



**Feidhmeannacht um Dhaoine ar Easpa
Díidine Réigiún Bhaile Átha Cliath**
Dublin Region Homeless Executive

**Submission on
'Your City, Your Space'
Dublin City Public Realm Strategy'
February 2012**

How we approach and understand the public realm in Dublin

Our approach to the design, provision and use of the public realm in Dublin is informed by the following key statements:

'Your City, Your Space aims to improve the quality and enrich the individual's experience of Dublin'

Dr John Tierney, Dublin City Manager
Draft Dublin City Public Realm Strategy (2012)

'Be pro poor and inclusive'

(Point nine of ten guiding principles of Urban Design),
The Global Planners
Network, Guiding Principles of Urban Planning
www.globalplannersnetwork.org

'Avoid segregation or stigmatizing any users'

The seven principles of universal design; Principle 1. Equitable Use 1b, as quoted in Appendix A1 of Draft Dublin City Public Realm Strategy (2012)

'Public realm design/planning is rendered meaningless, unless the economic and social needs of the population are addressed'

Zukin, (1998) Urban Lifestyles: diversity and standardisation in spaces of consumption

'Public spaces are a vital ingredient of successful cities. They can build a sense of civic identity, civic pride and enhance the cultural life of the citizen. Public spaces can also play a part in creating and encouraging the growth of democratically inclusive communities'

Planning Sustainable Cities, UN Habitat (2009)

Homeless persons and the public realm

The use of the public realm by people at risk of or experiencing homelessness is rarely addressed in the debates over the design and functions of the urban public realm.

Research has found that people at risk of, or who are experiencing homelessness are unwelcome in Dublin's city centre public spaces (McFadden, 2008). McFadden's study of the use of public spaces in Temple Bar found that the overwhelming perception among local stakeholders and interests was that the presence of persons who are experiencing homelessness exposed 'the darker side of city life' which 'is not conducive to and is often seen as being in direct conflict with the economic use and prosperity of commercial spaces within the Dublin city business and retail core'.

In public spaces such as libraries and galleries, parks and shopping centres, the presence who appear to be homeless or identify themselves as such, are often perceived as a threat to the very function of that space and therefore authorities feel justified in implementing legal restrictions or informal controls in order to exclude and 'move on' persons seen as in conflict with the image being cultivated by city authorities, local politicians, and business interests.

As with the experience of the so-called 'Operation Boulevard', in 2007, an imbalance of representative voices at decision making level in the local authority structure resulted in the 'cleansing of public space' to present a version of city life which disguised this socially excluded and marginalised population group in the city.

The policy of 'moving on' problematic street users from the Boardwalk area in Dublin city centre serves only to cause the issues to resurface elsewhere in the city and its environs.

The response from the homeless services sector led by The Homeless Agency Partnership was to set up the Dublin City Rapid Need Assessment Group, who following on from consultation with various service providers and

after carrying out specific targeted research, were able to develop a quick and appropriate service response that began plugging the gap in day services provision and developed greater choice and access to services for this particular population. This in turn led to reduced incidences of undesired congregation on the Boardwalk in Dublin city centre.

Subsequently, the Homeless Agency established a *Public Space and Justice* working group that met on an *ad hoc* basis to consider the issues of public realm management and that co-ordinated information across a series of key stakeholders including An Garda Síochána and city centre business interests, as well as statutory and voluntary service providers.

It was successful in maintaining a focus on diversion from the criminal justice system by improved case management approaches to individuals engaged in anti-social behaviour in the public realm and it worked towards maintaining an assertive outreach approach to vulnerable and at risk groups in occupation of the public realm.

Public perceptions and realities are often at odds with one another when anti social behaviour issues arise. Dublin city is by comparison to other European capitals a relatively safe city. Despite a reduction in public order and social code offences, (source CSO Recorded Crime Offences Number), there is a continued focus on such issues in the media.

It is also important to make the distinction between persons who are homeless using and living in the public space and street activities which maybe viewed as anti-social such as alcohol or drug misuse in the public space or- begging. While some of these activities are associated with those who endure rough sleeping and are homeless, persons who are homeless do not necessarily carry out any of these activities.

The failure to provide adequate service responses to the anti-social street activities mentioned previously has given rise to local stakeholder's consistently identifying public drug use as a problem in Dublin.

As identified in April 2011 in the survey 'Your Dublin Your Voice':

"... with over one in three respondents (36% of respondents) describing anti-social behavior (particularly drink and drug related behavior, crime and safety issues) as being the worst thing about Dublin.

There were over 400 mentions of drugs and drug use in the open responses.

Many of the panel members feel that this has had a serious impact on the image of the city centre and is something that needs urgent attention from all stakeholders that operate in the city."

(Cudden, 2011: 11)

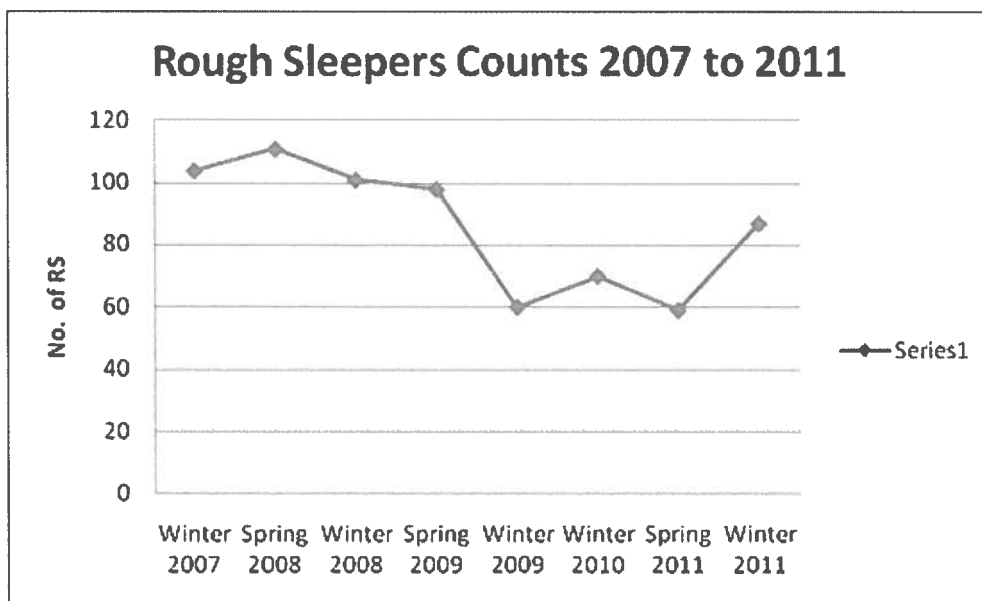
It is also worth noting here that public injecting is a high risk activity, which causes harms to the individual and the Community. Lawless (2005) noted that 68% of 66 homeless intravenous drug users (IDUs) reported injecting in a public place in the past month (Lawless 2005).

Whilst not all intravenous drug users are homeless, public drug use on the streets of Dublin is a matter of significant concern to the general public. In 2005, the Lord Mayor's *Commission on Crime and Policing* highlighted public perception of the problem of public injecting in Dublin:

"...addicts injecting in public places...a sight [which] causes distress to members of the public who feel threatened by such overt drug abuse on the streets...and a perception of lawlessness often ensues"

(Lord Mayor's Commission 2005)

Although not all persons who are experiencing homelessness are rough sleeping, a significant minority do sleep rough or may have had an experience of rough sleeping. The chart below indicates the trends in rough sleeping discovered in Dublin over the period since 2007, based on an actual street count conducted biennially across the city and county.



During a period of rough sleeping a person may use public spaces in order to carry out day to day activities sleeping, eating, resting, and sheltering from harsh weather, and engaged in leisure activities. This reality is confirmed by Anderson (1994),

For homeless people, public space is the realm in which they are forced to conduct the fragmented tasks of daily survival. Although public space has been romanticised as egalitarian in nature, homeless people have experienced it as a contested terrain filled with hierarchical and exclusive aspects.

Designing, maintaining and managing the public realm

Despite dedicated drop-in, food, information and advice centres that offer respite for persons experiencing homelessness in Dublin, conditions have been created which impose great challenges when using public space and that can add to the daily life struggles for many homeless people.

The deliberate design of what is termed '*prickly space*', (Bickford, 2000) in order to make public places uncomfortable and unwelcoming is a tool in the planning and design of urban public spaces that supports the policy approach to the management and maintenance of the public realm whereby conditions are created where challenges over space become part of the daily struggles for many homeless people.

The deliberate discouragement of citizens - whether homeless or otherwise - from comfortably using public spaces for leisure or socialising is in conflict with the essence of a public realm strategy (the guiding principles of which are set out on appendix A1 of the draft Public Realm strategy document):

There has been a noticeable pattern in which authorities have over time regulated exterior public space while under the influence of local businesses, economic pressure groups and the media, yet little has been done to ensure adequate provision of public conveniences and related services that are required for use by the public generally.

It is a generally accepted view that all citizens have a right to access public space, and yet it is possible to observe over time the slow erosion of the right of access to certain groups - older persons, young people, homeless persons, the poor and persons with a disability. These groups can find themselves excluded from using public spaces as the commoditisation and privatisation of public space becomes more extensive.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the local authority to promote the use of Dublin city centre, and the provision of free public events for which the city has a justifiably strong reputation, there has been a marked trend during the boom-time period of the last decade to commodify public space.

In pursuit of enhanced or greater economic performance, decision-makers and authorities can be seen to have shifted their focus from the citizen's free use of public spaces to a more consumer and business focus centred on engaging economically with the city space.

For example, it can now be argued that while shopping centres offer opportunities for civic sociability within a commercial setting, they are not equally available to the disadvantaged. They can now act as an enclosed and sanitised version of a central town or village square even if they often house public services such as libraries (e.g. the Ilac Shopping centre in Dublin's main retail quarter).

Access to such semi-public spaces is strictly controlled using private security and surveillance and remains unregulated within a public realm context.

The importance of urban planning in achieving social justice in the City

Within the bounds of public order, civility and norms, the opportunity to occupy and use public space for respite, to linger, to hang out and to participate in its use is fundamental to our achievement of a public realm that is not exclusive and similar, but inclusive and diverse.

Urban planning and design in Dublin needs to articulate this understanding in its development proposals. Urban planning and design should strive towards the development and use of criteria that measure the extent or degree of 'inclusivity' that is planned for in the spaces that comprise the public realm in Dublin.

Positioning city-wide social inclusion actions and initiatives at the centre of urban design and public realm planning in Dublin should be a central consideration if the vision set out in the Dublin City Public Realm Strategy, is to be realised.

That is, the development of a socially inclusive and diverse city, which we all aspire to inhabit, by the creation of well designed, comfortable public spaces, which are welcoming of all members of society.

The public realm strategy must recognise that public spaces can support economic and cultural activities and social inclusion equally. The Dublin Regional Homeless Executive has the following suggestions for consideration and incorporation into the public realm strategy:

1. Adopt a clear statement of principle and strategic objectives that asserts the right to equal use of all public spaces by all persons irrespective of their status and advocate this principle across the public realm via public awareness communication.
2. Conduct an audit of all public spaces considered 'prickly' and unhospitable in Dublin, using a consumer panel feedback mechanism. Allow and supports voice activation measures for marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Dublin to ensure they can participate alongside established stakeholders.
3. Work towards designing out 'prickly' urban public spaces by delivering a retro-fitting programme to change them to softer, more accommodating spaces.
4. Recognise the need to quality public conveniences that offer respite to the general public and design these into commercial, retail and office spaces that have a semi-public use function (e.g. plaza's, frontage etc)
5. Support the establishment of partnership working with homeless and other related service providers (e.g. health and care providers, particularly in addiction, mental health and drugs) as well as statutory authorities (An Garda Síochána policing forums etc).
6. Support the identification and implementation of good practice towards effective public realm management (including the design and maintenance of public space) that delivers a harm reduction approach to street drinkers, drug users and other street populations otherwise engaged in possible anti-social and risky behaviour who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness.
7. Support as a priority the design and development harm reduction services for drug users at risk of and experiencing homelessness in Dublin City such as the proposed piloting of a medically supervised injecting centre, as recommended by the Irish Drug Advisory Body in 2005, and more recently as supported by Cllr Andrew Montague, Lord Mayor of Dublin at the recent launch of the Ana Liffey Drug Project Strategic Plan 2012 – 2014.

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For more information please contact:

Ms Aisling Browne,
Dublin Region Homeless Executive,
Block 1, Floor 2
Dublin City Council Civic Offices
Wood Quay,
Dublin 8,
Ireland
aisling.browne@dublincity.ie