



“Sorry that application is closed”.

Responding to this and other housing list pitfalls.

Reporting the feedback from a workshop on a housing challenge in mental health.

The workshop was presented as part of
Celebrating Adult Mental Health Social Work and SWAMH AGM

31st March 2023

Carmelite Community Centre, 56 Aungier Street, Dublin 2.

Facilitated by The National Mental Health Housing Co-ordinator Network



Date of report: 8th September 2023

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Section 1: Introduction

The National Mental Health Housing Co-ordinator Network were asked to present at the annual Social Workers in Adult Mental Health (SWAMH) Annual General Meeting, held in March 2023. We were delighted to accept as there is much mutual concern from Housing Coordinators and SWAMH members to address the housing needs of individuals who attend the mental health services.

SWAMH found specific findings in their recent survey of mental health social workers ⁽¹⁾ about challenges in relation to service users' housing needs:

- 81% said housing related work makes up a large part of my weekly work.
- 52% of mental health social worker clients have a housing need.
- 24% are registered as homeless.
- 58% registered on local authority housing waiting lists.
- 74% of social workers disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement 'local authority procedures and processes are consistent and easy to navigate.'
- 94% of social workers disagreed/strongly disagreed with the statement, 'Clients find it easy to access housing supports independently.'

Initially, we considered giving a presentation as our contribution. However, instead we decided to facilitate a workshop as this would maximise interaction, participation, energy, and shared learning. We agreed with the SWAMH organizing committee that we would share the findings with the SWAMH committee for onward wider circulation.

We selected a real life housing related scenario based on the serious dilemma of a person with major mental health difficulties losing their place on the local authority housing waiting list (LA HWL). The scenario presented is a real case and unfortunately a common problem for mental health social work clients.

We would really like to thank the 25 attendees for their enthusiastic contribution at the workshop. Such active participation generated rich data and themes to further inform our work. The findings contain practical knowledge, thoughts, and ideas, as well as the over-riding realisation of the lack of data on need. We need to be collecting data on the structural challenges faced by our service users and the rate of occurrence. Then we are in a better position to address the structural challenges.

We feel that these findings demonstrate a shared understanding of the need for accurate data demonstrating housing need. Continuing from here we can work together to garner support for the need for such data collection within the Mental Health Services. We can then use this data in our interagency working with local authorities to improve housing pathways for people connecting with Mental Health Services.

⁽¹⁾Curran et al. (2022) *Adult Mental Health Social Work and Housing: A Position Paper*. Dublin: Irish Association of Social Workers. <https://www.lenus.ie/handle/10147/634778>

1.1 Purpose

1. To educate re: possible structural responses re common housing related issues.
2. To gather feedback and evaluation from mental health social workers re: possible structural responses.
3. To identify other possible responses.
4. To identify obstacles to implementing these possible responses.

1.2 Focus

Create opportunity to consider possible ways to respond to structural challenges to clients' housing issues rather than focusing on possible 'personal factors'. The activity intentionally excludes possible 'personal challenges' like mental illness, disability, addiction etc. Then, the focus is on 'structural challenges' to clients' housing issues and what mental health social workers can do to address these challenges.

1.3 Scenario

(Email to Housing Coordinator from mental health social worker – pseudonym used)

Tony was initially on the local authority (LA) housing waiting list (HWL) from 2012. He was homeless for some time, is now residing in an apartment, and had been trying to access Homeless HAP (HHAP). However, he has just found out that, his application was cancelled with the LA in 2018 and that he must reapply. Thus, as he cannot avail of HHAP now he is at risk of eviction and homelessness. Is there anything I can do to have this appealed as by having to reapply it could take 3 months plus which is time that he does not really have as the landlord has put pressure on him as he is in rent arrears. I would appreciate any advice you have. Thanks a mill.

1.4 Guiding questions

The group was then asked to explore some possible responses to address the structural issues:

1. What can be done at an individual social work level to advance this person's housing application?
2. Are there effective interagency processes between your team and the local authority to advance this?
3. Do you have access to a dedicated person in your service, like a Housing Coordinator, who can advise and support you in your contact with the local authority?
4. Are you familiar with the 'co-correspondent' option? Is it available in your LA? What are your thoughts on this as a support? Who do you think is best placed to be a co-correspondent?
5. Is there a Housing Needs Record or something similar in operation in your CHO? What do you think the purpose of this is?
6. How can we do better at collecting data on housing need? How could data collection have helped a more co-ordinated response to this and other structural issues?

Section 2: Collated feedback and additional comments from housing co-ordinators

Question 1.

What can be done at an individual social work level to advance this person's housing application?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- Discuss issue with local authority
 - o Seek answers. Discuss grounds for cancellation. Explore grounds for appeal.

- Complete a new application if necessary & advocate for time back.
 - o The need for a new application to be submitted depends on the local authority.
 - o Some areas have a system where a link can be made with the Local authority, and it is pretty much a given that the action can be revoked as they are mental health service users.
 - o Try to avoid new application if possible.
 - o The requirement for a new application to be submitted can be helpful if there is new information to share. It is still very straightforward to have it accepted.

- Advocate for the person
 - o Seek for years on the list to be counted (backdated)
 - o Collect different reports from different professionals to support advocacy.
 - o Link with previous social worker if application was completed historically to inform advocacy.
 - o In cases where a person has been removed from the list the burden of proof can take so much time. An affidavit can be used if needed.

- Practical crisis support
 - o Support to access homeless HAP in the meantime.
 - o Support to access exceptional needs payment from social welfare.
 - o With HAP he has a right to stay on the housing list.
 - o Currently there are no HAP tenancies. Of the few there might be mental health is at the bottom.
 - o In one area the local authority has recently stopped the RAS scheme – query are there other areas that don't have RAS? Generally, the feedback in the room was that RAS has been phased out and HAP was its replacement.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

At the individual social worker level, advocacy for reinstatement should include you explaining (and providing evidence, if possible) that while it is the applicant's responsibility to maintain his place on the LA HWL, his mental health disability and associated disorganization reduced his capacity to manage this on his own. It is very helpful to have an appropriate named person in the local authority to discuss the case with.

Question 2.

Are there effective interagency processes between your team and the local authority to advance this?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- Homeless Action Team (HAT) membership
 - o The HAT forum varies from place to place in terms of effectiveness.
 - o The social workers from the team generally attend these.
 - o HAT in some areas – not known if it is in some areas, e.g DCC & Fingal
 - o Some areas have no interagency processes.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

- The National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022-27 requires each local authority is to convene a Housing Disability Steering Group. This steering group must be interagency and have representatives with lived experience and disability advocacy groups. The strategy explains that this interagency group will “allow for an integrated and strategic response to the needs of disabled people at local level.”
- The strategy defines that role of the Housing Co-ordinator “to lead on the interagency collaboration.” Housing Co-ordinators attend the Housing Disability Steering Groups. They can use this opportunity to highlight structural barriers for mental health service users to social housing. If you have a housing coordinator in your area you can advise them of any structural issues you are encountering, and they can raise these at the next Housing Disability Steering Group meeting.

Question 3.

Do you have access to a dedicated person in your service, like a Housing Coordinator, who can advise and support you in your contact with the local authority?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- Yes and No – depending on area.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

- The Housing Co-ordinator can offer advice and a sounding board if needed when a complex issue arises in relation to housing.
- Currently there are four housing co-ordinators in post nationally – CHO2, CHO5, CHO6 & CHO7.⁽¹⁾
- The National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022 – 2027 restates the need for each CHO to have a housing co-ordinator for mental health. All heads of service have agreed to fill this position in their CHO.

⁽¹⁾ Since this workshop a Housing Coordinator was appointed in CHO9 in August 2023.

Question 4.

Are you familiar with the 'co-correspondent' option? Is it available in your local authority
What are your thoughts on this as a support? Who do you think is best placed to be a co-correspondent?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- Awareness:
 - Varied level of awareness of the existence of it. Some people have never come across it.

- Availability:
 - Some areas it is available – some areas it is not.
 - In some areas you can identify an advocate but there is no official form used.
 - In some areas it used to be available but is no longer available.

- Effectiveness
 - It is helpful.
 - How accessible is it? Is it only available online – this is not accessible for some people.

- Who is best placed to be co-correspondent?
 - The general consensus was that it is best placed to be a family member.
 - An over reliance can be created if it is a person on the mental health team – will the person then have to take responsibility if a person does not get the correspondence?
 - Risk of a social worker moving on if they are named.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

The 'co-correspondent' option is described in [the National Guidelines For The Assessment And Allocation Process For Social Housing Provision For People With A Disability](#). It involves a co-correspondent (could be a friend or relative identified by the individual) being registered with the local authority to receive a copy of the correspondence sent to the individual.

- If this is available in your area, you could discuss this option with individuals you think may require it to prevent losing their place on the LA HWL.

Question 5.

Is there a Housing Needs Record or something similar in operation in your CHO?
What do you think the purpose of this is?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- Housing Need Record in parts of one CHO.
- In another CHO the Housing Need Record is in place but there is no longer a housing co-ordinator so the information is not going anywhere.
- It is not available consistently across areas.
- Important that data is kept up to date and accurate – checks needed to see if people have been discharged and make sure the data is up to date.
- Can be useful to support advocacy.
- Some social workers keep a record of the housing need on their own caseload but there is no overall record. If someone's housing need changes how is this captured and is there a record of what happened in between?
- Each county council is supposed to allocate a percentage of houses– the data can be used to compare with council figures.
- How dynamic is the list? The database must be maintained – data has to be accurate and up to date. Someone has to be allocated to do this as it takes a considerable amount of time.
- If a person is allocated a house are they removed from the database? This allocation needs to be recorded.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

We have concerns that the official annual national data is not an accurate representation of the need we see on the ground. The [press release for the annual Summary of Social Housing Assessments](#) highlights the falling numbers on the social housing waiting lists, while most housing and homeless commentators believe these figures should be seen as the minimum number in need of social housing.

What can mental health services do? Some CHOs have commenced using various forms of a 'Housing Needs Record' The purpose of the Housing Need Record is to identify individuals who attend the mental health services and are on the local authority waiting list. The aims of the Housing Need Record are that:

1. The information on the housing need record will be used to communicate effectively with the local authority.
2. To inform CHO Mental Health service development.

The Housing Need Record could also potentially be used in interagency work with the local authority annually, at the time of the Housing Needs Assessment, to reduce the risk of individuals being dropped from the Housing Waiting List.

Question 6:

How can we do better at collecting data on housing need? How could data collection have helped a more co-ordinated response to this and other structural issues?

Feedback from the workgroups:

- How can we do better?
 - When considering the option of an excel sheet with personnel to maintain it - where would that data sit within the organisation – GDPR considerations.
 - Data can be collected by asking questions at initial assessment time or at time of discharge – a mechanism is needed to capture this data. Social Workers are not necessarily the people asking questions at these times. There is a need for the whole team to think about housing need.
 - A standardised approach nationally would help to feed into national picture.
 - Training/Education for all disciplines including medics that highlights housing need as playing an important role in recovery in mental health.
 - Housing issues can lead to mental illness
 - Concern that current figures are not representative of the level of need in mental health because not all relevant data is being included.
 - Adequately housed – this can be used to describe a person who is not adequately housed.
- How could data collection have helped?
 - Data is only helpful if it is done right.
 - When considering the workshop example, if data collection was ongoing there would be evidence of how long a person was on the list. Proof of how long he was on the list.
 - Also useful to show how long it can take to get allocated –would have proof from our own data.
 - Data base could influence what type of accommodation is given - not all accommodation would be suitable.
 - Data collected could evidence that variation across local authorities which can be very hard to understand.

Additional comments from the Housing Co-ordinator team:

In terms of official national data, this removal from the Housing List is neither recorded nor measured. The removal could be misinterpreted as:

- a successful reduction of demand for social housing
- successfully meeting the housing need from the previous year.

Our understanding is that there is no acknowledgement or official recording of the numbers who have lost their places on the housing waiting list.

One way of developing capacity to respond to this structural problem is to collect data on this kind of issue. Traditionally the Mental Health Service has a poor history of collecting data about the housing needs of our service users and this is restrictive. Could you speak to your social work colleagues and managers and Housing Coordinator about the possibility of collecting and recording the number of such instances in your CMHT or CHO each year. Knowing the extent of the problem allows the possibility of discussing possible solutions with the local authority.

Housing Coordinator contact list

If you would like to discuss any of the above further, please feel free to contact a housing coordinator:

- CHWest (CHO2): LorraineA.Kelly@hse.ie
- CHO 5: anne.barrett1@hse.ie
- CHEast (CHO 6): breffni.coffey@hse.ie
- CHO 7: john.cowman@hse.ie
- CHO 9: lisa.foley2@hse.ie (from August 2023)