

# **A New Agenda for Housing**

Threshold Strategic Plan

**Rights – Access – Sustainability**

## *Mission Statement*

Threshold is a not-for-profit organisation, whose aim is to secure a right to housing, particularly for households experiencing the problems of poverty and exclusion.

We do this by:

- 1) Campaigning for suitable housing delivered on a rights based approach;
- 2) Analysing existing problems and seeking innovative approaches and solutions through quality research;
- 3) Providing independent advisory and advocacy services;
- 4) Working in collaboration with others for those disadvantaged by the housing system.

Constructive Campaigning because - It brings about an understanding of the magnitude of the housing crisis, the cost in terms of people's lives and builds commitment to meaningful change.

Good Quality Research because - It will identify the nature and extent of housing problems and offer a robust analysis of the underlying issues.

Independent Advice and Advocacy services because - For many people advice and advocacy is the threshold between housing and homelessness.

Collaborating with others because - The combined efforts of like-minded or complimentary organisations and individuals can often achieve more than the sum of their individual efforts.

***Quote from a Threshold client:*** 'Me, my wife and my two children (10, 6) have been on the county council waiting list for the last four years. Last year I changed jobs and got an increase in wages. Now the council tell me that our income exceeds the limit and that I am no longer eligible for social housing. They tell me I need to apply for the Shared Ownership Scheme. My problem is that I am 52 and too old by two years to be eligible for the scheme. We are caught in a trap.'

## *The Housing Crisis – Five Years On*

Over 75,000 people asked Threshold for help with their housing problems between 1996 and 2001. With the rapid increase in house prices, escalating rents and inadequate social-housing provision during these five years, it became increasingly difficult for people, especially those on low incomes, to find a home that was affordable and met their needs. In the midst of an economic boom many people were discovering that they had fewer housing choices and opportunities. The costs were clear in a range of everyday problems, familiar to many people: inadequate accommodation, insecurity, evictions, unaffordable rent hikes, years spent on waiting lists, displacement and lengthy commutes to work, and even periods of homelessness.

In the past the emphasis of Threshold's work was on the private rented sector. With the continuation of the housing crisis it became increasingly difficult through our advice services to find adequate long-term solutions to peoples housing problems. In addition, the research and policy work was somewhat limited both in terms of funding and a predominant focus on private rental issues.

While continuing to advise people about their housing problems Threshold is now adopting a broader focus. We aim to look at the whole housing system: what happens in the private rented sector is greatly affected by developments in social housing and home ownership. And we place much greater emphasis on research to investigate key problems, policy analysis to find best solutions and campaigns to advocate for reform.

In these changed circumstances Threshold is adopting a new vision:

***'We share a vision of an Ireland which everyone has a right to secure, affordable housing, appropriate to needs and located in sustainable communities, particularly those households experiencing problems of poverty and exclusion.'***

Achieving the vision would mean that:

- ⤴ Everyone has access to good quality, affordable housing, appropriate to needs;
- ⤴ Housing makes a leading contribution to the creation of sustainable living environments;
- ⤴ The housing system does not deepen or reinforce social inequalities or division;
- ⤴ Housing is treated as a social good responsive to needs and cultural preferences, rather than simply as a commodity or investment option.

## *People in Homes, Homes in Communities*

At the heart of Threshold's new vision is the conviction that housing is one of those fundamental social, economic and cultural rights that are of central importance in the development of sustainable communities at the local level and the creation of a participative and equal society more generally.

The vision encompasses three fundamental themes in housing:

- ⌘ **Rights** – what difference would that make? No one would argue that anyone should be denied the right to vote or freedom from torture on the basis of social class, ethnic origins or gender. Yet many disadvantaged social groups are routinely denied effective housing rights, being unable to access an adequate, affordable and secure home. Basic civil and political rights are taken for granted, but a broader conception of social, economic and cultural rights has not always been effectively developed or implemented. This is why Threshold believes it is time to extend the language and practice of rights to housing. Such a rights-based approach offers a potentially powerful focus for analysis and action. It exposes the shortcomings of the housing system and provides a platform to organise around and work towards a future where the right to a home is a reality to everyone.

***'The best thing about home is having one.'* - Nicky, aged 5**

*'Me and my three children have been homeless for the last few months. It started when I received a notice of a rent increase from my landlord which I couldn't afford. I couldn't find any anywhere else and we ended up in a Bed and Breakfast and then a homeless hostel. We're now living in a one-bedroom apartment waiting for a local authority house. I am at my wits end.'* - Joan, Threshold Client

- ⤴ **Access** - Increasing numbers of people are unable to access secure, affordable and appropriate homes. This is reflected in the accommodation problems faced by the homeless, travellers, refugees, people leaving institutions, those who have to rely on supplementary welfare allowances to meet housing costs, and others. Access problems are also reflected in lengthening local authority waiting lists; most recent estimates suggest up to 58,000 households. The challenge is to enhance existing social provision and explore, promote and implement alternative approaches to ensure that lengthy social housing waiting lists are a thing of the past.
- ⤴ **Sustainability** – What does it mean? The recent history of Irish housing highlights the importance of thinking beyond housing provision alone. Some housing-led development succeeded in producing some remarkably poor residential environments, which undermined the quality of people's lives and created considerable obstacles to the development of communities. The National Development Plan 2000-2006, has committed to a much more active social housing building programme, which will greatly increase the social housing stock if it is implemented in full. Such an expansion highlights the importance of adopting a sustainable approach that emphasises the diverse factors that go to make healthful living environments, build for communities and ultimately for a more participative society in Ireland.

*'My sister is 39 years of age and suffers from epilepsy. She is currently living in attic accommodation at the top of three flights of stairs. The room is cold and dark with no external light and can only be described as pre-historic. She could live with her parents but she wants her independence and pride. She has been on the council list for the past six years but is being told that as a single person she is not a priority. I don't know how she will ever become eligible for a house.'* - Threshold Client

## *Strategic Plan: A sample of projects*

### ***Campaign Projects:***

- ⤴ New housing rights
- ⤴ The development of a coalition of organisations formally supporting a rights based agenda
- ⤴ A comprehensive review of social housing to ensure that the scale and place of social housing provision matches the growing needs
- ⤴ A public debate on housing rights, including a conference in Spring 2002
- ⤴ Effective enforcement of existing legislation governing minimum physical standards or private rented accommodation
- ⤴ Effective implementation of the Equal Status Act 2000 to counter growing levels of discrimination experienced by people trying to find accommodation
- ⤴ Effective implementation of proposed private rented sector legislation

### ***Research Projects:***

- ⤴ A joint research project with St. Vincent de Paul, Simon Communities of Ireland and Focus Ireland involving an analysis of local authority housing strategies and homeless action plans
- ⤴ Alternative models of social housing provision
- ⤴ Inequality within the Irish housing system with an emphasis on the experiences of particular vulnerable groups, i.e. older people, women, children and ethnic minorities
- ⤴ A joint research project on the implications of housing inequality for women (with the National Women's Council of Ireland)
- ⤴ The potential for institutional investment in the private rented sector
- ⤴ an evaluation of building for sustainable communities through selected case studies

### ***Service Projects***

- ⤴ A dedicated Housing Access Centre in Dublin with particular emphasis on helping homeless people find and sustain a tenancy in the private rental sector.
- ⤴ Expanding the focus on advocacy as a core element in service delivery
- ⤴ Establish good practice standards for the delivery of the advice and advocacy services and resource their implementation through the use of IT and training.

### ***Collaboration Projects***

- ⤴ Exploring opportunities to campaign jointly with other like-minded and complimentary organisations, especially on a rights based approach.
- ⤴ Effective contributions to social partnership processes at both a national and regional level.
- ⤴ Joint research projects.

### ***Funding the Strategic Plan***

- ⤴ Expand and diversify fund-raising activity to fund the Strategic Plan.

## *Making a Difference*

We believe that by pursuing these complementary actions and building the strategy around these thematic areas, Threshold can make a difference and contribute in a real way to realising the vision of rights, access and sustainability in Irish housing. The challenge is to make a real difference in the lives of people who are badly housed.

We believe that by our own efforts and through supporting the efforts of others the following is achievable:

- ⤴ Everyone able access housing that is affordable and meets their needs through the established in legislation of a right to a home;
- ⤴ Effective enforcement of existing housing rights for private rented tenants, resulting in a reduction in illegal evictions, an end to substandard accommodation and protection for those who exercise their rights;
- ⤴ A maximum waiting time of 12 months for anyone looking for a local authority or voluntary sector house;
- ⤴ A shared understanding of 'sustainability' among social housing policy makers and housing providers resulting in a process of development which is sustainable in economic, social and environmental terms.

## *Contact Details*

### **Dublin**

21 Stoneybatter, Dublin 7  
Telephone: (01) 872 6311  
Fax: (01) 872 6063  
E-Mail: [info@threshold.ie](mailto:info@threshold.ie)

### **Cork**

8 Father Matthew Quay  
Telephone: (021) 427 1250  
Fax: (021) 427 0261  
E-Mail: [threshold@eircom.net](mailto:threshold@eircom.net)

### **Galway**

Augustine House  
St. Augustine Street  
Telephone: (091) 563 080  
Fax: (091) 563 687  
E-Mail: [thresholdgalway@eircom.net](mailto:thresholdgalway@eircom.net)

Registered No: 70660  
Charity No: 6279