

## Presentation by Focus Ireland to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government

### Consideration of Reports –

- (i) 'Keeping a Home – Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless'<sup>1</sup>
- &
- (ii) 'Finding a Home – Families' Journeys out of Homelessness'<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Introduction (Mike Allen):

**1.1. Focus Ireland Strategic Plan 2017-2020**<sup>3</sup> prioritises two core responses to homelessness: 1) preventing homelessness and; 2) supporting people into housing. These two dimensions are delivered across an array of services across the country, targeting different 'types' of homelessness and varying support needs. In 2017 alone, we supported 700 families secure a home and escape from homelessness last year.

**1.2.** Much of the work that we do is **led by evidence and research**. The following two studies were commissioned to further our knowledge and understanding of prevention and sustained exits among families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Our research strategy has also been shared with Members of the Joint Committee which demonstrates how our research programme relates to our organisational strategy.

**1.3.** Key messages emerging from **the prevention study** tells us that:

- **Prevention works.** Families that were at high risk of becoming homeless were able to obtain or retain secure housing through a range of interventions
- **Case management by trained staff** plays an essential role in preventing homelessness in many cases. This is because of the complex range of issues that face families in housing crisis, even where the actual trigger for homeless risk is primarily economic. The human interaction in this relationship should not be underestimated.
- These interventions were **funded by two main sources:**
  - (i) local authorities through contacts with Focus Ireland established through competitive tendering (these services are not fully funded under these contracts and are supported by general Focus Ireland fundraising).
  - (ii) A Corporate Social Responsibility partnership with Bord Gais Energy. This shows the innovative and effective work that can be delivered by homeless organisations in a wide range of partnerships, where the autonomy of the organisation can be used to direct resources through evidence-based innovation.

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<sup>1</sup> Haran, N. and O'Shiochrú, S. (2017) *Keeping a Home: Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless*. Full report available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Haran-and-OShiochru-2017-Keeping-a-Home-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, K. and Harvey, B. (2017) *Finding a Home: Families' Journeys out of Homelessness*. Full report available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Walsh-and-Harvey-2017-Finding-a-Home-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Focus Ireland (2017) *Focus Ireland Strategic Plan 2017-2020*. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/organisational-strategy/>

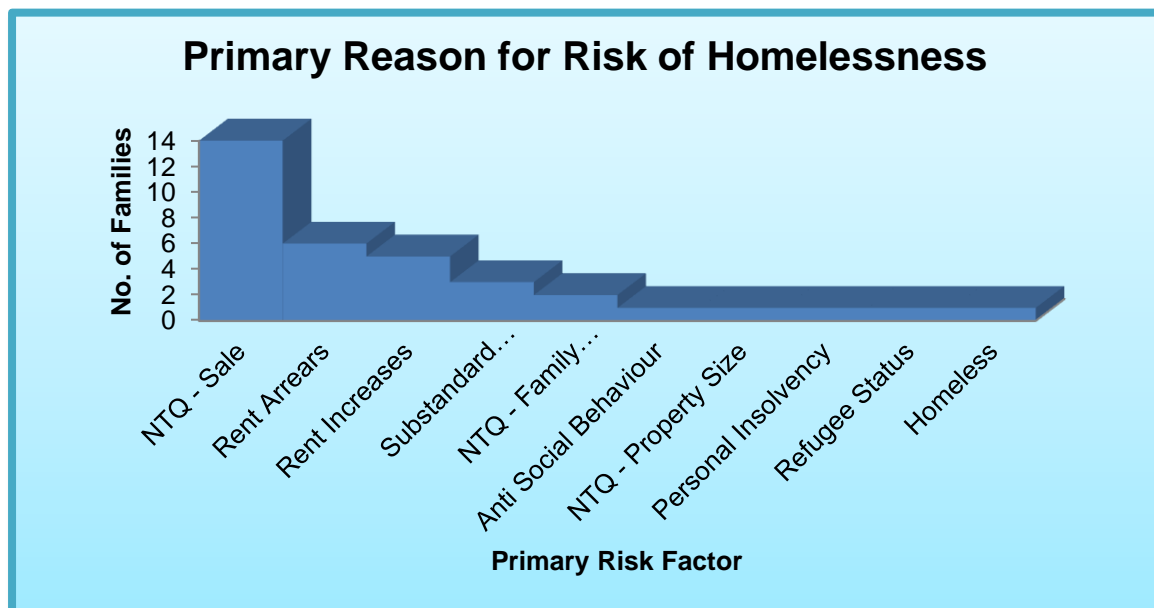
## 1.4. The **exits study** clearly demonstrates how:

- Sustained exits from homelessness can be achieved **even while there is an insufficient supply** of affordable housing.
- Again this study highlights the central role of **Case Management** in delivering positive outcomes. In this case the additional role of skilled child support workers is also highlighted
- An experience of homelessness can have **long-term impacts on children and families** even after homelessness is ended, but this may not always be the case. The length of time spent in homelessness and the age of the children emerge as the most significant factors.
- These interventions were primarily funded by **the DRHE, with Tusla and HSE funding the child support work**, and shortfalls met through general fundraising. Resources are not available to provide case managers to every homeless family or every child assessed as needing special support.
- The report raises a **range of important questions** that need to be explored – how can we assist those families where there are long-run impacts of homelessness? How can psychological and relationship supports be delivered? How can we ensure that no family experiences homelessness for prolonged periods? Why do some families return to homelessness? Focus Ireland is planning to explore these issues in further work, but believe more could be achieved in the context of a shared collaborative approach to evidence based learning, as outlined in the Research Strategy.

## 2. 'Keeping a Home': Key Findings (Séan O'Shiochrú):

This study looked at the experience of 35 families in five locations in Ireland who had used **the prevention services of Focus Ireland**; 34 of whom had avoided homelessness.

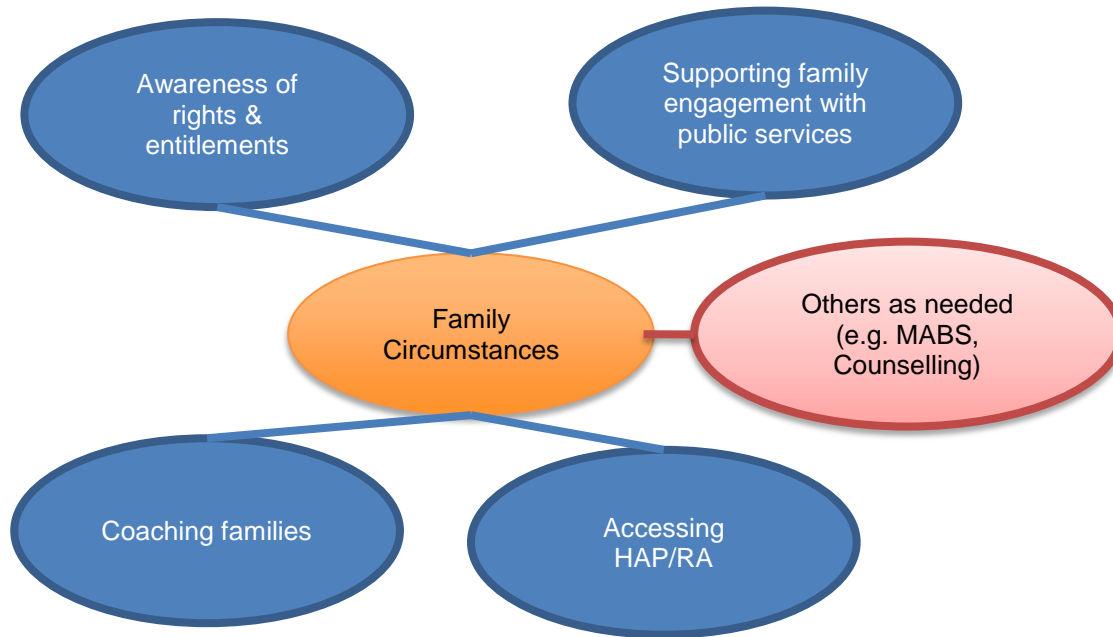
### 2.1. Main reason for risk of homelessness of research participants:



## 2.2. What works and why? - 5 key strategies in preventing family homelessness:

1. Building family awareness of rights & entitlements.
2. Assisting families to navigate state systems.
3. Coaching families.
4. Supporting families to access financial assistance.
5. Integrated package of prevention services.

## 2.3. These must be combined in a package of integrated support:



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## 2.4. How do we know these strategies work?

- Between 3 and 15 months after disengaging with Focus Ireland, 34 of the 35 families in the study had succeeded in avoiding homelessness.
- Not just 'what' works, but 'how'?

## 2.5. The 'how' of prevention - dealing with complexity:

- Any family can be at risk of homelessness: supports must be available irrespective of background; family status; economic status; ethnicity and cultural background, etc.
- A Case Management approach is effective: families need personalised, timely, flexible, hands-on support.
- Integrated and varied package of supports:
  - Information and practical advice.
  - Advocacy
  - Psychological support, non-judgemental approach, confidence-building.
  - Immediate support and solutions where available.

## 2.6. Short & medium-term solutions:

- Prevention services working with families can hope to achieve only reactive solutions.
- They support families in crisis, and do not address the structural causes of homelessness.

## 2.7. Interviewees proposed the following for medium-term:

- Effective implementation of the HAP payments.
- Improved regulation of the private rental market
- Increasing the supply of social housing.

## 2.8. Conclusion: How to avert 'risk'

- The importance of **holistic, family-orientated** services.
- Support designed to address the **immediate and varied support** needs of families accessing services.
- Communicating in a **respectful, non-judgemental** and humane manner

## 3. 'Finding a Home' – Key Findings (Kathy Walsh and Brian Harvey):

This was a study of 25 families who exited homeless since across the 4 Dublin local authorities (between March 2016- Sept 2016). Key findings include:

### 3.1. Sustained exits are possible. Exit 'enablers' include:

- Information and case management support of Focus Ireland key workers.
- Support from child support workers (where available).
- Capacity and tenacity of parents (to engage with the local authority/seek out rental properties – linked to the length of time in homeless accommodation).
- Level of support from family and friends (care and support).
- Particular family circumstances (e.g. a new baby with medical complications/claustrophobia).

### What the families told us:

*"We would not have managed to get out without our key worker, they helped us in so many ways they even came to viewings with us".*

*"We were lucky my mum and sister helped us out in every way they could. They were there for the kids they were there for me. They kept me sane."*

*"We had to get out. The kids were driving each other mad and they were driving me mad. The place was too small for the three of us for very long."*

### 3.2. 'Impediments' to exits included:

- High stress levels and negative emotions (linked to length of time living in emergency accommodation, and negative consequences of homelessness on family members

including relationship breakdown, addiction, behavioural problems in children, or poor performance in school, etc.).

- Lack of suitable affordable accommodation in preferred areas of Dublin (and near family support).
- Lack of case management and child support worker support.
- Practical difficulties and childcare issues to attend accommodation viewings and secure accommodation.
- Life events (leaving parents with limited energy and/or capacity).
  - Death of a partner/parent or other close family member
  - Unplanned pregnancy

### What the families told us:

*“We needed to find some place near family as, if I am ever to get back to education and get a job, I will need them to help with the kids. Being on my own, I really need that backup.”*

*“It was impossible for me to try and find a rental property. I had no one to mind the children and I could not ring them with me. No landlord wants a one-parent family with young children.”*

### 3.4. What helped **keep families in housing**?

- Affordable rent (deducted at source).
- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Location of accommodation (close to family/friends/schools).
- The sense of security in local authority and Approved Housing Body accommodation.
- Responsive landlords.
- Financial support to fit out the property (avoiding debt DEA & SP Exceptional Needs Payment).
- Previous experience of living independently.
- The shorter period a time a family was homeless the quicker they were to adjust to independent living.

### 3.5. Findings, conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 5 of report)

- The point of homelessness is a period of **high stress and panic**, but what follows is a 'long-duration, less intense but accumulating stress with boredom and poor conditions, with school being a key stress point. Many families lose all their possessions. While we need long-term solutions to family homelessness, alleviating the stress whilst homeless is also important.
- Families very much **favoured local authority accommodation because of its security**, affordability, standard and location. Some families can re-adapt very quickly. Second, approved housing bodies. Third, HAP, affordable but not secure. Last, private rented: insecure, high rents, poor conditions. Construction programme must be weighted to favour local authority accommodation.
- In sum, we must accentuate **good practices** that promote exit (support workers, moving-in payments); and address **bad practice** contributing to homelessness or inhibiting exits.

Many are **low-cost and involve changes in procedures:**

- **Prevention:** put in place accommodation options when families are due to become homeless. Ensure that the 'come-back-to-us-when-you-actually-homeless' practice never occurs;
- Stop the practice and use of the term of '**self-accommodation**' of families;
- End **substandard, overcrowded emergency accommodation**; place families in accommodation with cooking facilities and play areas for children;
- End practice of **daily signing-in** in person or by phone, replace with electronic/text;
- End practice of **removing families on housing waiting list** without consent or knowledge consent, meaning that they go to bottom of housing list again. Apply scanning, quality control systems, independent appeal;
- **End 'two-strikes-and-out' practice**, with accommodation offers to be 'reasonable', with a test of 'reasonability' and appeal system;
- Ensure move-in accommodation /housing is **floored and sufficiently furnished**;
- **Improve treatment of homeless in local authority offices**, with programme of dialogue with homeless and training.
- Finally, **a depot where families can temporarily store possessions** during the time that they are residing in emergency accommodation.

**End.**