

Providing shelter from the storms of life

Simon Community's Chief Executive Jim Dennison speaks to Ulster Business about the organisation's work with the homeless in Northern Ireland

In the race to keep on top of work, family and a social life, we often forget how lucky we are.

It's a hard fact to swallow that last year around 20,000 households presented themselves as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and another 40,000 are formally recognised as being in housing stress.

In 2016, according to the Homelessness Monitor which is produced by Crisis, Joseph Rowntree Foundation & Heriot Watt University, between 76,000 and 136,000 adults are homeless living as concealed households, more often referred to as 'hidden homeless' where they may be sofa surfing or staying with friends and not recorded on official reports.

One local organisation which is tackling the problem is the Simon Community NI.

It is a Northern Ireland wide charity that was originally set up in Belfast in 1971 in response to a homelessness crisis in the city during some of the darkest days of the troubles.

Nowadays the charity helps over 3,000 people every year across 22 province-wide accommodation projects providing beds every night of the year for short and long-term "clients" who are experiencing homelessness.

The provision of support to those living in its projects is an essential arm of the Simon Community's remit, particularly those who have complex needs including addiction, mental health and severe debt issues. It supports in a non-judgemental, high tolerance manner in close collaboration with the people it is trying to help.

It also works hard to prevent vulnerable people becoming homeless, while helping people stay in their homes or return to a previous home.



Jim Dennison has worked in organisations which provide support to vulnerable people throughout his career and has been Chief Executive of the Simon Community NI for the last four years.

He said the organisation's work has never been more important.

"More and more people are becoming homeless every day," he said. "We have seen individuals from all walks of life - those who have owned companies or held senior positions to those who have been involved in a family or marital dispute or those who have serious mental health issues, people with addiction or those who have emerged from the criminal justice system.

"Homelessness can strike anyone."

It stands to reason that such good work needs funding and the bulk of that comes from government and helps to pay the wages of the 300 staff the organisation employs and the running of the accommodation units.

The remainder is raised by the Simon Community itself through public donations or from corporate sponsorship.

This latter area is one where some local companies have been particularly innovative in the last few years.

For instance, staff at the Galgorm Resort and Spa have been fundraising by taking part in sponsored challenge events and the company has been tapping into guests' generosity through its SleepSmart scheme where it asks if they would like to make a discretionary addition to the bill in aid of the Simon Community.

"Galgorm facilitate that process and it is very beneficial to us," Jim said. "It provides much needed funds while raising awareness of homelessness in Northern Ireland, the group also provides a similar initiative with diners at its Fratellis restaurant in Belfast.

It's all vitally important to the future of the charity, as is the help of those companies which are willing to provide their time - such as Lloyds Banking Group and Marks & Spencer where volunteers to helped build welcome packs - or even those who are willing to provide work experience or apprenticeships to homeless people.

"If you're homeless when you're 18 then you're likely to remain homeless without significant help and support," Jim said. "Corporates would be in a brilliant position to support some of these people and we would love to hear from anyone who would be able to offer some training or a job to give them the foot up they need."

The future for the organisation will involve carrying on the good work it has been doing and also focusing on how it can prevent homelessness and how it can develop better alternative accommodation in Northern Ireland, Jim said.

"We need to stop the problem before it begins and by tackling those two issues then we can have an even bigger impact." ■

Merry Christmas
from everyone at Simon Community NI

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