

HOUSING FIRST MODEL MAKES ITS MARK IN MID-EAST

County councils in Kildare, Meath and Wicklow have rolled out a Housing First model that will focus on ending homelessness for people with complex needs across the three counties. Peter McVerry Trust has been chosen to deliver the initiative in the mid-east region and the immediate focus will be on an active settlement approach, reports Deirdre O’Flynn.

Kildare County Council is the lead authority for the Mid-East Region Homelessness Forum, which has established this regional Housing First service in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE).

The central objective of the Housing First initiative is the ending of rough sleeping and long-term emergency accommodation use, according to Peter Carey, Chief Executive of Kildare County Council.

He noted that the service model includes intensive wrap-around supports for tenancy and health supports provided to Housing First clients in “a timely and appropriate manner and for as long as required”.

This participant-centred approach provides secure tenancies in self-contained independent housing units, with the combined and integral services of the HSE’s primary care, mental health and substance misuse teams, working in collaboration with Tusla, An Garda Síochána, and other voluntary agencies.

HOUSING FIRST TENANCIES

Following a tender process, the Peter McVerry Trust was chosen to deliver the Housing First model across the Mid-East Region and a Service Level Agreement was signed in March. Pat Doyle, Chief Executive of the Peter McVerry Trust, said that the service’s immediate focus is on an active settlement approach.

With an emphasis on physical, psychological and emotional safety, it utilises trauma-informed care to assist the service user to regain a sense of control



(Seated l-r): Justin Parkes, HSE; Peter Carey, Chief Executive, Kildare County Council; Pat Doyle, Chief Executive, Peter McVerry Trust; and Ann O’Shea, HSE; (Standing l-r): Elaine Flannery, Peter McVerry Trust; Ollie Brady, Kildare County Council; Richard Price, Peter McVerry Trust; Barry Lynch, Meath County Council; Jackie Carroll and Joe Lane, Wicklow County Council; and Emma McMillen, Peter McVerry Trust.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF HOUSING FIRST

Research from the USA where the Housing First model has been operating for the longest period, shows that it is particularly successful with long-term homeless individuals who have a history of mental health difficulties and drug/alcohol misuse, according to the Peter McVerry Trust.

The key principles:

- Housing as a basic human right
- Warmth, respect, and compassion
- Commitment to the participant
- Scattered site housing
- Separation of housing and services issues/requirements
- Self-determination and choice
- Recovery orientation
- Harm reduction



The Peter McVerry Trust is responsible for 61 per cent of the services delivered under the National Housing First Implementation Plan.

Housing First participants will have ready, time-unlimited access to support and treatment services, for as long as the participant requires. Tenancy sustainment rates, the primary indicator for measuring the success of homeless housing policies, are much higher for Housing First initiatives than for treatment first initiatives.

In Ireland, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive’s Housing First Regional Service, delivered in partnership by Focus Ireland and Peter McVerry Trust, which ran from 2014-2019, created over 300 tenancies and had an 86.8 per cent tenancy sustainment rate.

and empowerment. The overall outcome is that the individual is moved successfully out of homelessness and into an appropriate tenancy arrangement.

At the time of writing (early June), Kildare County Council had six Housing First tenancies in place in Newbridge, Meath County Council had four in Navan, while Wicklow County Council made two available in Bray, according to Kildare County Council's Ollie Brady, Manager of the Housing First Service in the Mid-East Region.

Overall, those living in official homeless emergency accommodation across the three counties (as of the end of March) were 186 adults and 139 dependents in Kildare, 108 adults and 39 dependents in Meath, and 23 adults and six dependents in Wicklow.

The ultimate aim is to implement 31 Housing First tenancies in Kildare, 22 tenancies in Meath, and 11 tenancies in Wicklow.

HOMELESS ACTION TEAMS

Participants on the scheme are identified by the Homeless Action Teams in each local authority with a priority intake list for Housing First jointly managed by the local authorities, the HSE and the Peter McVerry Trust.

The focus is on ending homelessness for people with high and complex needs. "We look for people who get left behind, who may be living long term in a hostel or sleeping rough or over six months in long-term accommodation," said Brady. "However, the choice is theirs – they have to be willing to be open to it."

Once housed, the Peter McVerry Trust assumes the management of the person's tenancy, "using a high-intensity visiting support team to provide wraparound supports to make every success of each new tenancy generated", noted Pat Doyle, Chief Executive of Peter McVerry Trust.

The Trust has allocated a regional manager, an intensive case manager, an addiction specialist, and a mental health nurse to the programme in the mid-east region.

DAILY SUPPORTS

The day-to-day supports offered include daily contact, accompanying the client on their first shopping trip locally and linking in with the HSE services provided in each local authority. These services will include mental health, addiction support and various others services (for example local clinics and GP surgeries), linking in with community support organisations such as the Men's Shed and other services, and introducing the client to their neighbours.

"The Peter McVerry Trust also has a 24/7 estate management number, which is provided to the client and their neighbour, so that if something happens during the night, they can call that number and a support person will come out," stated Ollie Brady.

According to the Peter McVerry Trust, even if a tenancy fails, Housing First continues to support the individual to another tenancy and the support service continues to engage with the

participant.

Brady agreed and said that councils need to be "able and open to moving an individual – this needs a different approach that allows for changes". He added that it represented a brilliant chance for someone and "the feedback has been very positive so far".

MAJOR FOCUS ON THE LONG-TERM HOMELESS

Rolled out in 2016, the Government's 'Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness' set out its aim to introduce 'Housing First' as a means to address homelessness, by strengthening the housing-led approach and extending it nationally, focusing on persistent rough sleepers and long-term homeless households.

To this end, the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018-2021 was published in September 2018; and the commitment to deliver Housing First is a key action of the Mid East Region Homelessness Action Plan 2018-2020.

The service has been co-funded by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Health. The Mid-East Homeless Forum is advised by a multi-agency group including non-governmental organisations in the sector and other relevant statutory agencies. The HSE is an integral partner in the delivery of the Housing First service in the mid-east region.

"Adopted worldwide, Housing First is hugely successful at not only providing housing for complex cases, but also for ensuring they remain housed years later," noted Pat Doyle, Chief Executive of the Peter McVerry Trust.

As an early adopter and major supporter of Housing First, Peter McVerry Trust has been working on the model since 2011 in Dublin. As of 2020, the national housing and homeless charity is responsible for 61 per cent of the services delivered under the National Housing First Implementation Plan.



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