

Focus Ireland submission to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government: Family & Child Homelessness

Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to attend the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government to discuss family and child homelessness.

Focus Ireland has been the leading NGO working with homeless families for over 30 years and has extensive experience across the country and in different contexts; including:

- We operate the Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) on behalf of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE), with additional funding from Tusla, the HSE, and our own fundraising. Focus Ireland's role is to support families to exit homelessness. The FHAT provides case management to almost 500 families, some of which are in Family Hubs managed by private or not-for profit organizations, while others are in hotels/B&Bs.
- Focus Ireland, in partnership with DRHE, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform successfully delivered the first Social Impact Bond programme from 2012-14 which supported over 150 long-term homeless families into secure homes, and established the effectiveness of the Focus Housing family support model.
- We have operated supported temporary accommodation for families with high support needs in Aylward Green for many years.
- Focus Ireland manages and provides support in one Family Hub in Limerick, which is an own door facility.
- Focus Ireland is currently engaged in an initiative involving both research on international best practices and networking with key stakeholders to identify how therapeutic supports for children who are homeless can be best delivered in a cross-sectoral way.
- Focus Housing (the AHB arm of Focus Ireland) acts as landlord to a number of families who would find it difficult to maintain a tenancy with other social or private landlords, with Focus Ireland providing tenancy support.
- Focus Ireland runs a 'Family Homelessness Prevention' service, funded in a CSR partnership by Bord Gas Energy, which provides advice and case management support to families at risk of becoming homeless. This service has delivered a number of innovative communications campaigns to reach families at risk of homelessness, with partners including the DRHE, Threshold and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The Committee is aware of the unprecedented growth in family homelessness in Ireland with official figures showing a 400% increase from 344 families in July 2014 to 1,729 families in April 2019. While there has been much positive work undertaken by local authorities, government departments and NGOs, including Focus Ireland, the numbers continue to grow.

Focus Ireland research in this area shows that the recent growth in family homelessness is the result of a dysfunctional housing system. While the underlying cause of the problem is the failure over many years to deliver an adequate supply of social housing, on a daily basis the problem manifests itself in the private rented sector – with 75% of homeless families renting their last stable home from a private landlord. Many families that are evicted spend long periods ‘doubled up’ with family or friends, so that there are a large number of families who have no home but are not in contact with homeless services.

This dysfunction and hidden homelessness combine to create a situation where hundreds of families are supported to leave homelessness each year but an even larger number are forced to enter, resulting in the growing numbers set out above.

Focus Ireland has consistently made the case that the answer to this crisis is the provision of an adequate supply of social and affordable housing, an appropriate allocations policy that meets the needs of the most vulnerable families and on-going support where necessary. In the immediate crisis, there is a need to increase the protections to those families in the private rental sector while simultaneously ensuring that landlords are encouraged to remain in the market.

It is important to acknowledge that there has been progress in providing social housing, with a significant increase in delivery and in ‘pipe-line’ projects. However, the total amount of housing being delivered remains far behind what is required to meet the demographic increase in housing demand – for instance IBEC calculate that 36,000 new housing units are needed each year just to stand still. Delivery of new social housing also remains well below demand. The reliance on the private rented sector to fill the gap with ‘social housing solutions’ was an inevitable part of the first stage of the housing recovery, but the continued reliance on this approach is increasingly problematic.

The recent Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO) *No Place Like Home* report has provided a valuable and insightful contribution to the debate on responding to the needs of families who are homeless. In particular, the voices of children are an important contribution to our collective understanding of the impact of family homelessness. In acknowledgement of this contribution we have focused this submission on our response to the OCO report.

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and welcome the Minister for Housing’s response to the report in seeking the views of voluntary organisations responding to family homelessness.

Scope of the Ombudsman for Children's report

It is important to remember that the Ombudsman's report focuses on Family Hubs – the highest quality emergency accommodation available to families who are homeless. While this focus is warranted¹ a number of observations should be made before considering the findings:

- *The majority of homeless children live in hotels/B&Bs, not Family Hubs.* The OCO report sets out that in August 2018, only 580 of the 2,821 children homeless in the Dublin Region – just a fifth – were staying in Family Hubs. Many of the families outside the Hub system do not have the benefit of support from a Case Manager; they have to manage homelessness alone.

Ensuring that every homeless family has both case management and child support workers regardless of the type of emergency accommodation they are staying in should be a priority.

- *Families need a home.* Many of the issues flagged in the Ombudsman's report are intrinsic to all emergency accommodation: whether Hub, B&B or hotel, congregated settings are not suitable for accommodating families for anything beyond an emergency period of a few weeks.

There is no 'perfect Hub': the most important thing for every one of the 1,729 families that were homeless in April is to ensure they have their own homes as quickly as possible.

- *Child Support Workers mitigate the trauma of homelessness.* In the context of the negative experiences families reported, both parents and children spoke appreciatively about the skills, kindness and diligence of the staff they worked with, particularly Child Support Workers, and the difference those staff made in helping them negotiate their way through homelessness.

Skilled staff focused on the needs of families can mitigate the traumatic impact of homelessness.

From Focus Ireland's perspective, many of the issues identified in the OCO report arise from the fact that Family Hubs were established in the absence of clearly articulated objectives. The implications of this lack of clarity are discussed further below.

What are Family Homeless Hubs for?

What is a Family Hub?

When considering the performance of any public policy initiative, we need to compare outcomes to the objectives set for the programme. However, the OCO makes clear that the programme of Family Hubs has been embraced without clear objectives, rationale or even an evaluated pilot. The report (p.7) quotes the clearest articulation of the policy behind Family Hubs as being:

"to provide a form of emergency accommodation that offers greater stability for homeless families, facilitates more co-ordinated needs assessment, and support planning, including on-

¹ The unsuitable nature of hotel/B&B accommodation is widely acknowledged, and *Rebuilding Ireland* sets a goal of ending the use of such accommodation.

site access to required services (such as welfare, health and housing service) and provides appropriate family supports and surroundings”.

However, it would appear that other policy objectives are expected or implied, for example, government spokespersons have frequently stated that families exit homelessness more quickly if they are allocated to Hubs than if they are not. It is not clear what this expectation is based on: there is evidence that *case management* helps families leave homelessness more quickly, but not that families exit homelessness from Hubs quicker than from B&Bs/hotels.

Focus Ireland’s experience is that families managing the crisis of homelessness spend most of their time dealing with immediate challenges such as getting children to distant schools, or finding a place to stay that night. The time and energy they have to devote to the process of finding a new home is limited by the time-consuming nature of such tasks. This is the value of case management: it provides support in addressing those practical day to day challenges, reducing family stress, as well as assisting with the task of finding a sustainable exit route from homelessness.

Confusion as to the purpose of Family Hubs has been exacerbated by the decision of the Department of Housing to reclassify families accommodated in the highest standard of Family Hub (with own door accommodation) as not ‘homeless’ for the purposes of statistical reports. This leaves families in a kind of ‘no-man’s land’: they remain homeless under the legislation governing determination of housing need by local authorities, yet despite not being included in the homeless population by the Department, they are still expected to move on from this accommodation, in which they are denied legal tenancy rights.

Who are Family Hubs for?

The stated objectives for Family Hubs would also imply that more vulnerable families be prioritised for accommodation in Family Hubs – these are the families where the need for stability, needs assessment and support planning, and on-site access to services is greatest. However, it could also be argued that there is merit in using Hubs to maximise exits for families whose homelessness is primarily caused by economic issues.

Clearly the staffing and support needs would be very different depending on which group of families was being accommodated. The lack of clarity about what the purpose of Family Hubs means that there is no clear idea of who should be accommodated in Family Hubs, what a Hub should provide, or the standards that should be adhered to by those providing Family Hubs.

Facilities in Family Hubs

The Ombudsman for Children states (p.7) that “it is impossible to identify a typical or standard Hub”. Hubs differ in respect of physical facilities resulting in different types of cooking arrangements, whether homework and play areas are available, the number of people expected to share one bedroom, rules in relation to visitors etc. These differences emerge strongly from the testimony of children living in Hubs.

It is therefore not possible to make general statements about Family Hubs, and it means that the protestations of some providers that “our Hubs aren’t like that” may well be valid, but overall, this absence of clarity and standards undermines public confidence that Family Hubs are meeting the needs of homeless families.

The stories of children living in Family Hubs make clear the need for a well-defined set of objectives for Family Hubs, from which standards for the accommodation, staffing, and services available should flow.

Child support workers

Focus Ireland's work with homeless families has demonstrated the value of including child support workers as an integral element of the supports needed by families coping with homelessness.

In 2013, Focus Ireland launched a Social Impact pilot project – in collaboration with the Homeless Agency and the Department of the Environment² - to support around 170 families, who had been homeless and living in B&Bs for several years, out of homelessness into secure homes.

The Focus Ireland model of support included Case Managers to work with families; Child Support Workers to respond to the different needs children of different ages have in coping with homelessness; as well as Accommodation Finders to source suitable housing.

The Social Impact pilot was an overwhelming success, with all but two families making sustained exits from homelessness. Evaluations highlighted the importance of Child Support Workers in achieving that outcome. These findings are echoed in the findings of the OCO report: families highlighted the positive role such support workers can play in children's lives – helping provide stability, supporting children (and parents, as appropriate) with the various challenges they face, helping them to stay in education while homeless, and supporting families make a *sustainable* exit from homelessness.

The Social Impact project was re-funded as the Family Homeless Action Team, with HSE (and later Tusla) continuing to fund Child Support Workers. While unfortunately the ratio of children to support workers has not kept pace with need, and there are now long waiting lists for support, this remains the model of Focus Ireland support.

Unfortunately, the lessons of this successful initiative were not carried forward into the Family Hub model and, to our knowledge, few Family Hubs employ child support workers as an integral part of their practice. From Focus Ireland's experience, any enhancement of the Family Hub model must include consideration of the benefits to families and children, and the sustainability of exits from homelessness that resourcing sufficient Case Managers and Child Support Workers provide.

The lack of clarity as to what Family Hubs are for means that there is no clear targeting around allocations, how Family Hubs should be staffed, and what on-site services are most appropriate.

While Focus Ireland agrees with the Ombudsman for Children's conclusion that a full evaluation of Family Hubs is warranted, we stress that such an evaluation needs to be based on a clear articulation of the rationale for, and objectives of, Family Hubs.

² Now the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and the Department of Housing, respectively.

The OCO Recommendations

The report of the Office for the Ombudsman for Children sets out a number of priorities for action, both from the perspective of the OCO (p.26-7), as well as from children themselves (p.53-60). In general, Focus Ireland supports these priorities and in response we make a number of specific observations below:

- Limits on the time spent in emergency accommodation:** Focus Ireland supports this recommendation, but stresses that the manner of its implementation is key. It should be framed as placing an obligation on local authorities to identify suitable accommodation for families within a given time period – no longer than six months. There should be no possibility that a homeless family is forced to leave emergency accommodation when they still have no home to go to. In addition local authorities who have restricted or removed homeless priority from their housing allocation schemes should reflect on the fact that this is removing an important route out of homelessness for these children and can increase the stigmatisation of the families experiencing homelessness.
- Accommodation practices:** Focus Ireland shares the OCO’s concern about the continued reliance on the practices of ‘one-night-only’ and ‘self-accommodation’, we are only too aware of the additional stress this places on families and the further trauma it imposes on children; we welcome the recommendation that a time frame be named in which to end such practices entirely.

Data: we welcome the recommendations in relation to better data on families who are homeless, in addition to the areas outlined in the OCO report, Focus Ireland highlights the need for more robust data on the length of time families are spending in ‘emergency’ accommodation. Publicly available data shows that the percentage of families who were more than 18 months in emergency accommodation has grown from 18%, 178 families in February 2017 to 27%, 341 families in March 2019. This recommendation could usefully be progressed through the Data Sub-Group proposed at the recent National Consultative Forum on Homelessness.



Source: Dublin Region Homeless Executive



- Combating stigma, supporting dignity:** Focus Ireland has already discussed the issue of reducing the stigma of homelessness with the Press Ombudsman, and supports the OCO recommendations in this regard. It would be helpful to explore the issue of producing guidelines on this issue.

The OCO report confirms many of Focus Ireland’s concerns about the traumatic impact of homelessness on children and parents. Becoming homeless is a traumatic event, that trauma is frequently exacerbated by the experience of living in emergency accommodation. In this context, we strongly support the OCO recommendation that practical measures – such as an increase in therapeutic supports and child support workers – that could be implemented to “support the resilience, dignity and self-worth of children and parents while they are living in emergency accommodation” (p.30).

As noted above, Focus Ireland is currently engaged in an initiative to identify how therapeutic supports for children can be best delivered in a cross-sectoral way, efficiently and effectively, and we draw the Committees and the Department's attention to that initiative.

- *Increased space:* We agree with the recommendations in relation to adequate space, including communal space, and separate bedrooms for children and parents; Focus Ireland believes these standards should be included in a clear definition of the role and purpose of Family Hubs, as discussed above - there is little point in having a named strand of better emergency accommodation unless appropriate minimum requirements are set.

Focus Ireland further notes that the best form of short-term homeless accommodation is undoubtedly 'own door' accommodation, which overcomes many of the physical limitations of shared and institutional accommodation. This is the main form of accommodation provided to homeless families in the UK, and while data for families in 'emergency accommodation' and 'own door temporary accommodation' are published separately they are all considered homeless.

A number of local authorities in Ireland appear to be following this approach rather than the 'Family Hub' model and this should be encouraged and supported by policy.

- *Restrictions on freedom:* OCO recommendations concerning greater freedom for children are clearly desirable, but need to be assessed within the context of what is inevitably an institutional setting. Recommendations in relation to alcohol and drug use are equally important and valid, yet raise real practical challenges in practice. While there would be a strong case for some Hubs to be designated as drug and/or alcohol free spaces, this inevitably leads to the imposition of strong rules and some parents being barred. This could result in the families with the greatest social problems being accommodated together in facilities where drug use and chaotic behaviour is tolerated, and this would clearly not be acceptable.

This dilemma again highlights the fact that, while homelessness is a dreadful experience for all families, it places even greater risks on the children of families who were struggling before the crisis of homelessness occurred. Focus Ireland has 20 years' experience of working with high support needs families in Aylward Green and would be happy to share our experience and service standards for such services.

More generally, the above emphasises Focus Ireland's position that institutional congregate responses to homelessness are inappropriate and unsuitable, particularly for children.

Conclusion

Focus Ireland has long called for a dedicated strategy to tackle family homelessness. Adult homeless is a complex issue requiring responses from many Departments and Agencies but family homelessness is far more complex. While Rebuilding Ireland notes that family homelessness is different than adult homelessness, no attempt has yet been made to set out what these differences are and what implications they have for policy and practice. While providing homes is the ultimate solution to this problem, it is an insufficient policy to address the needs of the children and parents who remain homeless during this prolonged crisis. A multi-faceted, integrated and child-centred strategy is urgently required.