness. When the transition is the result of a death, a divorce, or a repossession, it can result in a devastating combination of stress, shame and the disruption of key relationships. These life crises can challenge an individual's sense of self and worth to



Sadly we seem to be moving further away from really protecting those who are vulnerable, and those who are caught, as a result of combinations of unfortunate life events and trauma, in the trap of unmanageable debt and homelessness

the degree that it triggers a spiral of depression. The struggles that occur in the days, weeks and months leading up to the transition are also associated with anxiety.

Financial stress, concern about repayments, and negotiations over property are for many a source of considerable anxiety, often over the long-term.

Whilst anxiety from time to time is a normal part of the human condition, the repeated activation of the fight or flight response, the cardiovascular, immunological, gastrointestinal system preparation for battle, is not conducive to good physical functioning.

Over time chronic stress increases the risk of the many physical health conditions that are associated with lower life expectancy and poverty.

Chronic stress, and in many cases severe trauma, are also at the root of the lifestyle "choices" that themselves create disease, and of course reliance on alcohol or drugs often excludes people from many housing options which are designed to protect.

We are getting good, as a society, at talking about mental health, particularly condemning a perceived lack of mental health services.

What is less often acknowledged is the role of the policy decisions, the practices of big business, and the social forces around us; which are in part responsible for many of these problems.

No amount of mindfulness meditation, resilience training and talking about our mental health will have an ounce on the impact of bold and just welfare policies.

Sadly we seem to be moving further away from really protecting those who are vulnerable, and those who are caught, as a result of combinations of unfortunate life events and trauma, in the trap of unmanageable debt and homelessness.

Our high suicide rates and the results from the analyses of the factors associated with the deaths are evidence of this, and my recent discussions with those working on the ground in suicide prevention services, would suggest that the problem is getting worse.

The poem below was written by VIEW editor Brian Pelan in memory of someone he once knew who was homeless for a period in his life and who has since died

For Jimmy

**I spotted it by chance or was I looking for it?
A cigarette butt protruding from a wall.
Did you leave it there?
Perhaps planning to retrieve it some day.**

**You listened to the ebb and flow of chatter
from your vantage point at a shopping centre.
A smile played around your lips but the eyes
told a different story.**

**Memories of better days must have been a
source of constant torment and delight.
Marriage, love, building with your strong hands,
children and hope.**

**Once you confided in me about a memory.
You were a child sitting tightly on the
handlebars of my brother's bike.
Careering down a hill with wide-eyed delight
into an uncertain future.**

The hours of wandering aimlessly lay far ahead.

We all of us have a name, a story, a journey and a future



Criminologist Faith Gordon, who has recently moved to London to work, writes about how she started to volunteer at two homeless projects after a chance encounter with a man called Joe who was living on the streets

The Grenfell Tower fire disaster in west London this summer tragically symbolises the impact of the legacy of government austerity, which has pushed the levels of homelessness to a record high and shines a light on the existence of a housing crisis in Britain.

The extent is reflected in statistics recently released by the National Audit Office. Since the Conservatives came into government there has been a 60 per cent rise in households living in temporary accommodation and a 134 per cent rise in rough sleepers.

In the days and weeks that followed the Grenfell Tower disaster, there was considerable concern regarding what would happen for those survivors whose homes had been destroyed.

Media reports highlighted that the affluent borough of Kensington and Chelsea was already the worst in England for housing homeless people locally before the disaster. Journalists documented how many evacuated families were forced to spend days sleeping rough or in cars.

Clearly the government failed to respond appropriately.

It is those who are relegated to the margins of our society through inequalities that rarely have their voices heard and their experiences recognised.

We all have a name, a story, a journey and a future.

I moved from Belfast to London for a permanent job. Not knowing anyone in this expansive city, I initially experienced a deep sense of loneliness.

The first person I shared a meal with in London was a guy called Joe. He was sitting on top of his coat on a side street off Regent Street in central London. We had made eye contact and I'd said "hello" and passed comment on the weather. He had laughed.

Joe was also from Northern Ireland



The fire disaster at Grenfell Tower in London has come to symbolise the huge housing crisis in the UK

originally, shared the same distinctive Northern Irish accent as me and knew of Annaclone, where I was brought up. "Small world," I said. Such an unfair world, I thought.

Joe told me that he'd been homeless for more than three months and that I was the first person he'd spoken to all week.

In that moment, as we shared a packet of sandwiches I'd been carrying, I thought about how vastly different our experiences of London were turning out to be.

As we parted ways, Joe told me to

"keep safe in this place girl. I've been robbed here, you know".

After meeting Joe, the issue of homelessness began to occupy my thoughts more, and as a criminologist, the levels of victimisation amongst those experiencing homelessness became a focus of research.

I got my hands on a copy of the then recently published text: *'Young Homeless People And Urban Space'* by Emma Jackson, which was based on her study of a day centre in London for young homeless people.

I also came across an extremely insightful blog written by Jon Kuhrt, who works with people affected by homelessness, offending and addictions at the West London Mission.

Soon after I began to volunteer for the evening shift at the Wednesday Club. For over 50 years, Hinde Street Methodist church has opened its doors every Wednesday and serves meals to people who are homeless, or who feel a bit rootless in London. Some local businesses support by donating produce.

As service users often highlight, it provides a safe and friendly environment for them.

"This is a safe place and I don't have that in life. I can relax here. Everywhere else I go I experience harassment and feel like it's kind of dangerous and like I need to be always on alert. Here, I can feel safe," one service user said.

I also volunteer at the West London Mission's night shelter, which involves 13 churches, a synagogue and a mosque partnering together to provide accommodation for rough sleepers for eight months of the year.

One night shelter participant told me how important the night shelter and support was in enabling him to obtain employment. "I lost my job and a few weeks later when I had run out of money I came to the day centre. I was able to have



Above and right: A few of the people that Faith has met since she started to do voluntary work to help the homeless in London

“Solutions need to be aimed at those who are experiencing social exclusion, inequality and homelessness”



a shower, food and tickets to get to interviews plus advice. The staff got me an interview as a breakfast chef at a hotel. I was successful and I have been there ever since. I was very lucky to get a place in the night shelter. I could sleep there comfortably which meant I could get a good night's sleep before doing a full day's work. I ate evening food and breakfast plus I could shower before work. After a few months I saved up enough money and I am now renting a small room.”

When I recently interviewed Jon Kuhrt, Chief Executive of the West London Mission, about homelessness in London, he said: “The fight against homelessness needs to take place on a number of levels. There is the political level because this is fundamentally an issue of social justice

because there is such a scandalous lack of affordable housing. Hostel beds and spending on rough sleeping has declined at the same time as rough sleeping has rocketed. But the majority of our work focuses on the practical level of actually helping those who end up on the streets back into accommodation. This can be a long, hard road, especially for those who have become entrenched on the streets and whose plight is worsened by addiction and mental health issues. I am so proud that we have helped 249 individuals off the streets last year. This is hope in action.”

The reality is the existing inequality and the levels of social injustice are not hidden problems but highly visible in London. It is the existing socio-economic inequalities which ultimately results in two

people, like Joe and I, originally from the same country, experiencing life in a new affluent city in two very different ways.

In front of the alarming statistics, there are an ever increasing number of new faces experiencing homelessness on the streets.

We need to open our eyes and we need to come together to collectively meet these challenges, on the ground and at the level of policymaking.

Hope in action means campaigning and lobbying on the ground and at the level of policymaking. Importantly, any solutions should be grounded in the needs and voices of those people who are experiencing the sharp end of the continuum of social exclusion, inequality and homelessness.

'I lost two friends who died on the streets'



Hard times: Wayne Cross beside the Homeless Jesus sculpture, which is on a bench outside Centenary House in Victoria Street, Belfast



Journalist Jane Hardy (left) talks to Wayne Cross about his battle with alcoholism, which led to him losing his job and his home and spending time living on the streets

Becoming institutionalised doesn't necessarily involve buildings. The homeless can also become institutionalised, used to if not comfortable with the routine of life on the streets.

Wayne Cross (32), former alcoholic and resident of the Salvation Army's Belfast homeless hostel Centenary House, said it's a significant problem. Over eight years as a rough sleeper, he realised what was happening. "I was institutionalised, I think, the streets were my home. It's very hard to get off the streets and when I first came here I had to sleep on the floor." He added that about 30 per cent of the rough sleepers he knew in central Belfast were similarly becoming used to being outsiders in their own town.

As a homeless man in Belfast city centre, he sensed a rhythm to street life. "There wasn't exactly a routine. I slept mainly in the doorway of MacDonald's in Royal Avenue in my sleeping bag from nine o'clock. You'd wake up early, feeling dozy, then head to Tesco's opposite for the first bottle of vodka."

By begging, Wayne earned enough to

keep him in booze – two bottles of vodka and two cheap bottles of QC wine a day. He said, in his view, giving money to beggars with drug habits exacerbated the problem.

His back story indicates how easy it is to drop out of the system. Wayne was a care assistant but he started drinking when his mother died. "That was 11 years ago. I bought a house with my inheritance but lost it through drinking." He also lost his job and started his career on the streets.

The solution to institutionalised homelessness is more complex than the offer of a bed. Wayne said other things were needed to ease people from life on the streets to life in a hostel or house. "There should be more active outreach and there should be more public toilets as they're often being used by people to inject heroin." In terms of washing, Wayne said bluntly: "You aren't clean."

He has been in and out of the Salvation Army hostel five times but this time was different. "I lost two friends who died on the streets, I'd had 10 convictions, all for alcohol, and decided to try rehab."

After a stint in Cuan Mhuire, Newry, Wayne returned to the hostel and is about to move to a housing executive house in Rathfriland.

In 2016 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive estimated the number of "entrenched" rough sleepers in Belfast as 42, although charities report a bigger problem. There are 103 beds at Centenary House yet only one was available the day I visited.

Stephen Potter, assistant regional manager of the Salvation Army's homeless services in Ireland, said helping people takes more than a room. "Sociologists refer to structure and agency and you have to address both. Dynamics like poverty and access to accommodation can oppress people and someone in that situation may turn to drink or drugs. The Salvation Army did research asking people when they were most happy. People answered by saying when they had a sense of purpose and were connected."

So support is needed for addiction, mental health and with navigating a way through (and out of) the world of homelessness.



Fionnuala Kennedy is currently working on a new play which will have a housing-related theme, and (inset) when she featured in the **VIEW** issue on homelessness in 2014

A voice for the **dispossessed**

Playwright Fionnuala Kennedy tells **VIEW** editor Brian Pelan that everything for her boils down to looking at the issue of inequality

A lot has changed for Belfast playwright Fionnuala Kennedy since she featured in the **VIEW** issue on homelessness in 2014.

In the article, 'Rebel with a cause' she talked about her play 'Hostel' and how it was based on a time in her life when, along with her daughter, she had to live in sheltered accommodation after she found herself homeless.

Fionnuala and I met for coffee recently in the comfortable surroundings of the Mac in Belfast. She said her experience of homelessness had occurred a long time ago and she most certainly never regarded herself as a victim.

"I had to go and live in a hostel if I ever wanted to have a chance of getting a permanent home. I'm delighted though that 'Hostel' – which is still being performed – has done so well."

She took the opportunity of the interview to hit out at the label of 'homeless people'.

"It's so dangerous to box people off by using this phrase. She prefers to describe them as 'people who happen to be homeless'."

Since 'Hostel', she has gone on to write

many more plays, but laughed when she confessed that none of them have been as successful as it.

"I am specifically interested in plays about people. In the arts and wider society, we have a responsibility to talk about things which are really important rather than turning a blind eye to what is happening around us.

"We need to talk about housing equality, gender equality, and sexual abuse which is a massive thing at the moment.

"Everything for me boils down to inequality.

"My last play was about welfare reform which is about inequality. Some people say: 'Just get a job'. But what I think is that if you are born into a place of privilege it is so much easier to get employment. Your parents may have sent you to after-school clubs. You were supported and given opportunities. But it's quite clear that we do not have equality of opportunity."

Fionnuala is currently working on a new play which will have a housing-related theme. "I worry that there are other experiences about homelessness which are not been talked about. I can talk about my

own situation but I'm aware that there are so many other people who are experiencing homelessness who do not have a voice.

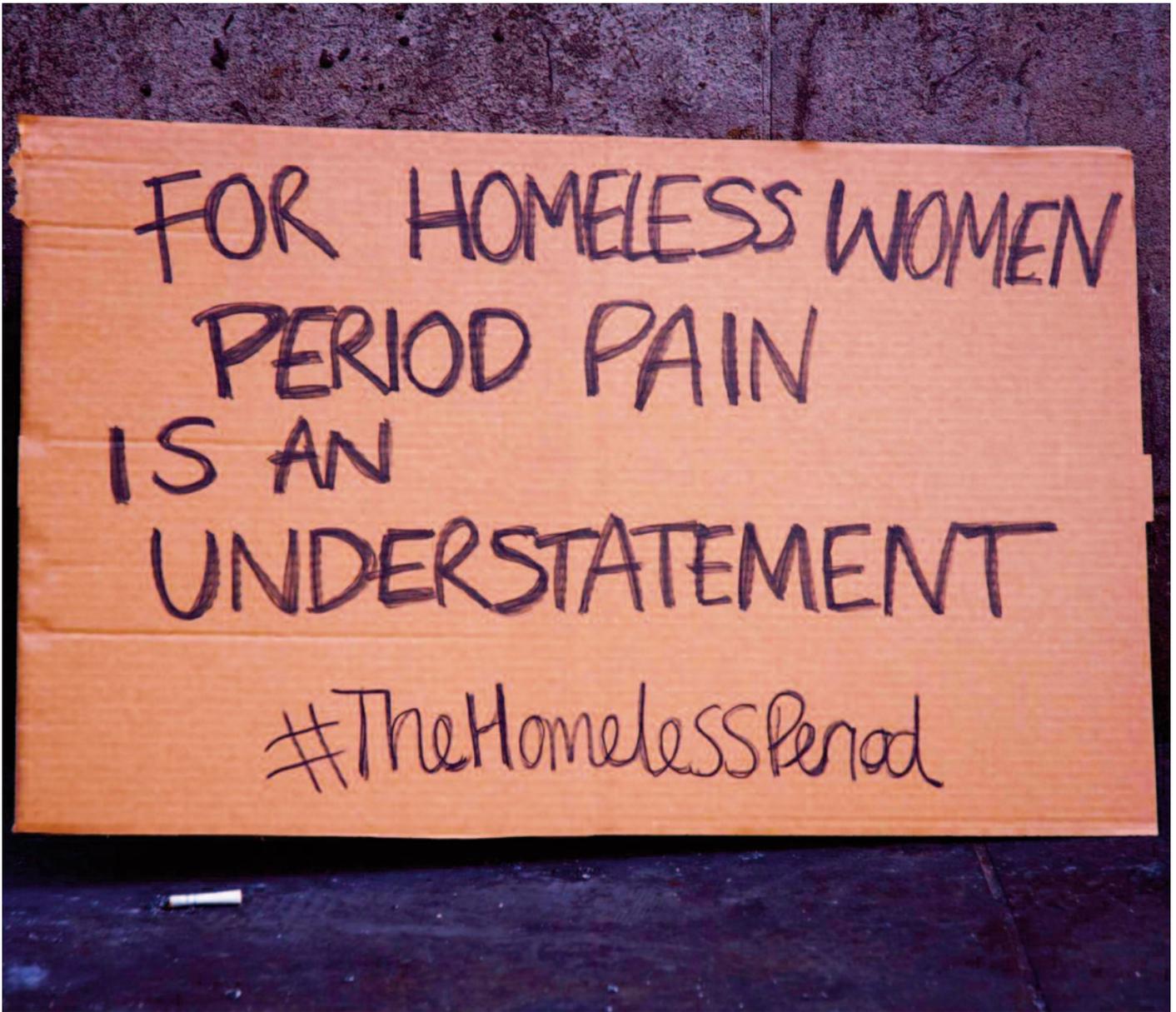
"As part of the work on my play, I will be carrying out interviews with housing staff and also talking to people who are experiencing or have experience homelessness in their lives.

"We are in a housing crisis at the moment and we need to be talking about it. I think that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive needs to start building houses again. I think it is wrong that they are not doing this and we should all be very worried about it."

My final question to Fionnuala was what does having her own home mean to her: "It represents safety, comfort, peace, and stability," she replied. "You cannot build a life when you are living temporarily, moving from place to place."

My impression of Fionnuala is that whilst she has stability in her own life she is still very much a rebel with a cause and has a lot more to say about inequality.

I'm convinced that her pen will do the talking even it makes some people and organisations feel uncomfortable.



Kylie Noble reports on the campaign to provide sanitary towels to **homeless women** in Belfast

Walk through Belfast city centre, as dusk falls, and you'll encounter what seems to be an ever-growing number of homeless people.

Women accounted for 3,546 of those reporting themselves as homeless last year, according to figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

For those women who have reached the most acute level of homelessness, and are sleeping on the streets, there exists an increased risk of sexual assault or rape and for those pre-menopause, the challenges of managing periods.

Twenty-four-year-old Katrina McDonnell, founded The Homeless Period Belfast, a volunteer-run project that takes donations of sanitary items which are distributed to various organisations and locations across the city.

Katrina had already done some volunteer work in homelessness, when she

heard about the period poverty campaign in England, over a year ago.

She contacted food banks and hostels in Belfast and found out that they lacked sanitary items. She then got several friends involved in her work.

"Everyone thinks about donating food and clothes, but women, especially those sleeping rough, often find themselves in difficult situations where they have to choose between buying food or buying sanitary products," said Katrina.

She said the lack of proper sanitary items can lead to serious health implications. "Some women are forced to use ripped up cloths, old socks or toilet roll from public toilets, or make a few tampons last the entire length of their period. This can lead to infections, so it doesn't just have an emotional impact but is also a danger to women's physical health."

The volunteers take around five days out of their time each month to empty collection bins, make up the period-care packs and do deliveries.

The Homeless Period needs yearly donations of sanitary towels, tampons, new underwear, liners, wipes and hand sanitiser.

- **The Homeless Period group can be found on Facebook at www.facebook.com/thehomelessperiod/**
- **Public donation bins can be found at Queen's University Students' Union, Michele International Hairdressers in Belfast, Oh Yeah music centre, Framework art gallery, Women's Resource and Development Agency, Kennedy Centre in west Belfast and WOMENSTEC in north Belfast**

COMMENT

Why we must listen to women's fears



Kelly Andrews, Chief Executive of Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid, says the lack of affordable housing means that many women and their children are forced to choose between abuse at home or life on the streets

When a woman leaves an abusive relationship, she often has nowhere to go. This is particularly true of women with few resources. Lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for social housing mean that many women and their children are forced to choose between abuse at home or life on the streets. What does this mean for women in Northern Ireland?

Between the period April 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017 the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 29,166 incidents of domestic violence, 13,933 recorded domestic crimes and three murders. Women's Aid Refuges are frequently filled to capacity and must turn away women and their children.

The relationship between domestic violence and homelessness is complex, as it's often underpinned by a range of factors such as gender inequality, socio-economic disadvantage, mental ill health as well as poor access to income support and housing.

Although domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships and can happen to men, the overwhelming number of victims are women (at the hands of a male partner/family member). For some women they come to refuge for safely as a dangerous perpetrator may know where else she may turn to for shelter.

Not all women who experience domestic violence will become homeless. Some have greater access to financial and social resources, such as income and housing. Women who have fewer of these resources are more likely to need help from Women's Aid refuges or other homelessness services, demonstrating how homelessness caused by domestic violence is also underpinned by other issues such as poverty.

Many women experiencing domestic violence will have to get help from Women's Aid or homelessness services because they lack the financial resources needed to secure housing. For example, a controlling partner may have withheld his partner's access to finances and/or not allow her to work outside the home, therefore limiting her ability to secure an income. Sometimes a woman may not have a credit history or bad credit, which makes



Unfortunately we live in a society where crisis domestic violence accommodation is needed

it harder to rent, and in other cases women have to leave quickly and simply don't have time to prepare. Many women who experience domestic violence are not 'houseless', they have houses, but they can't be safe in them because the perpetrator lives there too.

Women's Aid offers specialised support services and work with women and children who have experienced domestic and sexual violence or abuse. As well as our Outreach/Floating Support Service, Women's Aid provides crisis refuge accommodation where a woman, for her own safety or the safety of her children, must leave her home.

This is a 24-hour service as domestic violence is not restricted to 9am to 5pm. Women's Aid staff can support and work with a woman to enhance self-esteem and confidence by exploring 'What is domestic abuse?' 'The cycle of violence', and 'What is a healthy relationship?'

We offer court support and work with our statutory, voluntary and

community partners to help women navigate housing services, legal services, medical or social welfare support. By empowering women they are better able to protect themselves and their children, enabling them to sustain tenancies.

Women's Aid has child workers who support children and young people deal with their experience of domestic violence. Not all women who engage in Women's Aid services may take up to do a programme such as 'Journey to Freedom', however most do. Our one to one and group work with women can take up to 14 sessions.

In Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid most women stay in refuge for four to six days, followed by one to two weeks as the next highest length of stay.

However, we do have some women and children who are in our refuge for over six months. This is due to lack of available social housing or women being unable to access the private rental market. Women's Aid Refuge Services are for crisis accommodation, it is not a housing solution. We want to work with the Housing Executive to move women and their children out of refuge while maintaining appropriate support services.

The Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022 aims to carry out a review of temporary accommodation and link this to the Supporting People Review. This is welcomed by Women's Aid.

Our services need investment. Our refuges have full occupancies, heavy turnover of women and children through the service. Women and children are accessing the service who have complex needs and we must have appropriate facilities and staff to support these vulnerable people.

Investment in refuges has stagnated. If we are to future proof the service for women and children then modernisation programmes are needed.

While our outreach/floating support services continue to grow. Unfortunately we live in a society where crisis domestic violence accommodation is needed. I can't see this changing any time soon. We must listen to women when they say they are fearful for their lives. The consequences are too great not to.



Stephen McNally: “When people see you are vulnerable they try and take advantage”

‘It was fight or **flight** mode’

Stephen McNally talks to Kelly McAllister about his time on the streets and how he managed to turn his life around

It was the words “I used to come to places like this just for somewhere to be, just for heat” which really hit home as I sat opposite Stephen McNally in a cafe in a bustling shopping centre.

Stephen, who is 28 years of age and an aspiring musician with a part-time job, had a smile on his face as he spoke about his family, friends and ambitions for the future but also how he once ended up living on the streets.

His story was grim. It all felt unreal, as with his shopping bags at his feet he easily blended in with the other customers.

“I was in a relationship for a long time that just wasn’t working. We both drank alcohol every day and we were both unemployed. Gradually the relationship fell apart and I moved back in with my parents, I was still drinking heavily.”

Stephen talked about how alcohol had a huge negative effect on his life, and along with the pressures of his break-up, he freely confessed that at that point in his life he found it hard to have a positive outlook.

He began meeting with different musicians and moving forward with his

dreams but eventually that turned into more social events which then in turn led to alcohol.

“My parents saw it coming. I was drinking two to three bottles of cider a day. I would wake up in the morning and drink the remains of the cider from the night before, then I would go and get more.”

After many requests from his parents to change his behaviour, Stephen was finally asked to leave the house and very quickly he found himself homeless.

“I was not dealing with any of my problems, I didn’t realise the severity of them. I would try and find places to charge my phone when I was on the streets. But no one contacted me anyway.”

He found himself drifting from one sofa to the next, staying wherever he could for the night. He tells me how he made friends when other people, who were also homeless, noticed him alone in the city centre every day.

“But eventually fear takes over, I didn’t want to be in that environment.

“When people see you are vulnerable

they try and take advantage. It was fight or flight mode,” he told me.

“After a while, his fear turned into anger which he confessed that he fuelled with alcohol. Stephen then found himself in trouble with the police.

“Better off in a jail cell than on the street where someone can hurt you. At least in there you get fed in the morning,” he said.

During his time living on the streets, Stephen said he met many different kinds of people who had ended up homeless.

“Each of them had a very different story regarding their journey and how they got there,” he added.

“I began to wonder: who am I? How do I fit into all of this?”

“It’s not just addiction,” he said. “Mental health issues have a lot to do with it.”

Stephen added that he looked at his time on the streets as a blur with no set timeline of events.

I asked him did he now realise how serious his situation was.

“Definitely... I know that I have everything to lose now.”

14 shocking facts about the homelessness crisis in the United Kingdom

- **More than 4,000 people are sleeping rough on our streets**

- The need for social housing is now vastly outstripping supply with 1.24 million households on local authority waiting lists

- **Over the last seven years the number of people sleeping on the streets has risen by over 130 per cent with 1,768 known to have been sleeping rough in 2010 and 4,134 in 2016**

- Across the UK three million working families are just one paycheck away from losing their home, with one in three working families in England not able to afford to pay their rent or mortgage for more than a month if they lost their job

- **Every year more than 150,000 young people across the UK ask for help with homelessness**

- Although homeless people are considered as a priority to be rehoused, there are currently over a million people on waiting lists for social housing

- **In the next hour, across the UK, another six families will become homeless, and tomorrow over 100 families will become homeless**

- 8,900 people are estimated to be sleeping in tents, cars and public transport in the UK

- **15 per cent of prisoners reported being homeless before custody (including nine per cent sleeping rough) compared to 3.5 per cent of the general population having ever been homeless**

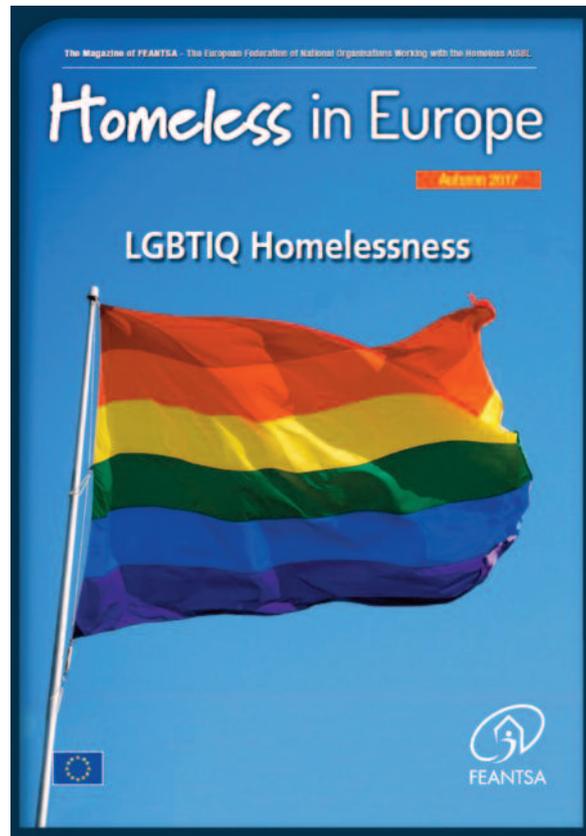
- More than three-quarters of prisoners (79 per cent) who reported being homeless before custody were reconvicted in the first year after release, compared with less than half (47 per cent) of those who did not report being homeless before custody

- **Three-fifths (60 per cent) of prisoners believed that having a place to live was important in stopping them from reoffending in the future**

- 1,856 rough sleepers have experience of serving time in prison

- **A study found that prisoners who had stable accommodation when leaving prison were 20 per cent less likely to reoffend**

- One in six prisoners report being homeless before they are taken into custody



LGBTIQ homelessness: A growing problem in Europe

People who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-gender, Intersex or Queer (LGBTIQ) are paradoxically both over-represented and under-reported in the homeless sector.

The existing data is patchy at best but in general, we see in the US, Canada, and the UK that 20 to 40 per cent of homeless youth identify as LGBTIQ. We also know from the limited research that is available that homeless LGBTIQ are more likely to avoid homeless services and sleep rough and couch-surf, meaning the true extent is not being captured by homeless service providers.

This should give anyone working in the homeless sector pause for thought. Why are LGBTIQ people more at risk of losing their home and do we provide adequate responses and support services?

The autumn 2017 edition of FEANTSA's Homeless in Europe magazine gives serious consideration to these issues.

EveIn Paradis, the Executive Director with ILGA-Europe, writes about the experiences of young LGBTIQ people who are rendered homeless from family rejection, discrimination in searching for accommodation and finding employment and the unfortunate gap that has arisen between "homeless actors" and "LGBTIQ ac-

tors", and the need to work together.

Jama Shelton, the chief strategist for the True Colours Fund, profiles the nature of LGBTIQ homelessness in the United States. The consequences of homelessness for the LGBTIQ community, when compared to heterosexual and cisgender people, can be more devastating.

LGBTIQ homeless are likely to remain homeless for a longer period and to be exploited and become involved in criminal behaviour. If we want to invest in successful interventions in combatting homelessness, they must be tailored to the needs of the individual. A one size fits all approach doesn't work. Services and staff need to be inclusive. True Colours provides an excellent example of how this can be done.

The Movisie (the Netherlands centre for social development) profiles the needs of homeless youth in the Netherlands highlighting issues with family break-up, educational attainment, support network, traumatic experiences and poor mental health.

While research is difficult to come across, this article from the Netherlands highlights why more research is needed to provide a better and more informed picture of what LGBTIQ homelessness looks like, so we can implement services which can serve to not only reduce but also

prevent people who identify as LGBTIQ from becoming homeless.

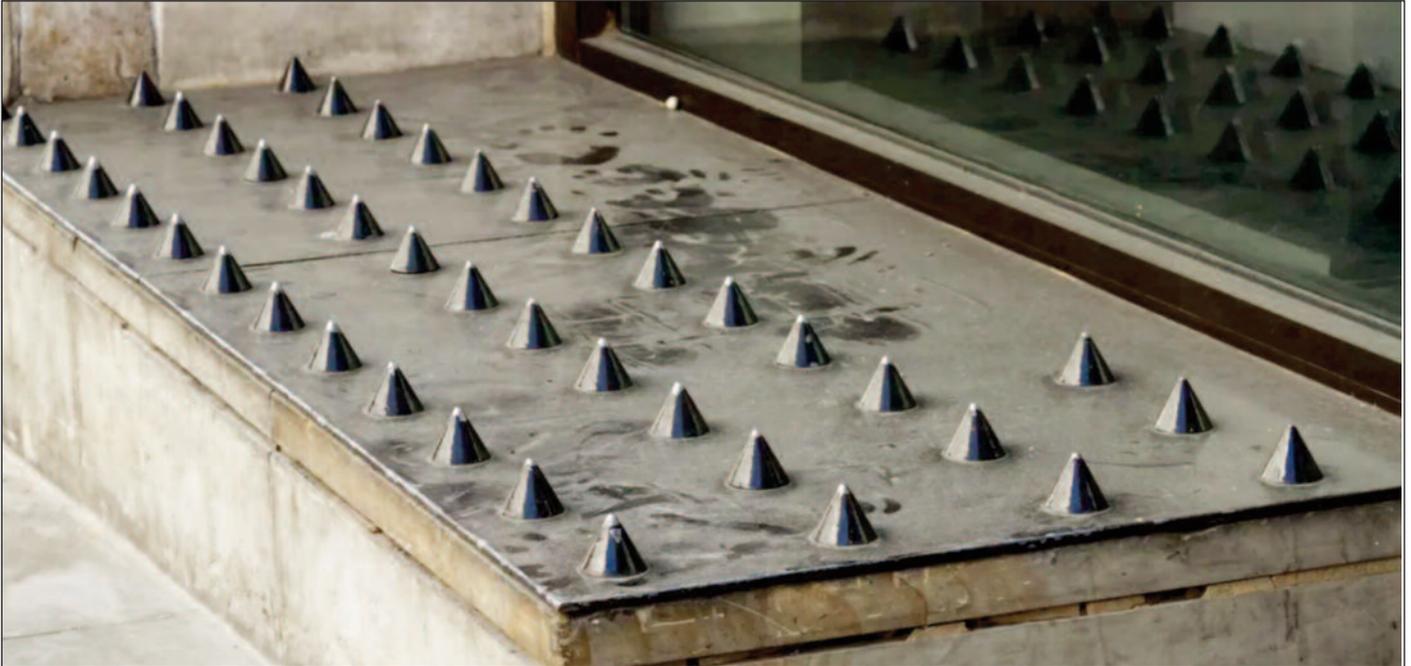
A similar picture has developed in Spain. While there is no specific research that highlights the risk of LGBTIQ community to homelessness, it is a growing problem. Feedback from the ground and frontline services is the issue is growing, and similar to the United States, Netherlands, Canada and many other countries to combat this issue requires more data and research.

LGBTIQ homelessness may not be a visible form of homelessness and it is certainly not clear to see in the way we structure and design services. The limited research out there clearly shows that LGBTIQ homeless engage in what we call 'hidden homelessness', where they may not present to shelters and services, and instead sleep rough in parks or stations or couch-surf for months at a time.

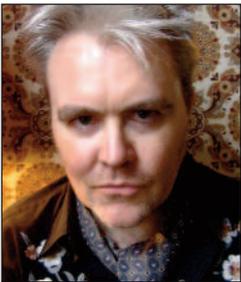
This makes it a problem that is easy to ignore. But it is growing, and if we don't invest in the collection of adequate data and research soon, we risk further socially excluding an already marginalised community.

• **FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. (www.feantsa.org/en)**

And now for *another thing*



Anti-homeless spikes, which were aimed at preventing people from sleeping in public and private spaces



Columnist John Higgins argues that we have to reject some of the warped thinking about homelessness that has included some businesses installing blunted spikes to try and deter people from sleeping outside their premises

When I think about homelessness my mind drifts back to two things that seem forever entwined by proximity and irony. In 1987 a discarded match on a wooden escalator led to the Kings Cross Fire in London which killed 31 people.

For 16 years one of these was known only as '115' – the number given to his body in the mortuary. Body 115 was ultimately revealed to be 72-year-old Alexander Fallon, a Scot whose life had unravelled after the death of his wife from cancer. He had sold his house in Falkirk and was living rough in London. That was why he was in Kings Cross that evening.

Around the same time the former Conservative Party chief whip Sir George Young allegedly joked that the homeless “were the people you step over when you're coming out of the opera”.

This may sound like the sort of callous bon mot popped into the cat's bum gob of Yes, Minister's Sir Humphrey Appleby, but it presents us with a very specific mindset and one I think is still prevalent: the homeless are an impediment to Sir

George, a stone in his pathway, an embarrassment to be ignored, if indeed he could muster the human decency to feel embarrassed. It's the kind of thinking that leads to businesses installing blunted spikes outside their premises, or apparatus that sprays water on people trying to sleep. Somebody thought that would be a good idea. Somebody bought it. Somebody manufactured it. Somebody designed it.

It's a policy similar to the one I maintain with my bank statements: if you ignore it then it isn't a problem. If it is happening somewhere else then it's not your responsibility. But it is our responsibility.

Be warned: virtue signalling approaching. I quite often give money to the homeless (equally, and for balance, I quite often don't give money to the homeless – I will use another cashpoint, I will cross the street). And I don't care what they spend the money on. They can do what they like with it – good luck to them.

We live in a cold, wet country, where benefits are falling and rents are spiralling.

If they can claw back some crumb of comfort with my quid then I'm happy. I don't like to examine my motives, though, because I don't particularly like my motives. There's some pity in there, there's some “there-but-for-the-grace-of God”. There's probably quite a lot of throwing money at the problem and hoping it goes away.

I'm not proud, but I would rather be giving money than not.

We live in a supposedly Christian society but I don't recognise a lot of Christianity in people's attitudes to the homeless. Christianity is a heavy presence when telling women the sorts of things they should or shouldn't be doing with their bodies, or the gender of people you're allowed to fall in love with, but Jesus in the Bible seemed to talk about loving one another and told parables about helping the disenfranchised and needy.

That was, sort of, the point. In the future I'm going to try and do more about the epidemic of homelessness. In future I'm going to try and act more like Jesus and less like a Christian.



Are you passionate about social justice?

Contact VIEW editor Brian Pelan
at brianpelan@viewdigital.org
to find out how you can help grow
our independent journalism vision