

Focus Ireland Submission to Department of Social Protection in advance of the Pre-Budget Forum 2017

Introduction

Focus Ireland is one of Ireland's leading non-governmental organisations providing quality services, support and housing to people who are homeless or at risk of losing their home. Working with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive we are the lead agency supporting families experiencing homelessness in Dublin.

From 2011, there has been an unprecedented increase in the level of homelessness in Ireland, with large scale family homelessness emerging as a new and fast growing problem. All published research¹²³ has shown that the majority of the families becoming homeless had their last secure home in the private rental sector. In the early stages of the crisis the overwhelming majority of these families reported that they had lost their homes because they could not cover the costs of rising rents. More recently, landlords exiting the market have emerged as a substantial reported cause of family homelessness.

While less pronounced there has also been a significant increase in the number of single people and young people experiencing homelessness.

Since coming into office the current government, with the support of the Dáil, has shown a renewed commitment to addressing the housing and homelessness crisis, and the full Government programme within a promised 'Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness' is awaited at the time of writing.

Addressing the issue of homelessness requires a functioning housing system that meets the needs of our society but it also requires that there is a safety net in place to protect those who experience some form of crisis and lack the social and financial resources to prevent that crisis leading to homelessness.

In this regard the Department of Social Protection has a critical role to play, most particularly in the prevention of homelessness.

¹ Walsh, K. Harvey, B. (2015) *Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness-The Families Experience*. Dublin, Housing Agency

² Focus Ireland (2016) Survey of families that became homeless during March 2016. *Insights into Family Homelessness 4*. Dublin, Focus Ireland.

³ O'Donoghue-Hynes, B. (2015) *Analysis of 78 newly homeless families accommodated by Dublin's homeless services in August 2015: A briefing paper*. Dublin, Dublin Region Homeless Executive.

The proposals set out in this document, if implemented, would constitute a social protection response proportionate to the scale of the crisis facing individuals and families.

Basic Social Welfare Rates

The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data shows a yearly increase in consistent poverty rates since 2008. It is clear that if social welfare rates do not keep pace with inflation we see those individual and families who rely on these payments falling into consistent poverty. The long-term consequences of this are dire for both the individuals and family concerned and more broadly for society.

However, if an individual or family can access a payment that enables them to live above the poverty line they are more likely to be healthy, economically active and valued members of society. To begin to reverse the trend of increasing poverty in the country Focus Ireland is calling for the basic rates of social protection to be increased to bring them broadly in line with the rate of inflation (CPI) since the rate was set in 2010. Over the 12 month period June 2015-May 2016 the average rate of CPI increase when compared with December 2010 was 3.92%⁴. To return welfare rates to their 2010 values would require an increase of €7.35 per week in the basic rate. Focus Ireland are calling for an increase of €7.35.

Addressing Youth Homelessness

Focus Ireland have a long history of working with young people experiencing homelessness. Our front-line report a growing number of young people who have been rendered homeless as a result of the reduced rate of social welfare paid to welfare recipients under 26 years of age. This experience is confirmed by research in Ireland by Dr Paula Mayock et al⁵, and a similar pattern is found in other countries which have followed a similar route in relation to welfare payments for young people.⁶

The policy objectives of reducing the payments to those under 26 were generally to incentivise young people to take up training and employment. It is regrettable that the Department has not invested any of the €148.4m⁷ a year which it has saved through this measure in any evaluation of whether it has had any of its intended outcomes. As such the policy case for this measure is unproven. As a result it can be viewed as an austerity measure which should be reversed in general. While its general impact is unclear it is however certain that it has had very negative unintended impacts on a small number of young people. It is an explicit assumption of this policy that young people who get into difficulty can return to the family home. As a result, special provision was made for care leavers to relieve the full adult rate. However, no safety net was put in place for young people without a care background who cannot return home. For such young people who become homeless training and labour market opportunities are virtually impossible to realise given the chaotic and insecure nature of life without a home.

Focus Ireland has proposed solutions and worked collaboratively with the Department of Social Protection to develop pilot schemes that would allow some of those young people

⁴ CPI excluding housing downloaded 11/7/16

⁵ Mayock, P. Parker, S. Murphy, A. (2014) *Young people, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*. Dublin, Focus Ireland.

⁶ Benjaminsen, L. Busch-Geertsema, V. (2009) 'Labour market reforms and homelessness in Denmark and Germany: Dilemmas and consequences.' *European Journal of Homelessness*, 3, 127-153, Brussels, FEANTSA.

⁷ Dail Eireann, Debates, 25th November 2015, 200-201.

who are homeless to access training. However the department has not been able to agree or fund any of these initiatives and despite repeated commitments made by the previous Minister for Social Protection to the Dáil no mechanism to support these young people has been put in place.

Focus Ireland is calling for an exemption to the reduced rates for all those under the age of 26 to be provided to those who have been assessed as having a social housing need by their local authority in addition to being assessed as being homeless. This increased welfare payment should be supported by a clear labour market integration plan as part of the care plan devised with the help of their key worker. The social and economic cost of young people using emergency homeless services is much heavier than giving these young people the opportunity to lead an independent life.

Care Leavers

Young people who were in the care of the State for the 12 months before they reached 18 are entitled to the full Jobseekers or Supplementary Welfare allowance. However, this exception to the above rule only applies between the ages of 18 and 24. As a result, once the young person reaches the age of 25, their weekly income will fall significantly (from €188 to €144 if in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance). Given the small number of young people who would benefit from receiving the full rate for the year they are 25, removing this anomaly would not place an undue burden on the State.

Prevention for those leaving Direct Provision

To better understand and respond to the crisis of family homelessness Focus Ireland instigated a periodic survey of families placed in emergency accommodation during a prescribed month.

The most recent survey conducted with those families placed in emergency accommodation in April 2016 found that 17% (n12) of families coming into homeless in that month were 3rd country nationals and 40% (n5) of those had previously been in asylum system. Of these 5 families, 4 had in fact been experiencing homelessness since leaving the direct provision (DP) system. On leaving DP they experienced a period of hidden homelessness before engaging with homeless services.

The June 2015 report of the working group charged with reporting on improvements in the Direct Provision system⁸ found that on the 16th February 2015 there were 679 people who have been granted status but were unable to leave direct provision accommodation. Some of these families are leaving DP and accessing temporary support from family and friends in the hope that they can move on from there but in the medium to long term this is not sustainable and for some this has led to homelessness.

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<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Report%20to%20Government%20on%20Improvements%20to%20the%20Protection%20Process,%20including%20Direct%20Provision%20and%20Supports%20to%20Asylum%20Seekers.pdf/Files/Report%20to%20Government%20on%20Improvements%20to%20the%20Protection%20Process,%20including%20Direct%20Provision%20and%20Supports%20to%20Asylum%20Seekers.pdf>

There is a clear need for a designated multi-disciplinary team who can provide support to this individuals and families as they make the transition from living in direct provision. A designated service would obviously need to include support in accessing housing supports but also support with access to training and employment supports, and should be led by the Department of Social Protection.

Prevention for Single Parents

Of those families experiencing homelessness in May 2016, 67% were lone parents compared with 26% of families being lone parents in the general population⁹.

A number of these single parent families have identified the termination of their lone parent payment when their child turned 7 as the catalyst for their homelessness.

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon with multiple causation so it would led be unwise to jump to policy conclusions from such reports. However, given the high level of homelessness among lone parents, we believe there is an overwhelming case for undertaking an independent study of the pathways of lone parents into homelessness, so that we can identify the gaps in support that exist or have been created by changes in the social protections system and identify appropriate supports to prevent homelessness for this group.

Focus Ireland propose that the Department commission independent research on the influence of the policy decision to reduce lone parent payments on levels of homelessness and to evaluate the particular support needs of all lone parents both to prevent homelessness in the future and to support sustained exits from homelessness

Rent Supplement

Focus Ireland strongly welcomes the recent decision to increase rent supplement levels. We believe this is an essential emergency response which will help to keep people in their homes. However, given the length of time since the rates were last reviewed, the increase of 15-30% may not match market rents in Dublin or other cities. As such, rent supplement rates must be subject to an annual independent review process, to ensure that they keep pace with the rental market.

In addition, those who are paying top-ups in order to meet their rent must be made aware that they contact their Community Welfare Officer and receive a discretionary increase without negative repercussions. A campaign is necessary in order to highlight the fact that those 'topping up' can access additional funding and that top-ups will be 'regularised'¹⁰

Finally, the Department of Social Protection should introduce rigorous policing of reported instances of landlords refusing to accept rent supplement even though so doing is now illegal.¹¹

⁹ Census 2011

¹⁰ (From Department of Social Protection press release:

http://www.merrionstreet.ie/MerrionStreet/en/News-Room/Releases/Rent_Supplement_Housing_Assistance_Payment_to_increase_in_both_rural_urban_areas.html)

¹¹ http://www.ihrec.ie/download/pdf/important_changes_to_equality_law_for_rental_market.pdf