



**WORD ON  
THE STREET**

Voices of Homelessness

# WORD ON THE STREET

Voices of Homelessness

## About this publication

This publication offers an insight into homelessness in Belfast.

It combines images, stories and statistics to give voice to homelessness and challenge public perceptions of homeless people.

All of the photographs were taken in Belfast by men and women who are or were homeless. All the stories are about real people and real lives. Some people have changed their names to conceal their identity.

The project was facilitated, written and produced by the Westcourt Centre.

Design: Mark Mulholland  
[www.trickboxdesign.com](http://www.trickboxdesign.com)

This publication was supported by the Christian Brothers Edmund Rice Trust fund. Its work and concern for so many people who seek to improve their lives through education and further training is a cause that is particular to the vision of Edmund Rice who founded the Christian and Presentation Brothers.

## Contents

Foreword / 4

Introduction / 7

The Project / 8

Groups Involved / 10-17

Real Life Stories / 18-33

Homeless Statistics / 34-41

Comments & Thanks / 42-43



## Foreword

One of the deepest human instincts is to remove from view uncomfortable social realities. A kind of communal blindness descends upon us when we are confronted by intractable situations. As T. S. Eliot observed in *Burnt Norton*, “humankind cannot bear very much reality”. In recent years, the Westcourt Centre’s ‘Hidden Quarter’ and ‘Hidden Voices’ projects have mounted photographic exhibitions in Belfast and around the island of Ireland. These exhibitions have made the inconvenient truth of urban homelessness a visible reality. A veil has been removed. Whether in the Red Barn Gallery in Belfast, the Camden Palace Gallery in Cork or on academic campuses in Dublin, these exhibitions have disturbed us, named our complicit complacencies, and challenged us citizens to recognise the dignity of people made homeless and acknowledge our responsibility to do something about the situation.

A remarkable insight of the Westcourt Centre has been the recognition that homeless people themselves can be advocates for social change. Using its educational facilities and resources, the Centre has provided homeless and former homeless people with access to relevant forms of education through media training programmes. It has empowered them to find their own hidden voice. In the tradition of Cartier-Bresson and Doisneau, they discovered that street photography can be a powerful medium for documenting social realities. They also quickly understood that this kind of reportage can also provide a platform for engaging key social actors and the public at large in strategic conversations concerning homelessness in Belfast. This is advocacy at its best. When homeless people discover their voice and become agents for social change, society can no longer avert its gaze.

Beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and developed further in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the right to adequate shelter and housing is well-recognised. States, however, have been reluctant to translate commitments into action. Whether in Belfast, Dublin or Cork, homelessness is perceived as an intractable issue rendered all the more acute by the impact of the current economic recession and the consequent inability of local authorities to provide adequate funding to service providers.

Initiatives such as ‘Hidden Quarter’ and ‘Hidden Voices’ serve an important advocacy function by representing the experience of homelessness through the artistic vision of people who are or were once homeless themselves. Who can forget that poignant image from the 2011 exhibition of the neatly placed shoes by the folded blankets in a doorway squat just a few steps off one of the busiest streets in downtown Belfast (see back cover). The absence of the shoes’ owner only served to underline the emotional and imaginative impact of the image. It is precisely this appeal to the imagination that invests the raw emotional power of the images with authority and truth. They speak their own truth to power.

Edmund Rice, an Irishman born in the eighteenth century and a social entrepreneur of significant influence in his day, was prompted to action by the experience of street poverty framed by the window of a comfortable Waterford residence. He went on to become the founder of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers, whose work for education in Belfast continues today through the Edmund Rice Schools Trust (NI). All who represent his vision are proud to be associated with ‘Word On The Street – Voices Of Homelessness’ and the Westcourt Centre in their efforts to provide a new and compelling window on the social reality of today’s hidden Ireland.

Donal Leader cfc  
Edmund Rice Advocacy  
Province Centre  
Griffith Avenue  
Dublin 9





## Introduction

While many people tend to think of homeless people as Rough Sleepers, there are many others who are homeless because they do not have a decent place that can be called a home. People who are ‘sofa surfing’, those who are staying in substandard, overcrowded or insecure temporary accommodation, can also be seen as homeless. Homelessness is about more than not having a roof over your head. It is about the loss of roots, identity, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional security. It is well known in the voluntary sector that the longer a person is homeless the more prone they are to mental health issues such as depression, addictive behaviours, social exclusion, stigmatisation and physical ailments.

The number of households presenting as homeless is much higher than a decade ago. Most of the increase has been households without dependent children, (two thirds of those presenting) and the majority of these are aged 25 or over.  
Source - NIHE Statistics 2009/2010

The most recent official statistics available show that from July to September 2012 there was a significant increase (13%) in the number of households deemed legally homeless by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive when compared to the previous quarter. The main reason cited for homelessness is unreasonable accommodation (24%) followed by relationship or family breakdown (19%).  
Source - Department for Social Development, Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin (01 July – 30 September 2012)

However, those figures may not include many single people who are effectively homeless, as there is no general legal duty to house such people in Northern Ireland and many therefore do not apply. “The vast majority of single homeless people actually end up surviving out of nights in hostels, squats, unsatisfactory or overcrowded accommodation and on the floors or sofas of friends and families, these are the hidden homeless.”  
Source - Crisis policy briefing (Sept 2010)

**Homelessness is about the loss of roots, identity, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional security.**

### Legal Definition of Homelessness

The Housing Order 2003 defined a homeless person as one who has no accommodation available for their occupation in the UK or elsewhere.

You may present to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) as homeless if you have nowhere to live because of:

- **Violence/threatened violence**
- **Have had to leave shared accommodation**
- **No accommodation where you and your family can live together**
- **Have a home, but no access to it (e.g. illegal eviction)**
- **Notice by court to leave accommodation has passed**
- **Have caravan or boat but nowhere to park or reside**
- **Accommodation unreasonable to occupy (e.g. unfit/unsuitable)**

Margaret Henry  
Deputy Director  
Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland

## The Project

The Westcourt Centre aims to promote social inclusion and reduce disadvantage through education. As part of the Edmund Rice network, Westcourt is committed to working towards social justice by giving voice and support to people on the margins.

The homeless are amongst the most isolated and disadvantaged people in society. For the past few years, Westcourt has been working with a number of Belfast service providers for the homeless to raise awareness of the issue of homelessness.

In November 2010, Westcourt produced a photographic exhibition with men from the Morning Star House hostel entitled 'Hidden Quarter' which offered a unique insight into what it's like to be homeless in Belfast from three individual and personal perspectives.

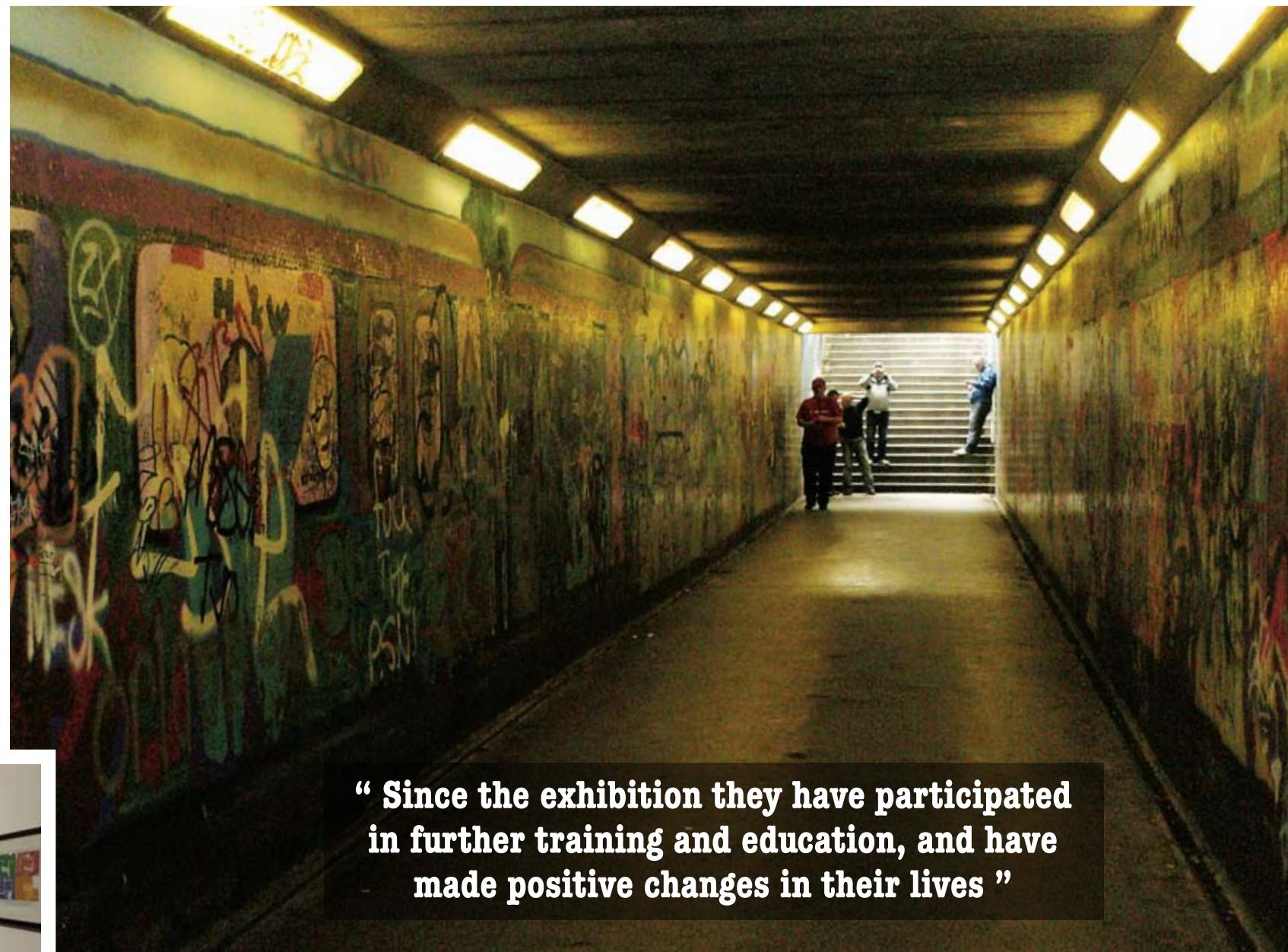
The exhibition was on display three times in Belfast as part of National Homelessness Awareness Week (November 2010), The Belfast Inclusion Festival (June 2011) and The Féile An Phobail (August 2011), and once in Cork (May 2011), and received press coverage in The Andersonstown News, Belfast Telegraph, Cork Evening Echo and on RTÉ.

In November 2011, Westcourt produced the 'Hidden Voices' photographic exhibition with Service Users from Depaul Ireland, Morning Star House, Simon Community NI and The Welcome Organisation.

The images gave voice to their experiences of what it's like to be homeless, sleeping rough or staying in temporary accommodation from the perspectives of men, women, families and young people.

This exhibition attracted over 500 visitors and was covered in the local papers and on BBC Radio.

Hidden Voices was supported by The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland's 'VOICES: Participation for Social Justice' programme.



**“ Since the exhibition they have participated in further training and education, and have made positive changes in their lives ”**



The process: discussing, capturing & exhibiting personal experiences of homelessness

## The Welcome Organisation

The Welcome Organisation is a Belfast based charity which helps homeless and vulnerable people to find decent homes, build supportive relationships and lead fulfilling lives. Their primary goal is to reach out to those who are homeless and vulnerable, and to offer a place of acceptance, tolerance and understanding. They seek to assist individuals to move off the street with the ultimate goal being long term accommodation and a home they can call their own.

The Welcome Organisation is recognised locally and in the wider community for the delivery of low threshold services and for the innovative ways in which they seek to meet the needs of some of the most marginalised people in the community. The Welcome Organisation delivers a range of services including:

### Street Outreach Services

The outreach service seeks to engage with those who are sleeping rough in the city, providing practical and emotional support in an effort to reduce the level of harm they experience.

### Drop-In Support Centre

The drop-in serves as a place of refuge for those experiencing homelessness providing access to facilities which are essential to daily life: showers, clean clothes and hot food. The drop-in also supports those requiring assistance to find accommodation, to access physical and mental health services, and to address the issues arising from substance use.

### Female Crisis Accommodation

The female crisis accommodation service seeks to offer women a comfortable and welcoming home for the night, with the ultimate goal of finding more settled, permanent accommodation.

In 2012 The Welcome Organisation assisted 60 women through their female crisis accommodation, 940 individual people through their drop-in centre, and 829 individuals through their outreach service.

Lynne McMordie  
Homelessness Services Manager  
Tel: 02890234387  
Email: [lynne@homelessbelfast.org](mailto:lynne@homelessbelfast.org)  
Facebook: The Welcome Organisation, Belfast  
Website: [www.welcomebelfast.org](http://www.welcomebelfast.org)





## Morning Star House

Morning Star House provides temporary accommodation to homeless men and has done since 1938 when it was opened at 125 Divis Street, Belfast by the Legion of Mary.

The current hostel is now based closer to the city centre at 2-12 Divis Street, and opened on the 28th July 2004.

The hostel can accommodate up to 39 guests and is a refuge for homeless men, many of whom have a history of rough sleeping and alcohol or substance misuse.



The hostel aim is to promote rehabilitation and independent living for the guests that are unfortunately homeless and temporarily see themselves passing through the hostel environment. All the men staying in the hostel are provided with practical help to assist them in the day to day requirements necessary to maintain their own accommodation when the opportunity to do so is right.



The hostel offers all current and past guests a secure and welcoming environment in which they will be treated with dignity and respect regardless of their personal circumstances.

The development of the spiritual dimension of the person is fundamental to the outlook of the Legion of Mary. It is also a vital ingredient in the recovery of those with problems of addiction and empirical evidence suggests that it is beneficial to a happy and contented life. An oratory is available where religious services are held of which all the guests are invited to avail.

Mark Fitzsimmons  
 Manager  
 Morning Star House  
 2 - 12 Divis Street  
 Belfast, BT12 4AL  
 Tel: 028 90333500  
[www.morningstarhouse.org](http://www.morningstarhouse.org)

## Mater Dei Family Service - Depaul Ireland

Depaul Ireland supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are a leading cross border organisation providing accommodation and support to those most in need in the community.

Mater Dei is one of Depaul Ireland's family services and provides vital services for vulnerable families, who have been affected by homelessness due to issues related to;

- Domestic violence
- Community intimidation and violence
- Exclusion
- Relationship breakdown
- Addiction

Mater Dei offers families from Northern Ireland a safe, secure and comfortable place to live, with structured support to break the cycle of homelessness.

Depaul Ireland work with other support agencies, to advocate for vulnerable families, to help them secure their own long-term stable accommodation.

Mater Dei provides families with the skills they need to live independently so that they can reintegrate into their community and society as a whole.

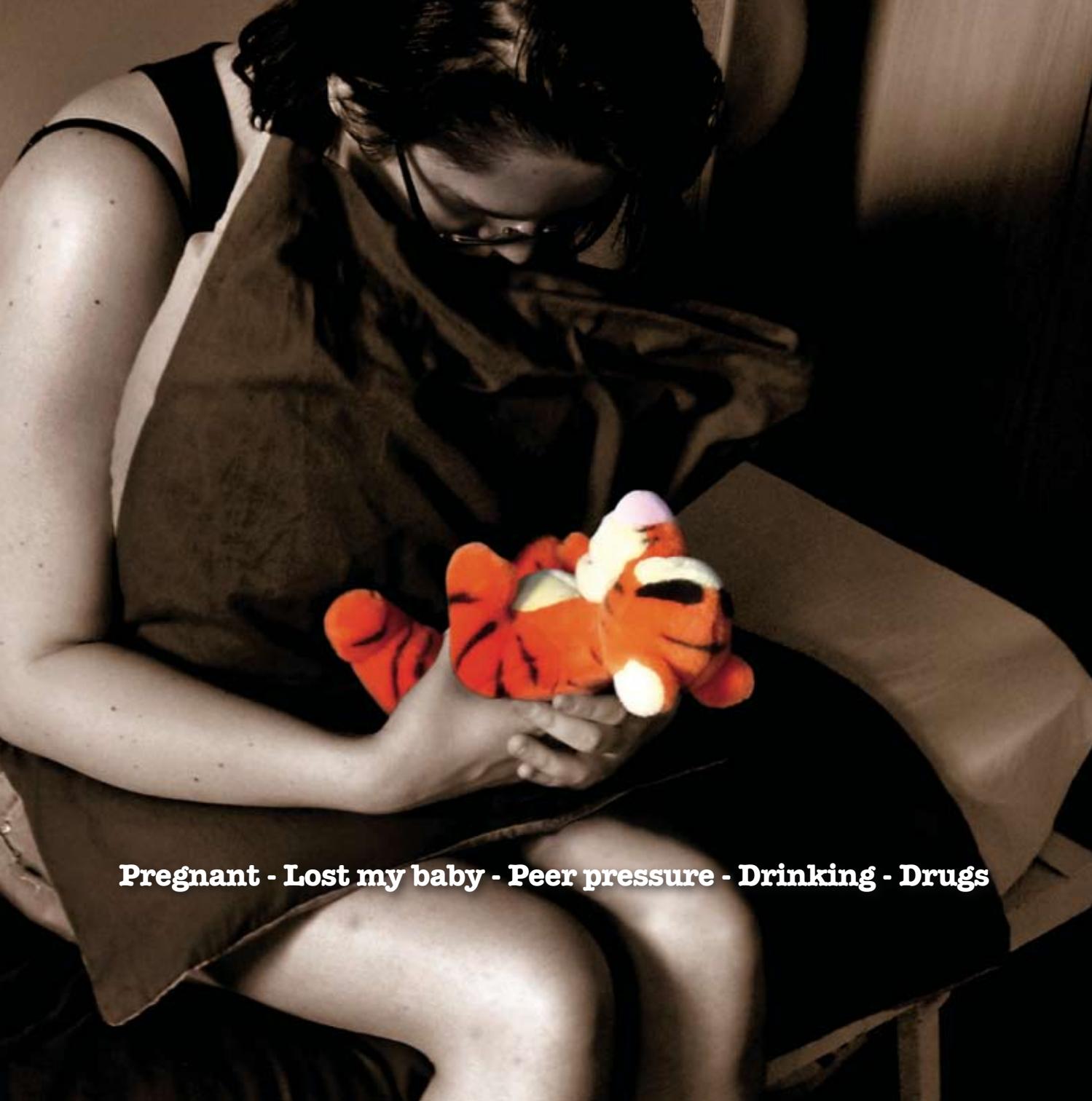
Mater Dei Provides keyworking support to strengthen families through;

- Development opportunities including child development
- Parenting advice
- One-to-one individualised professional support
- Advocacy
- Referral to external services to address addiction
- Health and education support
- Counselling support

There are 13 family units in Mater Dei.

Mater Dei Family Service - Depaul Ireland  
298 Antrim Road  
Belfast  
BT15 5AB  
028 9074 3668  
[www.depaulireland.org](http://www.depaulireland.org)





**Pregnant - Lost my baby - Peer pressure - Drinking - Drugs**

### **Simon Community NI Belfast Foyer**

Simon Community NI is a voluntary organisation which provides advice, temporary accommodation and community based support for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

The Belfast Foyer was opened in 1997 in conjunction with HELM Housing (previously known as Belfast Improved Housing) to provide supported accommodation for 17-25 year old single people.

The Belfast Foyer provides tailored programmes designed to help young people engage in training, education and employment preparation programmes as well as life skills, in order to assist them in achieving sustainable independent living.

The accommodation comprises of 42 bedsits all with en-suite and cooking facilities, 3 of which have mobility access. A laundry room is included onsite for all clients to access.

All referrals to Simon Community NI including the Belfast Foyer can be made by contacting the Free Phone Helpline number: 0800 1712222.

Simon Community NI Belfast Foyer  
3 -5 Malone Road  
Belfast, BT9 6RT  
Tel:- 028 90 686200  
[www.simoncommunity.org](http://www.simoncommunity.org)  
[www.belfastfoyer.co.uk](http://www.belfastfoyer.co.uk)



## Daniel

My name is Daniel and this is part of my journey of having been homeless.

My journey began in 2008 when I returned home from abroad after 20 years to find overwhelming differences in the place where I was born. These differences included lack of work, accommodation and changes in benefits.

One of the hardest things of being homeless was the attitudes of other people towards me and the reactions of those of whom I asked for help. Most people have the wrong idea of what it means to be homeless, simply put it means without a home – nothing else.

The process of getting back into society isn't an easy one and without the help of people who know the "ins and outs" of the current system would prove to be a much longer and difficult task. I was blessed and landed in the Morning Star House whose whole staff helped me feel like a human being once again. It was through this facility that my faith was strengthened, my courage was renewed and friendships began.

Doing this project helps to remind me and keep me humble of those that still need help and that the places that do help homeless people need support. It is my hope that upon viewing this exhibition you can begin to immerse yourself somehow in the need to help others. Thank you.

“ One of the hardest things of being homeless was the attitudes of other people towards me ”





**“I’m not going to bang on about it, but it’s terrifying. The town is a different place at night.”**

## **Erin**

The thing I remember most about my childhood is the smell: stale cigarette smoke and alcohol. It smelt worse when you were hungry. My mummy was an alcoholic. I loved her and she loved me. I was her baby. The blue eyed girl. Thing is, alcohol is stronger than love. It wins every time. So we were on our own emotionally. We are also on our own literally at times. I was locked in my bedroom. I don’t like to think about that. Sometimes we weren’t on our own, we were surrounded by drinkers. It was better to be alone, if I’m honest. These were the good times.

Then suddenly I wasn’t the baby anymore. Mummy had more kids. She wasn’t really able to be a mummy, not properly. I don’t really remember when it became my job to clean house, and do the shopping, and look after the kids, but it did. I’d get it wrong because I was a kid. Getting it wrong wasn’t good, not in our house. You’d get beat. Properly beat. Getting beat was better than what happened when my mum left me alone with my dad. That’s all I’m saying. You can only take so much, everyone has a breaking point. I broke. It’s when you break that you get the labels. It’s like your damaged goods. Like you will never be free.

I ended up homeless. Not you’re staying in a hostel kind of homeless; you’re sleeping on the streets, sleeping bag, kind of homeless. I’m not going to bang on about it, but it’s terrifying. The town is a different place at night. A very different place.

I am still on my journey, working through all this stuff that other people put on me as a kid. Maybe I always will be. Now I’ve got a friend on my journey though. You know when you’ve got a friend and you know you can tell them anything and they’ll laugh and cry with you. Well that’s the Welcome Centre so it is. Then the Welcome sent me over to Westcourt, to a photography course. The guy that runs the course was different. He was a bloke and he was alright. That’s an odd thing in my world. I loved the photography course. It was like a break, every week, from my normal life. I could lose myself in it. Then we put on an exhibition. That was awesome. I spoke on the radio and everything. Who would have thought it? But see honestly, the best bit, was letting people know what it’s like. Showing people my life. This is how it is folks. This is the world I live in. This is the world we all create. This is what happens here. This is what happened to me.

## Kelly

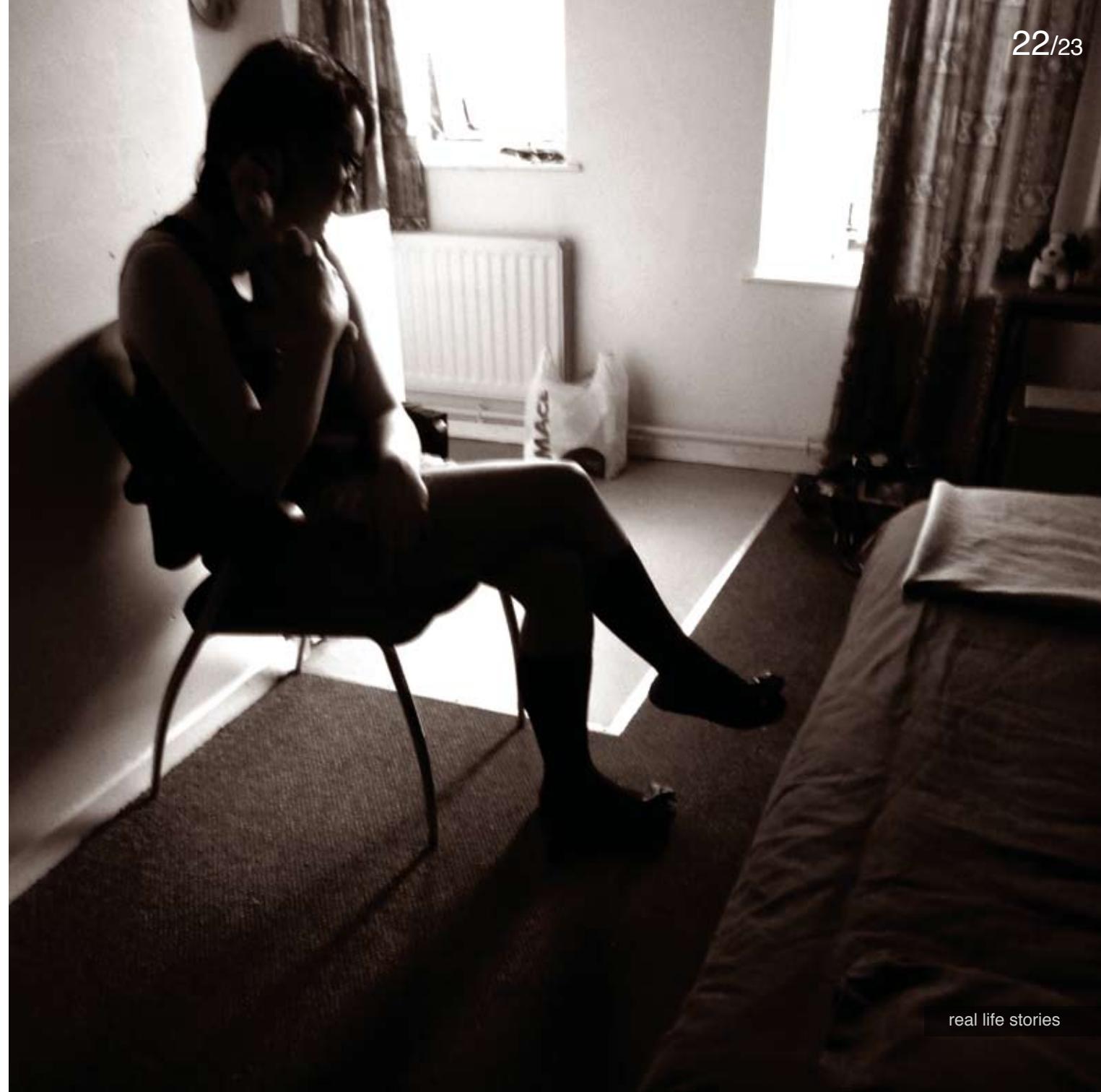
I never thought it would happen to me: homelessness. It's something that happens to men; older men maybe – people with beards and alcohol problems. Or maybe to those who have no family, or difficult families. Thinking about it now I don't remember really giving homelessness much thought. Why would I? I was young, female, from a decent family.

I was really protected by my family. I never went out. I wanted to, but my parents wouldn't let me. My dad was strict with us. No social life allowed. He had been brought up that way and he was looking after my mum. She was very ill. Looking back I had no idea what the world was really like.

I left school and moved to Belfast. I had a cousin there who said I could stay with her. I was only sixteen. I thought I could train as a hairdresser, get my own place, and enjoy the city. It didn't work out that way. I ended up sofa surfing. I think that's a weird term, sofa surfing. Makes it sound fun. It's not. When you wake up on someone's sofa, day after day, knowing that they want to help but also want their home and sofa back, it's not good. I ended up in hostels, just going round and round in circles. I lost my mojo. I thought at one point I'd given up totally, lost it. One thing saved me though. I was determined not to go down the drugs route. That probably sounds funny to you. You're probably thinking why would you need to be determined? Well I'll tell you why. When you're vulnerable, and alone, and feeling like you really are the lowest of the low, drugs seem like an easy way out. I didn't take it though.

Instead I got lucky. My uncle introduced me to The Welcome Organisation. They helped me get my wee place. I'm getting training on cooking and administration. I think I'm going to make it after all. I'm pretty good at the admin stuff. Better than the manager I reckon. Who knows, maybe one day I'll get her job.

“ I never thought it would happen to me: homelessness ”





## Grace

My name is Grace. This is my story. The first lesson I learnt in life was how to walk on eggshells. I later discovered the label for my childhood: harsh and inconsistent treatment. At the time, it was just how it was. I was the carer; never the cared for. Sometimes I got it right and I was mummy's special girl. I loved those times. Mostly I got it wrong. I preferred being punched and kicked. It was better than the verbal abuse. I wouldn't repeat here the names I was called, but I hear them still, even now. I left when I was still young. I moved away. The thing is that you can move away physically; that's the easy part. You can get away from the person, but the abuse stays there, locked inside. You become your own abuser, recreating in your adult relationships all the abuse you experienced as a child. I could never defend myself, because I hated myself more than those who abused me. I returned, of course, to care for my mother. I became trapped and isolated, living continuously on the edge of homelessness.

Then I discovered The Welcome Centre. I almost fell in the door, bursting with anxiety and loneliness, and full of drugs and alcohol. The people I met there treated me like the person I actually am, not the abused child I had become. It changed my life. I grew in confidence and started to attend the photography course at Westcourt. Things really started to take off then. I rediscovered my skills and interests. It turned out that I loved photography, and I was a fantastic photographer (even though I say so myself). There was no stopping me then. I was on fire for education! I still am.

So today, as I sit here writing my story, I can honestly say I am a different person. The person I was always meant to be. I discovered that I wasn't dependent on substances, and I didn't need to be abused. I didn't need the approval of others. Why? Because I approve of myself. Simple. And the motto I now live by, "I am a strong and powerful person". If I could get away with wearing a plaque that said "I love life", I would.

“I became trapped and isolated, living continuously on the edge of homelessness”

## John

Everything was grand when I was kid. We didn't have a lot of money and my dad could never find work but we weren't treated badly or anything. I done ok for a bit, as a young man; had a job and all. I met my wife too - she was beautiful - you ought to have seen her. I loved her. We had a few kids. Great kids they were. Still are. I was an idiot though. I thought I was set for life; thought it didn't matter how I treated people. I guess she just got tired. I still can't believe how stupid I was. I should have noticed what was happening. I should have tried harder. I didn't even help around the house. I could never find work.

Everything I had dissolved overnight. She just didn't want me anymore. They stayed in the house: my beautiful wife, my lovely kids, and my wife's new man. The first months were just a blur really, night after night of desperation and pain. They say men don't cry. Well if men don't cry then I am not a man. Nothing could fill the gap in my life. It was like an aching wound, all day, every day. I had never really been alone, not really. I went from my mum to my wife. I know how stupid this is, how pathetic I was, but I didn't even know how to look after myself. I drank for a while, slept at friends houses, and acted like I was enjoying the freedom. It's hard when you're a bloke, hard to say help. You would not believe how quickly things go from you. My friends got fed up with me on their sofa, drunk or hung over. My kids were embarrassed by what I'd become. Then it was hostel life: rules, and alcohol, and fights, and boredom.

I know what people think of people like me. They think I should sort myself out, get a grip, stop being a scrounger. The thing is no one could ever think any worse of me than I think of myself. I'm fighting it now though, with the help of some pretty cool people: people who believe in me. I've started to learn what it means to be part of something. You have no idea the difference this makes. Instead of being helped, I am helping. I prepare food for The Welcome Centre, serve teas, and clean up. It's nothing really, not to anyone looking in, but to me it's everything. I even think I might venture outside, start volunteering somewhere else. Maybe even make my kids proud of me. Who knows?

“ You would not believe how quickly things go from you ”



“ Everything I had dissolved overnight ”



## Kevin

Hi my name is Kevin and right now I feel so lucky.

I became homeless a long time ago after having a serious row with my then wife and with the help of too much drink.

In those days money was tight but I had to get money for drink and gambling and if it wasn't there I became a different person to what I appeared in public - I made my wife and kids suffer.

Because of the many lows I'd had (which I always blamed on someone else) and not caring about my kids, I became the pits - I was down.

Eventually I got into a hostel where thankfully I was able to find myself again. I had help from the Morning Star House who put me in touch with the Housing Executive where I was registered homeless.

They told me I didn't have enough points to be housed so I had to go into a hostel, which I never wanted because I had the wrong impression of them.

Now I am glad I did because it seemed to be a new beginning for me. I was lucky to get into the Morning Star at Divis Street. I started to use their Oratory and got into prayer. It was a turning point for me. I feel so lucky now because I am not homeless any longer.

I have my own place now and my girls who I hadn't seen for years now come to visit me and I thank God for guiding me to this point in my life.

My wish now is for all homeless people to have some of my good fortune and find a positive way in their life and for them to get help with their problems. I PRAY FOR THEM EVERY DAY.

“ They told me I didn't have enough points to be housed ”

## Patrick

Hi my name is Patrick and this is my story.

I became homeless as a result of family breakdown.

My first step was to go to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to present myself as Homeless and I was able to get myself a room in the Morning Star House. This experience left me feeling low. Even though there was a lot of people and support around me, I was still feeling really lonely and depressed. With the help of many people and organisations I am in a better place today.

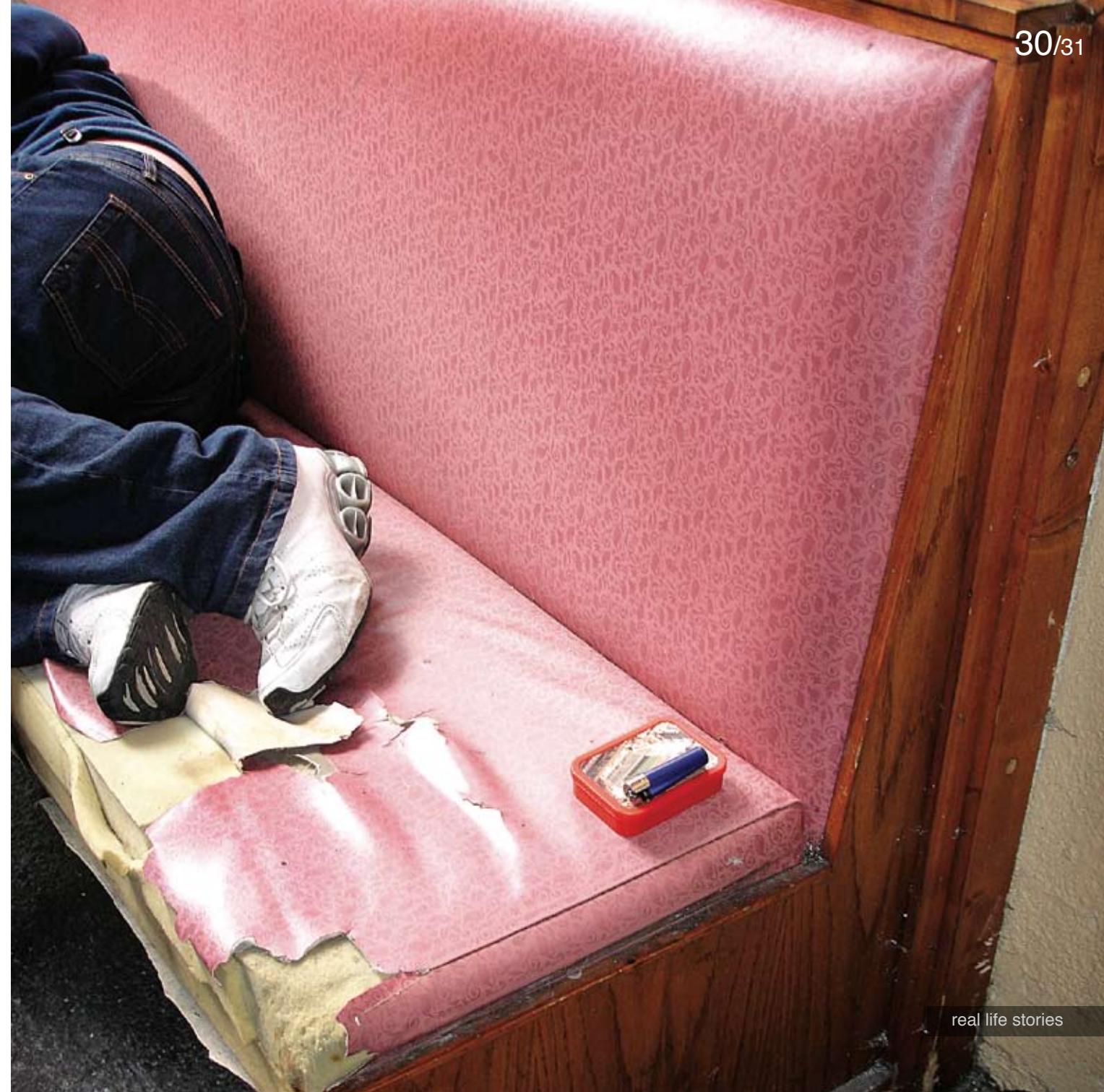
My experiences as a homeless man opened my eyes as to how people treat those who are homeless. For example, when I went for a job interview I feel I was discriminated against because I had an address of a hostel rather than a house. However there were others who helped me get into a really good catering course and work-based course which has given me the ability to approach life a lot more positively.

The Morning Star had helped me get into a programme called 'Drive Ahead' where I was able to complete a variety of different qualifications such as my forklift licence and First Aid at Work certificate. I also began driving lessons with them and having first achieved my theory test, I proceeded to pass my practical test at the first attempt and now have my full driving licence.

As a result of all this help I was able to get my own place and because of this I have been able to become my own free man again.

I decided to take on the challenge of this exhibition to try to show people my experience of being homeless. I hope to raise awareness of what it's like for other people who are in the position that I was.

“ I feel I was discriminated against because I had an address of a hostel ”



## Tommy

I have no idea what it is like to have a mum and dad. It must be class. I've had lots of stand in people: foster parents, support workers, key workers. I even had a personal advisor once. Seriously! There are lots of great people out there, helping and trying to make a difference. There's a few dodgy people too, believe me. I don't know if it's the same thing as having a family. I'm pretty sure it's not.

I think I was a bit difficult from the beginning. People find it hard to work with me. I am pretty hard work at times, I know that. I don't really want to be though. I want to be sorted: my own wee place, a decent television and that. It's hard though. I've had it a few times: my own wee pad. It's really lonely though. I mean really lonely. You have nothing to do but think. That's not a good thing in my world. You just get pure desperate. See the minute you find someone, that's you, your inviting them over to yours. It's party time then: alcohol, drugs. Sometimes it's a great laugh, but then it takes over. Next thing you know your house isn't your own. There are fights and neighbours freaking out. All sorts of crazy stuff going on; you get out of your depth. Then it's gone again and you're back where you started. Makes you feel like a total idiot: all because you're lonely.

I've burnt my bridges everywhere. I don't blame anyone. At the end of the day I know it's my own behaviour. They keep letting me in at The Welcome Centre though, no idea why. I'd put me out to be honest. It's different. It's my fall back. After a while you don't want to mess them about no more. Sometimes I still do like. I feel rubbish about it though. So I don't do it as much. That's good for me.

“It's really lonely though. I mean really lonely.  
You have nothing to do but think.”



## Article 25

**The Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

“ Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services ”

**Numbers of Homeless**

**20,158** households presented to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homeless between April 2010 and March 2011. This was an **8% increase** on 2009-10 (18,664).

**10,443** households met the legislative criteria and were assessed as ‘legally’ homeless by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in 2010/2011. This was a **5.3% increase** on the previous year.

Households are registered as a single unit but they may include couples and families and therefore the number of actual homeless individuals is much greater.

Of all the households registered homeless:

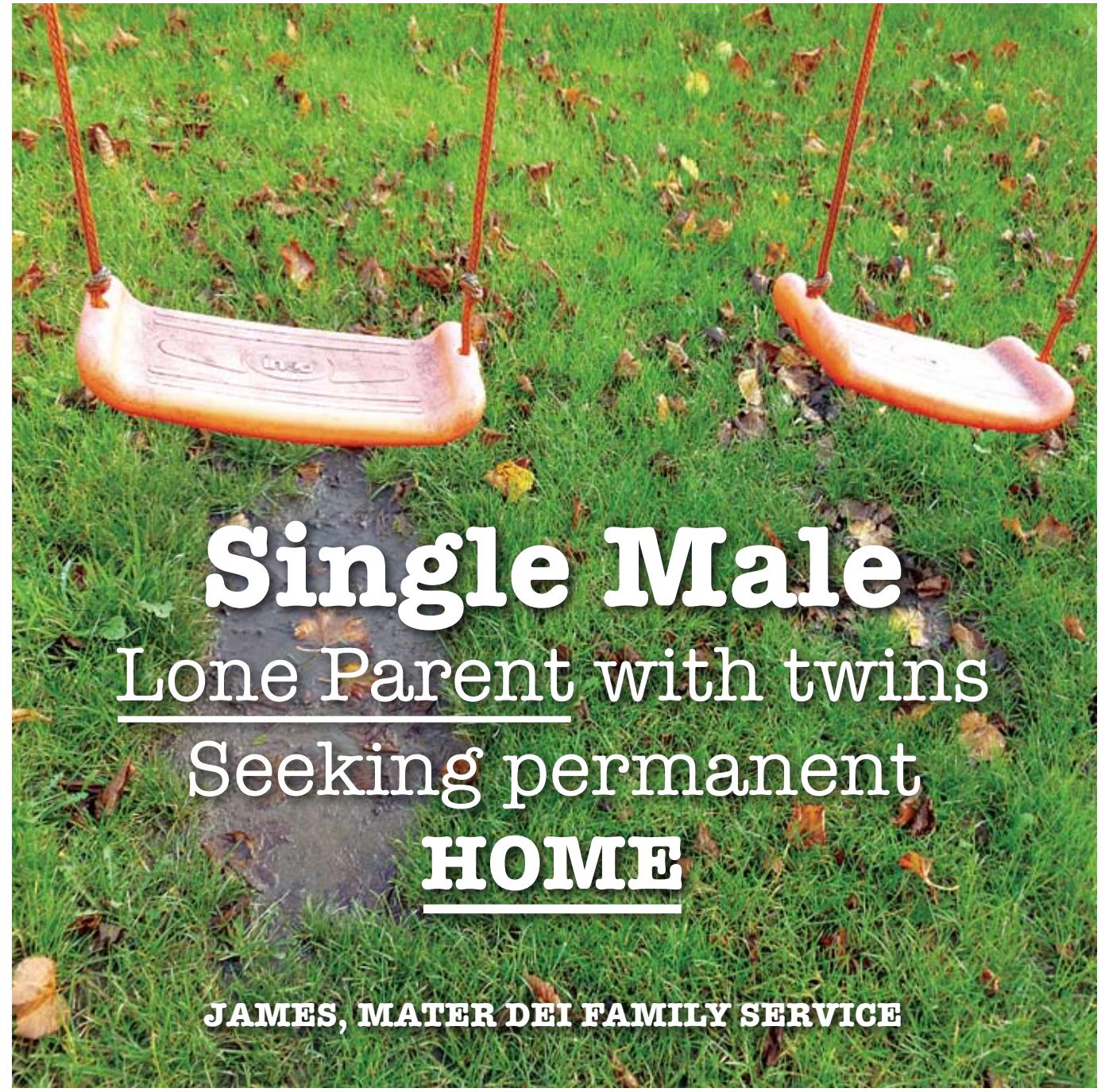
**42%** were ‘**families**’  
**38%** were ‘**singles**’  
**16%** were ‘**elderly**’  
**4%** were ‘**couples**’

(NIHE Homeless Statistics 2010/2011)

**Reasons for Homelessness**

Accommodation not reasonable	<b>2644</b>
Sharing breakdown/family dispute	<b>1995</b>
Loss of rented accommodation	<b>1200</b>
Marital/relationship breakdown	<b>954</b>
Neighbour dispute/harassment	<b>854</b>
Domestic violence/abuse	<b>829</b>
No accommodation in Northern Ireland	<b>614</b>
Other reasons	<b>566</b>
Intimidation	<b>361</b>
Release from hospital, prison, care etc.	<b>226</b>
Mortgage default	<b>200</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,443</b>

(NIHE Homeless Statistics 2010/2011)



**Single Male**  
 Lone Parent with twins  
 Seeking permanent  
**HOME**

**JAMES, MATER DEI FAMILY SERVICE**



## Rough Sleepers

There are **30-40** people **sleeping rough** in Belfast on any given night.

(Homeless Outreach Projections)

Rough sleepers have an average **life expectancy** of **42 years**, compared with the national average of **74** for men and **79** for women.

(NISRA)

Around **30-50%** of rough sleepers have been found to suffer from **mental health problems**. And around **50%** of rough sleepers have been found to have a serious **alcohol problem**.

(www.homeplusni.org)

Rough sleepers, as a group, report **higher rates of suicide** and death by unnatural causes than the general population.

(www.homeplusni.org)

## The Welfare Reform Bill

The Bill will introduce Universal Credit, a new monthly benefit. Claims for Universal Credit will normally be made online - not everyone has computer access and skills, particularly those who are homeless.

Failure to meet benefit conditions can result in loss of benefit for up to 3 years - this will affect homeless people with complex needs.

Claimants will be expected more than ever, to attend interviews, go on job placements and take any available job - this will be difficult for homeless people in transit.

The Bill will introduce a bedroom tax. Housing benefit will be restricted if a claimant's dwelling is deemed larger than they need. It could result in £7 to £14 per week reductions in Housing Benefit. Unless households can meet the shortfalls, they will have to transfer to smaller social housing, or relocate to the private rented sector where rents are higher and where there is little security of tenure.

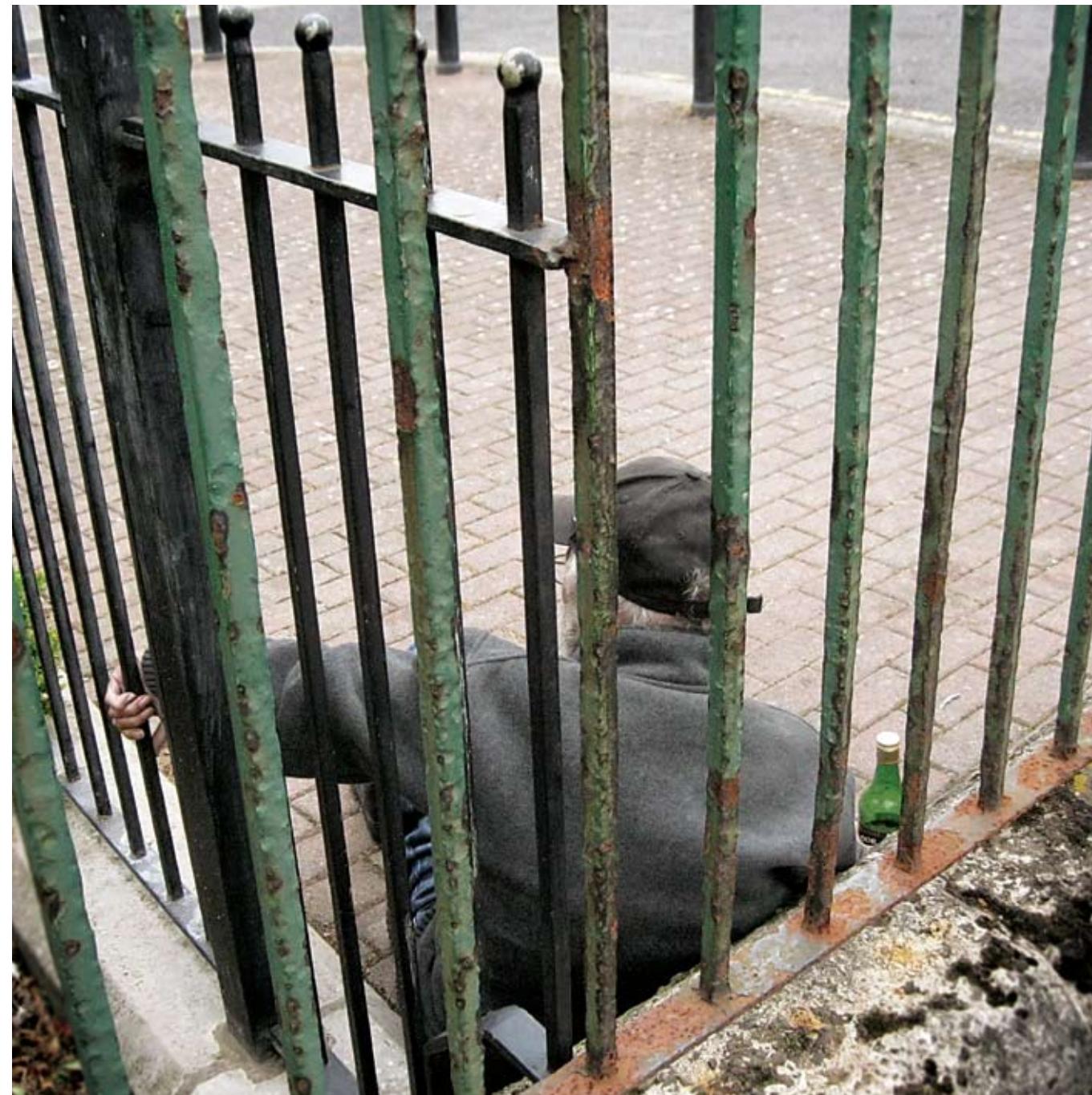
The NIHE has projected this measure will affect approximately 26,168 tenants, (almost 50% of NIHE'S housing stock has three plus bedrooms) 7,000 of whom will be under-occupying by more than one bedroom.

If a sizeable proportion of the people affected request to be re-housed in social housing, the smaller properties they will need simply are not available.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has raised particular concern around the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill in relation to housing benefit.

Chief Commissioner, Professor Michael O'Flaherty, said:

“The scale and nature of Northern Ireland's housing shortage, coupled with a highly segregated housing system, means that the potential for people to move home following cuts to their benefits is severely limited. Many thousands of vulnerable people may be forced to seek new housing away from their longstanding neighbourhoods and support networks. This is incompatible with the human right to shelter and housing.” (www.nihrc.org)



## Comments

People often imagine that homelessness impacts only on men but our experience has brought us into contact with countless females who experience homelessness in all its forms, including rough sleeping. Often these females are the most “hidden”, entirely unseen by society. The Westcourt Centre gave three of these females a voice, and an opportunity to express their experience of homelessness through photography. The exhibition they produced was deeply impactful, and those who viewed it gained an insight into homelessness which was both genuine and authentic. The therapeutic benefit of expressing their experience and the impact of others recognising and responding positively to this expression has been far reaching. The females who participated have grown in confidence; they have recognised their own skills and their ability to produce change for themselves and others. Since the exhibition they have participated in further training and education, and have made positive changes in their lives. For those who viewed the exhibition, a different perspective of homelessness was gained; a perspective which originated from the most important people - those who have experienced it. The perspective was a personal one, a genuine expression of the impact and consequences of homelessness, and one which no one could or should ignore.

Lynne McMordie  
Homelessness Services Manager  
The Welcome Organisation

Although the official numbers of homeless people remain static or show little movement, this does not reflect the reality of homelessness in Northern Ireland. It is very difficult if not impossible to accurately quantify the hidden homeless, sofa surfing and rough sleepers.

Homeless service providers are experiencing dramatic changes in the profile of service users – with more and more men and women becoming homeless at a much younger age than 5 or 10 years ago. These organisations all report an increase in cases of alcohol and drug misuse. They are seeing more multiply disadvantaged homeless people with mental health and addiction problems.

The recent Welfare Reform measures will only exacerbate the situation in terms of affordability and accessibility, particularly for those with complex needs and there will be further pressure on homeless services. Now more than ever, it is important for the voices of those living (or rather, existing) within the reality of homelessness to be heard.

Cormac McArt  
Project Manager  
Westcourt Centre



## Acknowledgements

### Thanks to:

The participants who shared their personal experiences of homelessness.

Morning Star House, The Welcome Organisation, Depaul Ireland Mater Dei Family Service and Simon Community NI Belfast Foyer for granting access to their services and guests.

The Christian Brothers Edmund Rice Trust for supporting the production of this publication.

Donal Leader cfc (Edmund Rice Advocacy) for contributing the foreword and Margaret Henry (Council for the Homeless NI) for writing the introduction.

Mark Mulholland for volunteering his time to help with planning and design.

The Westcourt Centre committee and staff for their encouragement throughout the project.

W/L  
NORTH  
Belfast  
HOODS

DAVE  
LETH

