

# Election 2016 Manifestos: Setting out credible responses to the housing and homelessness crises.

## Introduction

All political parties and independents recognise that Ireland is currently facing a set of interlinked crises in the area of housing. These relate to large number of households with unsustainable mortgage arrears, escalating private rents, a housing shortage in most urban areas and rising levels of individual and family homelessness. These housing problems are increasingly impacting on other areas such as wage rates, tourism and decisions on foreign direct investment. It is likely that all party manifestos will attempt to respond to some or all of these issues and they will feature in both the long and short elections campaigns.

Focus Ireland believes that, as one of Ireland's leading homeless and housing organisations, we can make a useful contribution to the understanding of these issues, with particular consideration for the situation facing the most vulnerable, whose voice is too seldom heard.

Focus Ireland acknowledges the support for people who are homeless voiced across the political spectrum. However, delivering real and sustainable solutions to housing requires consistent and sustained policy responses which tend not to show immediate results – exactly the sort of policy responses which are difficult to bring forward during elections.

Addressing homelessness requires a sustained commitment, strong principals and a clear vision of what is needed by families, communities and society. We believe that establishing such principals in party General Election manifestos will help sustain such longer term policy making.

With homelessness rising each month, we are concerned that parties will shy away from important commitments which have been made in recent years to 'end long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough. However, we believe that the momentum towards achieving these objectives can be maintained in a credible way. Focus Ireland maintains this is necessary to galvanise the action needed to respond to the current crisis in a progressive manner.

This document puts forward a series of policy proposals set out under the conventional Departmental headings, and broken down the headings of: '*Prevention of homelessness*', '*From homelessness to home*' and '*Emergency responses to homelessness*'. We hope this framework assists manifesto drafters to see where our approaches can support their draft programmes.

## 1. Overarching Commitments

Before setting out the Department-by-Department considerations, we believe that there are a number of underlying principals and commitments which should help inform any political position on this issue.

### *Referendum on a Right to a home*

The Convention on the Constitution [recommended](#) that Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR), which includes a right to housing, should be included in the Irish Constitution<sup>1</sup>. This would of course require

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/Right2HomeConvention>

a referendum and Focus Ireland believes that there should be a commitment to holding such a referendum during the term of the next Dáil. Such a change in the constitution would not in itself eliminate homelessness, but it would make a strong statement about the values of our society. There is more detail about ESCR and specifically the right to housing on the Constitutional Convention [web-site](#).

We are calling on all political parties to make a commitment to such a referendum in their manifestos.

### ***End long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough.***

When the objectives of ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough were adopted by Government in 2008 it was a historic step forward in our national understanding of homelessness and our commitment to tackling it. Despite the difficulties in achieving these goals it is of critical importance that they are not abandoned.

These commitments have widespread social and political support. They were first made by the Fianna Fail/Green Government in the national homelessness strategy 'The Way Home' in 2008, and were subsequently adopted by the Fine Gael/Labour Government in 2013. Sinn Fein also supported this objective in its 2011 Election Manifesto, and politicians from other parties and independents have also endorsed it.

While in each case this commitment was linked to a particular target date, it should be understood primarily as a statement that homelessness is not a 'natural phenomenon' but rather is the result of particular political and economic policies - and can be solved.

Ending long-term homelessness (Which means people remaining homeless for more than 6 months) is not the same as ending homelessness entirely. This commitment recognises that some people will become homeless due to a variety of factors, but with the right mix of public policies they can quickly return to mainstream accommodation. Sometimes these individuals need additional support services, but not always.

Targets to end long-term homelessness have not been met, so there is a strong temptation to completely abandon this approach. However, when Focus Ireland looks back over our 30 years of working to end homelessness, we see clear reasons to believe that progress is possible and that strong, ambitious commitments drive that progress, even when the target is not immediately achieved.

For instance, in the past 30 years we have seen an end to children, alone and separated from their families, sleeping rough on our streets, which was commonplace when Focus Ireland was established. While the 2010 target was not achieved, it is important to recognise that in cities like Cork, rough sleeping was all but eradicated for the first time. In Dublin the numbers of people sleeping rough in winter 2010 was the lowest ever recorded (70).

Ending the need to sleep rough is, at one level, simply having enough emergency beds available for those who need them, and this is discussed further under 'emergency responses' below. However, the lessons of the last ten years demonstrate that even the strongest commitment to end long-term homelessness cannot be delivered unless there is a parallel commitment to provide an adequate supply of affordable homes, and this is discussed below.

### ***Governance structures***

Tackling homelessness requires the active collaboration of a range of government departments around agreed goals and targets. Because circumstances can change quite dramatically, it demands a form of collective flexibility, which is difficult for Government to achieve. It also requires the active participation and engagement with the voluntary organisations which provide most of the front-line services.

After a number of years, the current Government has now established a strong framework to tackle homelessness. Progress on an 80 point 'Implementation Plan' is monitored by a broad National Consultative Committee on Homelessness and is reported on a regular basis to the Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Sector Reform.

Clearly improvements can be made in the functioning of any governance structure, but it is essential that any incoming government recognise the importance of maintaining such structures, or similar alternatives, to ensure that the combined energies of all government departments and voluntary organisations can be marshalled to tackling the problem.

## **Maintaining budgets**

Public funding for homeless services comes primarily from the Department of Environment (Section 10) through local authorities, which must cover at least 10% of the costs from their own resources. Important funding also comes from the HSE (in relation to social inclusion, mental and general health) and Tusla (in respect of care leavers, youth and unattached children).

The Department of Environment funding was increased in 2010 and 2015, but reduced in the intervening years; other funding lines have been substantially cut, year on year. Staff in homeless services have foregone pay increments and in many cases seen pay cuts over the last 6 years, and yet services have been cut to the bone. Further cuts in any of these grants would lead to closure of essential services. While wages in the voluntary sector are not linked to public sector wages, it is important that staff in these front-line services are taken into account in the broader consideration of public sector pay.

There needs to be a commitment to increase funding for services, at least in line with inflation, until there is a significant decline in the numbers who are homeless. A commitment to set budgets early so that homeless services can plan would improve the efficiency of spending and be very welcome in the sector.

## **2. Department of Environment, Community and Local Government.**

- **Preventing Homelessness**
  - **Amend Section 10 of housing act to support prevention**
  - **Rent Certainty and Secure Occupancy**
  - **Legislate to protect tenants in buy-to-let properties**
  - **Strengthen the Housing protocol for young people leaving care**
- **From homelessness to home**
  - **Commit to building of at least 40,000 socially rented homes in the lifetime of the government**
  - **Ensure that Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) rates are review annually.**
  - **Resource housing first teams with the necessary move-on accommodation.**
- **Emergency responses to homelessness**
  - **Ensure there are sufficient emergency beds to accommodate all individuals and families that are assessed as homeless**

### **2.1 Preventing Homelessness**

#### **Amend Section 10 of the housing act to support prevention of homelessness.**

The importance and cost effectiveness of preventing homelessness has been recognised since the Department of Environment's *Homelessness – A Preventative Strategy* in 2002. However, the current legal definition of homelessness and the wording of Section 10 of the Housing Act (1988) refer exclusively to people who are already homeless. While central and local government has been flexible in interpreting this legislation, the weak legal basis results in preventative interventions that are underdeveloped and piecemeal

Amending the Housing Act 1988 would facilitate local authorities to harness skills from other sectors and to more effectively meet the needs of the homeless strategy. Two amendments are needed. The first is an amendment to Section 2 that introduces the concept of and provides a definition of 'at risk of homelessness'. This serves to locate the point at which local authorities can interact with a person's housing support issues, and focus attention on practical steps to avert homelessness. A similar definition of 'threatened with homelessness' was introduced in the UK in 1996, with overall very positive effects.

The second element is to create, under Section 10, provisions which enable the funding of suitably approved bodies to deliver the various types of intervention that will deliver on the objective of preventing homelessness. This change would facilitate local authorities in planning and delivering a range of internationally proven interventions including family reconnection, hospital and prison in-reach and rapid rehousing. See more on this issue [here](#).<sup>2</sup>

#### **Create rent certainty in the private rented market**

Escalating rents in the private rented sector is one of the primary drivers of rising homelessness. Legislation passed in 2004 increased the level of regulation in the private rented sector and created a level of certainty for both landlords and tenants with the introduction of a standard 4 year tenancy contract. This

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<sup>2</sup> <http://bit.ly/PreventHomelessnessLaw>

set the scene for a doubling of the size of the sector over the following ten years, with 20% of Irish households now renting their homes from private landlords. However, with rising rents in recent years the security provided by the 2004 act has proven illusory, as tenants can essentially find themselves evicted by the unrestricted right of landlords to increase rents.

To date, efforts to control rents have been limited to the decision of the Department of Social Protection to reduce and then freeze rent supplement levels for those on low incomes. While this has had no effect in moderating rent increases, it has forced many households out of their homes or left them with no alternative but to illicitly 'top up' their rent payment by bridging the gap between the rent supplement limit and the actual rent. This has left many families struggling to provide for other necessary basics, and is a primary cause of the current rise in homelessness.

The National Economic and Social Council has recently published a series of detailed reports which make a case for '[Secure Occupancy](#)'<sup>3</sup>, and the OECD recently published [important research](#) demonstrating the positive impact that such policies can have on the private rented market<sup>4</sup>.

The Private Rental legislation already regulates rents by stating that they can only be reviewed on an annual basis and that increases should be in line with market changes. Tenants can refer disagreements on such annual reviews to the Private Rental Tenancy Board (PRTB) for resolution. Linking rents to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) would regulate rent and ensure a fair deal for landlord and tenant.

It would also serve to provide some level of protection to those in receipt of rent supplement as it would protect against the 20% annual increases in rent that Focus and other service providers have seen tenants fall victim to on an ongoing basis. This would also serve to protect the exchequer from the same swings, given that the private rental market is likely to continue to play a significant role in social housing provision with the role out of the housing assistance payment (HAP).

#### ***Legislate to provide legal protection to those renting if their accommodation is under receivership***

In the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2015 there was a welcome decrease in the numbers of buy-to-let mortgage in arrears, however, over 35 thousand remain in arrears with 15,386 of these over 720 days in arrears<sup>5</sup>.

If these properties come into the receivership process, the individuals and families that are living there can be left in very precarious positions as the receiver will seek vacant possession. In her time as Minister for housing Jan O'Sullivan TD spoke of bringing forward legislation that would require receivers who take over rented housing to accept the full duty of landlords providing a level of protection for these families, but this was never forthcoming<sup>6</sup>. NESC has proposed that consideration should be given to bringing such homes into public ownership.

Given the scale of the difficulties in the rental market and in buy-to-let mortgages legislative support for those individual and families who are put at risk of homelessness in spite of meeting all of their duties as tenants is more than warranted.

#### ***Annual, transparent & independent review of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) levels***

Currently the rates for the Housing Assistance payment (HAP)<sup>7</sup> simply mirror those established by the Department of Social Protection for rent supplement, with the important difference that HAP does not permit the individual discretion about rent levels which Community Welfare Officers can exercise with RS.<sup>8</sup> The DoSP lead role arises from the history of the scheme and the fact that the majority of the initial budget for HAP will be transferred from the Department of Social Protection to the Department of Environment Community and Local Government.

The level of Rent Supplement is set through an irregular, opaque process by a section of the Department of Social Protection applying a wide range of policy objectives. HAP is defined as a social housing support<sup>9</sup> and as such is there to meet long-term housing need.

The Department of Environment should take the lead for setting the framework of rents which will be covered by state subsidy and should establish an independent and transparent mechanism to review these

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<sup>3</sup> [bit.ly/NESCsecureoccupancy](http://bit.ly/NESCsecureoccupancy)

<sup>4</sup> [bit.ly/OECDrentsreport2015](http://bit.ly/OECDrentsreport2015)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.centralbank.ie/press-area/press-releases/Pages/ResidentialMortgageArrearsandRepossessionsStatisticsQ42014.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/jan-o-sullivan-seeks-review-of-law-for-tenants-under-control-of-receivers-1.1495641>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2014/en/si/0576.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Maximum-Rent-Limits-by-County.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2014/en/act/pub/0021/index.html>

annually. A manifesto commitment to this process reform would be welcomed by large numbers of people in the private rented sector.

### **Strengthen the Housing protocol for young people leaving care**

Young people who have grown up in state care continue to have a higher than average risk of becoming homeless as adults. The protocol on young people leaving care<sup>10</sup> was a welcome addition supporting young people leaving care through ensuring that there is clear direction to local authorities. However, this needs to be further developed. Local authorities have to be instructed to ring-fence a number of units each year for the most vulnerable young people leaving care, based on assessments from Tulsa about the level of need.

## **2.2 From homelessness to homes**

### **Commitment to provision a minimum of 33,750 new social housing units over the lifetime of the government**

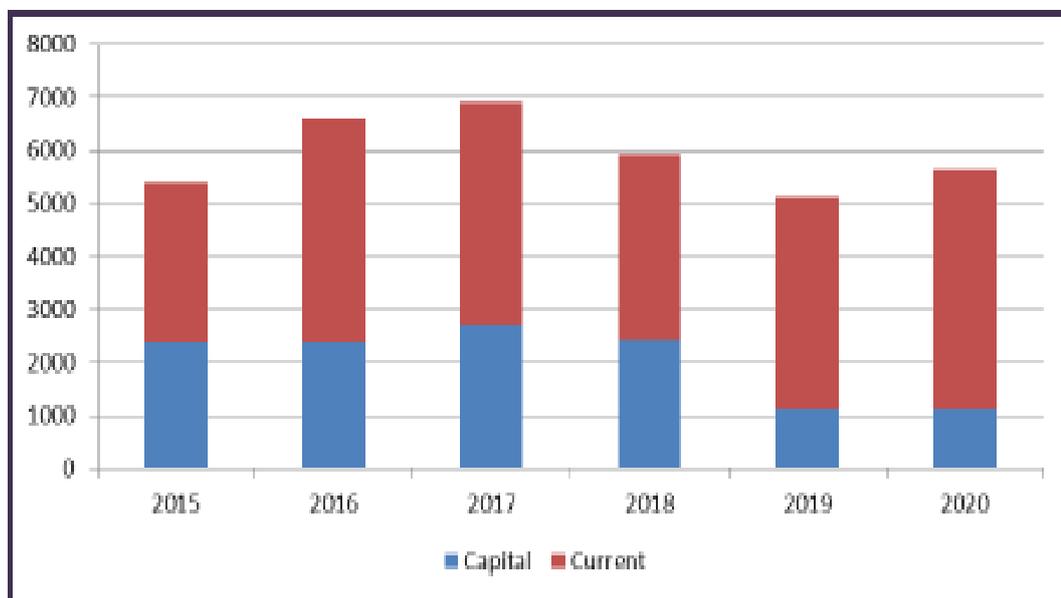
Lack of affordable housing supply is one of the key problems contributing to the scale of the homeless crisis we are now experiencing.

The current government has produced and is implementing the Construction 2020 strategy<sup>11</sup>. The Housing Agency calculates that we need to deliver at least 20,000 new homes each year just to keep up with rising demand<sup>12</sup>.

While increases in general housing construction will have eventual knock-on benefits for people on low income and those at risk of homelessness, these will be very slow to emerge and may not address the underlying problems for low income and vulnerable households. For this reason the provision of an adequate stock of affordably price socially rented housing is critical. In this area the Government has published and is committed to implementing the Social Housing Strategy 2020 with an 'upfront exchequer commitment' of €1.5billion. This will deliver 18,000 new social homes in the three years up to the end of 2017, either through building, acquisition or leasing, with a commitment of a further 17,000 by the end of 2020.

Table 1: showing indicative breakdown of new social housing between build/acquisition and lease

**Figure B: Housing Units to be Delivered: Capital and Current 2015-2020**



During 2016 and 2017 the strategy commits to 6,758 units per year, while in the subsequent three years this falls to 5,556.

There is a commitment to bring a further 75,000 social housing units into social housing provision by 2020 through schemes such as HAP. Most of these units will essentially be transfers of Rent Supplement tenants to HAP leases, so are not likely to represent an increase in either overall housing supply or even an

<sup>10</sup> Housing Circular 46/2014

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.merriestreet.ie/en/ImageLibrary/Social\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_20141126.pdf](http://www.merriestreet.ie/en/ImageLibrary/Social_Strategy_Document_20141126.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> National Statement of Housing Supply and Demand 2014 and Outlook for 2015-17

increase in 'socially rented' housing. However, since RS tenants are currently included in the Social Housing waiting list, this should substantially reduce the headline number on this list.

Given the economic situation from which we are emerging, the commitment of resources to build social housing is welcome - and given the level of housing need in the state it is critical. The delivery mechanism and framework of the Social Housing Strategy is also very positive and represents significant progress in social housing delivery in Ireland. Any new Government committed to delivering social housing would need to retain the core of this approach.

Most political criticism of the Government Social Housing Strategy has been that it is insufficiently ambitious given the length of the social housing waiting lists. However, in our view the fundamental challenge that the Social Housing Strategy faces will be in actually delivering the number of units already committed to.

Focus Ireland is asking all parties to, at a minimum; meet the commitments made for the first two years of the Social Housing Strategy 2020 (6,750 units per annum), and to continue that pace of construction/leasing so that a government elected in 2016 with a 5 year mandate would commit to ensuring that 33,750 new social housing units are delivered over the life of the government. If the Housing Agency target of building 20,000 new homes every year is achieved this will in itself deliver up to 2,000 social homes through the revised Part 5

The commitment to deliver housing units must be linked with a commitment to ensure that new building creates vibrant communities rather than just 'housing'.

### ***Allocations of social housing to homeless households***

Historically, while patterns varied in different local authority areas fewer than 10% of allocations of social housing were made to homeless households, despite their categorisation as a 'priority' group.

In January 2015, Minister Alan Kelly issued a Ministerial directive that increased this proportion of allocations significantly: 50% going to homeless (and other vulnerable) households in Dublin, with 30% in Cork, Limerick and Waterford. While these levels of allocation are unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term, we strongly believe that on-going commitments of at least 30% allocations in Dublin and 15% in other cities will be required over the next few years to tackle the homelessness problem. Such targets need to be established and monitored at national level.

### ***2.3 Emergency responses to homelessness***

Over the 12 months from April 2014 to April 2015 there has been a 27% increase in the number of adults in Section 10 funded homeless accommodations from 2,477 to 3,143. A significant portion of this increase has been driven by the crisis of family homelessness, and there were an additional 1,118 children living with their families in homeless services in April 2015.

The solutions to homelessness involves preventing it from occurring in the first place and supporting people to move back into sustainable homes – but we will always require an emergency response which is a capable of responding to the immediate needs of people in crisis. The rising number of people forced to sleep rough on our streets indicates that the scale of this emergency response is inadequate

However, while there are individuals and families in need we must also ensure that there are suitable, professional services to try and ameliorate the worst effects of the personal crisis that those experiencing homelessness face.

To this end we must ensure that there are sufficient beds available to people experiencing homelessness.

## **3. Department of Children and Youth Affairs**

- **Preventing Homelessness**
  - **Strengthen Aftercare provisions**
  - **Extension of Aftercare provision to section 5 cases**
  - **Investment in services**
- **From Homelessness to Home**
  - **Define and evaluate youth homelessness**

### ***3.1 Preventing homelessness***

Focus Ireland has provided high support residential care and aftercare for almost 30 years. Through our day-to-day work with people who are homeless we recognised that many such individuals grew up in State

care. As a result, we have grown to become one of the leading providers of aftercare services in Ireland as well as a leading campaigner for the rights of those leaving care in the State<sup>13</sup>. A great deal has been achieved by recent Governments, particularly in relation to the creation of the child and family agency, Tusla, and the drafting of the Aftercare Bill 2014. However, young people who have grown up in care continue to be at a high risk of experiencing homelessness, and the next Government must build on the progress achieved.

***Strengthen aftercare legislation to ensure that the relevant agencies are statutorily required to provide the supports identified in their assessment.***

The publication of the heads of bill for the Aftercare Bill (2013) was an important step forward in providing a legal framework for assessing the needs and providing appropriate support for young people leaving care. Focus Ireland and our colleagues of the Action on Aftercare group have lobbied successive governments for a statutory right to aftercare, and while the proposed approach falls short of this, we believe that the approach taken provides a good framework for progress.

However, at the time of the Dáil rising in July 2015, the complete bill had not been published. There is now a risk that this legislation will not be passed prior to the General Electio. If this is the case, it would be important that political parties make a commitment to reintroducing this legislation in the new Dáil, with the minimum of delay.

Addressing the housing needs of care-leavers is a fundamental aspect of aftercare support. Some care-leavers may be ready to progress to independent living, while others will require a more supportive setting initially. Both options must be available as international and Irish research has found that periods in State care constitute a significant pathway into long-term homelessness.

Focus Ireland further recognises the situation of aged-out non-Irish nationals who would be at risk of homelessness without access to services and supports. The distinct needs of these young people should also be taken into consideration by any future administration.

***Extend aftercare provision to young people who have an identified need including those who have been accessing care support under Section 5***

In 2014, a total of 3117-year-olds were placed in accommodation in the greater Dublin region under Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991. Five of these young people turned 18 when accessing these accommodation services and all but one of the five had to access adult services upon reaching 18. Some of the 31 young people may have been provided with a care placement. However, under current aftercare provisions, none of the 31 young people would have qualified for aftercare support. Where young people have come into contact with trained staff and Developing Needs assessments have been conducted, these should be used as the identifier in determining the level of aftercare required.

At present the system relies on an assessment of the young person's time spent in the care system. We believe this is an inadequate method of determining whether a young person would benefit from aftercare. The incoming administration should ensure that young people placed in accommodation under Section 5 can benefit from aftercare in the same way that young people who have spent longer periods in care can.

***Investment in services***

In order to ensure that aftercare provisions constitute meaningful progress for young people leaving care, any incoming administration must adequately invest in services. Young people must be able to easily access the supports, services and interventions they might need. For example, the emergency out of hours social work service needs to move from a position where there is 'agreement' to an actual roll out of the service.

Investment should also be made into services which assist young people in remaining out of homelessness, for example mental health services, addiction services, and employment services. However, it should be noted that without stable accommodation, it can be difficult for young people to access primary health care or preventative physical or mental health services.<sup>14</sup> The Youth Homelessness Strategy, published by the Department of Health and Children in 2001, explicitly aims to provide "a comprehensive range of services aimed at re-integrating him/her into his/her community as quickly as possible".

In order to meet this stated aim, any administration will need to not only make promises but also find the resource to invest in the services envisaged. The Tusla CEO, Gordon Jeyes told the Oireachtas Joint

<sup>13</sup> Kelleher, Kelleher & Corbett (2000) *Left Out in Their Own, Young people leaving care in Ireland*, Dublin, Oak Tree Press

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.focusireland.ie/files/docs/Youthinfo1.pdf>

Committee on Health and Children on 17 July 2015 that there was need for between 220 and 250 additional social workers.

### **3.2 From Homelessness to Home**

#### **Define and evaluate youth homelessness**

It is widely recognised that an experience of homelessness in childhood or early adulthood can increase the risk of homelessness throughout a person's entire life. It also recognised that young homeless people have needs which are distinct from older adults. Nevertheless youth homelessness continues to be a neglected area in Ireland, so much so that there is currently no agreed-upon definition of youth homelessness.

While the Forum on Youth Homelessness included a definition, this concerns children who are homeless and does not explicitly cover young adults who are homeless. Some government policies include young adults up to the age of 20 who are homeless and a definitive definition of youth homelessness should be introduced.

Similarly, there is no agreed upon policy or definition in relation to the classification of children who are attached to their families, but whose families are experiencing homelessness. Focus Ireland is particularly aware of the stigma that can attach to a young person or child being labelled as "homeless".

The development of a strategy aimed at evaluating the extent of youth homelessness in the State and recommending policy objectives to eradicate the issue should be considered by any incoming administration.

## **4. Department of Social Protection**

- **Preventing Homelessness**
  - **Rent supplement rates**
  - **Keep social welfare rates in line with inflation**
- **From Homelessness to home**
  - **Support under 26's experiencing homelessness**

### **4.1 Preventing Homelessness**

Homelessness usually results from the interaction of a range of issues and problems, but straightforward poverty is frequently one of them. It is clear that the social protection system can have a major impact on the level of homelessness – not only through the level of basic payments but also through its efficiency (or otherwise).

In particular, the Rent Supplement scheme has always played a crucial role in assisting people who live in private rented accommodation to maintain their homes during periods of unemployment or illness. With the proportion of people living in private rented accommodation rising from 10% to 20% over the last decade, it has become even more central to determining whether households will retain their home during periods of difficulty such as unemployment.

Focus Ireland believes that there has been a failure to recognise the importance of social protection in tackling homelessness. This has created a policy and protection gap that has been a very significant factor in the rise of homelessness. A coherent social protection strategy must address this gap.

#### **Rent Supplement rates set at median level and reviewed annually.**

With the role out of the Housing assistance payment in the medium term rent supplement is going to become less relevant as a support for those seeking to exit homelessness. However, its role in the prevention of homelessness will remain central.

Research undertaken by Focus Ireland reviewing the reasons why families are experiencing homelessness in Dublin found that a significant number were economically homeless. That is that they were without the means to meet the cost of their housing.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the reason for the difficulty that is experienced by those on rent supplement is that the rent supplement rates are only reviewed every 18 months. In a volatile market rent supplement rates too quickly lose any relevance to market rent.

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<sup>15</sup> Focus Ireland: Reasons for Family Homelessness, (unpublished)

However, the most substantive reason is that even when rent supplement rates have been reviewed they have not been set in line with a market rent.

This often leaves households who require support to pay their rent are in a situation where they are ‘topping up’ at unsustainable levels to meet the rent and are going into arrears either on the rent or in other areas that is not sustainable in the medium to long-term. The only way to prevent this set of circumstances developing is to ensure that the rates are regularly and robustly reviewed, at a minimum every 12 months and to be aligned with mean or median market rents.

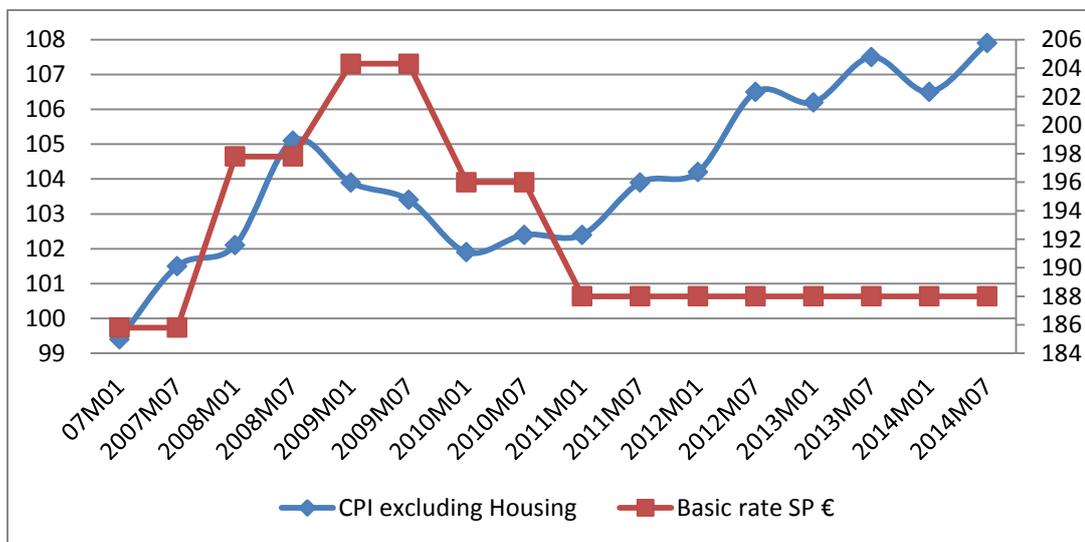
**Basic rate of social welfare (increases in line with inflation)**

The major cause for the significant increase in the numbers of families accessing homeless services has been identified as being primarily economic. While the basic social welfare payment for those over the age of 25 has been protected since 2011 it was reduced in the two budgets that preceded it. The reasoning given at the time of the cuts to basic payment centred on the contention that the cost of living was declining.<sup>16</sup>

As demonstrated in Table 2 below, increases in welfare rates from 2007/08 kept in line with rising living costs. The sharp drop in living costs from 2008 as the recession hit, combined with the increase in welfare levels that year, meant that living standards for people on social welfare did improve in the early part of the recession.

However, by 2011 two welfare cuts had brought living standards sharply below their 2007 level. Increases in living costs since then have significantly eroded living standards further for people relying on social welfare since then. From the end of 2014, the cost of living has now risen to such an extent the even if welfare rates had remained at €204/week they would now be being eroded. The cost of living will continue to increase with the introduction of additional charges such as the water charges. It is important to remember when considering these figures that a household relying on social welfare payments alone is living below the accepted poverty line, the only changing factor is how far below the poverty line they fall.

Table 2: CPI (excl. Housing) (Base Dec 2006=100) and Basic Rate of Social Protection



This high level analysis is confirmed by the official Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data which shows a yearly increase in consistent poverty rates since 2008, demonstrating that if social welfare rates do not keep pace with inflation we see more individuals and families falling into consistent poverty. The long-term consequences of this are dire both for the individual 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 believes that the basic rates of social protection should be increased above the annual rate of inflation (the CPI).

<sup>16</sup> <http://politico.ie/politics/government-deceives-public-social-welfare-cuts>

## 4.2 From homelessness to home

### *Protect the under 26's who experience homelessness*

Young people who are homeless can be prevented from moving on into independent living due to the unintended consequences of the reduced rate of social welfare paid to people under 26.

This problem has been addressed in the case of young people coming from a care background, but not in the case of other young people who become homeless. As a result, young people who become homeless can be trapped in emergency accommodation for very long periods as they are unable to sustain the rent on independent accommodation. This problem impacts on a relatively small number of young people but is likely to have a long-term damaging impact on their life chances.

It also represents a significant cost to the state as the young people continue to reside in emergency accommodation.

This government and Minister for Social Protection have continually maintained that this lacuna in the social protection system would be addressed. Focus Ireland has put forward a number of proposals that we believe are workable<sup>17</sup>. However meetings with officials from the Department have so far not been fruitful. Despite this the rates for young people were reduced in the 2014 budget.

While we have worked with the departmental proposals and have sought to implement a pilot programme this has run up against internal issues within the Department.

Given the long-term cost both of homelessness to the life chances of the young person and to the state Focus Ireland believes that a sustainable solution that acknowledges the support needed by a young person when they experience a period of homelessness is both attainable and necessary.

In the interim there needs to be an audit of the number of young people in this situation and funding provided through supplementary welfare allowance to provide the required support.

## 5. Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE)

- **Preventing Homelessness**
  - **Discharge protocol and support**
- **From Homelessness to Home**
  - **Commitment to multidisciplinary support including mental health**
  - **Commitment to providing services to tackle alcohol and substance addition**
- **Emergency Responses to Homelessness**
  - **Funding for Homeless Services in line with demand**
  - **Access to medical cards for those experiencing homelessness**

The health outcomes for people experiencing homelessness are very poor. A European report on Health and homelessness has noted that: "homelessness may, by its very nature, be considered as a state of ill-health".<sup>18</sup>

The HSE interacts with homelessness in a number of ways: it is the second largest state funder of homeless services, there is a significant interaction between mental health and homelessness, and interaction between other elements of health care (e.g. drug and addiction services) and homelessness, and the HSE primary care and hospital services are responsible of the physical health of people who are particularly vulnerable because of their homelessness.

### 5.1 Preventing homelessness

#### *Discharge protocol and support services*

Discharge from General and Psychiatric hospitals has been recognised as a key route into homelessness since the Governments Homelessness Prevention Strategy in 2002. It has been recognised since this time that clear discharge protocols are needed to ensure that patients are not discharged from hospitals into homelessness. We welcome the decision to introduce a formal protocol which was made by the Cabinet sub-committee on Social Policy and Public Services Reform. The protocol was intended to become operational in the first quarter of this year.<sup>19</sup> However, this discharge protocol concerned only hospitals in

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.focusireland.ie/files/memo%20on%20half-rate%20payments%20and%20homelessness%200712.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article153&lang=en>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/hospitals-face-strict-new-rules-to-help-homeless-30943931.html>

Dublin and included a commitment not to discharge a patient into homelessness *where possible*. In practice, the best that most hospitals can achieve is to discharge patients into homeless services, while the real objective must be to avoid homelessness entirely by linking with the statutory housing authorities to ensure that affordable accommodation is available, supplemented with support services to ensure that the required follow-up care is received

There is need for a more ambitious protocol, with a timeframe for implementation. Furthermore, the protocol should be extended to cover patient discharges from hospitals throughout the country. The formal protocol should also cover patients discharged from acute psychiatric wards. An audit carried out between 2012 and 2013 in Tallaght Hospital found that a patient was discharged from the acute mental health unit into homelessness every 9.4 days.<sup>20</sup>

## **5.2 From Homelessness to Home**

### **Commitment to Multidisciplinary Support**

As referenced above, Focus Ireland has long campaigned for increased multidisciplinary support for individuals accessing homeless services. International evidence demonstrates that teams comprised of professionals with different areas of expertise are best positioned to deal with the complex needs of those with housing difficulties. This position has also been adopted by successive governments.

The Partnership for Health Equity study highlighted above found that 58% of respondents who were homeless said they had been diagnosed by a doctor with at least one mental health condition.<sup>21</sup> This finding emphasises the need for a combined approach to tackling homelessness and mental health conditions. Focus Ireland believe that multi-disciplinary community mental health teams (CMHT) are the best way to effectively support individuals. The HSE has been tasked with developing and adequately resourcing CMHTs. The Cabinet Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform's Implementation Plan notes that, as of Q1 2015, discussions between primary care services and the HSE's mental health division were on-going. Incoming administrations should look to build on this preliminary work.

Any incoming administration should commit to implementing the recommendations made in A Vision for Change<sup>22</sup>, particularly as they relate to homelessness. This document, produced by an Expert Group established by the Department of Health, made substantive recommendations, the majority of which were applauded by government and the broader sector. This document constitutes a useful blueprint for the improvement of the mental health system in Ireland.

### **Commitment to providing services to tackle alcohol and substance addiction**

Multidisciplinary support services should also be expanded to accommodate alcohol and substance addiction services. From our day-to-day work, Focus Ireland is aware of the prevalence of drug and alcohol addiction among people accessing homeless services. The Partnership for Health Equity's study found that 41% of men and 36% of women who were homeless reported excessive drinking, while 78% reported current or past drug use. An important aspect of addiction treatment is the availability of residential rehabilitation and detoxification.

A report of the HSE working group on residential treatment and rehabilitation estimated that there was a deficit of 356.5 beds in the State.<sup>23</sup> The National Advisory Committee on Drugs has previously stated that service providers felt there were not enough beds available for treatment programmes, particularly given the increased needs of individuals who are homeless and the fact that residential programmes are the only feasible option as an absence of home and personal support systems makes out-patient treatments much more difficult.<sup>24</sup>

Incoming administrations should commit to retaining a Minister with responsibility for the drug strategy and to a review of current residential options, with a view to increasing the number of treatment and step-down beds available in line with need. Any increase in residential programmes should be supported by follow-on services to mitigate the risk of relapse.

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<sup>20</sup> John Cowman (2013) "Prevalence of housing needs among inpatients: An audit of housing needs, over one year, in the acute mental health unit in Tallaght Hospital", unpublished

<sup>21</sup> Supra

<sup>22</sup> [http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/vision\\_for\\_change.pdf](http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/vision_for_change.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/reports/3966-42381118.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.drugsandhousing.co.uk/druguseamongstthehomelesspopulationinireland.pdf>

### 5.3 Emergency Responses to homelessness

#### *Funding for Homeless Services in line with demand*

The HSE is the second largest state funder of homeless services, providing an essential part of the budget for a large number of key homeless organisations. While the Department of the Environment has maintained funding levels in recent years, there have been significant cuts to funding allocations within the HSE, and the HSE has repeatedly 'raided' the homeless budget to cover cost-overruns in other areas. Given the importance of its role in the sector, HSE homeless funding should be ring-fenced and set at a level in line with the demand experienced by front-line services.

The Committee on Social Policy and Public Service Reform stated the importance of ensuring value for money in their implementation plan progress report. The Committee intends to consult relevant stakeholders in this regard and work on this action is due to commence in 2016. International evidence shows that where countries fail to tackle homelessness, a considerable part of that cost falls on the health service. People who have been supported to move out of homelessness are healthier, make fewer demands on expensive health services and interact with health services in a more efficient way. The incoming administration must ensure that the provision of homeless services is a paramount concern.

#### *Access to Medical Cards for those experiencing homelessness*

Much of the research that has been conducted on the health of those experiencing homelessness is point-in-time, meaning that those who are experiencing long-term homelessness are disproportionately represented. However, the findings are shocking even when this is taken into account. A recent study conducted by the Partnership for Health Equity in Dublin and Limerick found that 89% of respondents who were homeless had a diagnosed mental or physical health problem. They further found that one in three respondents had attempted suicide at some point in the past.<sup>25</sup>

Access to a medical card is an essential passport to medical support for people who are homeless. The above recent study by the Partnership for Health Equity found that 25% of respondents still did not have a medical card. The [HSE Annual Report for 2013](#) (pg. 52)<sup>26</sup> reported that 65% of those admitted to homeless hostels in the year had access to a medical card, as against a KPI of 75%, but the KPI is not reported in the 2014 Report.

The Homeless Oversight Group recommended immediate action be taken to improve access to medical cards and some progress has been made on this (Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness - Progress Report for Quarter 1 2015, pg. 13).<sup>27</sup>

However, these policies, particularly in relation to the most vulnerable homeless people, and the fast track systems need to be closely monitored by any incoming administration. Similarly, an assessment should be carried out to ensure that individuals accessing homeless services but who may be working are not being inappropriately denied medical cards.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Focus Ireland has set out a number of recommendations that we believe are crucial to stem the flow of individuals and families into homelessness. These policies address the changing nature of homelessness in Ireland while recognising the importance of policies aimed at the move from homelessness to home.

Our aim is the development of a policy landscape which sees a reduction in the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness by ensuring that when a crisis occurs, preventative strategies serve to keep people in safe and appropriate accommodation. Where homelessness does occur, support services must be readily available to move individuals and families back into stable accommodation as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/disproportionate-levels-of-illness-and-addiction-among-homeless-people-1.1964372>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/annualrpt2013.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.enviro.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,38053,en.pdf>