

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair looking down at a baby. The baby is sitting at a table and eating from a white plate. The baby has some food on their face. The background is blurred, showing other people in a public setting.

# **Focus Ireland** **Pre-Budget** **Submission** **2018**

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.  
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**FOCUS**  
Ireland

# Focus Ireland

## Pre-Budget Submission 2018

# 10 ACTIONS

## TO TURN THE TIDE ON HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

### Introduction

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**While the Irish economy is seeing welcome signs of recovery, the economic crash and some of the decisions made to bring the Irish economy back from the brink have left deep scars. One of the most visible is the ongoing homelessness crisis. Over 8,000 people are without a home; more than one in three is a child. Nearly 3,000 children are living in emergency homeless accommodation in Ireland.**

Focus Ireland is driven by the fundamental belief that homelessness is wrong. We have been and will remain at the heart of the response to this crisis and we acknowledge and respect the hard work and commitment of our colleagues in government departments and local authorities across the country, as they play their role in addressing the hardship faced by families and individuals. There is much good work being done without which this crisis would be so much worse.

However, it is crystal clear that more needs to be done and that the Government must change track to move from managing the crisis towards ending it. The escalating number of people homeless has meant that huge resources and energy have been drawn into crisis management and emergency response. This effort has been necessary because successive governments have not addressed the root cause of this homelessness crisis, Ireland's dysfunctional housing system. In fact their response has been marked by too little too late.

The two critical areas that must be address are the provision of public and affordable rental housing to counteract the years of government underinvestment in social housing and the expansion of preventative strategies to keep people in their homes.

Of course, many of the policy decisions needed to tackle homelessness are not made in the annual budget. Nevertheless Budget 2018 represents a critical opportunity to help to prevent more people from becoming homeless, and also support speedy delivery of much needed social housing. These 10 Budget recommendations are set out in more detail in our full Pre-Budget Submission (<http://bit.ly/FIPBS18>) circulated to all Ministers several weeks ago, and should be seen in tandem with our submission to the Review of Rebuilding Ireland (<http://bit.ly/FIRBIRReview>).

# Housing supply

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The key to tackling the housing and homelessness crisis is to increase access to – and delivery of – social housing along with affordable rental accommodation. Existing policies are failing to deliver this much needed increase in supply with sufficient urgency or in enough numbers.

We have called for the following actions in Budget 2018 to address these issues.

## SOCIAL HOUSING

Focus Ireland welcomed the review of Rebuilding Ireland and the Taoiseach's comment to examine if there is a need for 'a greater quantum of social housing build'. However, before we set new targets we must examine why the existing targets in Rebuilding Ireland have not been met. There have been repeated announcements that 'funding is not an issue' and €5.35 billion is earmarked to deliver 47,000 homes. However, the reality is that much of the €5.35 billion only becomes available towards the end of the 6-year strategy. A lot of the success reported to date in terms of housing delivery has been due to the refurbishment of existing vacant local authority houses. These new homes are to be welcomed. However, as the supply of such empty properties dries up the real impact of the failure to drive a significant State house building programme will become much clearer. Many local authorities which have prepared ambitious delivery programmes find delays and limitations in place.

While successive Governments have insisted that the 'money is there' for local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to invest in social housing, the current mechanisms available make this a complex, cumbersome and slow process. We are calling for the Government to streamline this process by sanctioning a €1.3 billion borrowing capacity to the Housing Finance Agency to be loaned to Local Authorities in order to build **13,500 new homes** over the period of Rebuilding Ireland, with the balance delivered through acquisition, Part V and leasing.

**1 RECOMMENDATION: The Government must streamline approval process for building new local authority housing and make the Housing Finance Agency the primary source of funding for local authority building to help them build 13,500 new homes by 2020.**

## PRIVATE RENTAL ACCOMMODATION

As rents rocket and supply plummets in the private rental sector Focus Ireland has seen more people forced into homelessness. There is a rental crisis in Ireland and this is causing rising homelessness along with much hardship for many of the 300,000 households who live in private rented accommodation nationwide. It is clear that the State needs to take a more forceful role in the provision of affordable rental housing. The private market will not deliver all the housing the Irish people need. Focus Ireland is calling for a twin-track approach in Budget 2018 to kick-start the delivery of an increased supply of affordable rental accommodation.

Approved Housing Bodies are well-placed to provide affordable rental accommodation alongside their traditional role of providing social housing. A number of the larger AHB's could fulfil this role in Ireland. Many are keen to do so, but require an effective and settled policy framework and appropriate financial support in the early stages. Neither of these has been forthcoming. This opportunity should be grasped with a particular focus on the building of long-term affordable rental properties.

The second strand to increase supply of affordable rental properties is for the government to act upon the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) recommendations for the State to establish a publicly-owned company to undertake or commission the development of new cost-rental homes. This company could supplement the work of Approved Housing Bodies, with additional funding being secured from commercial lenders. Rental income could then be used to repay loans.

**2 RECOMMENDATION: Budget 2018 should commit to cash funding of an affordable rental scheme, and should ring-fence a portion of this funding to subsidise AHB development.**

## YOUTH HOUSING

There are now over 800 young people homeless and the situation gets worse every time new figures are issued. We know that being homeless at a young age can have serious impacts on an individual's life course. While the causes of homelessness are complex, access to housing is a key issue for many young people. While the situation is bad there are some good initiatives delivering results which need to be built upon.

One positive initiative is the Rebuilding Ireland commitment of Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) funding to provide homes for vulnerable young people leaving care. This is working well and has the real potential to have a long-term impact. However, the real potential will only be realised if investment in youth housing is sufficient and sustained.

We are calling on the government to ensure that the €66 million of CAS allocation to TUSLA in 2017 is maintained each year until 2021.

**3 RECOMMENDATION: The State should commit to the sustained funding of the 'CAS for care-leavers' programme, at least until the expiration of the Rebuilding Ireland action plan.**

# Preventing homelessness

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Focus Ireland continues to advocate strongly for an increased commitment to policies and services that prevent homelessness. Even as organisations and State Agencies successfully support households to move on from emergency accommodation, the number of individuals and households experiencing homelessness continues to rise. While the State has invested in some welcome preventative measures, Focus Ireland believes more targeted measures are required. It is vital to cut the ever increasing numbers of people becoming homeless every month if we are to halt the homelessness crisis and work towards ending it.

## EARLY PREVENTION

Focus Ireland recently piloted a prevention programme in Dublin 15 where we worked with the local Department of Social Protection to write to families in receipt of rent supplement who were potentially at risk of homelessness. Over 165 families at risk of homelessness contacted us – 75% had never before contacted State prevention services. Households were referred to clinics run by trained prevention workers. The pilot successfully supported 90% of at-risk families that contacted us to maintain their tenancies or find alternative accommodation. This pilot was fully funded by our corporate partners Bord Gáis Energy.

Government funding for homeless services has increased substantially in recent years. However, a large proportion goes to pay for emergency responses, increasingly in the private, for-profit sector. A total of €39 million was spent by the State on emergency accommodation alone in 2016. We believe if more was invested in targeted prevention this would help to cut the constant rise in the numbers of families and people becoming homeless.

**4 RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Housing should ring-fence a proportion of Section 10 funding for more targeted prevention services.**

## EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION FOR FAMILIES

The current situation is that while most families who are homeless are placed in emergency accommodation we estimate that up to 250 families are currently made responsible for finding their own emergency accommodation every night in Dublin. This will then be paid for by the local authority. This practice is known as ‘self-accommodation’.

Many families are capable of doing so. However, given the huge demand for hotel rooms, it is not unusual for some families to be unable to find accommodation themselves. Families and Focus Ireland staff spend an enormous amount of time each day contacting commercial hotels in an attempt to secure rooms. This practice represents an attempt to transfer the responsibility for securing accommodation from the statutory authorities to the family in crisis. It is justified as a cost containing measure by the local authorities, but in fact involves a transfer of the cost to other statutory and voluntary organisations and to vulnerable citizens at their most vulnerable moments.

Most significantly, due the scarcity of hotel accommodation during busy times, this practice results, from time to time, in some families not being able to find any emergency accommodation for the night and having to sleep rough or make other potentially risky

arrangements. The Government's existing commitment to 'end the use of commercial hotels except in exceptional circumstances' should be linked to a new commitment to end the practice of 'self accommodation' for families.

**5 RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Housing to instruct local authorities to end the practice of 'self-accommodation' and that they must secure emergency accommodation for any family accessed as homeless under legislation. Funding for this to be ring-fenced in the Section 10 funding.**

## INCREASED AFTERCARE SUPPORT

Young people who grew up in our care system are over represented among the 800 young people who are homeless. There is much good work being done and Focus Ireland plays a vital part in this as we work in partnership with Tusla and the HSE to deliver vital aftercare support and accommodation. An aftercare worker with the time and resources to help can protect young people leaving care.

The long-awaited introduction of the right to an aftercare plan for every careleaver from 1st September was particularly welcome, but major problems remain in terms of resources to meet the aftercare support needs. One of the ways Tusla has sought to square the circle of working to meet the legislative commitment is to increase the number of young people which an aftercare worker is expected to support as part of their allocated caseload. Historically Focus Ireland aftercare services operate at a caseload of 15–20 but have recently been required to increase this to 22–25. At this level of caseload the needs of a young person with complex needs cannot meaningfully be met, rendering the goal of 'allocating an aftercare worker to every care leaver who needs one' to little more than a 'box ticking' exercise. Focus Ireland's experience, backed by internationally recognised good-practice, indicates that the optimum caseload in respect of young people with support needs is between 15–20.

**6 RECOMMENDATION: Budget 2018 should provide sufficient support and funding to Tusla to provide an aftercare worker for all care leavers who need one at a caseload of 1:20 in 2018, working progressively towards a reduction to 1:18 by 2020.**

## Children who are homeless

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**There are now nearly 3,000 children who are homeless. All these children and their families need a home. However, while they are homeless these children require a range of support to help reduce the impact being homeless has on them.**

### EDUCATION SUPPORTS

A shocking 1,800 schoolchildren who have returned to school for a new term this month are homeless. They need a place to call home – but without essential education supports right now, the children will suffer again as international research shows that being homeless can damage a child's education and can impact on their whole life. Focus Ireland has received huge support for its call for a package of education supports for children from families who are homeless.

**7 RECOMMENDATION: The 2018 budgetary allocation to the Department of Education should include funding to provide educational supports, separate to DEIS, to schools with a high-level of pupils who are homeless.**

## CHILD SUPPORT WORKERS

Each month there are more vulnerable children living in emergency accommodation who need specialist support. Focus Ireland carries out an assessment with families to identify where children need dedicated help. Since the beginning of the crisis, the HSE has funded three specialist child support workers to provide support for children in homeless families that are assessed as needing that support, and Tusla gave welcome support for two additional workers in 2016.

However, the number of families that are homeless and the length of time during which they remain homeless continues to grow, and there now a waiting list of children that have been assessed as needing support. Focus Ireland estimates that the current level of children homeless with their families would require approximately 14 caseworkers to assist children that need support. Focus Ireland funded research into the impact of family homelessness has indicated both the benefits of the child support for homeless families, and that children who need such support are being denied it.

**8 RECOMMENDATION: The Department of Children and Youth should allocate €540,000 (in a full year) to TUSLA to ensure that sufficient child support workers are available early in 2018.**

## Rent supplement

In July 2016 Rent Supplement/HAP levels were increased after a long period during which they had been kept at levels well below real market rents. This policy was part of the austerity programme. The inadequate level of rent supplement played a significant part in creating the high level of family homelessness we face today. However, the increase in mid 2016 had a positive impact and helped prevent many more people from becoming homeless at that time. It also increased access to rental accommodation for a time. But these positive impacts fell away as rents rocketed due to many other factors.

We need to learn from the positive impact of the July 2016 increase and ensure that Rent Supplement levels are revised in a regular, predictable and transparent manner to keep them in line with market rents. A recent limited snapshot of the properties for rent found that nearly 90% were too expensive for anyone reliant on State Housing Payments.

Meanwhile, the Rent Pressure Zones cover most areas where rent inflation is leading to increased homelessness. It is vital that rent supplement payments take account of this fact.

**9 RECOMMENDATION: Rent supplement/HAP should be reviewed annually and benchmarked against market rent. Rent Supplement/HAP levels should be increased by at least 4% in Rent Pressure Zones areas.**

## Investment in domestic violence services

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There is considerable evidence that domestic violence continues to be the cause of family homelessness in a significant number of cases. Domestic violence was cited as a contributory or causal factor in each of the regular surveys that Focus Ireland has carried out into the causes of homelessness, though its extent has varied considerably. Given the current housing crisis and the lack of affordable housing for individuals fleeing violence, reports that domestic violence refuges are being forced to turn away hundreds of women and children are highly worrying. Rebuilding Ireland commits to providing additional emergency refuge spaces to protect those forced to leave their homes because of the threat of domestic violence. This commitment was due to be delivered in '2016/2017', however, Minister Zappone recently confirmed that five additional family accommodation units will be available in the Dublin area in 'early 2018'. It is unclear how many families will be accommodated in these five units.

Existing domestic violence services, which are now within the remit of TUSLA, have seen a 17% cut in funding since 2012. These vital services must be fully funded in order to protect those experiencing domestic violence, particularly those who lack safe accommodation as a result.

**10 RECOMMENDATION: Progress on the commitment in relation to homelessness arising from Domestic Violence in Rebuilding Ireland should be funded and expedited. In addition, statutory funding for domestic violence services should be returned to pre-2012 levels.**

## About Focus Ireland

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Focus Ireland works with people who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes across Ireland. We are driven by the fundamental belief that homelessness is wrong.

Wrong because it is a failure of society that creates victims out of ordinary people and robs them of their potential. Wrong because it can be prevented, it can be solved but is allowed to continue and in doing so, undermines society.

We need to challenge our society to think and act differently. We are committed to challenging everything about homelessness; the causes, systemic failures, people's perceptions and how it is tackled.

And we challenge ourselves in how we allocate resources to maximise our ability to prevent people from falling into homelessness and to help people find and keep a home.

For more information go to [www.focusireland.ie](http://www.focusireland.ie)

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