



Speech by

Mr Martin Cullen T.D.,

Minister of Social and Family Affairs

on the occasion

**of the launch of the 2006 Annual Report of the South
East Simon Community**

Monday 8 October 2007



Mayor of Waterford, Cllr Mary O Halloran, Simon Chairperson, John McHugh; the Directors of Simon South East; Chris Anderson, Simon Regional Development Officer; staff members, friends and volunteers of Simon South East Community; ladies and gentlemen:

Introduction

I am pleased to be here today to officially launch the **2006 Annual Report** of the South East Simon Community and I would like to thank South East SIMON for inviting me here this afternoon.

The Simon communities have a well-deserved reputation for their work with people who experience homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland – people who are some of the most vulnerable members of our society. People who become homeless are people who may have come on hard times or found themselves in situations where they have never been before - and Simon works to improve people’s lives by using your outreach services across a number of areas. Being homeless is more than about being without a roof over your head and bricks and mortar. It is about little privacy, a lack of security, a lack of belonging. People can become down on their luck for any number of reasons; I read in your 2006 Report that the youngest person you helped last year was aged just 16 years and the oldest was 78 years of age. Its makes for very poignant reading. The Simon organisation has been there to help people move out of bad circumstances - day in, day out dealing with the situation of homelessness on the ground, and I would like to acknowledge your invaluable contribution to improving the lives of many many people.



Department of Social and Family Affairs

I have been reading about your organisation and I know that the Simon is a federation as such of eight communities in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the North West, and here in the South East. Your focus here in the South East Simon Community is on delivering four specific different services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness throughout counties Carlow, Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford. This is a big undertaking by any measure, particularly as you are a small staff group.

You are an industrious organisation and in 2006 through your four services - **advocacy, outreach, re-settlement and tenancy** programmes, you worked with approximately 65 people per month across the region. In the Development section of your Annual Report, in addition to acquiring Simon homes you shared your experiences as part of a terms of reference group to devise on a *homeless action team* and you also moved offices from Killure to Waterford Business Park. I think it is fair to say that 2006 was a busy year for you and for your volunteers who give so generously of their time. I am aware of the fine reputation the staff and volunteers here in the South East have – a reputation which speaks of kindness, compassion and commitment. I commend all of you for your work in responding to local needs and providing innovative local solutions.

Government Policy

This Government is committed to tackling the issue of homelessness in all its forms. In 2000, *Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy* was launched by the Government's Cross Departmental Team on Homelessness followed by the *Homeless Preventative Strategy* in 2002. The aim of these strategies was to provide a more coherent response to the issue of homelessness. To make improvements in this area, homeless representative groups were established in all cities and counties around the country. Their membership includes representatives from all service providers. Local authorities were required to



Department of Social and Family Affairs

draw up three-year action plans to show how they proposed to tackle homelessness. These plans detail how all services for homeless persons, including accommodation, health, welfare, education and training were to be provided based on a number of core principles.

In February 2006, *The Independent Review of the Implementation of Homeless Strategies*, which was carried out by Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants was published. The Government has accepted the broad thrust of the recommendations of the Independent Review, including a recommendation that the Integrated and Preventative Homeless Strategies should be amalgamated. This work is well underway at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and it is anticipated that the new strategy will reflect the recommendations of the Independent Review, including **moving the emphasis away from emergency to long-term accommodation**. It will be facilitated by the use of local authority, voluntary and private rented accommodation including the Rental Accommodation Scheme.

Range of Services

The new strategy will build on work that has already begun. There is now a wide range of accommodation and services across the country – from emergency hostels and transitional accommodation programmes to outreach and resettlement services. There has been good progress made in providing emergency solutions to homelessness and **it is now time to move on from these**. While there is a need to provide a certain amount of transitional and move-on accommodation, the main aim at this point should be to assist homeless persons into long-term accommodation as soon as possible. This really is the only way forward and I am sure Simon South East will agree. This, together with appropriate outreach and resettlement support to ensure that they can maintain their tenancies, is essential in assisting people out of homelessness altogether.



The Government's clear commitment to this approach is demonstrated by the inclusion in the most recent social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, of a commitment to eliminate the long term occupancy of emergency homeless accommodation by 2010. By long term we mean six months. Therefore, the aim is that by end 2010, no homeless person will spend longer than six months in emergency accommodation – instead they will be facilitated in moving on to appropriate transitional or long term accommodation, depending on their needs.

The Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) has significant potential in this area. It is an additional housing option that will see local authorities progressively assume responsibility for accommodating people who have been in receipt of *supplementary welfare allowance* rent supplement (a supplement from my own Department) for more than eighteen months who have a long-term housing need. In relation to the homeless area, the introduction of the RAS will also enhance the availability of housing options for those homeless persons, currently on rent supplement who are capable of independent living. This increased supply, together with appropriate outreach and resettlement support is essential in assisting people out of homelessness altogether.

Of course it is also vital that the necessary supports such as care, welfare, education and training are in place if we are to succeed in moving people out of homelessness into independent living in the community. It is often the presence of these supports that enables a person to successfully live in the community and not become homeless again. We must ensure that all the agencies involved play their part in providing these services, as without them we will never move away from the "emergency bed" situation. The concept of tenancy sustainment - providing assistance and support to people to maintain their tenancies, to remain out of the cycle of homelessness and in their homes is a powerful tool in the fight



Department of Social and Family Affairs

against further marginalisation. Tenancy sustainment has the capacity to make a very significant impact on homelessness in future years.

Funding

This Government's commitment to tackling homelessness is also evident in the substantial funding provided. My colleague in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Batt O'Keeffe, has particular responsibility for this area, and he keeps a firm eye on developments on the ground and around the country. The 2007 allocation for the provision of accommodation and related services through his Department is **€52.2 million**. This is a dramatic increase from, for example, the 1994 allocation of €1.73 million. This is in addition to funding for care costs provided by the HSE and capital funding provided by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

For my own part as Minister for Social and Family Affairs, my priority aim is to use the opportunities provided by one of the most successful economies in Europe to work towards making a decisive impact on the most vulnerable in our society. The problems we face are known and understood the challenge now is to effectively implement the policies and apply the huge resources made available across all Government plans in this area to improve the quality of life and the experience of living for each and every citizen.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all very much.

ENDS