

# Homelessness Policy



# Homelessness Policy

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# Homelessness Policy

## 1.0 Summary & Key Points

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The Green Party recognises the success of the Housing First strategy in other jurisdictions and sees it as fundamental to eradication of homelessness in Ireland. There is a clear message from the pathways biographies that there needs to be more early intervention and attention to the structural causes and individual risk factors that lead to homelessness. We need to better resource flexible preventative services in our communities and safe shelters to help families move towards stability.

We also support the following:

- The Aftercare Bill, which guarantees a right to an aftercare assessment on turning 18 and leaving care, should be fully implemented and the resulting services fully resourced.
- Habitual Residence Condition (HRC decisions) should be published and where an appeal for residency status is pending, homeless migrants should, at a minimum, continue to have access to temporary emergency accommodation.
- Medical cards should be issued based on an individual's PPS number and not on the basis of a permanent residential address.
- Should a household have to reapply for rent supplement within a given period, they should not have to go through the full approval process again and those identified as having a housing need by a local authority should be pre-approved for rent supplement. Similarly, all housing support payments should be tapered off as income levels increase and not operate on a cut-off basis.
- Local Authorities should be obliged to offer tenancy sustainment supports to tenants who had received a warning before resorting to legal action.

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## 2.0 Introduction

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The issues of housing and homelessness are inextricably linked. Traditionally homelessness in Ireland was a symptom of a disordered society and those experiencing it were most likely to have experienced physical or sexual abuse in the home, drug or alcohol addiction and mental health issues. Individuals finding themselves homeless for these reasons may experience homelessness for a short period of time while others may remain homeless for decades. They may also be hidden, with people living short to medium-term on the couches or in the spare room of friends and family, while some are very public as with ‘sleeping rough’. This profile of homelessness is complex and takes time and commitment to unravel as ‘most theoretical and practice viewpoints agree that the causation of homelessness is complex, with no single ‘trigger’ being either ‘necessary’ or ‘sufficient’ for it to occur’<sup>1</sup>.

In recent times we’ve started to experience a new form of homelessness, one that is wholly and exclusively down to economic circumstances. The Green Party believes that we need to develop strategies and policies that deal with both forms of homelessness concurrently, recognizing that the causes and therefore needs of each group may be very distinct. That said, we believe that all government policies needs to address homelessness on multiple fronts by

- Preventing homelessness
- Provide rapid response for those that are out of home
- Help those at risk of homelessness move towards stable housing for the long-term

## 2.1 Principles

- Security: The provision of good quality temporary, transitional and permanent accommodation for all those not in a position to provide their own.
- Caring Services: We believe that the state needs to provide services that:
  - are people-centered

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- treat individuals with respect and dignity
  - are transparent and subject to review and appeal
  - are efficient and effective
  - are flexible and tailored to the individual wherever possible
- Independence: The Green Party believes in services that help individuals at risk of on-going homelessness need to focus on building the skills required to be independent and autonomous by:
- supporting independent living
  - educating them of their rights
  - providing peer support and mentoring

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## **3.0 Services and Support**

### **3.1 Prevention**

In accordance with a comprehensive study by Focus Ireland that thoroughly examined individual biographies that caused homelessness, there is a clear need for early intervention to the structural causes and individual risk factors that lead to homelessness. Research has shown that family conflict and relationship problems constitute the *most significant* contribution leading to discontinuation of schooling, employment and inevitably homelessness<sup>2</sup>. We need to better resource a flexible preventative service in our communities and safe shelters to help families move towards stability.

We stand with Focus Ireland in their key takeaway messages from their research that focus on affordable housing opportunities, better coordination for effective services, safety, and mental and drug abuse rehabilitation<sup>3</sup>.

- Given the rising level of homelessness amongst the under 25's we call on this government to restore welfare payments to this group at a parity with other recipients
- We propose that the government must provide state funded and constructed homes for its people based on need rather than cost. As we work towards that goal we urge the government to ensure HAP payments reflect the cost of rental in the private sector

### **3.2 Housing First; A New Strategy**

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<sup>2</sup> P Mayock and N Carr, 'Youth Homelessness in Ireland', HSE, Ireland, 2008, pg 9

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<sup>3</sup> J Pillinger, Homeless Pathways, Focus Ireland, 2007, pg 5

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The original approach to homelessness was to emphasise a step by step “housing ready” rehabilitation program; those who found themselves homeless would be given access to shelters or halfway houses, treatment and rehabilitation, and then given a chance at permanent housing. However, in recent years Ireland is embracing a “housing first” strategy that allows people to stay in their homes without fear of eviction in order to focus on rehabilitation in a more stable environment.

To help individuals address the issues that might have led to their homelessness, The Green Party supports providing people with a supportive stable environment first. Championed by USA states Utah and New York, this approach has resulted in a 72% reduction in homeless in Utah in 8 years<sup>4</sup> and a 93.8 % retention rate in New York<sup>5</sup> at 60% of the cost of the traditional approach. This approach is supported by all of the leading homeless charities in Ireland and the Green Party sees it as fundamental to the eradication of homelessness in Ireland.

While the Green Party supports providing a roof over the head of an individual with endemic issues such as poverty, stress, and mental health difficulties, we acknowledge that it is not a solution in of itself. Successful pathways out of homelessness encompass prevention, crisis intervention and intensive and relevant targeted support in order to guide a person towards autonomous and independent living situations with appropriate support services. Regular contact with key workers/support workers, particularly in helping people to be independent, autonomous and self-confident is of paramount importance<sup>6</sup>.

### **3.3 Temporary Accommodation**

According to the Case Management Guidebook in Ireland there are a variety of services and accomodation available depending on need, age and gender including a range of services for domestic abuse victims and minors<sup>7</sup>. The issue of access to hostels is also an area of concern.

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□ <https://pathwaystohousing.org/programs-partners/stories/housing-first-utah> accessed 14.09.15

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□ Fairmount Ventures Inc, Evaluation of Pathways to Housing PA , Jan 2011, pg 21

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□ Jane Pillinger, Homeless Pathways, Focus Ireland, 2007, pg 65

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Some hostels have entry procedures that require residents to be in place by 5 p.m.; this obviously militates against an individual trying to hold down a job or a stable lifestyle. These kinds of issues need to be addressed to enable hostel users as normal a life as possible<sup>8</sup>. The Green Party also believes in making the hostel experience a stable, safe environment for the homeless persons who rely on hostels as their primary source of accommodation.

- The Green Party calls on the government to fully finance support for these services as well as expansion of more accommodation to minimise the amount of homeless sleeping on the street.
- We propose the creation of minimum guidelines for hostels in receipt of state funds to ensure that service users are treated with dignity and respect and supported to create links with in the community or continue/return to work
- We propose that all homes and facilities must provide lockers with free,changeable combination locks as well as the addition of privacy materials, such as curtains, should be offered to all of those in need in order to create a safe environment, free of theft.

### **3.4 Health**

At present, medical cards are issued based on permanent residential address, a situation wholly inappropriate for homeless households. At present, temporary emergency medical cards will be provided to families and individuals attending the Homeless Persons Unit (HPU) but this system is inadequate for the ‘hidden homeless’ staying with friends, living in overcrowded accommodation or involuntarily sharing with family and for any other homeless family or individual not accessing the HPU. Similarly the current system of referral is address and catchment-area based; a system wholly inappropriate for homeless households. The failure of the present medical card and referral system is forcing homeless families and individuals to inappropriately attend A&E departments<sup>9</sup>.

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8 <sup>□</sup> Accomodation/Homelessness, Case Management Guidebook, accessed 2017 from web

9 <sup>□</sup> FT Houghton and C Hickey, 'Caught in a Trap', Focus Ireland, 2001, pg 36

<sup>□</sup> FT Houghton and C Hickey, 'Caught in a Trap', Focus Ireland, 2001, pg 34



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The current practice of discharging psychiatric patients to the HPU is not acceptable and is detrimental to the welfare and mental well being of the patient. Patients released from psychiatric care need ongoing care and support, and this is not available through the HPU, which is primarily concerned with placing homeless individuals in emergency accommodation. We believe there needs to be greater recognition among the medical profession that homeless individuals with psychiatric needs face additional difficulties such as access to, storage of and taking of medication.

We recognise the need for greater access to chiropodists and podiatrists for those in emergency accommodation, who frequently suffer from foot problems due to the nomadic nature of their predicament<sup>10</sup>.

Those who suffer from chronic homelessness often suffer isolation due to family breakdown and limited social networks. Maintaining a stable lifestyle in housing can be a challenge for many vulnerable people but the opportunity for success is greatly enhanced by supportive drop-in clinics staffed by peers who have been through similar experiences<sup>11</sup>. These clinics could double up as cafes offering well-balanced substantial meals, which would help improve the health of those experiencing homelessness.

- The Green Party proposes that medical cards should be more easily attainable by those with no housing and limited identification paperwork so as not to alienate those who have lost their homes as well as its contents. Medical cards should be issued based on an individual's PPS number and not on the basis of a permanent residential address.
- We propose the implementation of specialist scheme to support the safe and regular taking of medication needs to be piloted and implemented.
- We propose the roll out of community run drop in clinics, staffed by peers, on a nationwide basis, in easily accessible locations and with opening hours appropriate to the needs of its customers.

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□ FT Houghton and C Hickey, 'Caught in a Trap', Focus Ireland, 2001, pg 34

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□ Evaluation of Spokes Program, Focus Ireland, 2010, pg 29

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## 3.5 Substance Addiction

Similar drug abuse compounds the difficulties that people encounter in being able to maintain a stable life that is required to keep them in housing. Becoming drug-free is a journey and it is essential that we support homeless individuals with drug or alcohol addiction so that they can start that journey when they are ready. We do this by making sure that enough of our emergency accommodation is available to service those with addiction issues, in addition to drug and alcohol-free emergency accommodation to lessen a vulnerable person's exposure to substance abuse. The system of accessing drug treatment services based on residential address is wholly inappropriate for the homeless population. Possession of an address should not be a precursor to obtaining addiction treatment.

- We call on this government to increase the scope and the capacity of the National Drugs Strategy to service needs within the community
- We call on the government to dedicate more funding to the development of improved drug free aftercare housing for people who have completed medical detox and drug treatment programmes.

## **3.6 Employment**

The Green Party recognise that stable housing and stable employment should be the main focus of any policy aimed at eradicating homelessness but we appreciate that this is a journey for many. Therefore, we support initiatives that offer employment to homeless or formerly homeless individuals such as the 'My Streets' programme in Drogheda. Rent supplement is means tested and currently, once the income of a household goes over a certain figure, the supplement is immediately cut off and if a person finds themselves out of work again they need to reapply for rent supplement and go through the same application process all over again. We believe that this disincentivises those on rent supplement from seeking work.

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- We support and recommend the expansion of the provision of financial incentives to employers to hire homeless or formerly homeless individuals.
- We propose that should a household have to reapply for rent supplement within a given period, they should not have to go through the full approval process again. Similarly, we believe that rent supplement payments should be tapered off as income levels increase.

### **3.7 Government Agencies**

Individuals with no permanent address or with limited funds may find it difficult to apply for government assistance that requires multiple forms and a large amount of information. Also, slow administration/decision making on rent supplement claims frequently result in landlords opting for non-RS households.

- We propose a re-introduction of the free phone number for all callers to Central Rent Units who ease the financial burden on those having to interact with the department.
- We support the construction of a clear and coherent website, which will provide updates and information on services available to homeless people all in one place, such as soup kitchens, soup runs, and temporary accommodation.
- We propose that housing officers should be allocated to specific geographic areas to enable applicants to have a consistent point of contact to discuss their applications.

To work effectively, all departments involved in addressing homelessness need to work in a coordinated and pro-active manner, preferably through one agency. This team should include:

- The person making the decision on Rent Supplement
- The person making the decision on the Housing First Supplement (if different)
- The person making decisions in respect of SLI

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- The person making decisions on allocation of any floating mental health supports
- Any person (e.g. Environmental Health Officer) making decisions on standards of accommodation that apply.
- Any ‘accommodation finders’ in the voluntary sector.

### **3.8 Education & Information**

Focus Ireland reports that one of the reasons people lose their home is not having information on their rights or options at the right time<sup>12</sup>.

- We propose that information about avoiding homelessness is readily available in numerous languages within the community and that citizens are aware of its existence.

### **3.9 Data Collection**

Currently the number of people at risk or suffering homelessness is unreliable and makes it difficult to accurately project the needs for the future. The ‘hidden homeless’, individuals in prison or hospital without permanent homes, and young people leaving care are not recorded, which gives us only a partial view of the problem. Part of this problem is due to the need for people to register on the housing list in order to get rent allowance. By creating two separate lists for both, we will have a much clearer picture of the real needs of people at risk of homelessness.

- The Green Party supports channelling more financial support into further studies of the pathways to homelessness in order to best represent and understand their needs.

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## 4.0 Society and Community

### 4.1 Children & Young People

In a 2011 report, Focus Ireland reported that 68% of children leaving care experience homelessness within 2 years<sup>13</sup>. Foster families can offer a valuable safety net for these vulnerable young people. At present, foster families receive no form of payment for continuing to support a young person after the age of 18 if they are not enrolled in a college course. We believe this needs to be urgently addressed, particularly in light of the current lack of affordable housing and employment for young people in order to minimize turbulence during the transition from a child to an adult.

- We propose that foster families can apply for and receive a reduced care rate of 75% of the payment received for a child under 18 who wishes to still live in the home for twenty months after a child in care reaches adulthood
- We propose that where a young person moves to independent living, he or she should be supported to find accommodation and to move into, and settle in, accommodation. A suitable housing officer within each local authority should be appointed to enact this requirement
- Such individuals must also be entitled to a moving-in allowance to cover designated household items. Aftercare policies should also address the role of foster families, residential care units and birth families in providing aftercare.
- Special provision should be made for young people with special needs, such as intellectual disability or mental health problems, who continue to live with their foster families after they reach the age of 18 years. We propose the integration of care service between children and adult service to optimise this transition
- The Green Party supports the full implementation of the Aftercare Bill, which guarantees a right to and aftercare assessment on turning 18 and leaving care. We also advocate for full

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resourcing of this service given the high prevalence of young people in care ending up homeless.

## 4.2 Families

A total of 1,530 families have recorded homelessness as of July of 2017 which include 3,333 dependents. 45% of these families are made up of single parents.<sup>14</sup> According to Focus Ireland, all of these families are housed in temporary accommodation. The Green Party stands with organisations such as the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission that believe families facing homelessness should not be responsible for sourcing their own emergency accommodation<sup>15</sup> We also believe that families facing homelessness should only be placed in temporary care for very short periods of time, with access to permanent residency the primary focus.

We know from international experience that people who experience homelessness in childhood are more likely to experience it throughout their lives, so the key challenge with families is to avoid possible eviction from their current homes. If a family becomes homeless unavoidably, an approach that has shown great success in the state of Georgia, USA is called Rapid Rehousing<sup>16</sup>. This program rehuses families into homes of their own very quickly, rather than keep them in shelters or transitional housing while they get “housing ready”.

- We propose that local authorities provide those experiencing homelessness with a case by case housing officer who will be tasked with locating emergency accommodation should the need arise
- We call on this government to ensure that all forms of homelessness within the state is as of short a duration as possible

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<sup>14</sup> Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Gov., Homeless Report, Nov 2017

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The Provision of Emergency Accomodation to Families Experiencing Homelessness, IHREC, July 2017, pg 5-

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<sup>16</sup> M Cunningham, S Gillespie and J Anderson, ‘Rapid Re-housing: What the research says’, Urban Institute, June 2015,

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## **4.3 Current Social Housing Tenants**

Currently, individuals renting from Local Authorities do not have an independent body to report grievances to if their landlord – the Local Authority – fails in their duty.

Local Authority tenants should also get as much notice as is possible that the housing authority is intending to apply for a possession order. This should enable the tenant/tenants the opportunity to obtain advice and information so that they can participate meaningfully in the legal process.

Local Authorities must be encouraged to offer tenancy sustainment supports to tenants who had received a warning before resorting to legal action. Sustainment orders could well help tenants overcome the behaviour which led to the warning, reducing the risk of homelessness and avoiding wasteful legal costs. Legislation relating to Local Authority housing should explicitly require the local authority to do ‘everything reasonable to prevent it tenants becoming homelessness’.

The Local Authority’s ability to bar an individual or family from the housing list for 3 years due to antisocial behavior is effectively a 3-year sentence of homelessness. During this time the Local Authority must maintain the family in a B&B for this period, at public expense. The children frequently become poor attenders at school, the parents’ authority and morale is totally undermined and whatever social problems existed in the first place are profoundly deepened <sup>17</sup>.

Where a person living in private rented accommodation is placed on HAP as a result of long-term unemployment and subsequently returns to low paid employment pays a reduced, differential rent. However, another person who never experienced unemployment would not receive any subsidy even where they are paying the same rent and earning the same wage. We believe that there needs to be the same income threshold for everyone placed on HAP, regardless of circumstance.

- We propose that the remit of the Private Tenancies Board should be extended to local authority tenants or another similarly styled organization should be created for Local Authority Tenants.

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- We propose a period of longer than 3 weeks - 30 working days for tenants who have engaged with the Local Authority.
- We propose that clearer guidelines, mechanisms for proving and mechanisms for challenging antisocial behaviour evictions and policy by the local authorities need to be put in place.

### **4.4 The Travelling Community**

According to the 2016 presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness by Pavee Point, nearly one fifth, or about 5,500 travellers lack proper accommodation. Between 2008 and 2013, the budget for traveller accommodation was reduced by 90% from €40 million to €4 million. 36 per cent of the new budget was not used at all<sup>18</sup>.

The Green Party stands by Pavee Point and their suggestion of a monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure full expenditure of funds allocated for Traveler accommodation. We also believe in working closely with Pavee Point and relative organisations to ensure the most effective services are being offered to prevent homelessness and unsafe living conditions for the Traveller community.

Health boards and organisations such as Focus Ireland and the Salvation Army that are providing services for young Travellers who are homeless should be encouraged to develop culturally appropriate nationwide responses to the needs of young Travellers.

- We propose that out-of-hours services should have access to beds in residential centres specifically for Travellers or to residential centres where staff is trained to respond to the needs of Travellers.



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## 4.5 The Migrant Community and Asylum Seekers

Habitual Residence Conditions (HRC decisions) from the social welfare appeals office should be published to ensure that applicants can identify criteria they must meet and to ensure transparency, consistency and confidence in the process. In the case where an appeal for residency status is pending, homeless migrants should, at a minimum, continue to have access to temporary emergency accommodation.

The “right to reside” clause introduced in 2009 under Article 15 of the Social Welfare and Pensions Act states that all non EEA nationals in Ireland **cannot reside in Ireland** if they a) do not have sufficient means to support themselves, b) are not students enrolled in an educational establishment, c) are not currently working or d) are not registered as a job-seeker with the Department of Social Protection or FAS.

The “right to reside” clause is particularly difficult for many migrants and asylum seekers who have found themselves homeless or at risk of homelessness when they seek access to social welfare programs. Undocumented migrants, an estimated 30,000 people, are one of the most vulnerable groups due to less protection by the state. These migrants may have entered the state legally and then become undocumented, including victims of workplace exploitation, human trafficking victims or failed asylum seekers who cannot be removed from the state or are stateless. For these people, access to social welfare programs are not an option.

- The Green Party supports extending social welfare programs to undocumented migrants; especially victims of exploitation, human trafficking and statelessness. We also wish to extend homelessness prevention programs to both documented and undocumented migrants without fear of deportation without probable cause.
- The Green Party supports the provision of information on avoiding homelessness in Citizens Information Centres throughout the country and on the Citizen’s Information website but we note that this information is only available in two languages; English & Polish<sup>19</sup>. The Green Party believes that such leaflets should be available in languages

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appropriate to their location and that the website should be translated into as many languages as is required.

### **4.6 Prison and Ex Offenders**

Prison and hospital are predictable risks for both heroin relapse and homelessness. This risk could be lessened through the provision of suitable accommodation on release. Offenders frequently lose their place on community or city drug treatment clinics (waiting) lists by not notifying clinics about their incarceration. This is exacerbated by offender's reluctance to inform the prison authorities about any drug treatment they may be applying for.

Currently offenders with long sentences are taken off the waiting list for accommodation with the Local Authority. We argue that offenders whose sentences are shorter than the wait time on the waiting list, which can be 10 years with some Local Authorities, should remain on the waiting list.

We would extend the pilot scheme between the Prison service and Louth County Council, which connects offenders with less than 9 months on their sentence with the Local Authority housing department. Currently, no one is charged with finding accommodation for offenders at risk of homelessness; we would appoint a network of dedicated resettlement officers in every prison or extend the remit of existing personnel to execute this task.

Currently offenders need to have an address to avail of early or temporary release. This disincentivises offenders from disclosing their risk of homelessness until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, when they've been awarded early or temporary releases leading to last minute searching of accommodation. Research shows that the imposition of custodial sentences for relatively minor offences led to family and spousal relationship destabilisation and accommodation and employment loss. Crimes that are survivalist nature, i.e. not always predatory but based on subsistence and need, may suggest that custodial sentences might not always be appropriate for such offenders.

Often the social problems that led a person to commit a crime can increase their risk of homelessness. Identification of family mediation and family support needs should be an integral

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part of the assessment process and the appropriate services developed to ensure that family networks are protected during periods of imprisonment<sup>20</sup>.

- We call for the provision of drug treatment facilities to offenders in prisons and we welcome the commissioning of a review of these services<sup>21</sup>. We note that no deadline has been given for this review. In the interim, the Green Party supports the implementation of any outstanding recommendations outlined in DCU's 2007 report 'Counseling and Prison based Addiction Treatment'<sup>22</sup>.
- We propose the provision of specialised short term accommodation to any past offender who may wish to avail of it and for this accommodation to be recognised by the parole service as an habitual residence
- The Green Party would support an initiative to measure the outcome of issuing community service for non-predatory offences instead of incarceration. We support a nationwide rollout of the pilot project in Limerick prison, which provides parenting courses to offenders and their family.
- We call for the nationwide rollout of the Community Return Scheme, which manages the integration of offenders on temporary release into the community with respect to accommodation and employment.
- We support the move towards avoiding release times between Friday afternoon and Monday morning. We call on the government, in consultation with the prison authorities, to determine the optimum time to release an offender to avoid this, regardless of the crime, once the new release date is less than 7 days from the original release date.

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□ C hickey, 'Crime and Homelessness', Focus Ireland, 2002, pg 10

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□ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/prison-drug-and-alcohol-addiction-services-for-review-1.2217411>

accessed 14/09/15

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□ G Moore, M Redmond, R Glover, C Stevenson, P Gallagher, E Gordon, R Lines and Linda O Driscoll, Counseling and Prison based Addiction Treatment, DCU, 2007, pg 133