

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code:	2002/8/514
Title:	Co-ordination Centre for Relief, Falls Road, Belfast: paper on the housing and other relief needs of Catholic families forced from their homes in the Belfast area.
Creation Date(s):	16 November, 1971
Level of description:	Item
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

THE CO-ORDINATION CENTRE FOR RELIEF

10th November, 1971.

Director: Rev. Sean Lowry. Chairman: Mr. L. Ryan:
Hon. Secretary: Mr. M. Dynan.

The Co-ordination Centre for Relief is situated at 107A, Falls Road, Belfast, and operates under the directorship of Fr. Sean Lowry in conjunction with the Co-ordination Committee. With a full time secretary and a team of voluntary workers, expert advice and practical assistance are given to a large number of families who have been rendered homeless in the violence which has torn Belfast apart since 1969. This document presents a brief summary of the background to our work, the main function of the Centre, and some of the problems remaining to be solved at the time of writing.

Background: In August 1969, approximately 500 homes in the Catholic Falls Road and Ardoyne areas of Belfast were looted and burned by armed mobs. In a short period after the arrival of the British Troops, a further 1,500 Catholic families were also intimidated from their homes by Protestant extremists. The situation was chaotic. Local relief groups sprang up in most Parishes of Belfast, especially in the safer Catholic suburbs of West Belfast. Schools and Church halls were opened as refugee centres. Thousands of homeless were also accommodated in private homes, mainly in Ballymurphy, Turf Lodge, and Andersontown.

With twenty-three major refugee centres in operation catering for about 20,000 men, women and children, the need for co-ordination led to the establishment under Catholic Diocesan auspices, of the Co-ordinating Committee for Relief. A centre was opened at St. Joseph's College of Education, Trench House, operating with about fifty volunteer staff. The Committee found itself tackling a mammoth task including all kinds of rehousing and welfare problems. By 1971 some of the major problems had still not been solved to our satisfaction. The heavy financial losses suffered by many families who were forced to leave houses which they owned, and which still remain empty and unsold in Protestant areas were causing great distress.

Tragically, in August 1971, mass arrests and internment of Catholic men (mostly from the same areas in West Belfast and Ardoyne) caused a new wave of violence and suffering, which now extended to include parts of Belfast which have been relatively quiet previously. Official figures indicate that over 2,500 families (Catholic and Protestant) were rendered homeless. Within days, over 800 women and children fled across the Border to refugee camps in the South of Ireland.

Local relief groups were reactivated and the Co-ordinating Centre, from new premises, again faced massive relief problems, some of a nature which had not arisen before.

Functions of Co-ordination Centre: These functions divide into two main categories relating firstly to short term situations of major crisis, and secondly, longer term relief work after the immediate disruption and panic has somewhat abated, and relief centres have been closed at least temporarily.

During a major civil disruption, the role of the Centre is to co-ordinate all aspects of Relief for distressed families sheltering in relief centres. This involves close contact with each Parish relief group operating a relief centre. It also involved close liaison with central and local Government bodies especially Welfare Authorities, who have the primary responsibility of providing necessary food and bedding for the homeless families.

With the scale of the disaster which has struck Belfast these Authorities have found it impossible to get to grips with the whole problem particularly when transport and communication have virtually broken down in many parts of the City. In the atmosphere of tension and confusion, the Co-ordination Centre has tried to arrange for co-operation between Welfare Officers and voluntary relief workers. This can be a delicate task when the atmosphere is charged with emotion and even hysteria.

Immediate Voluntary Relief Supplies: It is often essential during such crisis to arrange for food supplies to be provided from voluntary relief sources for families at relief centres. While Parish relief groups are primarily responsible for this task, which they perform extremely well, it is the function of the Co-ordination Centre to provide cash aid to these groups, and where necessary to try to arrange delivery of essential food supplies; particularly to areas which are cut off. During the recent crisis, whole areas were cut off for days, and men and women were unable to get to work or to collect Social Security payments. Local relief centres were almost overwhelmed with the need to provide essential food for these families, many of whom had no resources to fall back on.

Rehousing Problems: The Co-ordination Committee for Relief is represented on the Emergency Housing Liaison Committee, where Housing Officers and Senior Civil Servants have to face the huge task of rehousing over 2,500 families. The difficulties are compounded by the tremendous housing shortage in Belfast, coupled with the sectarian problem which means that Catholic families are afraid to live outside specific areas such as West Belfast and Ardoyne, which are already bursting at the seams since the troubles of 1969.

Priorities for rehousing have to be established and other measures taken to alleviate the hardship to the hundreds of families who remain homeless for a long period. The Committee feels that its representation on the Emergency Housing Committee is extremely useful, and important.

Financial Aid: Shortly after the recent violence occurred, the Government at Westminster and Stormont made £500,000 available for use as immediate relief, and a Government appointed committee is responsible for administering this sum. Through another advisory committee under the Chairmanship of Mr. Maurice Hayes of the Community Relations Commission we have been making continual representations on behalf of the homeless and other distressed families.

At the time of writing our Committee is pressing strongly, though so far unsuccessfully, for cash grants of £200-£300 to those families who lost all their clothing and furniture when they were forced to flee. Although these families will eventually be able to claim compensation for loss of possessions, experience has shown that the court awards are insufficient to meet the needs of a family which has to completely furnish a new home and to clothe the parents and children. While the Supplementary Benefits Commission makes financial aid available to such families, at present this aid is in the form of LOANS, which the unfortunate family must repay when they receive their meagre compensation award. The Co-ordination Centre for Relief is using a substantial part of the voluntary relief funds available to help many of these families settle into their new home. More money is needed for this task.

Meeting Special Needs: The problems of families who suddenly find themselves refugees in their own city, without home or belongings in many cases, are many and varied, and are not confined simply to getting another dwelling. These families all require expert advice, and many of them are in great financial distress. Few of them will ever recover their financial losses, even after compensation is made. Many other people suffer great distress due to loss of work or earnings, resulting from the troubles. Each person needs individual help and advice. Each new episode of violence brings fresh problems, temporary evacuation of families, the old, the sick; another wave of families deciding to settle away from the North, house repairs, transport, financial problems.

TSC/H/3: Central registry records Department of the Taoiseach
families of internees. One major new task of the Taoiseach Centre
for Relief is the administration of the Innocent Dependents Fund. The
Centre exists to help in a small way to alleviate the financial distress
to families of the hundreds of men who are now either in prison or in
Long Kesh internment camp.

The Trustees of the Fund are independent of our Committee and the Chair-
man is Fr. Padraic Murphy, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to whom contributions may be sent.
It is clear to us that the hardship to the families of these men is very
great indeed, and it is our view that there is a special moral respon-
sibility on the whole community to look after the needs of these famil-
ies. Internment without trial means that normal judicial proceedings
have not been used whereby a man is innocent until proved guilty. Some
of these men are now released and were obviously above suspicion. Yet
their families have had to suffer severe financial losses. In our view,
their families should be compensated by the State. Financial problems
of these families, great as they are, are not their only problems.
Families deprived of menfolk become vulnerable in the community and the
support of the community is required to sustain them. Mothers of young
children require moral support, sympathy, comfort, a friendly patient
ear. At the time of writing there are (in the Belfast Area alone) over
250 families of internees receiving practical help through the Co-ordin-
ating Centre.

Structure and Organisation: The Co-ordinating Committee has drawn up
contingency relief plans and has organised relief groups in the Parishes
of Belfast. Each Parochial relief group sends a representative to a
meeting held regularly, at which mutual problems are discussed. The
activities of the groups are strictly non political and are aimed at
bringing the maximum amount of help to a distressed family within the
shortest possible time. Liaison has also been established with organ-
isations in other parts of the country, since the needs of the people of
Belfast in time of trouble extend well beyond the city.
The Committee has the services of a full time qualified director at its
Centre and has a further three full time employees. One department is
concerned with individual problems presented at the centre, while the
other is concerned with a number of relief schemes in progress through-
out the city. The latter is accomplished by some thirty voluntary field
workers; to their credit, they have been responsible for the distri-
bution of funds, channelled through the centre, to the families suffering
greatest hardship, on the basis of knowledge supplied by local relief
groups and obtained by regular supportive visits. They have also brought
to the homeless families information and practical help in connection
with special schemes devised for the rehousing of families on the Emer-
gency Housing List. In tackling this problem, the fieldworkers have
far outstripped the statutory housing authorities in providing compre-
hensive advice and service. These volunteer fieldworkers also help at
the centre on a rota basis, a system which has worked very efficiently.
The centre has the part time service of two people who administer the
funds to families of internees. They ensure the families are receiving
the maximum to which they are entitled from the Supplementary Benefits
Commission; they negotiate the temporary suspension of payment of
capital on a mortgage, the temporary suspension of hire purchase payments,
as well as advising on other financial problems. Cases of special hard-
ship or distress are referred to appropriate organisations or individuals
for specialised help.
The Centre has also the voluntary services of an accountant, who has re-
corded the allocation of almost £250,000 which has passed through the
hands of the Committee since August 1969. Particularly to be noted is
the comparatively small administrative costs of operating the centre.
Finally, the centre employs a full time secretary, to whom the copious
correspondence and record keeping has been entrusted and efficiently
executed.

Conclusion: From this brief review, it should be clear that a trust-
worthy and efficient organisation exists through which funds can be
channelled to the victims of troubles in Belfast. The extent of need
can only be demonstrated effectively by listing the numerous problems
endured by families and there is no doubt that the inability or un-
willingness of statutory relief bodies to bring adequate help quickly to
the families of burnt-out or looted homes makes the operation of an effi-
cient voluntary centre, backed by substantial financial resources, all
the more necessary.