



20 years of Depaul in Northern Ireland

Supporting people who are
experiencing homelessness
or at risk of homelessness

CEO foreword

In 2025, Depaul is marking 20 years of service in Northern Ireland, supporting those who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. We were then, and remain so now, committed to helping people most in need who are excluded from society.

The story of Depaul in Northern Ireland began in 2005 with the opening of Stella Maris which was a first of its kind service, established to help people who were street drinking and sleeping rough, who, because of a lack of appropriate hostel accommodation, had nowhere to go. Stella was created to be a place to call home for the men and women living there - supporting people with the help they needed at the time when they needed it most.

In the 20 years since its opening, Stella Maris has not strayed from its original purpose and remains a true reflection of the Depaul values. Accepting all, empowering all to the best of their abilities, never giving up, never judging. Today, perhaps more than ever, homelessness continues to be a challenge in Northern Ireland. Our services have grown to rise to this challenge. Depaul now has four emergency accommodation services and seven community/outreach services across Northern Ireland. Offering not only residential services but a day centre, floating support services, Housing First services and services for vulnerable families.

What is and has been most important, is that Depaul serves people who may otherwise be excluded and not receive the help and support they need to fulfil their potential and change their circumstances for the better. At Depaul, we believe homelessness has no place. We are committed to play our part in achieving the Northern Ireland Housing Executives Strategy to address homelessness and we are grateful for the funding we receive

from this source and our other wide range of partners and funders. The people of Northern Ireland have also played a critical part in our services, supporting us in the communities where we provide services practically and financially and believing in the work we do.

I would like to thank all of the staff that have been with us throughout our 20 year journey. It is through their commitment and dedication in our services that those accessing our support have been able to reach their full potential in a supportive and positive environment. I would also like to thank all of the wonderful volunteers; without their support we wouldn't be able to achieve all that we do.

Over the 20 years we have been able to change the lives of thousands of men, women and children. We have supported and accepted those with difficult challenges. We have believed in and empowered many to move on from homelessness and live healthy and positive independent lives in their communities. It has been our privilege to work with and serve them on this part of their journey.



David Carroll
Depaul CEO

Introduction

20 years of compassion, commitment and change

Depaul is proud to mark two decades of dedicated service in Northern Ireland, supporting individuals and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of losing their homes. From the opening of Stella Maris in 2005—a first-of-its-kind service offering refuge and hope to people sleeping rough and street drinking — to a network of eleven services today, our journey has been driven by an unshakable commitment to those most in need.

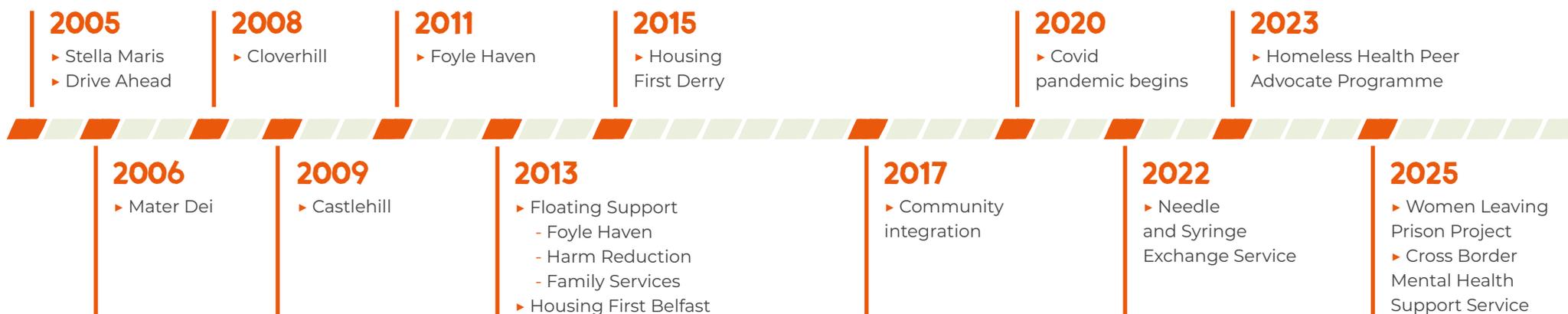
The numbers of those we have supported continues to grow - in the last ten years alone our services supported more than 3,500 adults and children in our emergency accommodation, and supported more than 1,600 people to exit homelessness.

At the heart of everything we do is a belief in dignity, compassion, and inclusion. We serve people who are often excluded elsewhere —those with complex needs, facing significant personal challenges, and struggling to find a place in society. Through emergency accommodation, outreach programmes, harm reduction initiatives, and family support services, we walk alongside those who need us, offering practical help, emotional support, and a belief in better futures.

Over the years we have seen significant changes in the nature of homelessness, revealing a growing complexity of needs, such as mental health issues among service users. There has also been a shift in the demographics of those affected - with more females, families and younger people now accessing our services. In fact, the most common age group amongst our service users is now those aged between 26-35. There has also been a marked increase in the demand for services. This underscores the need for Depaul to provide more sustainable and flexible solutions to effectively support service users now and into the future.

This milestone provides Depaul with the opportunity to look back on the last 20 years in Northern Ireland and celebrate the service users, staff, volunteers, supporters and partners who make up the story of Depaul. This is not just a celebration of our past — it is a recommitment to our mission to end homelessness and change the lives of those affected by it in Northern Ireland. Homelessness remains a pressing issue in Northern Ireland, and we remain steadfast in our vision: of a society where everyone has a place to call home, and a stake in their community. With the support of our partners, funders, and communities, we will continue to work collaboratively to end long-term homelessness and ensure everyone has a place to call home.

This booklet shares the story of 20 years of our ground breaking services in Northern Ireland, our work, our incredible people, and the lives transformed along the way. Thank you for being part of our journey so far.



STELLA MARIS



A place to call home for the most vulnerable

Depaul set up Stella Maris in September 2005 as part of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) homelessness strategy. This service, the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, is a partnership with Radius Housing, (formerly HELM Housing) and was established to help people who were street drinking and sleeping rough in Belfast. Due to a lack of appropriate hostel accommodation, these people at the time had nowhere to go until Depaul opened its doors to them.

At Stella Maris, we offer safe accommodation in a low-threshold setting for people who have complex needs, including alcohol addiction, giving them space and time to manage the issues which led to them being in a homelessness situation. The service is guided by the principles of harm reduction, meaning we support people to manage their addictions without the requirement of total abstinence, allowing our service to admit those who need our help the most.

There are 19 bedrooms in Stella Maris, providing a place to call home for up to 23 men and women at any one time. The service provides daily nutritional meals and support with health services such as a podiatrist, psychotherapist and optician via a network of community nurses. There are also in-service activities such as arts & crafts, games, karaoke, outings & workshops that help to prevent social isolation for this vulnerable group.

Stella provides 24-hour support, a high standard of accommodation, help to address mental and physical health needs, promote self-esteem & independence and work with service users in a way that respects their decisions as individuals. Over the last 20 years, the service has supported over 300 men and over 100 women and they remain at the very core of the work we do. The Stella Maris team is made up of 11 staff and three volunteers, all of whom dedicate their time and total commitment to the service users.

Since 2005, we have also worked to integrate into the local community by developing and fostering partnerships. For example, in recent times we've partnered with Inspire and the Ashton Community Trust to provide our users with support in the form of counselling services and also to provide practical courses such as how to obtain forklift licenses or driving theory tests. Service users recently showed the pride they have for their local community by organising a litter pick in the Sailortown area.

In 2021, Stella Maris won the Aisling Award for our work with marginalised individuals. This award recognised the staff's non-judgmental approach to supporting individuals through their complex needs, allowing them to play a part in their local community by breaking the stigma surrounding homelessness.

Two decades on from opening Stella Maris, Depaul hasn't strayed from its original purpose, continuing to develop new initiatives in harm minimisation around alcohol consumption and health improvement. At Stella Maris, we continue to accept, work with and care for those with multiple and complex support needs.

"I love Stella for how the staff treat me, they ask my opinion and show that I matter, I feel like Stella has saved me and helped me grow in confidence and attitude towards life."

– Service User

MATER DEI



Supporting families to move forward

In November 2006, Depaul opened the doors of its first family hostel, Mater Dei, in North Belfast. Mater Dei replaced Atlantic House, a family service run by a voluntary management committee of St Vincent de Paul. At that time, Atlantic House had been providing accommodation and support to families for over 20 years, and was in need of modernisation. Today, Mater Dei offers 13 self-contained apartments to families. The families have an assigned caseworker to help them get the best support to facilitate a positive move-on out of homelessness into suitable long-term accommodation. Importantly, Mater Dei provides the time and space so that families can address the issues that led to their homelessness. Giving them time to mend broken relationships; address debts; develop and maintain a household budget and learn to run a family home. Mater Dei has benefitted from initiatives such as the PHA's Clear Project, encouraging service users to cook nutritious meals and educating them as to why it's important for their family's health and wellbeing.

For those parents facing difficulty with their parenting knowledge or skills, practical support is always on hand in Mater Dei to make family life a more positive experience for all family members. The focus is to give parents the tools so that they may more effectively parent their very young children through their various stages of development while dealing with the trauma of experiencing homelessness.

When families move on from Mater Dei, they can receive ongoing support in their new homes from Depaul Family Services Floating Support workers. This service provides bespoke 1-1 meetings to help with the resettlement process and provide support with engaging with their local community and statutory agencies. The aim is to help them to become part of their community and through support and empowerment to ensure a successful resettlement program for everyone involved. Importantly, this after service continues to foster the positive improvements that families may have made while in Mater Dei by offering advice and guidance when they are in their new homes. This work is vital in ensuring sustainable tenancies and secure homes for the future for vulnerable families who have come through homelessness.

In 2024, Mater Dei added a volunteer mentor to the team who provides 1-1 mentoring to aid our young service users with social, emotional & academic support. They lead fun-filled activities to develop the children's literacy, numeracy and social skills. These enable our young service users to understand the importance of positive relationships & effective communication. Since 2006, over 400 families have been accommodated in Mater Dei and moved on to permanent accommodation, including over 500 children. Mater Dei continues to play an active part in the local community, encouraging users to engage in local events and activities.

Partnerships, such as those with the Belfast Met, Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre and Shankhill Women's centre are also instrumental in the success of the service - particularly in terms of the support the service can offer young families when they are settling into their local area.

"I love it here. It's clean and comfortable for me and my wee boy."

– Mater Dei Service User

"I think of the staff here like my family and friends, they always support me with things, especially my caseworker."

CLOVERHILL



“The staff are amazing and the activities they put on are so good, my girls love them.”

A place to call home

Depaul's Cloverhill service was opened in West Belfast in 2008 following the success of Mater Dei in North Belfast. Depaul felt well equipped to take on a new service in an area of great need for vulnerable families. Cloverhill offers 18 self-contained apartments with communal spaces including: lounges; indoor and outdoor play areas; a laundry room; and an art and crafts room all available to the families. The service provides a comfortable, homely environment for families while the move-on process is ongoing. Since opening, Cloverhill has provided a place to call home to over 400 families, including over 500 adults and over 500 children. Providing a warm and welcoming environment is at the centre of Depaul's service provision and at no time is it more important than when welcoming small children into unfamiliar surroundings at a difficult and potentially scary time in their lives.

Families are referred to Cloverhill by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and by Social Services' emergency duty team. Once living in Cloverhill, each family has a dedicated caseworker who, together with the family, identifies the areas of greatest need for them. A support plan is devised to cover key needs but the primary focus is on getting the family moved to permanent accommodation of their choice as quickly as possible.

There are many reasons why families become homeless; mortgage default; end of a private rental tenancy; breakdown in sharing in the family home; overcrowding; intimidation; anti-social behaviour; domestic violence; abuse and debt are just some of the examples. Cloverhill offers families the time and space to address the issues that led to their homelessness. Depaul's dedicated child support workers also worked with children in Cloverhill, setting aside one-to-one time for those children who were struggling to come to terms with the great upheaval in their lives. Unfortunately, funding stopped in 2022 for this service. Cloverhill has also recently added a student placement volunteer to their team. They've been utilising their psychology degree to improve awareness around mental health in the service including activities which work around trauma informed practice and care, and promoting mindfulness among service users.

Where possible Cloverhill works with external partners to help its users to rebuild their lives and regain their independence. For example a Cloverhill service user was signposted to the organisation Street Soccer NI and given encouragement from our staff to get involved. From this, they've taken football in their stride and last year captained Northern Ireland in the Homeless World Cup.

“Cloverhill has really helped me in getting ready for living in my own house, there is loads of activities and trips for the kids. It doesn't feel like a hostel because we have our own space, but I know that if I needed anything the staff are there to help”

- Cloverhill Service User

CASTLEHILL



A lifeline for the most vulnerable

Castlehill opened its doors in June 2009, becoming Depaul's first service outside of a major city. The opening of this service was in response to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive identifying the Dungannon area as needing an accommodation-based service to address the highest homelessness figures outside of Belfast at the time. Operating in partnership with Radius Housing, Castlehill is a purpose-built facility, providing high-quality accommodation and support to people who are experiencing homelessness.

The service is a mixed gender, low threshold residential service, providing accommodation for homeless individuals and couples for up to two years whilst providing the support needed to move through and out of homelessness. The service set out to provide the people living there with the opportunity to develop their independent living skills with the support of staff, volunteers and relevant external support services, before moving on into permanent accommodation.

Unlike other Depaul services, Castlehill does not specialise in one particular support area. Over time, the service has adapted to provide support to people who have alcohol and/or substance addiction, mental health issues, physical ill-health, criminal history, risk-taking behaviours, experience of the care system, relationship breakdown, discrimination and harassment, parental responsibilities, limited independent living skills and more.

Since opening, Castlehill has successfully secured funding to improve on-site facilities that now include an arts & crafts room, gardening activities and an on-site gym with staff qualified to induct service users in the use of the equipment. The service benefits from inclusion nurses coming in to check on our service users' physical and mental health and to help them organise GP appointments.

Castlehill has seen a younger demographic entering their service in recent years, which is reflected in the external partners that they work with. Our service users aged between 18-23 have been getting involved in the Game Changer programme, which has been great at building their confidence, social skills and preparing them for the adult world while gaining key skills from CV writing to driving licenses. Depaul is part of Dungannon's advisory group which is coming together to improve and build community relations in the local area. Castlehill works alongside South Tyrone Empowerment Program (STEP), who advocate on behalf of our service users and assist with writing housing and benefit forms. Their diverse staff group are able to help with the non-English speaking service users.

While initially there were some reservations about the need for Castlehill as a substantial service in a relatively small town, the intervening years have demonstrated the need for the service with a consistently high occupancy rate. In the last ten years, Castlehill has supported over 200 individuals to exit their homelessness situation.

"This is the first time I feel I've been treated with respect. No one looks down their nose at me and I am treated like a human being. Other places were quick to judge me. This is the first time I feel like I am getting help and I am not on my own. I want to stay sober because I know they are helping me and if I fall they will help me get up again. I would have been put out of other places if I had fallen off the wagon, but not here. I know when I leave here I will be able to have my own wee house again"

– Castlehill Service User

FOYLE HAVEN



Supporting Change – Two decades of Compassionate Care

Foyle Haven was originally opened in December 2001 in direct response to the large number of street drinkers congregating in the Londonderry/Derry City Centre. There were a number of reasons that this was an issue: people were out in all weathers, sleeping rough and exposed to various personal well-being and health risks, but there was also the impact on local emergency and law enforcement agencies as well as the negative image that was presented to tourists and shoppers.

In 2011, the original management committee decided the requirements of running the centre were growing beyond their capacity and a decision was made to merge Foyle Haven with Depaul.

The day centre provides practical assistance including hot meals, snacks, tea and coffee, access to shower and laundry facilities, clothes and toiletries and various recreational, educational and harm reduction

activities such as nutrition workshops and gardening. The centre boasts a fully equipped treatment room which is used regularly by the Homeless nurse and podiatrist and clinics such as sexual health and vaccinations are regular occurrences.

Two years ago, a needle exchange service was opened in Foyle Haven, as well as a Homeless Health Peer Advocate project to address health inequalities for those who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness through supporting them to attend and understand appointments, find out information about health and health services and to address their health issues. In the coming months, the range of services will be further boosted by the addition of a mental health worker.

In 2011, Foyle Haven was awarded the GlaxoSmithKline award for Community Health Development and an award for achievements in Community Arts - an award which was attended by day centre service users and staff in 2013.

The team has steadily grown to over 12 full time staff, a team of relief workers and volunteers. Foyle Haven continues to grow with developments in funding in recent years. However, despite service growth, the focus remains on providing a person-centered approach appropriate to the needs of those who use the day centre.

Foyle Haven has become an integral and vital part of the front-line homelessness and community addiction services in the North West and is hugely supported by the local community.

“It has made me more outgoing and helped me to mix with people. I used to live in the day and now I look forward to the future. The staff of Foyle Haven have a down to earth friendly approach and there’s no prejudgement”

– Foyle Haven Service user

FLOATING SUPPORT



Importantly, this after service continues to foster the positive improvements that families may have made while in our short term accommodation services, such as Mater Dei, by offering advice and guidance when they are in their new homes. This work is vital in ensuring sustainable tenancies and secure homes for the future for vulnerable families who have come through homelessness.

In the last 10 years alone, we've supported over 700 individuals. The work of the Family Services Floating Support team cements the work already done in Depaul's family accommodation services and provides a continuum of care, long after families have left our services.

"I am very happy with the service I am having and my caseworker is so helpful and interested. Thank you and happy 20th anniversary to Depaul."

– Family Services Floating Support Service user

Family Services Floating Support

Depaul's Family Floating Support Service started because families moving on from Depaul's services, into independent accommodation, needed help to make the transition and maintain their new homes. The service is integral in supporting families around tenancy sustainment issues, working to prevent them from becoming homeless or returning to homelessness again.

The team link in with families on a regular basis to advocate on their behalf, provide ongoing support and identify other needs the families may have. Depaul Family Services Floating Support workers provide bespoke 1-1 meetings to help with the resettlement process and provide support to the family with engaging with their local community and statutory agencies. The aim is to help them to become part of their community and through support and empowerment to ensure a successful resettlement program for everyone involved.

Harm Reduction Floating Support

Depaul's Harm Reduction Floating Support is a community-based service. The aim of the service is to help those who are at risk of homelessness due to alcohol and substance use.

The staff visit people at their request in their own homes, and tailor the support they offer to meet the particular needs and reduce the risk of homelessness. This is varied but can include support about maintaining tenancies, helping to ensure their home is suitable for their needs, practical assistance around benefits, physical & mental health, independent living skills, budget management and much more.

The service is available to individuals in tenancies provided by Private Rental Housing Executive, Housing Association, and Owner Occupiers. Referrals can be taken directly by any source, e.g. self-referral, family, GP, or other organisations / agencies with prior consent from the individual who is being referred.

Each person is appointed a dedicated case worker who will work with them to create and implement a bespoke support plan depending on their personal needs. Together they agree on a way forward with a strong focus on ensuring their housing needs are met with a harm reduction approach to their current levels of substance use, with the aim of promoting positive health and wellbeing.

To date the service has helped over 300 individuals to maintain their tenancies and has prevented them from falling into a homeless situation.

“I think floating support are brilliant. When they visit you at home they are wonderful company, they have a chat with you and give their help when needed. I just think they are amazing people.”

– Floating Support Service user

HOUSING FIRST

Providing security and stability for all

Housing First was established in April 2013 as a support service, when it was identified that there were huge difficulties in finding move-on accommodation for the people ready to leave our high support accommodation services and move into the community to their own home.

Housing First is built upon the principle that housing is a human right. It focuses first on giving someone immediate access to a settled and secure home. This is placed above goals such as sobriety or abstinence. The model is specifically tailored for individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness and have multiple complex needs.

Our Housing First service provides a stable environment with 'wrap around' support to ensure that the individual gets all the help they need, no matter what it is, to sustain their new home in the community.

Depaul's Housing First service is very effective in facilitating individuals who are experiencing chronic homelessness to access and maintain a permanent home in the community. It also helps stop them from having to move around emergency services and sleep rough. This is often the case for people who have complex support needs that can include addiction and mental health issues.

Very often the individual's that Depaul support through the Housing First service are deemed as unable to live independently and maintain their own home. However through partnerships with the person themselves and other support services, using the Housing First case coordination model, tenancy sustainment is possible for many of the individuals who are referred to us.

The Housing First team works hard to identify, assess, place and help individuals into permanent housing from a range of accommodation sources, and co-ordinate support around each individual's needs. This support can include: life-skills, dealing with anti-social behaviour, help with completing forms, money management, advocacy with other

agencies including health professionals and many more. Once accepted onto the service, each client will be allocated a caseworker who will be responsible for leading with and coordinating the case.

After a successful 18-month pilot period in Belfast, Housing First was adopted into Depaul's mainstream work in November 2014. In early 2015, the need for a further Housing First service was identified and Depaul opened its second Housing First initiative in Londonderry/Derry to support people who are homeless with independent living.

“Without Housing First, I don't think I would have maintained this home that I have been in for almost two years now.”

– Depaul Housing First Service User



THE NEXT 20 YEARS

Innovation, Prevention, and Hope

Undoubtedly, over the past two decades the landscape of homelessness has changed significantly, and we have seen year after year demand for our services grow. Alongside rising mental health challenges, drug-related addictions have become more prevalent, with polysubstance abuse now more common - further underlining the evolving and complex needs of our service users. Our service growth in recent years has been towards development and outreach services, as we believe prevention has better outcomes for individuals who are at risk of homelessness. While they have a stable home it is easier to access vital resources such as healthcare, job opportunities and education. In the future we'd like to see improved coordination and communication across sectors in order to identify those at risk of homelessness at the earliest possible stage.

Later in 2025, Depaul will be opening its first transition service for women leaving the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. Encouraged by the success of a similar service in ROI, Depaul is looking forward to opening this first of its kind service based on the belief that a stable home is the foundation upon which individuals can rebuild their lives and our aim will be to help integrate these women back into society before moving on to more permanent homes. Looking to break the cycle of recidivism and encourage them to reconnect with their friends, family and local community.

At Depaul, we are proud to take an innovative approach to the services we create - continuously evolving to meet the changing landscape of homelessness. Guided by our vision, mission, and values, we remain committed to recruiting and training staff who reflect and uphold our commitment to responsive, compassionate care. Looking into the future, the sustainability of our services is extremely important - and this is only assured with adequate and sustained funding. Working with our funders and all our partners is key to our continued ability to run our services. The importance of inter-agency collaboration is key now and in the years to come.

There is growing understanding and acceptance that homelessness in Northern Ireland is at crisis stage and more social housing is key to meeting this crisis head on. In Northern Ireland, housing waiting lists have doubled in the last two decades. Addressing this crisis requires more than just building homes—it calls for a bold, cross-departmental response that recognises homelessness as not only a housing issue, but also a matter of health, justice, and community wellbeing. People must be able to access the right support at the right time.



Acknowledgement

The professionalism and passion of our staff is a driving force for our organisation, enabling us to change and save lives every day in the last twenty years. As we recognise our two decades of service in Northern Ireland I want to pay tribute to the tireless work of our staff and volunteers over the last 20 years. Our shared vision and mission to end homelessness remains steadfast. Despite record levels of homelessness and a severe housing crisis, we believe that, through cross-sectoral partnership, there is a way for everyone to have a place to call home, a stake in their community, and support that will empower them to realise their potential.

This is what will drive us forward in the next 20 years in Northern Ireland as well as our values, which have continued to be our guiding light throughout this time. This anniversary is a good time to reflect on the vision of the people who recognised that Depaul's approach to helping homeless people, rooted in the Vincentian tradition, was needed in Northern Ireland. Today's trustees and Depaul's leadership team appreciate the extraordinary dedication of staff, past and present, and our volunteers who embraced that vision and made it real for people who used our services.

The work that we do would not be possible without the support of our funders, past and present, including: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Supporting People, The Public Health Agency, National Lottery Community Fund, Peace Plus, Citi Foundation, Commonwealth, Community Foundation and the Gillen Trust.

Above all, we think of the many thousands of service users who came to Depaul at a vulnerable stage in their lives and we hope that our response restored some hope to them.



John Murphy

Chairperson of the Depaul Board of Trustees

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Ending Homelessness.

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