

Social Affairs

‘Tonight we had 470 meals, they all went’: Dublin soup kitchen offers essential help but faces uncertain future

Soup kitchen run by Muslim Sisters of Éire among estimated 24 voluntary on-street facilities targeted for regulation under controversial plan



People line up for the Muslim Sisters of Éire soup kitchen for the needy at the GPO on Friday.
Photograph: Chris Maddaloni



[Kitty Holland](#)

Sun Jan 19 2025 - 17:35

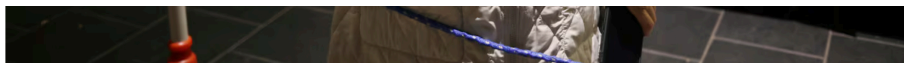


At a time of uncertainty about the future of [Dublin's](#) voluntary on-street soup kitchens, which provide food to the poor and [homeless](#), demand for their services shows no sign of abating.

Days after the publication of the draft programme for government, which reiterated plans to clamp down on these services, one of the largest, operated by the Muslim Sisters of Éire (MSE), a registered charity, is setting up at the GPO on O'Connell Street.

By 6.30pm on Friday, beneath the portico of one of the State's best-known buildings, hundreds of the capital's destitute are queuing. They come for not only for nourishment but for community too, many say.





Lorraine O'Connor, who founded Muslim Sisters of Éire charity in 2010, overseeing the Friday night soup kitchen at the GPO in Dublin. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

Preparing for service from 7pm, about 15 volunteers, mostly women, set up on long trestle tables. They will serve more than 400 individual hot meals including spiced chicken and basmati rice, pasta, falafel burgers and soup.

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Also available will be basic provisions – fruit and vegetables: carrots, onions, potatoes, oranges, apples, bananas; pastries in individual bags; 'fun-size' chocolate-bars; crisps and non-perishables including boxes of cup-a-soup and scone mixes. At the end of the long row is a final table offering tea, coffee, bottled water and assorted biscuits.

The women serving wear hairnets, face masks and silicon gloves.

There are three separate queues – families with children and disabled or ill people; people who sleep rough, and a third, the longest, of other adults. By 7pm, the latter queue extends to about 150 people – stretching around on to Henry Street.

[*'We're Muslim and we're just like you': The women taking care of Dublin's homeless*]

The first invited forward are families, explains Lorraine O'Connor, who founded the MSE's street kitchen nine years ago.

"I like the children to get what they need, and go. I don't like to see the children hanging around," she says.

Achta, from India, is here with his daughter Aveda (10). "I don't have job," he says. "I am looking – cleaning, anything, no problem. That's why I come here and get some help. When your child is hungry you must get food to eat. God is great."

Another father is with his sons, aged 12 and 13. "My English not good," he says. They arrived from Nablus, in the Palestinian West Bank, five months ago and are living in the Baleskin reception centre. Asked how they find Ireland, he smiles: "At first hard. Now, like Ireland."



A family at the Muslim Sisters of Éire soup kitchen for the needy at the GPO on Friday. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

Several people are in wheelchairs, on walking frames or very frail. A volunteer assists an older man who is moving slowly, stooped and using a white stick, helping him to choose items. The retired warehouse operative, aged 73, rests a cup of tea on a ledge.

“I come every Friday. They are very good and there is plenty of everything there. I have a little [vision] in the left eye but nothing in the right,” he says, his hand shaking as he points to his eyes. “I am on a gluten-free diet so everything for me is dearer than everything else.”

Marian, who appears to be in her 70s, says services such as this are “certainly” important. “People are homeless. People are lonely. People come for food but they enjoy the company. I try to come every Friday, for all of those things.”

Clothes, hygiene packs, sleeping bags and tents are also available.

Gareth (44), from Ballyfermot, is sleeping in a tent in a park. Recently diagnosed with cancer, he says he has an upset stomach. “I am just looking for socks and jocks.”

Asked how he coped in the recent sub-zero temperatures, he says: “So cold. These soup runs are very important. Only for them we’d be lost.”

Joey (60), also living in a tent, says: “The food runs are essential. With the money we get today we can’t go to cafes. This is a community, a meeting place and the people are very good to people.”

Asked his view on plans to regulate street kitchens, he says: “Ireland has become a place for the privileged ... They are trying to push the homeless out to the suburbs. It’s about tourism, money, business. It’s not about compassion. It would be a bad day if these closed.”



Ismail Benarab, owner of the Golden Olive restaurant in Clonskeagh, prepares 60 chicken dinners at a steep discount for the Muslim Sisters of Éire soup kitchen for the needy on Fridays. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

Shortly after 8pm an unexpected visitor is Lord Mayor of Dublin Emma Blain. She was not aware The Irish Times would be here. The Fine Gael politician wants to see “for myself the great work the [Muslim] Sisters [of Éire] are doing”.

Blain arrives with a party colleague, Cllr Gayle Ralph, at a time when there are controversial plans, first mooted by Dublin City Council four years ago, to regulate the estimated 24 voluntary on-street soup kitchens.

There is no plan to end such services, she insists. “All parties are in agreement, the work the soup runs do is necessary and worthwhile. There’s no draft bylaw, nothing drafted yet but certain things need to be put in place to protect the people who are using the services and the people providing the services.”

The council envisages a permit system setting out “operating hours, locations, restrictions and adherence to any other relevant regulations”.

The plan was set out in 2021 but not acted on. The publication last October of the report from the Taoiseach’s taskforce for Dublin however appears to have resurrected it. While these



Lorraine O’Connor, who founded the Muslim Sisters of Éire charity in 2010, speaks with the Dublin Lord Mayor Emma Blain and Sinn Féin Dublin city councillor Daithí Doolan at the Friday night soup kitchen at the GPO. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

...volunteers involved for Dublin, however, appears to have requested that these services were “well-intentioned”, it said they put “the privacy, dignity and the safety of people” using them at risk and that such activity “degrades the public realm”.

The draft programme for government, published last week, commits to ensuring “on-street charitable services are properly regulated”.

Blain describes the MSE’s operation as “the gold standard”. Its volunteers are Garda-vetted and trained in child safety and food safety to the HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control point) standard. All hot meals are provided, free or at cost, by professional, HACCP-compliant kitchens.

Operation costs are between €2,500 and €2,900 a month, funded by public donations, Lorraine O’Connor says.



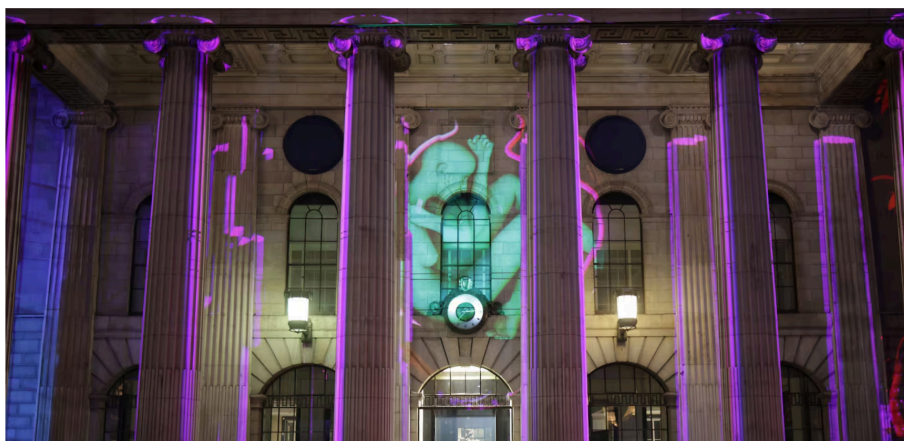
Michael Collins, a driver for the Muslim Sisters of Éire, picking up a food donation from a Tesco in Ranelagh. The preparation for the Friday meal beings a few days beforehand, with numerous stops all the way, collecting food from various locations, saving the most perishable items for Friday morning. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

“Need is only increasing,” she says. “Before Covid the most meals we did was 250 in a night. Since then, people lost their jobs, Ukraine war, the cost of everything. We have people who cannot pay their rent, families in hotel accommodation, in hostels, rough sleepers. Tonight we had 470 meals, they all went.”

As she speaks, O’Connor is observing constantly, calling directions to volunteers. She greets people by name, asking if they’ve got a cup of tea yet. “You are more than welcome, sweetheart,” she tells an older woman.

She has yet to see a Government report that includes the voices of people who use services such as MSE’s. None published to date, including a 2021 Dublin City Council-commissioned report, includes the views of soup-kitchen users.

“What is degrading is what’s happening to people,” she says. “The Government need to look at the real problems. We’re outside the GPO. Yes it’s a national icon, but what would Michael Collins do if he was here? He’d be here feeding the people and he would be making sure it was outside the GPO for the Government to listen.”





People line up for the Muslim Sisters of Éire soup kitchen for the needy at the GPO on Friday. Photograph: Chris Maddaloni

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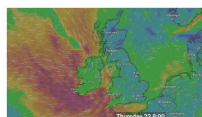
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