

Housing charities facing big cutbacks

Sam Adams

HOMELESSNESS CHARITIES are facing devastating funding cuts and increased demand for their services in the coming year.

In the run-up to Christmas, Catholic charities working with the homeless are experiencing the impact of reductions in state funding while preparing to deal with a jump in homelessness.

The Passage, the charity which helps rough sleepers in Westminster, has had its £4 million budget cut by £500,000 this year, due to the reduction in its income from public funding, while the Cardinal Hume Centre, which offers a range of services to the homeless including hostel accommodation, expects a 10 per cent decline in its SPG – Supporting People Grant – funding in 2012.

Last year, the Government both cut and removed the ring fence around the SPG, which went directly to helping homeless and vulnerable adults, and the effects of this cut are now starting to be felt.

Mick Clarke, director of the Passage, described the situation as “deeply frustrating”, saying: “In relation to Supporting People [no longer] being ring-fenced, local authorities have more flexibility over where they spend this money, and we have received less direct funding as a result. Demand for our help is increasing and, if anything, we need more resources in order to cope, not less.”

Paul Marriott, chief executive of Depaul UK, which works to address youth homelessness, fears the impact of further cuts, explaining: “[The Supporting People Grant] helped Depaul UK to reduce the number of young people sleeping in shop doorways in the early Nineties ... our fear is that the removal of the ring fence will lead us back towards those days.”

Keith Fernet, chief executive of Anchor House, a hostel for the homeless in Canning Town, east London, said that his charity must wait until January before finding out whether it has secured the funding it needs to continue its work.

“We’ve had to submit a tender for the [SPG] money from the council for the first time,” he said. “If we don’t get it, then things will become extremely difficult for us. [Homelessness charities] are facing challenges on a number of different fronts at once during the coming year – you could say that the perfect storm is gathering.”

Mr Fernet said the 120-bed hostel, which has won national awards for excellence and recently launched a campaign to raise the funds needed to expand its capacity, now has 80 people on its waiting list.

Latest figures from Chain – a homelessness database – showed a 25 per cent rise in the number of rough sleepers in London over the past five years, while demand for local authority housing is already rising, according

to the ecumenical charity Housing Justice.

Alastair Murray, deputy director of Housing Justice, said many of the church groups it works with have seen a significant increase in demand for food and shelter from the homeless, adding: “It looks as though it is only going to get worse, so we are bracing ourselves.”

A spokesman for the Department of Communities and Local Government said the change to SPG funding was designed to devolve more financial decision-making to a local level. He said that a £400 million direct state fund for supporting homeless services had been protected.

Meanwhile, the Society of St Vincent De Paul (SVP), which works to support the poor, has distributed survival packs to homeless people. The “Vinnie Packs” are being distributed through parishes.

The packs contain a space blanket, warm clothing, information about support services and other materials aimed at helping the homeless.

The scheme is launching next week but the SVP already has requests for packs from across London and Hertfordshire.

Westminster councillor Daniel Astaire said that while government funding had been cut, “Westminster has remained committed to investing in and developing new supported housing services for vulnerable groups”.

Child protection review exposes abuse cover-ups

A REVIEW of child protection in six Irish dioceses by the Church’s child protection watchdog has criticised a number of bishops for putting the interests of abusers ahead of their victims and the safety of children, *writes Sarah Mac Donald*.

The six separate reviews by the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church (NBSCCC) conducted in the Dioceses of Raphoe, Derry, Kilmore, Dromore, Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, and Tuam, were published by the NBSCCC on Wednesday in audits covering the period 1 January 1975 to 1 August 2010. They were part of an overall review of child protection practices in all

Catholic institutions across the island of Ireland due to be completed by July 2012.

The reviews were highly critical of the handling of historical cases of abuse in the Dioceses of Raphoe, Derry and Dromore. But the NBSCCC praises Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam’s “thoroughness” in taking appropriate action under existing guidelines.

Allegations against 14 diocesan priests were examined in Raphoe including that of a notorious paedophile, Fr Eugene Green, who was jailed for 12 years in 2000 after pleading guilty to 41 sample charges against 26 victims between 1962 and 1985.

The report found that “significant errors of judgement

were made by successive bishops” in their responses. Judgements in relation to the handling of abusive priests were often clouded by factors such as the accused priest’s alcoholism.

In a statement accepting the review findings, Bishop Philip Boyce of Raphoe expressed regret that his focus on victims’ needs had not been greater in the past. He apologised to them for the “terrible deeds ... inflicted on so many by a small minority of priests”.

In Derry, the audit covered allegations against 23 priests and found that some practices historically had been weak and uncoordinated and many decisions were made to protect the institution of the Church rather than the abused children.

“These historical practices showed a real lack of awareness of the suffering caused to victims by abusers, as well as an ignorance of the habitual nature of child abusing,” the review stated.

The Derry review also found that priests about whom there were clear concerns were moved around parishes where their abusive behaviour continued.

The reviews covered allegations against seven priests in Kilmore, 10 in Dromore, 18 in Tuam and 13 in Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. All six reports underline that improvements in safeguarding have taken place in the last 10 years and that bishops have learned from the errors of the past.