

Seeking a home  
on rent  
supplement

Experience in Cork City in 2004



## Contents

Foreword	2
1 Introduction and Policy Context	3
2 Research Findings	9
3 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations	15
Appendix 1: Rent Supplement Recipient Questionnaire	20
Appendix 2: Threshold's Access Housing Unit	22
Appendix 3: Landlord Telephone Survey	23

## Foreword

Threshold has been working to assist the people of Cork with their housing problems since 1982. We have a particular emphasis on supporting those who are most disadvantaged. In my capacity as Services Co-ordinator of the Southern Region Advice Centre, I have seen significant changes in the housing environment in recent years. I have grown increasingly concerned at the escalating number of callers dependent on the private rented sector for their housing who present at our advice centre with serious housing problems.

Little documented information was available on the private rented sector locally. Therefore Threshold decided to undertake this research study focusing on a number of key issues identified from our in-house statistics and the anecdotal evidence we had from our clients who are in receipt of rent supplement.

Threshold is a member of the Cork Homeless Forum whose mission is to eliminate homelessness in our city. It is hoped the results of our study will highlight some of the causes of homelessness and the recommendations put forward will result in changes and improvements by various statutory bodies. The outcome of these changes will assist the Forum in putting in place an appropriate action plan to address the causes of homelessness.

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to Ms. Joanne Kiely who carried out this piece of valuable research. For her tolerance and commitment to see the project through and her willingness to take all comments offered by the Advisory Group established during the lifetime of the study.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks to all those participants who provided us with valuable information and to the service providers who kindly allowed us access to their clients to gather the necessary information. These include the following:

### Service Providers:

Centre for the Unemployed  
Cork Simon Community  
Cuanlee Refuge  
Good Shepherd Services  
Health Board Executive – City Centre Community Welfare Clinics  
Society of St. Vincent de Paul

### Advisory Group Members:

Mr. Donal Guerin – Social Inclusion Unit, Cork City Council  
Ms. Aileen O'Connor – Homeless Management, Cork City Council  
Ms. Siobhan Goulding. Acting Superintendent, Community Welfare Officer, Health Service Executive  
Ms. Lillian Buchanan – Housing Research Unit, Threshold  
Mr. Joe Finnerty – Department of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork

Finally I wish to acknowledge the support and contribution of the Chair of Threshold, Ms. Aileen Hayden, the Board of Threshold and Mr. Patrick Burke, the Director. I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Inclusion Unit, Cork City Council who part funded this research study.

*Margaret O'Neill*  
Services Co-ordinator,  
Southern Region



## 1 Introduction and Policy Context

This report summarises a research project carried out by Threshold's Southern Region Advice Centre with regard to people living in the private rented sector and supported by the Rent Supplement Scheme. The work builds on our previous investigations into the impact of the rent supplement scheme on people at risk of homelessness. It looks at how the operation of the scheme, including tighter restrictions imposed in 2003, has affected recipients. While this research focuses on rent supplement recipients living in Cork City, the findings we believe would be replicated across the country.

The rent supplement scheme is an important element in Ireland's housing and welfare policy package. An estimated 40% of tenants living in the private rented sector in Ireland depend on rent supplement. The scheme is a significant and expanding source of accommodation for people in housing need. There were 9,465 recipients of rent supplement in private tenancies in Cork in 2004. By comparison, according to Cork City Council's Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan 2004-2008 there are 7,710 local authority houses in Cork.

The extent to which the rent supplement scheme works for people with housing need is important, because inadequate housing support can depress the quality of life for people below an acceptable social standard. Moreover any inadequacies undermine the widely accepted aim of reducing and eliminating homelessness. Given the shortage of social housing, moving into private rented accommodation is sometimes the only pathway out of homelessness, especially for single people.

This section of the report describes the research objectives, policy context for the report and the research methodologies used. The second section summarises the research findings. The final section contains recommendations directed to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Department of Social and Family Affairs, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, as well as local authorities.

### Research Objectives

During 2004 Threshold's Southern Regional Advice Centre helped more than 5,700 clients, mostly tenants living in accommodation at the least expensive end of the private rented sector. Amongst the problems encountered were 1,899 issues about accessing accommodation and 1,090 about dwelling standards. The primary impetus to pursue the research therefore arose directly from Threshold's concern for its clients. In addition, the Homeless Forum in Cork identified the availability of affordable private rented accommodation as a measure under Objective Two of Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy for Cork 2004-2006.

The aim of the research is to examine the situations of persons dependent on rent supplement payments living in the private rented sector in Cork City. The research explores recipients' experiences with:

- Accessing accommodation
- Affordability of accommodation in the context of maximum rent ceilings imposed by the Health Board.
- Accommodation standards in terms of dwelling facilities and quality.

First, however, the Housing Needs Assessment 2002 and the operation of the rent supplement scheme in 2004 are described briefly as well as current regulation of the quality of private rented dwellings.

An estimated  
**40%**  
of tenants living  
in the private  
rented sector in  
Ireland depend on  
rent supplement

## Housing Needs Assessment 2002

The most recent Housing Needs Assessment of March 2002 reported that 48,413 households were in need of local authority housing nationally. Lone parents represented 40% of those in need and almost a third were one person households. The majority, over two-thirds, had household incomes of less than €10,000.

A profile of those assessed under Cork City Council Housing Needs Assessment 2002 reveals a similar reality with 2,282 assessed as being in need. Over half of those in housing need (51%) were single person households, 40% male and 11% female, with 47% of those in need currently living in private rented accommodation. A total of 378 households were assessed as homeless and the overwhelming majority (93%) were single person households. Almost three-quarters, 72% of households, had a household income of less than €10,000.

The number of allocations made in Cork between March 2002 and March 2004 only amount to 27% of the number who were in need in 2002. Based on the 2002 assessment a significant number of households are still on the waiting list. Cork City Council's Social and Affordable Action Plan 2004-2008 states that 3,727 households were on the waiting list on 31st March 2004.

Given the growth in housing need and increased waiting times for local authority housing, low income households are increasingly relying on rent supplement payments as the only available housing option.

## Rent Supplement Scheme

The Supplementary Welfare Allowance system was introduced in 1977 by the then Department of Social Welfare. It provides health and welfare services, on an eligibility basis, as part of a locally based community welfare service administered by eight Regional Health Service Executives. Entitlement to rent supplement is primarily based on two criteria:

- The applicant has a genuine housing need, which cannot be provided for from his or her own resources
- The applicant satisfies the specified means test

The amount of rent subsidy is calculated so as to leave the recipient with a disposable income equivalent to the rate of supplementary allowance appropriate to family size less a minimum contribution, currently €13.

Rent supplement was intended primarily to provide for emergency or short-term needs. However many recipients require support for considerable periods of time. The figures in the table below may under-represent the numbers of longer term recipients because those who change address are likely to be recorded as new cases. Even so, 47% of recipients were reported to have been in receipt for more than one year. For them, the scheme substitutes for the allocation of a social housing unit.



### National number of recipients by duration at May 2004

Months	Number of Rent Supplement Recipients
0 to 3	7,522
3 to 6	8,545
6 to 9	8,519
9 to 12	6,260
12 to 18	13,976
24 to 36	5,088
36 plus	8,616

Source: Report of the Social Partners' Group on Rent Supplement, August 2004. Appendix 2 Table 1.

The number of recipients and expenditure grew rapidly as housing prices escalated in Ireland. The Health Service Executive, Southern Area spent €33.7 million on rent supplement in 2002 with 6,792 recipients in Cork. In 2004, there were 9,465 recipients in Cork, an increase of almost 40% on 2002.

Increasing levels of expenditure on rent supplement nationally created pressure for budgetary constraints. Under restrictions introduced at the end of November 2002 each Health Service Executive fixed maximum rent levels above which rent supplement would be denied. These levels remained fixed for the following year.

These restrictions to the rent supplement scheme raised concerns about the availability of accommodation within the rent ceilings and prompted Threshold to undertake this research. At present the maximum rent levels in place in the Southern Area are as follows:

### Rent Levels in the Health Service Executive, Southern Area

Status	Amount
Single person in shared accommodation	€70
Couple in shared accommodation	€70
Single person – single unit	€95
Couple with no children	€153
Couple with 1 child/ One parent family 1 child	€153
Couple with 2 children/ One parent family with 2 children	€190
Couple with 3 children/ One parent family with 3 children	€203

Further restrictions on eligibility for rent supplement were introduced in early 2004 but these restrictions were later somewhat relaxed after lobbying by Threshold and other groups. A major change to the Rent Supplement Scheme was announced in July 2004 with the introduction of the new Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS).

## Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS)

Under the Rental Accommodation Scheme, local authorities will assume responsibility for meeting the long term needs of households who have been dependent on rent supplement for 18 months or longer. Most recipients of RAS will live in private rented accommodation provided by landlords on behalf of local authorities. Local authorities will engage in contracts with existing landlords and use Public Private Partnership arrangements (PPPs) to ensure a supply of rented accommodation for the scheme. Social housing and housing provided by voluntary housing associations will also be provided.

Almost half of rent supplement recipients were eligible for the new scheme by December 2004 – 28,000 out of 57,000 recipients nationally – and this proportion may increase as time passes. Nevertheless it remains the case that up to 50% of households on rent supplement will not be assisted to source rented accommodation by this new scheme.

## Regulation of the Private Rented Sector

A long standing concern of Threshold and another focus of this research is the quality of the accommodation that is available to rent supplement recipients. Local authorities are responsible for inspecting private rented dwellings to ensure compliance with the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 1993. In Cork City, 3,701 units have been inspected since 1999, primarily older properties within the inner city and its suburbs.

Year	Number Inspected	Improvement Notices
2000	738	514
2001	545	378
2002	838	409
2003	850	426
2004	730	310

Almost 70% of the properties inspected in both 2000 and 2001 were issued with improvement notices. This figure fell to 42% in 2004. Cork City Council follows up inspections to ensure compliance with the improvement notices issued. This appears to be having an impact as the rate of compliance has gradually increased in recent years from 30% compliant in 2000 to 58% compliant in 2004. While this improvement is most welcome, the evidence indicates that many properties still fail to provide accommodation that meets minimum standards.

The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 contains provisions that should provide tenants with more protection against substandard accommodation. Recommendations in the final section of this report are designed to fit within the framework of this legislation.



## Methodology

The study involved surveys as well as desk research, including a survey of a sample of rent supplement recipients living in Cork, a survey of users of Threshold's placement service, a survey of properties to let advertised in the the Evening Echo, Cork's daily evening newspaper, and interviews with letting agents.

### Survey of Recipients of Rent Supplement

Seventy recipients of rent supplement responded to a series of preset questions posed in one-to-one interviews held during May and June 2004. The respondents were contacted by the researcher at three Community Welfare Clinics and at Threshold's advice centre. The questionnaire was administered by staff of five other service providers including Simon Day Centre, The Centre of the Unemployed, Cuanlee, Good Shepherd Services Outreach Team and Society of St. Vincent De Paul. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire.

#### Profile of Respondents:

- 57% men and 43% women
- The highest proportion, two-fifths of respondents (40%), were aged from 25 to 34 years; 29% were aged from 35 to 49 years; almost a quarter (24%) were aged under 25 years; and 7% were aged 50 years or older.
- The highest proportions were either sharing accommodation with people other than relatives or partners (40%) or living alone (36%). A further 17% were single parent households and 7% were couples.
- 29% shared two-bedroom houses; 21% occupied one-bed flats; 19% were in two bed flats; 14% shared three or four-bedroom houses; 7% lived in bedsits; and 10% lived in other types of accommodation.

### Threshold Client Survey

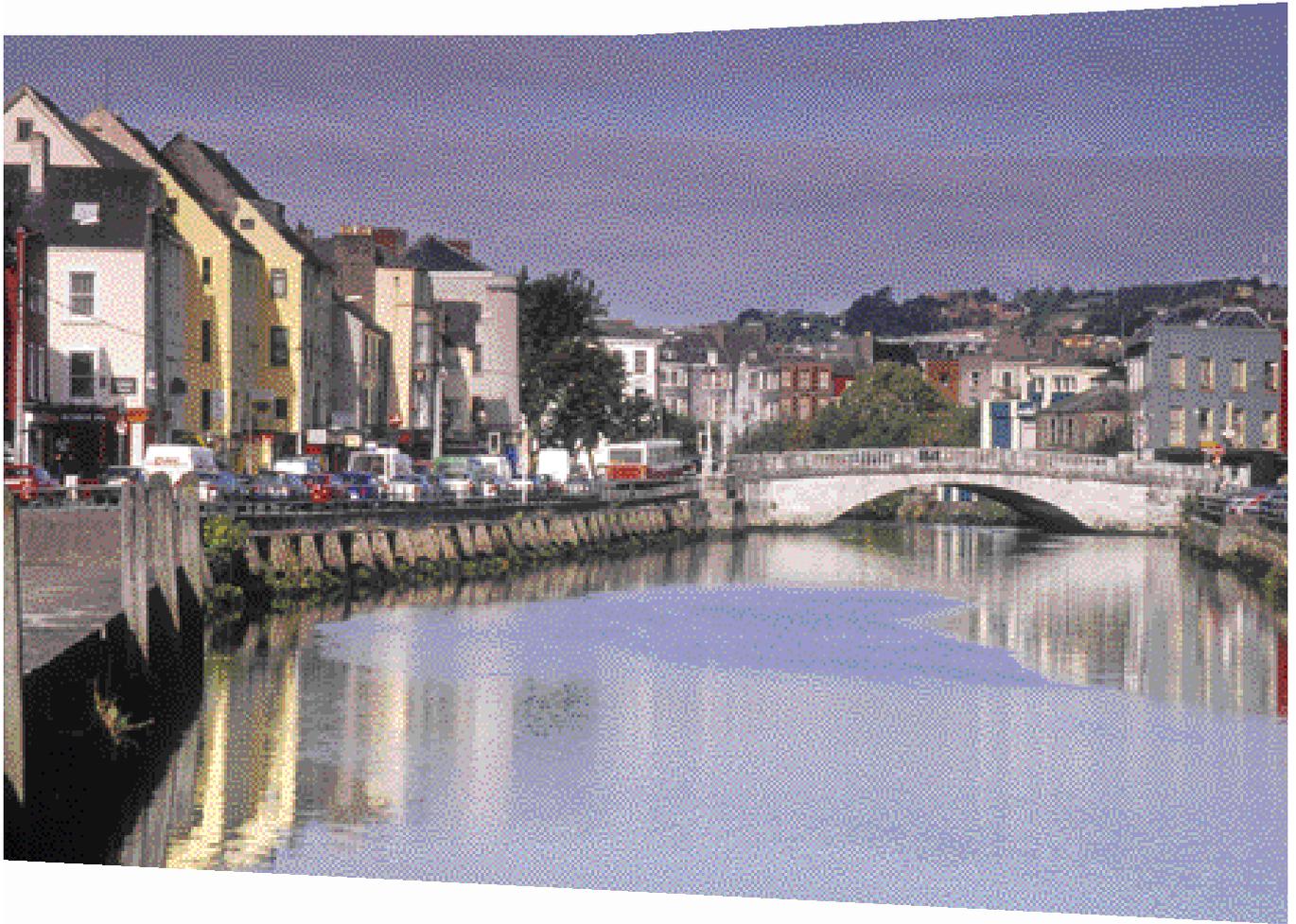
Threshold's placement service makes copies of the Evening Echo available to clients as well as providing free access to a telephone and on site assistance from an advice worker. During January to March 2004, 127 rent supplement recipients who used the service responded to questions about their search for a home.

### Accommodation Availability Survey

The Evening Echo is one of the primary means of sourcing accommodation available particularly for those dependent on rent supplement. A survey of the 'Apartments / Flats' and 'Property to Let' columns was undertaken on 17th, 24th 25th, 31st May and 1st June 2004.

Information was recorded on the total number of properties advertised and whether rent supplement was accepted or not. In addition, telephone calls were made to a random sample of those landlords who did not state a preference in order to obtain an estimate of the proportion of properties advertised that could be accessed by rent supplement recipients. Details of the landlord telephone survey are included in Appendix 3.

In addition five estate agents and property management companies were interviewed to gather information on the availability of accommodation for households dependent on rent supplement.





## 2 Research Findings

### Introduction

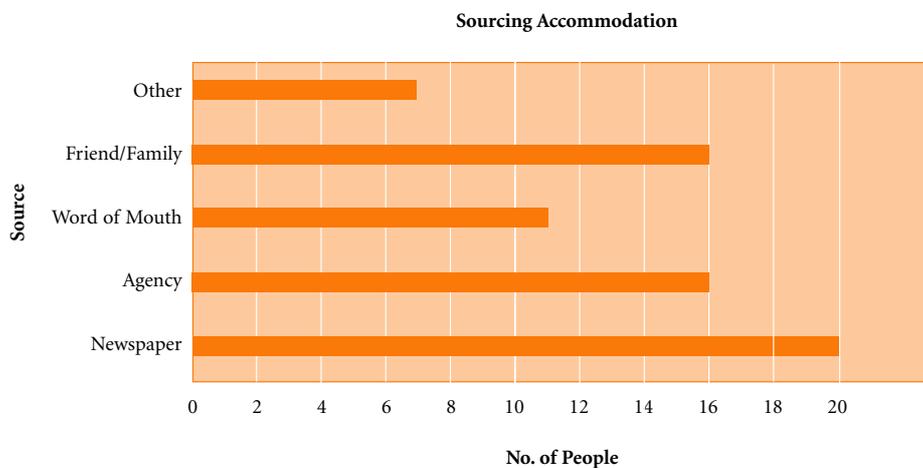
This section examines the position of some of the most vulnerable households living at the lower end of the private rented sector in Cork. It looks at the ability of this group to access accommodation, the affordability of accommodation obtained and the quality of accommodation.

### Accessing Accommodation

Prior to sourcing accommodation, every household should contact their local authority to have their housing need assessed. While this has not always occurred in the past (nearly 19% of the rent supplement recipients in our survey said they were not registered on the housing list), regulations have been introduced requiring all households to register with their local authority prior to their application for rent supplement being considered. Households contact their local Community Welfare Officer who will determine their eligibility for a rent deposit and rent supplement payment. They then try to find suitable accommodation that conforms to the terms of the scheme.

### Sourcing Accommodation

The bar chart below outlines the primary means of sourcing accommodation used by the 70 respondents who participated in the survey of rent supplement recipients. The newspaper is the most popular means of finding accommodation, followed by letting agents and friends / family.



Respondents were also asked how many enquiries they had to make before they were successful. Twenty four percent (17 respondents) said that they had to make ten or more calls before securing accommodation. Those households making more than 16 enquiries were predominantly single person households.

### Available accommodation

All the advertisements for residential properties to let published in the Evening Echo were reviewed on five different dates during May and early June 2004. A total of 903 advertisements were noted, some of which were explicit about the acceptability of applicants on rent supplement. Over the five days there were 198 advertisements that excluded people on rent supplement, using phrases such as 'professional couple', while another 63 accepted rent supplement recipients.

Phone surveys on each day to a random sample of the remaining advertisements reveals widespread exclusion of rent supplement recipients. Thirty five percent of the phone contacts said rent supplement recipients were not acceptable, and another 33% demanded rents that disqualified recipients because the level was too high. Twenty three percent of the phone contacts said that they would consider recipients as tenants and 9% had rents above the Health Service Executive ceiling but indicated that the rent was negotiable.

Taking into account both the information given in the advertisements and extrapolating the findings from the phone survey, our research indicates that rent supplement recipients at best can compete for only 30% of the lettings on the Cork market. Over one third of the available lettings are unavailable because the landlord won't consider those dependent on rent supplement and another third or more is unavailable (irrespective of the attitudes of the owners about recipients) because the rents are too high.

#### Bedsits

On the fourth day of the survey there was 6 properties advertised as 'bedsit available'. This was an exceptionally high number to be advertised on any one day. However out of the 6 bedsits only one landlord was willing to accept rent supplement and was within the rent level.

In order to get a greater understanding of the properties available to households dependent on rent supplement payments, leading property management companies and estate agencies were contacted. The agencies were asked what properties they had available willing to accept rent supplement payments. These findings indicate that a lone person household dependent on rent supplement would have the most difficulties. Direct quotations from these agencies are set out on the next page.

24%  
said that they had  
to make ten or  
more calls before  
securing  
accommodation



**Agency One**  
 Nothing on books at present  
 Nowhere out there within single person rent level  
 Possible share 2 bed property  
 Very occasionally property available around €550 price range.

**Agency Two**  
 Would not get apartment for single person rent level  
 Very little bedsits available  
 Have some 3 bed properties on books that accept rent supplement.  
 For insurance purposes children could not live in an apartment

**Agency Three**  
 Only property within price range for a single person is a bedsit.  
 Only one available at present for €83  
 1 bed flat available next week for €125 (above rent supplement level)  
 2 bed apartments next week for €180 (above rent supplement level)

**Agency Four**  
 Nothing at present  
 Could be lucky but their properties come and go very quickly.  
 Had only one or two properties suitable for a single person in past few months.  
 Have a few 3 bed houses in suburbs for €800 - €900 that would accept rent supplement.  
 More landlords accepting rent supplement in recent months but only for houses in suburbs.

**79%**  
 of clients surveyed indicated that they would have difficulty financing their accommodation search without the free telephone access provided by Threshold

**Threshold 'in house' survey**

In addition to the limited availability of low cost rental accommodation is the limited ability of people to search for the accommodation. The responses of 127 clients of Threshold's placement service reveal the obstacles that exist. The majority of landlords can only be contacted by costly mobile phone and frequently many calls have to be made when searching. 79% of clients surveyed indicated that they would have difficulty financing their accommodation search without the free telephone access provided by Threshold. Over 83% stated they had no one to help them conduct their search. Many clients also had literacy difficulties.

**21%**

stated that an incorrect amount of rent had been entered on their rent supplement form

## Affordability

When households on low income find accommodation, they can encounter affordability problems despite receipt of rent supplement. Over a fifth of the recipients surveyed, 15 out of 70 respondents (21%), stated that an incorrect amount of rent had been entered on their rent supplement form. In fact without disclosing it to their CWO, they paid the landlord more out of their own resources than the minimum contribution officially required. People made these 'top-up' payments because accommodation priced within the Health Service Executive rent ceilings was unobtainable. The difference between the actual rent and the rent reported to CWOs ranged from 7% to 47%, with an overall average of 23%. While there was no opportunity to explore the implications for households paying these extra sums, there is some evidence showing that hardship can result.

### Differences between rent paid and amount of rent stated on the rent supplement form

Housing Situation	Actual Rent Amount Weekly	Amount stated by landlord on form	Personal payment paid including €13 minimum contribution
Sharing	€95	€80	€28
Sharing	€10	€95	€28
Sharing	€95	€70	€38
Sharing	€80	€70	€23
Sharing	€85	€70	€28
Sharing	€107	€100	€20
Sharing	€80	€70	€23
Living alone	€110	€95	€28
Living alone	€140	€110	€43
Living alone	€130	€100	€33
Living alone	€140	€95	€58
Living alone	€130	€95	€48
Single Parent	€180	€152	€41
Single Parent	€180	€150	€43
Married	€200	€160	€53

### Threshold Case Study 1

A man in receipt of a disability payment of €134.80 called to Threshold seeking assistance. His landlord signed his rent supplement form stating the rent being sought weekly was €95. The correct rent being sought was €127. The man was paying €45 weekly out of his disability payment towards his rent. This left him with €89.80 to meet all other living expenses. Additionally the tenant had signed a lease agreement for six months. He had been living in the flat for the past two months and he could not afford to maintain these rental payments. He had borrowed money in order to make ends meet.

Threshold contacted the landlord and explained the individual circumstances. The landlord agreed to return his deposit in full. The man was very relieved and began looking for more affordable accommodation.



**11%**  
 did not have access to a sink with hot and cold running water

## Standard of Accommodation

Given the difficulties that people dependent on rent supplement payments experience in accessing housing it is important to monitor the quality of accommodation that they do find. The survey indicates the existence of properties in Cork City occupied by rent supplement recipients that are not meeting the minimum standards set out in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992. Fifty percent of the respondents reported one or more difficulties.

### Number of respondents reporting substandard accommodation

Standard	Percent with difficulties	Number of respondents with difficulties
Sink with hot & cold water	11%	8
Moisture getting in through walls	21%	15
A leaking roof	7%	5
Windows not closing properly	17%	12
No secure handrail	3%	2
Windowless rooms*	7%	5
Mould on walls or ceiling	26%	18

\* windowless rooms excludes bathrooms

Over a quarter (26%) of respondents said they were experiencing difficulties with mould on walls and ceilings. Over a fifth (21%) had moisture coming through walls. A significant proportion of respondents (11%) did not have access to a sink with hot and cold running water. Nine households indicated they were living in accommodation that was in breach of two or more standards.

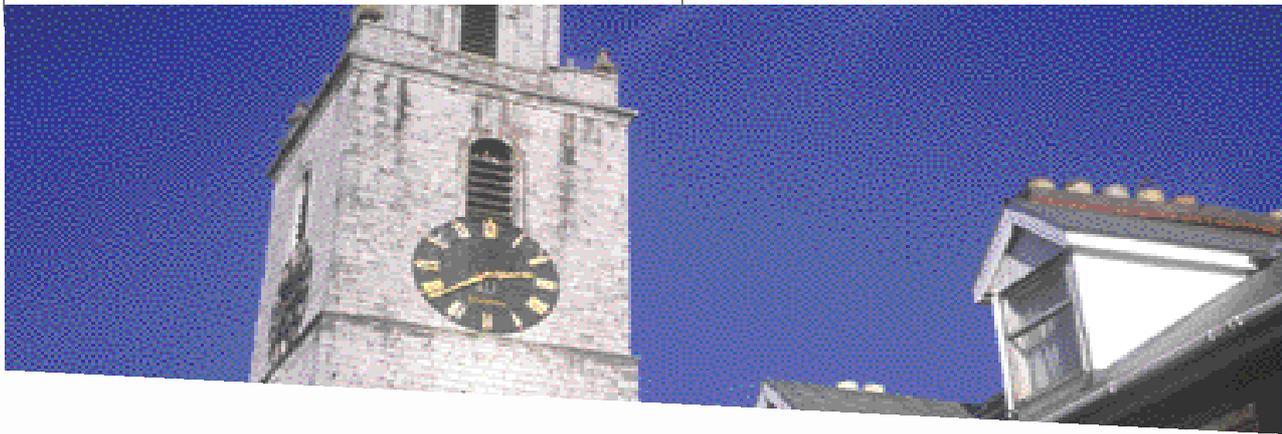
The survey also found that many of the respondents rely on expensive methods of heating: 27% of the respondents rely on plug-in electric heaters for their heating and 7% of respondents rely on an open fire. Almost 12% of respondents stated they had difficulties with pests and vermin. Six out of the fifteen respondents paying top-up payments on their official rent were occupying properties that did not meet basic standards.

## Threshold Case Study 2

A 19 year-old woman called to Cork Threshold seeking assistance regarding the poor condition of the accommodation she was living in. The woman was in receipt of rent supplement and was sharing a two-storey property with seven other tenants. Two of the bedrooms did not have any windows as the rooms had been partitioned. There was only one shower working in the property. The tenants had asked the landlord on a number of occasions to fix the other shower but to date it had not been fixed. The woman was unaware of her rights. She wished to leave the property but was worried she would not get her deposit back.

Threshold wrote to the landlord advising him of his obligations under the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992. A letter was also sent to Cork City Council regarding the property. The landlord agreed to return the woman's deposit.





### 3 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Threshold, the national housing organisation, has been working with people experiencing housing disadvantage and homelessness since 1978. Alerted by the problems that clients bring to our advice centres, Threshold has conducted a number of investigations into the impact of increasing reliance on the private rented sector for accommodating people in housing need. Rent Supplement: A Social Policy Report was the latest, published jointly with Comhairle in 2002. This current research complements our previous work. Although it focuses on rent recipients living in Cork, our other advice offices report similar experience across the country. The study looks at how the tightening of the rent supplement scheme announced by the Department of Social and Family Affairs at the end of 2002 affected rent supplement recipients living at the lower end of the private rented sector in Cork City.

Our research demonstrates that while the private rented sector and rent supplement accommodates many in housing need, it is failing a significant minority of vulnerable people. Accessing affordable accommodation that complies with minimum dwelling standards is problematic for a significant number of welfare-dependent households. The risk that people will experience homelessness is greater as a result - because finding a place is difficult and, when obtained, tenancies can be difficult to sustain due to hidden extra costs and intolerable dwelling conditions.

Cork Threshold at present helps some by making searching easier and less expensive, but clearly more support is required. Involuntary sharing, unaffordable rent payments, substandard conditions undermine tenancies, raising the spectre of homelessness. In particular, single persons are most adversely affected by the restrictions imposed by the rent supplement scheme, and they are the group most at risk of homelessness.

The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 and the recently announced Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) may improve matters for tenants renting privately but these reforms will mainly affect those who have been renting for longer periods. RAS eventually will cover those in long term housing need who have been rent supplement recipients for more than 18 months. The 2004 Act provides for greater security of tenure where a tenancy has existed for six months without a notice of termination being issued. But additional protections are required for those not covered by these new measures.

#### Access

Rent supplement recipients struggle to find suitable affordable accommodation because they are excluded from most of the private rented sector (pages 9 - 11). For example almost one quarter of the respondents in our survey of rent supplement recipients had to make ten or more enquiries before they sourced a landlord willing to consider households in receipt of rent supplement. A significant number of single respondents had to resort to shared accommodation.

The Evening Echo survey of advertisements in the 'Property to Let' and 'Flats/Apartments' columns indicates that only 30% of advertised lets are actually open to applicants on rent supplement (as well as others seeking cheaper accommodation). Of landlords contacted almost 70% either refused to accept rent supplement payments or their property was above Health Service Executive, Southern Area rent levels. Interviews with estate agents confirmed the difficulties faced, particularly by single persons.

The low rent ceiling set for Cork is forcing low income single home-seekers to endure inadequate accommodation or incur financial burdens. It should be increased.

the actual personal  
contribution to rent  
was on average

**23%**

above the rent  
supplement rate

- **Recommendation 1:**

The Health Service Executive, Southern area should be instructed by the Department of Social and Family Affairs to raise immediately the rent ceiling for single person households

Access to private rented accommodation is limited by the unwillingness of many landlords to accept rent supplement recipients as tenants. Home seekers should be considered on their individual merit, and landlords discouraged from discriminating amongst potential tenants based on source of income.

- **Recommendation 2:**

Threshold reaffirms its recommendation that the Equal Status Act 2000 be amended to prohibit differential treatment of people according to their source of income.

Meanwhile comprehensive enforcement of registration and rent book legislation should allow the authorities other means of protecting against fraud rather than depending on confirmation of tenancies by the landlord.

- **Recommendation 3:**

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Social and Family Affairs should develop the means of administering and managing housing support for people in the private rented sector that assists recipients to secure private rented accommodation.

## Affordability

Some 21% of the rent supplement recipients surveyed admitted that they had adapted to the fact that market rents were above the Health Service Executive, Southern Area, permitted ceilings by making top-up payments to landlords (page 12). Amongst these respondents the actual personal contribution to rent was on average 23% above the rent supplement rate.

The top-up 'adaptation' is kept secret because tenancies with rents above the relevant ceiling are prohibited under the scheme's rules. Welfare payments are set at a very basic level and housing expenses above the minimum contribution impose considerable financial strain. The prospect of homelessness creates a strong incentive for paying top-ups nonetheless.

It is important to eliminate the practice: top-ups undermine the basic principle of the welfare system; they make the tenant beholden to their landlord and they increase the likelihood of households getting into debt. At the same time it is unrealistic to expect the reports from CWOs to reveal the true state of the rental market.

- **Recommendation 4:**

Cork City Council together with the Private Residential Tenancies Board must closely and regularly monitor the Cork rental market, and the ceilings should be revised accordingly. This practice should be replicated in all urban rental markets.



## Standard of Accommodation

The accommodation of half the rent supplement recipients surveyed failed to comply with the minimum standard requirements set out in legislation passed more than ten years ago (page 13). Substandard conditions include the seepage of water through walls and wall or ceiling mould. Seven percent of respondents (5 people) stated they are living in accommodation with windowless rooms while 11% (8 people) do not have a sink with hot and cold running water.

Rent supplement payments account for significant government expenditure and landlords who do not maintain their properties to a decent standard should not benefit from the scheme. Indeed they should not be allowed to rent to anyone so long as their properties fail to meet minimum legal standards. The arrangements and resources provided for under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 will facilitate stricter enforcement.

- **Recommendation 5:**  
The Private Residential Tenancies Board should publish twice yearly public reports on the effectiveness of local authority enforcement of the minimum dwelling standards. Those authorities who fail to reach an adequate standard should be penalised financially.

## Revisiting Standard Setting

The existing standards for rented dwellings were set more than a decade ago, before most people in Ireland began to enjoy rapidly rising living standards. The DOE has recognised that they are out of date and the announced intention to review them should not be delayed further. The content of the revised standards should also reflect the fact that some 40% of private tenants are subsidised, and many have homes in the sector for considerable periods of time. Considerations such as storage space, sound proofing, clothes drying facilities, common play areas, in addition to central heating, are very relevant.

- **Recommendation 6:**  
The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government without further delay should up-date dwelling standard criteria to reflect modern living standards.

The rent ceiling has confined single persons to a small segment of the market where it is hard to obtain independent accommodation. The involuntary sharing that often results is not an adequate solution. Moreover recognition that single persons may have family responsibilities and ties such as children needs to be reflected in the assessment of the type of housing need.

In Threshold's view one bedroom (rather than bedsit or shared) accommodation should become the norm for single person households, and two bedroom accommodation for single households with children visiting and one parent/one child households. Official acceptance that private tenancies will be the long term home for many in housing need, inherent in the introduction of RAS, underlines the importance of setting appropriate standards.

- **Recommendation 7:**  
The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government should review the housing need criteria for small households, and issue guidelines to local authorities that reflect the norms of society today.



## Developing the Private Rented Pathway out of Homelessness

For people who struggle with social, economic and health disadvantages finding and sustaining a tenancy is difficult, especially for those who are starting from a situation of homelessness. Providing rent supplement is only one aspect of the support that may be needed. The experience of Threshold's Access Housing Unit in Dublin office demonstrates that homeless persons can successfully move from emergency and institutional accommodation to renting privately, given thorough and timely assistance. Appendix 2 supplies information about the operation of Threshold's Access Housing Unit.

This type of initiative, which is funded by the Homeless Agency in Dublin, should be adopted in Cork.

- **Recommendation 8:**

The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Department of Social and Family Affairs and the relevant local authorities should support organisations that help people to establish homes in the private rented sector and thereby prevent homelessness. In particular the Access Housing Unit initiative should be adapted for application in Cork.

## Social Housing - Private, Public and Non Profit

Threshold in a coalition with other national anti-poverty organisations submitted to the government a detailed set of recommendations on the structure and implementation of RAS to ensure that tenants will have genuine homes under the Scheme. Many of the recommendations are directed to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Department of Social and Family Affairs but a number are relevant to Local Authorities, who after all, will be implementing RAS. The submission is available on our website [www.threshold.ie](http://www.threshold.ie)

- **Recommendation 9:**

Those designing and implementing the Rental Accommodation Scheme should ensure good quality, appropriate and well maintained accommodation

Expansion of social housing would relieve demand pressure on the lower end of the private rented sector thereby encouraging landlords of poor quality properties to up-grade or exit the sector. Cork City Council's Social and Affordable Housing Action Plan 2004-2008 projects 3,924 first-time lettings of Local Authority and Housing Association units during the five year period 2004-2008. The plan also states that 3,727 households were on the waiting list on 31st March 2004. Although it does not project new housing need this can be expected to add further to social housing requirements and maintain the gap between supply and need. As pointed out in December 2004 by NESC in Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy, we need a more ambitious social housing investment programme to bring the housing system into a more sustainable balance.

- **Recommendation 10:**

DOE and the Department of Finance should facilitate much greater social housing investment.

Seeking a home  
on rent supplement

Experience in Cork  
City, 2004

## APPENDICES

65

65A

65B

## Appendix 1

### Cork Threshold Accommodation Questionnaire.

This questionnaire will be treated as strictly private and confidential. No names and addresses are required. All answers will be used for statistical purposes only.

Threshold is a voluntary organisation that provides advice, information and advocacy on housing and housing problems. Threshold is carrying out this research to reveal the difficulties people dependent on rent supplement payments are experiencing living in private rented accommodation. We would be very grateful if people receiving rent supplement would complete this questionnaire and place the completed questionnaire in the envelope provided.

Please tick the relevant answer.

- 1 Age:  Under 18yrs  18-24  25-34  35-49  50-65  Over 65yrs
- 2 Gender:  Male  Female
- 3 Currently are you:  Living Alone  With Partner  Married  With Parent  
 Single Parent  Sharing  Other
- 4 Number of dependent children (if any)
- 5 Please indicate your present accommodation?  
 Bed-Sit  1 Bed Flat  2 Bed Flat  1/2 Bed House  
 Bed House  Other (*please give details*)
- 6 What type of accommodation were you living in previous to your present accommodation?  
 Bedsit  Flat  House  Hostel  Other
- 7 How did you find your present accommodation?  
 Newspaper Advertisement  Agency  Word of Mouth  
 Friend/Family  Other (*please indicate*)
- 8 How many inquiries did you make before you were successful?  
 1-5  6-10  11-15  16-20  More than 20
- 9 In your search for your present accommodation how many times has a landlord refused to accept rent supplement?
- 10 Rent amount sought by your landlord  Monthly  Weekly
- 11 What rent supplement do you receive from your CWO weekly
- 12 How much do you pay out of your own income towards your rent?
- 13 How long have you been paying this amount?



14 What amount did your landlord write on the rent supplement form?

15 Are you registered on the Housing List?  Yes  No

16 How long have you been on the Housing List? .....

17 Are you aware that there are certain minimum standards for rented accommodation?  Yes  No

18 Do you have a sink with hot and cold water facilities in your accommodation?  Yes  No

19 Do you have problems with any of the following:

(a) A leaking roof  Yes  No

(b) Moisture getting in through walls  Yes  No

(c) Mould on walls or ceilings  Yes  No

(d) Windows that don't open or close properly  Yes  No

(e) Pests-rats, mice etc  Yes  No

20 How is your accommodation heated?

Gas/Oil central heating with radiators  Plug in Electric Heaters

Open Fire  Other

21 Are there shower or bath facilities present?  Yes  No

22 If yes how many non household people do you share these facilities with?

23 Have you been provided with a  Cooker  Fridge

24 Are there any windowless rooms in your accommodation (besides your bathroom)?  Yes  No

25 Is a secure handrail provided for all common stairways?  Yes  No

26 Did you ever make a complaint to anyone regarding the condition of your accommodation?  Yes  No

27 If 'yes' who did you make a complaint to? .....

28 If 'no' why did you not make a complaint? .....

29 Do you have a lease/letting agreement on the property you currently rent?  Yes  No

30 If 'yes' is your agreement verbal or written?  Verbal  Written

31 If 'yes' how long is your lease for? .....

32 Did your landlord provide you with a rent book?  Yes  No

33 Were you ever refused rent supplement from a CWO due to the condition of a property?  Yes  No

34 How many times have you moved to different accommodation in the last five years? .....

*Thank you for your time. It is greatly appreciated.*



## Appendix 2

### Threshold's Access Housing Unit, Dublin

#### Introduction

Threshold's Access Housing Unit is an innovative project designed to help people who are homeless to access private rented accommodation and to ensure necessary supports are put in place to help them sustain such accommodation. This project was a part of the original Homeless Agency action plan 'Shaping the Future' and came about through a necessity to increase long term housing options for homeless people. The Unit helped accommodate its first tenant in January 2003 and has since finished its pilot phase, been subject to an independent evaluation and subsequently been mainstream funded. By May 2005, 200 tenancies had been created. Referrals are made from over 30 different organisations including homeless services, drug treatment services and social workers.

#### Operation

The Access Housing Unit works by getting referrals of suitable potential tenants from other homeless service providers (such as Focus Ireland, Dublin Simon Community and Merchants Quay). These providers identify people that would be able to sustain private rented accommodation but are unable to access it themselves or need some help in adjusting to independent living.

A referral form is completed, sent to the Unit and then an interview is set up between someone from the Unit, the referrer and the potential tenant. The purpose of the interview is to ensure that the private rented sector is the right option for the prospective tenant, to look at issues that have caused them difficulties with housing in the past and to make sure all the details on the referral form are correct.

A referrer must arrange post-settlement support in advance of the referral, to ensure that the tenant has help to settle into their new home. At the initial stages this may be as simple as helping someone get furniture, arrange a grant for bedding, accessing local services and helping with cooking and budgeting skills. Later on issues around literacy, education and employment may well be explored. The provision of this service is of paramount importance in increasing the sustainability of a tenancy and is a mandatory condition for referral.

#### Tenancy Sustainment

Some homeless organisations that referred clients to the Access Housing Unit in 2003 were unable to provide post-settlement support within the first week of the tenancy. This prevented the AHU from accepting referrals of people who were capable of living independently. The AHU established it's own Tenancy Sustainment Service in September 2004 to provide tenancy support to people who can live independently but cannot access post settlement support from their own organisation.



### Appendix 3

#### Access to Rental Market by Rent Supplement Recipients: Findings of Telephone Survey of Advertised Properties

Date	Total No Calls Completed	Accept Rent Supplement	Do Not Accept Rent Supplement	Above Rent Cap	Willing to Drop Price
17/05/2004	13	2	6	5	-
24/05/2004	14	5	5	4	-
25/05/2004	12	2	3	4	3
31/05/2004	18	5	6	6	1
01/06/2004	12	2	4	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>6</b>

65

65A

65B

