

EUROPEAN ACCREDITATION FOR QUALITY OF HOMELESS SERVICE

Alice Simington, Dublin Simon Community's Senior Manager for Supported Housing, talks to Lorraine Courtney about the importance of providing high quality housing and homeless services to the thousands of vulnerable people who rely on the charity, following the recent European accreditation in recognition of the standard of service it provides.

Dublin Simon Community's teams of volunteers used to offer soup and sandwiches to homeless people on the streets of the capital each night. However, the modern reality of homelessness is, of course, more complex than the archetype of the rough sleeper.

Although the numbers of homeless people on the streets has risen steadily over the past few years, it's dwarfed by the numbers of those living in temporary accommodation, and homeless organisations have responded by stepping up to the challenge.

"We've responded by increasing our capacity to take in as much people as we can," Alice Simington, Senior Manager for Supported Housing with Dublin Simon Community, tells 'Council Review'.



And in recognition for providing the high standard of homeless services in the capital and surrounding regions, the charity was recently accredited by the European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS).

Dublin Simon Community is the only homeless organisation that has been awarded the certificate, and it's the second time that the charity has received this accreditation, having been recognised for quality of service provision in 2016.

Speaking about the accreditation, Alice Simington, Senior Manager for Supported Housing with Dublin Simon Community, tells 'Council Review' that her organisation is committed to ensuring continuous improvements in their work.

"We will continue to ensure the high quality of our homeless services to the thousands of vulnerable people who rely on us each day. Like any quality standard, EQUASS was looking for



Soup runs and rough sleeper teams continue to be an integral part of the organisation.

systems and structures that are well implemented. They wanted to see that we have strong policies and guidelines and are following them and producing strong, tangible results for our clients," she adds.

EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

One of the strengths the auditor said deserved to be highlighted was the charity's person-centred approach. "Our services are very client focused, responding to personal needs and personal wishes, and providing tailor-made solutions and services for each client as an individual," says Simington.

"We don't treat clients like we are working on a project. We work with the individual and consider what's realistic for them. For example, a person might be ready to go back to education or there is a community employment scheme designed specifically for people who have experienced homelessness."

Dublin Simon Community's emergency accommodation has



Dublin Simon’s managers go on certified leadership training while volunteers are exposed to training sessions.

increased by 31% since 2013. “We have increased our treatment capacity by 73%. Our property stock has increased by 50%. We actually acquire properties now, in partnership with local authorities – and our prevention programmes have responded to the scale of the housing crisis by growing 246%. We are also doing more work with our statutory partners. So, we’ve evolved as an organisation in response to what we’re seeing on the ground.”

The charity currently delivers housing and support services to people in Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare and Meath, and in 2016 it

CERTIFICATION CRITERIA

EQUASS utilises a quality certification system that certifies compliance of social services with European quality principles and criteria. Following an external independent assessment at the end of 2018, Dublin Simon Community’s housing and homeless services were evaluated on the following 10 principles for quality – leadership, staff, rights, ethics, partnership, participation, person centred approach, comprehensiveness, results orientation, and continuous improvement.

In particular, the strengths that the auditor said ‘deserved to be highlighted’ for the 2018 audit included the following:

- 1. Person-centred approach: Services are very client focused, responding to personal needs and personal wishes/goals, providing tailor-made solutions and services for each client as an individual one.*
- 2. Respect of the rights of their clients: Treating client with a non-judgment approach, empowering them and advocating for them, to exercise their citizenship.*
- 3. Client participation approach: Every client has a voice that is taken into account, clients feel they can freely give their opinion and there was clear evidence that there is an openness around the services and between staff members and clients.*
- 4. Staff and Training: Staff are committed to the organisational mission and dedicated to the client. They are well trained and have opportunities for growth and development within the organisation.*

expanded its service to Cavan, Monaghan and Louth.

“Dublin Simon is focused on emergency accommodation and support - providing people with a place of welcome, warmth and safety. This side of our work is expanding in response to the homeless crisis,” says Simington.

“We give people a bed for at least six months. Sometimes this is a room to themselves or it might be sharing with one or two other people. They are free to stay all of the time – they don’t have to leave during day – and someone works with them on a daily basis to move them onto permanent accommodation.”

HIGHER SUPPORT NEEDS

There is also supported housing for client groups that require higher support needs or who might struggle without support around them on a 24-hour basis.

Soup runs and rough sleeper teams continue to be an integral part of the organisation and these teams are often the first point of contact for people sleeping rough.

“Our teams go out every night and interact with people on the streets,” says Simington. “This also serves to engage the client, to link in with them. We try to encourage them to come into our emergency services and we see if they can be linked in with GPs and other health services. The idea is that one day they will come in and reside in one of our homeless services.”

FACTFILE – ALICE SIMINGTON

Alice Simington joined Dublin Simon Community in early 2018.

She has a BA in Public Administration and a Masters in Development Studies, and has over 12 years of experience in international development, including eight years at senior management and country director level in West and East Africa.



Simington is experienced in working in multi-cultural environments, negotiating and making connections with a diverse group of stakeholders.

According to her profile blog on the Dublin Simon Community’s website: “she is client centred and committed to ensuring the delivery of high quality medium and long-term supported housing, designed to meet the needs of our clients”.

Housing provision, tenancy sustainment and settlement services help people to make the move out of homelessness and work with households at risk of homelessness. This side of Simon's work is more around prevention side of things, working with people who might have problems around their tenancy to ensure that they don't end up on the streets.

Their specialist health and treatment services address some of the issues which may have contributed to homeless occurring or may be a consequence of their homelessness. And people who are going into detox or require respite or are going into recovery are given counselling sessions.

JOB PLACEMENTS

The charity puts lots of focus on personal skills development and then identifies suitable job placements. "This originally started out as a pilot programme. It was very successful, and we now have a number of clients who have gone onto employment from it. We even have a former client working for Dublin Simon on our facilities and maintenance team," says Simington.

Respect of the rights of their clients was another area highlighted by EQUASS. Simington talks about the importance of treating clients with a non-judgment approach, empowering them and advocating for them, to exercise their citizenship. "Every client has a voice that is taken into account," she says.

"Clients can freely give their opinion. We are always thinking about how we can involve our clients in service planning, delivery, evaluation and in a continuum of care. We try to ensure that they are integrated into whatever community they are living in, whether that is with classes or linking in with GPs and primary care services."

STAFF UPSKILLING SUPPORTS

Monthly meeting for residents are chaired by one of the residents where possible and they also have a client action group, where clients participate, according to their capability.

Staff upskilling is encouraged and supported. "All of our staff are committed



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to the organisation's mission and dedication to our clients. They are well trained and have opportunities for growth and development within the organisation," says Simington.

"We work in a very dynamic environment so it's crucial to have proper procedures and policies in place. We have a very strong health and safety code, and specific training programmes in which all

staff participate. Some of our managers go on certified leadership training and even if you're a volunteer, you still get exposed to training sessions."

This year Dublin Simon Community plans to focus on the quality side of things. "We've grown so much as an organisation over the past few years that we need to ensure we're going in the right direction," says Simington.

SERVICES PROVIDED BY DUBLIN SIMON

- *Dublin Simon Community provides services to over 6,200 people in Dublin, Kildare, Wicklow, Meath, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Services range from:*
- *Emergency Accommodation & Support providing people with a place of welcome, warmth & safety;*
- *Soup Runs & Rough Sleeper Teams who are often the first point of contact for people sleeping rough.*
- *Housing Provision, Tenancy Sustainment & Settlement Services, Housing Advice & Information Services helping people to make the move out of homelessness & working with households at risk;*
- *Specialist Health & Treatment Services addressing some of the issues which may have contributed to homeless occurring or may be a consequence of their homelessness.*
- *For more information visit www.dubsimon.ie*

About EQUASS: The European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) is an integrated sector-specific quality certification system that certifies compliance of social services with European quality principles and criteria. EQUASS is an initiative of the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR) and its secretariat is based in Brussels.