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Improving Homelessness Services: A Case Study from the South East Region

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If you have ideas for a case study, contact roslyn.molloy@housingagency.ie.

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Improving Homelessness Services: A Case Study of the South-East Region

Introduction

In response to increasing levels of homelessness, the South-East region's¹ Homelessness Strategic Management Group, led by Waterford City and County Council introduced a new homelessness management and prevention structure in 2018. The Homelessness Strategic Management Group is made up of representatives from local authorities, the HSE and Tusla in the South-East region. The Group is responsible for the preparation of the region's annual Homelessness Action Plan, and associated funding.

This Housing Agency Policy Insights paper describes the changes introduced since 2018 in the South-East region which have resulted in local authorities, homelessness service providers, the HSE and other stakeholders working together to provide a more effective, integrated service. This paper also describes some key innovative solutions introduced in the region to tackle homelessness. The purpose of this paper is to showcase good practice in the implementation of homeless policy. In particular, this paper highlights the importance of good management structures and collaborative working.

Insights

Structural changes resulted in more than 50% of those presenting as homeless being redirected from entering emergency accommodation.

A dedicated Homeless Lead role provides full-time focus on reducing homelessness by building local relationships and introducing innovative solutions.

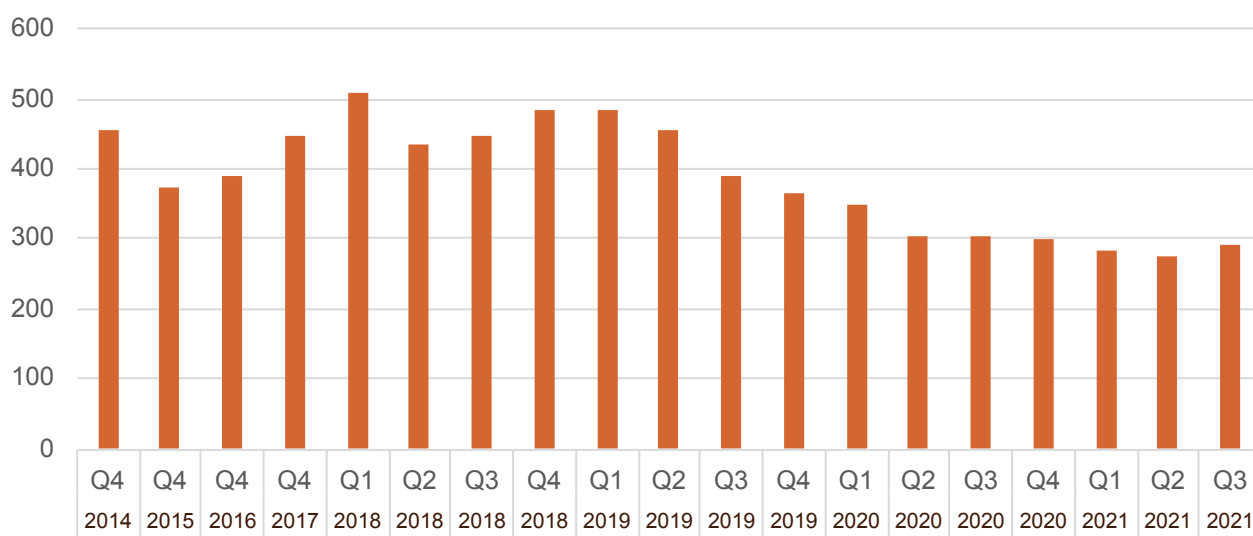
Social Workers employed as Homeless Prevention and Support Workers work closely with clients to secure and sustain tenancies.

¹ The South-East Region covers Waterford, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary and Wexford

What was the issue?

During the late 2010s the South-East region experienced rising homelessness, peaking in 2018 (O'Sullivan, Reidy, & Allen, 2021). The increase in the number of individuals living in emergency accommodation in the South-East Region peaked at 509 in the first quarter of 2018 as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Numbers of Individuals in emergency accommodation in the South-East Region, 2014-2021



Source: Government of Ireland (2022), Homelessness Data accessed on gov.ie

Family homelessness also grew significantly, with a 267% increase from between January 2016 and January 2018, from twelve to 44 families (Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2020). Before 2018, the South-East region relied primarily on Bed & Breakfast (B&B) accommodation as emergency accommodation for those presenting as homeless. However, there was growing evidence that B&Bs were not suitable for this purpose. Their use could exacerbate the stresses and anxieties families were already experiencing due to homelessness (Walsh & Harvey, 2015). This form of accommodation was also expensive, for example, Waterford City & County Council spent €324,902 during 2018 on Bed & Breakfast accommodation (Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2020).

What was the solution?

In 2018 the South-East Region commenced a systematic review of its homeless services. The review was carried out by the local authority and HSE Homeless Leads, in conjunction with relevant homeless services and local authority staff. It led to six significant changes in the region's structures:

1. A new role of a dedicated Homeless Lead, for the South-East region was introduced. This role is the coordinator and main driver for the homelessness activities in the region, situated in Waterford City and County Council. This role works closely with the HSE Homeless Lead.
2. The Waterford Integrated Homeless Service (WIHS) was created.
3. The Homeless Strategic Management Group was restructured to include Housing Directors of Services from each local authority in the region.
4. A Homeless Coordinator was appointed in each local authority.
5. Social Care Workers were employed in the new role of Homeless Prevention & Support Workers to focus on homelessness prevention and provide key working support to households living in private or unsupported emergency accommodation.
6. A Care and Case Management Support Framework was introduced.

Dedicated Homeless Lead Role

A dedicated Homeless Lead role (Grade VII) for the South-East region's local authorities was created. This role reports into the lead authority's (Waterford City & County Council) Director of Services. The Homeless Lead is the coordinator and main driver for the homelessness activities in the region. This person works closely with the HSE Homeless Lead to address gaps and blocks in the system. The dedicated Homeless Lead role is crucial as it provides a full-time focus on improving homelessness services. This is achieved by building relationships and collaborations with relevant stakeholders, implementing the region's homelessness strategy, and developing innovative solutions to address homelessness.

Waterford Integrated Homeless Service established

The Waterford Integrated Homeless Service (WIHS) was established. It is a partnership between WCCC, the HSE, Focus Ireland and the South-East Simon Community. This centre employs staff from across the participating organisations and provides a streamlined, centralised resource for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

Restructured Homeless Strategic Management Group (SMG)

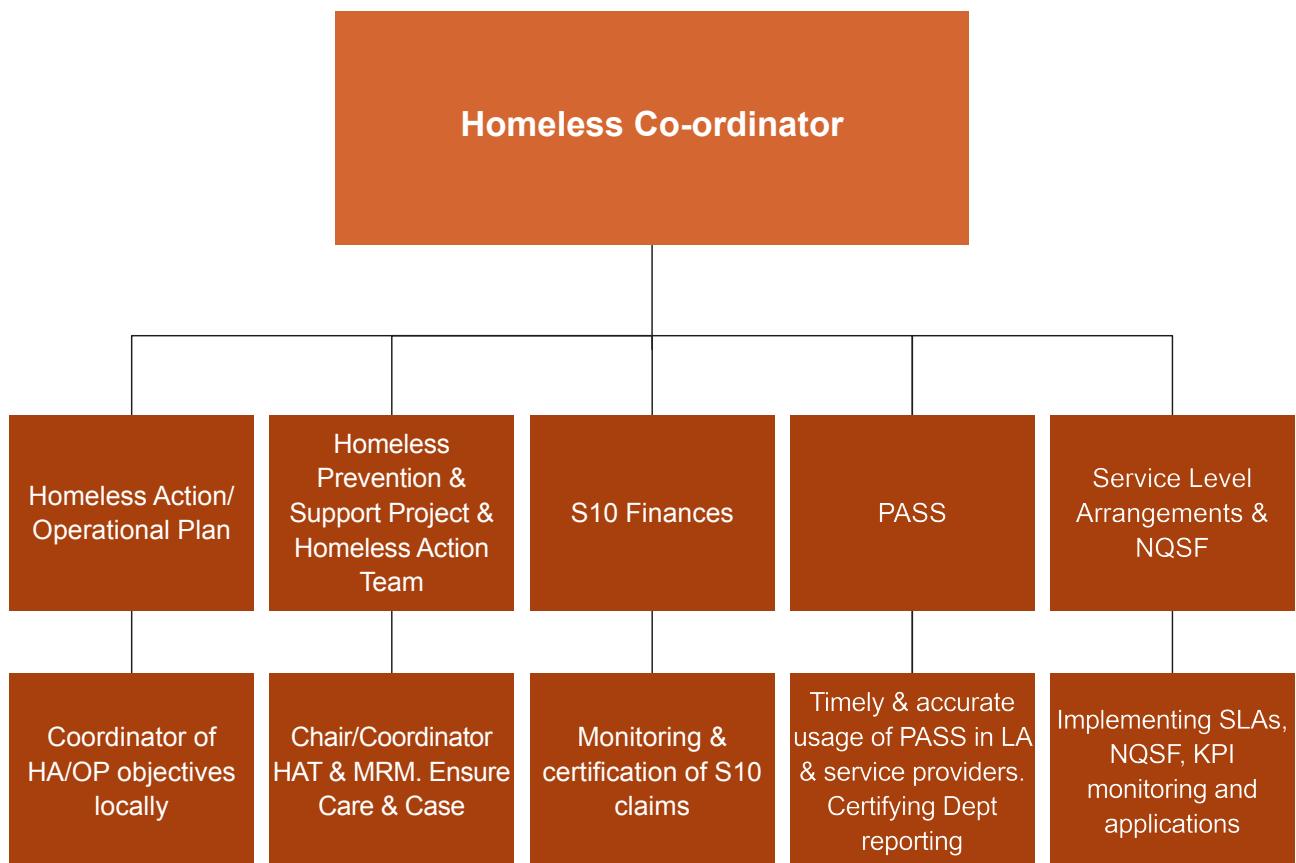
The role of the strategic management group is to promote an integrated and collaborative approach to managing and preventing homelessness within the South-East region. Following the review in 2018 this Group was restructured to include Directors of Housing. Attendance and membership of this group by Directors of Housing ensures the senior level support that can achieve national and regional objectives. It also facilitates a consistent approach to addressing and managing homeless service provision across the Region. The SMG also includes the Regional Homeless Leads (local authorities & HSE), representatives from HSE South-East Community Healthcare (Social Inclusion & Mental Health Services) and representatives from Tusla. The full list of members of the SMG is listed below:

- Lead Authority, Director of Housing, Waterford City & County Council, Chairperson
 - Lead Authority Regional Homeless Lead
- Directors of Housing,
 - Carlow County Council
 - Kilkenny County Council
 - Tipperary County Council
 - Wexford County Council
- HSE South-East Community Healthcare
 - Regional General Manager, Social Inclusion
 - General Manager, Mental Health, HSE South-East Community Healthcare
 - Regional Rehab Coordinator/Homeless Lead, Social Inclusion
- TUSLA
 - Representative – Waterford / Wexford
 - Representative – Tipperary/ Kilkenny/ Carlow

A New Homeless Co-ordinator Role created in each local authority

A Homeless Co-ordinator role in each South-East local authority was created to manage the homeless teams and report on homelessness levels. The Homeless Co-ordinators are typically Administrative Officers (Grade VII) in the local authorities. The Homeless Co-ordinator is the main point of contact in each local authority for all stakeholders. They are responsible for the implementation and management of agreed homeless protocols and processes delivering consistency throughout the South-East Region. The core duties of the Homeless Co-ordinator role are outlined in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Role of the Homeless Co-ordinator



Source: SER Regional Structures V10 01102021

Created Homeless Prevention & Support Worker Role

The fourth significant change is that each local authority recruited Homeless Prevention & Support workers, with social care qualifications. This is a Social Care Worker grade and aligned to the Social Worker salaries. The Homeless Prevention and Support Workers are responsible for carrying out prevention and mediation work when people present as homeless. They also provide care and case management support to households living in private or own front door emergency accommodation. Their role is to:

- conduct homeless assessments
- carry out prevention and mediation work with those presenting due to family or relationship breakdown
- arrange temporary accommodation
- provide care and case management key working and supports to households in emergency accommodation
- identify support needs and ensure linkage with required services.
- provide settlement support moving into a new tenancy
- make referrals to the Tenancy Sustainment & Support Service where longer supports are required.

Care and Case Management Framework Implemented

The final significant change brought about as a result of the systematic review in 2018 was the introduction in the South-East region of the Care and Case Management Framework². This is an inter-agency case management tool used to help identify homeless service users support needs and help identify and address issues that may have caused or contributed to somebody becoming homeless in order to be able to put the necessary supports in place. To receive homeless accommodation the client engages with a key worker and completes a care and case management support plan. This plan aims to address the issues that may have caused or contributed to the individual's homelessness and which may potentially affect their ability to maintain a new tenancy. This framework is embedded in every homeless service provided across the South-East Region.

² Visit www.kckm.ie for case management framework in Cork and Kerry where it was piloted

What were the outcomes?

The restructuring in the South-East created a highly effective and collaborative Strategic Management Group that resulted in streamlined service provision. It enabled the local authorities to develop strong relationships with local stakeholders, including service providers, estate agents, the HSE and approved housing bodies. The review of homeless services in the South-East region maximised the resources available to improve the delivery of services and prevention of homelessness. The region also introduced new innovative and collaborative programmes following the review and restructure of its homeless services. Below are two examples of this collaboration in the South-East region.

Waterford Emergency Family Service (Own Front Door Emergency Accommodation)

The Waterford Emergency Family Service (WEFS) was established in 2018 as an alternative to B&B accommodation. It involved a number of hard-to-let local authority social housing homes being allocated to homeless families in need of emergency accommodation. By mid-2019 WCCC had made nine homes available for use. Seven of these were in Waterford City (three apartments and four houses) and two were in Waterford County (two houses). A Memorandum of Understanding was signed with Focus Housing Association for management of the accommodation. The first family moved into the accommodation in August of 2019, and one month later the WCCC ended its use of B&Bs and hotels entirely.

Between the period of August 2019 and December 2019 there were 13 families, which encompassed 53 individuals accommodated under the Waterford Emergency Family Service scheme (Haran & Ó Siochrú, 2020). Seven of these families were single-parent families. Five of the 13 families subsequently found permanent accommodation under the HAP scheme. The average stay of these families in the emergency accommodation was 24 days. The six families who remained in situ had an average stay of 118 days, as a result of COVID-19 postponing the transition to permanent accommodation for several months. The table below outlines the breakdown of the family journeys through this process:

Table 1: Outcomes of the Waterford Emergency Family Service – Families presenting August 2019 to December 2019

Family Outcome	No. of Families
Remain in situ as of August 2020	6
Accommodated under the HAP scheme	5
Long-term Focus Ireland accommodation	1
Moved to transitional accommodation	1
Total	13

In April 2020 the service was broadened to include provision for single persons during the Covid-19 restrictions and seven WCCC apartments were allocated for this. In September 2020 Tinteán Housing Association provided a further two emergency units and intensive supports for families with higher complex needs. To date, twenty family and seven single accommodation units have been allocated to the project by the local authority and service providers in Waterford. Each family receives support from the Homeless Prevention and Support Worker and Focus Ireland provides tenancy supports as landlord.

When a family arrives at the Waterford Integrated Homeless Service the Homeless Prevention & Support worker is assigned to them immediately and remains their contact until they secure long-term accommodation. The Homeless Prevention & Support worker registers the family as homeless, assesses the level and nature of need and draws up a code of conduct agreement. Included in this agreement is a commitment to engage with the Homeless Prevention & Support worker and agencies as required. The tenant also agrees to actively participate in seeking accommodation and to move on from the emergency accommodation when this has been secured.

The introduction of the WEFS own front door emergency accommodation service also resulted in savings of over €350,000 per annum being spent on B&B accommodation in Waterford. The service has since been adopted by the other local authorities in the South-East Region which has resulted in over €1.07 million less being spent on B&B/Hotel provision in 2020 than in 2019. The local authority's 10% contribution that had been spent on B&B accommodation is now being spent on the maintenance of the accommodation, with the rent being used by the Service Provider for cosmetic maintenance and turnover of the property.

Approved Housing Bodies requirement for CAS funding

In Waterford, in an effort to increase resources for preventing and managing homelessness it is a policy objective of WCCC that all AHBs seeking Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) funding commit to providing accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. They can meet this obligation in two ways: providing a unit to Waterford City and County Council for use as emergency accommodation or providing permanent accommodation to a family currently living in transitional or emergency accommodation and with required time spent on the housing list. This arrangement sees AHBs partnering with local authorities to tackle and prevent homelessness.

Lessons learned

The changes made to homeless services and management in the South-East region of Ireland have demonstrated the positive impact of collaborative working and dedication to quality homeless service provision and a focus on homeless prevention and tenancy sustainment.

Learnings for other local authorities taken from the working model in the South-East region are:

- 1. A dedicated Homeless Lead is very beneficial in improving homeless services in the region.** The role could be focused full-time on improving homeless services, building relationships with relevant stakeholders, implementing the region's homelessness strategy and developing innovative solutions to addressing homelessness.
- 2. Nominating a Homeless Coordinator** can assist with meeting homelessness responsibilities as well as improving communications and consistency in homeless service provision across the Region.
- 3. Establishing clear processes and regional homeless structures can promote change and improvements.** Involvement at senior level (i.e. Directors of Housing) is crucial to achieving support and delivering results at Strategic Management Level. A terms of reference for regional structures should clearly establish the regional framework and define roles and responsibilities. The South-East Regional Homeless Structures Framework is a good example of this (available upon request).
- 4. Social workers can contribute significantly to the work of homeless management teams.** They utilise the care and case management framework to identify the needs of people experiencing homelessness and work with clients to ensure these needs are met.
- 5. Relationship building is crucial.** Developing strong working relationships with health services, homeless service providers, Approved Housing Bodies, letting agents, and other key stakeholders in the region is essential to achieving a more collaborative and integrated approach to homeless service provision and securing supported move-on accommodation for people in emergency accommodation.

References and Further Reading

Haran, N., & Ó Siochrú, S. (2020). *Exploring Own-Door Models of Emergency Homeless Families in Ireland: A Comparative Case Study of Four Models*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

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