



FOCUS
Ireland

Strategy 2017-2020
Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.



Introduction

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Chief Executive

Years of government underinvestment in social housing, together with spiralling rental costs have resulted in record numbers of people, families and children becoming homeless in Ireland. At Focus Ireland we have been, and will remain, at the heart of the response to this crisis.

For us to challenge society to tackle the causes of homelessness and ensure a lasting way out of homelessness for the people we help, it is vital that we have a strong and innovative strategic direction.

At Focus 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.

It can be different.

More than thirty years of listening to our customers' experiences has told us that the longer people remain without a home, the harder it is for them to get their lives back on track.

In recent years the escalating crisis in homelessness has meant that so much resource and energy has been drawn into crisis management and emergency

solutions. While this response is understandable, we believe that the real solutions lie in preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place and ensuring that they have help to stay in their home once they have found one. In other words, help to stay in your home, and finding and keeping a secure home for good if you are homeless, are the long-term answers to the crisis.

These are the two areas that will be central to the work of Focus Ireland in the coming years. This document will explain how that will happen and more clearly show how we as an organisation will respond to the deep human crisis that is amongst us.

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The current homelessness crisis

Homelessness is now higher than it has ever been. During 2015 alone the number of families who were homeless nearly doubled.

At the heart of this is that there simply aren't enough homes being built in Ireland to meet demand. The ESRI advised that we would need to build 25,000 new homes a year just to meet the needs of our growing population, yet we have built a fraction of that figure.

This, along with spiralling costs of renting is driving people, families and their children into homelessness. At Focus Ireland we have seen this first-hand in the numbers of people coming to us for help – from 8,000 in 2012 to more than 12,500 in 2015 – a 57% increase.

Whilst the Irish economy shows recent signs of recovery, this recovery is benefiting some groups more than others and poverty and inequality continue to rise.

8,000

in 2012 to

>12,500

in 2015

+57%

increase

Tackling homelessness

There are three main approaches to addressing homelessness: prevention, emergency responses and providing housing with support.

Emergency responses such as night shelters only give short-term help or 'manage' the problem and aren't really helping people to find a way out of homelessness for good.

Research has shown us that this way of tackling homelessness can be more expensive and short-term. The longer a person is trapped in homelessness, the harder it is for them to cope with personal problems such as physical health, mental health and drug or alcohol use.

In recent years in Ireland Focus Ireland have started to lean more towards working to prevent homelessness and recently to take a 'Housing Led' approach, providing a secure home first, with support to stay in your home; but the chronic shortage of homes has held this back, as has lack of government priority.

In this Strategy, we will strive to bring about real and lasting change for the people who need our help by deepening our commitment to preventing homelessness and supporting people into housing.

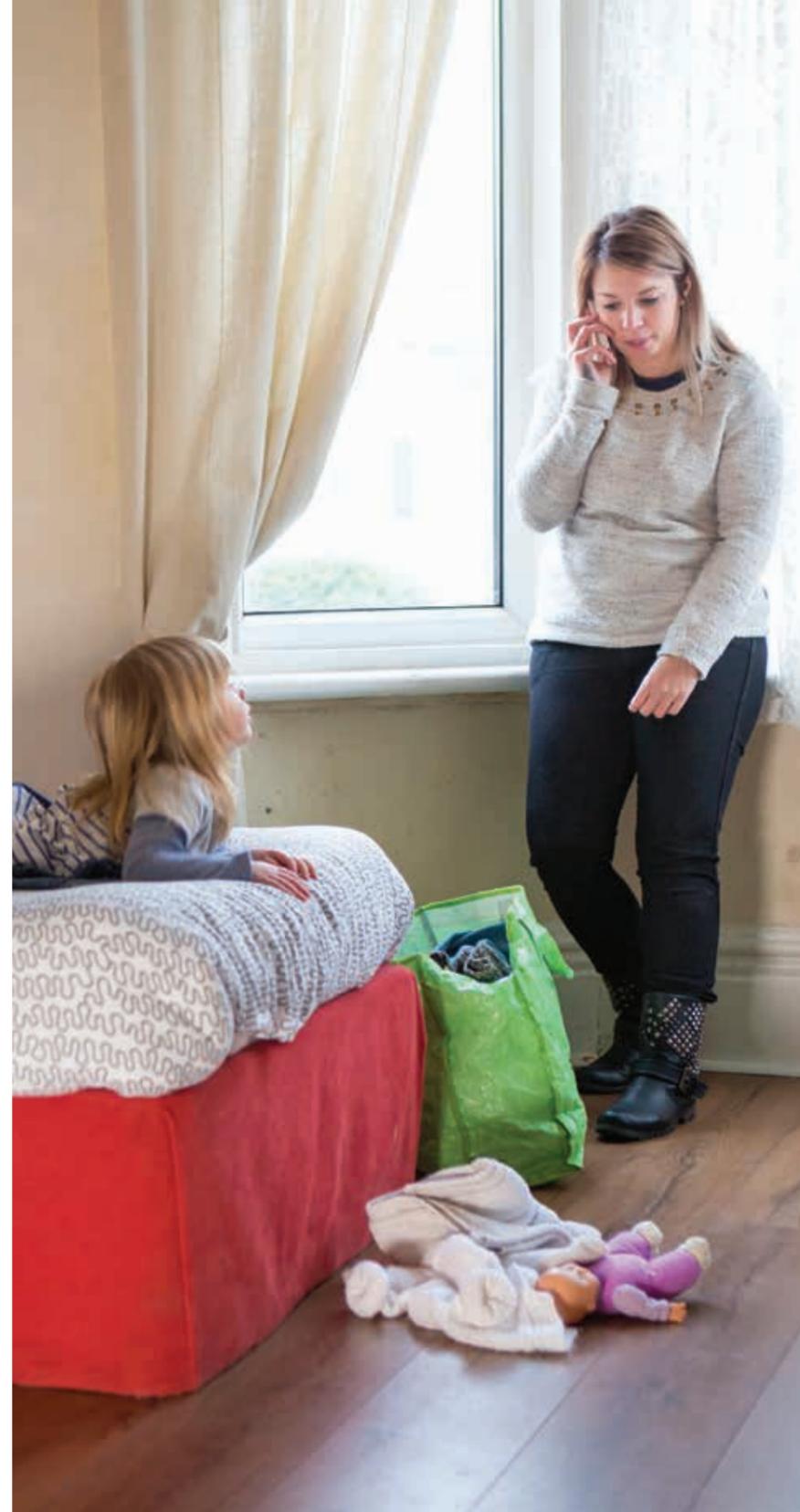
This will mean additional services that help us to reach people before problems start to worsen (early intervention) and that help people to stay in their homes, combined with the physical provision of additional homes through Focus Housing Association.

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As part of the new direction, we will take a hard look at all of the work we do and review services that are not in line with our strategic vision. The first action we will take will be to wind down services that provide only 'emergency' help, and that do not have a longer-term impact for the people who use them.

We will focus on two pillars:

- 1. Preventing homelessness**
- 2. Supporting people who are homeless to move on into secure homes**



Ongoing monitoring, evaluating and researching

From the very beginning, our work has been rooted in deep listening to people, learning about the problems and risks they face and pointing to where the solutions lie. This approach provides the bedrock on which we stand. We use this evidence to ensure our organisation is always learning, bringing fresh ideas to improve homelessness policy and to inform our advocacy and lobbying.

The insight from years of our customers' experiences has informed our belief that the most effective ways we can tackle homelessness are to prevent people who are at risk from becoming homeless and to ensure that people have a long-term way out of homelessness again by supporting them to stay in their homes for good.

Over the course of this strategy, our Research Programme, working with our customers and our teams on the front line – will track closely how effective our services are - gaining evidence for what is working, to challenge what is not working and to keep bringing in new thinking to keep pace with change.

We will ensure that the voices and stories of our customers are at the heart of our thinking, and that they are heard by our supporters and crucially by government where change is needed most.

Preventing homelessness

Making sure that we can prevent homelessness before it happens is one of the most effective ways we can tackle this crisis.

When we talk about 'prevention' we mean working with young people, adults and families who are facing homelessness to ensure they keep their homes.

In recent times most people are becoming homeless for primarily economic reasons (not enough money to afford secure accommodation) but there are certain situations where the risk is higher.

- Such as/in particular
- Growing up in care
 - Leaving prison
 - Leaving hospital/psychiatric care
 - Being discriminated against in the housing market
 - Living in unsafe, overcrowded conditions or emergency accommodation

We try to reach people who are facing these situations early to ensure they have our support to keep the home they have.

The first port of call for people facing homelessness is often our Advice and Information team, and to meet growing demand we have set up a number of these teams in towns and cities around the country. We know from our customers' experiences that the right information at the right time can help prevent homelessness. Over the course of this strategy we will continue to grow this vital first line of help.

Young people leaving care can find it very difficult to find and keep a home of their own and this can put them at risk of homelessness. At Focus Ireland we have worked particularly closely with young people leaving care, providing residential care, education and employment and family mediation support. We know that our work helps to prevent young people who grew up in care from becoming homeless. We will continue to do more in this area using the knowledge and expertise we have developed through our work with young people.

We try to reach people who are facing these situations early to ensure they have our support to keep the home they have.

Other groups that we know we can support to stay in their homes include people and families who are struggling to pay their rent or find a more affordable home. We will continue to do further work with people in emergency accommodation and also with individuals and families who are living below the radar in 'unseen' spaces – i.e. in inadequate, overcrowded, wor unsafe conditions as well as people who may experience discrimination in the housing market.

A stable future

A financially stable organisation is vital for Focus Ireland to deliver this strategy. This is what will allow us to keep our independent voice, strengthen our challenge to homelessness in society and continue to offer the very best in new thinking and solutions to the people we work with.

We will keep best practice governance in place for our organisation including our housing body Focus Housing Association – this will be critical as we borrow more to grow the number of homes we can offer. Our fundraising means we can continue to fight for people who are homeless and bring the right solutions to get people back to secure homes. We will continue to find new ways to tell the stories of our customers and to reach out to the public to grow support for our work, developing new, different and sustainable fundraising initiatives.

We will ensure the long-term financial security of Focus Ireland by building our reserves to a 13 week level by the close of 2018.

Our financial plan is aimed at balancing risk whilst also ensuring we can invest in ground-breaking solutions.

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Supporting people who are homeless to move on into secure homes

Some people and families who become homeless can find their own route out, but many others require support in finding accommodation and support in holding on to their new home. Some need this support for only a few months, others might need it for the rest of their lives.

The longer a person is homeless, the worse their personal problems can get – particularly mental or physical health problems or substance abuse. The sooner we can find a secure home for anyone facing homelessness, the better chance they have to reduce the damage caused by homelessness. We know that the right type of support to stay in your home gives you the best chance of staying out of homelessness for good.

At Focus Ireland we have a number of teams who work closely with people who need more help to keep their homes. Amongst these are our families team in Dublin and our teams working with young people who grew up in care. All of these teams provide ongoing ‘floating’ support to help people to keep their homes.

But we can’t achieve this if the homes simply aren’t available, which is why we will continue to call on the government to build more social homes. We will also play our own part in ensuring there are more homes for people who need them by owning and managing a number of homes for people who need extra support. We will expand Focus Housing Association to meet this demand and double the number of these homes within the next five years.

We believe the quality of the work undertaken in this area is without equal and we will continue to invest heavily here over the coming years.

The sooner we can find a secure home for anyone facing homelessness, the better chance they have to reduce the damage caused by homelessness.

The concept of Housing First has been well proven in recent years both worldwide and here in Ireland by ourselves and our partners in this project, the Peter McVerry Trust. It has clearly been seen that for those who have a long experience of sleeping on the street, the best chance of bringing about sustainable positive change in their lives is to first provide a home and then the necessary supports to make it work. We will be further proving and expanding this concept.

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Staying true to our values and ethos

For more than thirty years Focus Ireland has worked with people who are homeless or at risk of losing their home. We have always held true to the core belief that everybody has a right to a home and we are passionate about bringing about real change, in our society, and in the lives of people who are homeless.

In developing this plan, we have kept our commitment to do the very best for our customers. We have listened to our staff and the people we work with, as well as looking to the best in new thinking at home and abroad. We have placed effectiveness and sustainability at the heart of how we work, and will continue our high standards in transparency and strong governance.

Our approach has been guided by our ethos of treating our customers with fairness, dignity and respect.



Investing in people

We are a committed team who care deeply about the people we work with and the people we work for. We use all our skills and years of experience to help our customers secure a home of their own that best suits them and their needs.

Our Human Resources Team play a vital role in ensuring that Focus Ireland can deliver the strategy through its people and we work hard to attract, develop and keep people working at Focus Ireland who can ensure the very best for our customers.

We need the right skills to bring about this change and to deliver the change in our focus towards prevention. We are committed to investing in the learning and development of all our employees and in continuing to build on their strengths because we are all working to help people find and keep their home.

Conclusion

Homelessness is a problem for all of us. It is unacceptable that people's lives are torn apart by homelessness in our society. Yet continued economic inequality, underinvestment in social housing and an overall housing shortage have resulted in an increasing number of individuals and families losing their homes. Ireland is experiencing a housing crisis which has never been seen before.

It can be different.

More than thirty years of working with and listening to our customers has shown us that there are answers.

Preventing homelessness – particularly for people who are at most risk and supporting people who have been homeless to stay in secure homes for good – are the ways we can change lives and take on the challenge.

We also know that homelessness cannot be solved without changes in legislation to bring an end to the causes of this crisis. We will make sure that the experiences of our customers inform public opinion and government policy. It will take courage and persistence, but we will stand up and say what is wrong and unfair.

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We refuse to fall into the trap of just managing the problem of homelessness – we need to challenge its very existence. We will continue to do our very best to bring fresh thinking and find long-term solutions that help people to keep their homes.

Crucially, we believe that this Strategic Plan aligns with a wider recognition that homelessness is unacceptable, that the mistakes of the past cannot be repeated, and that everyone has the right to a place they can call home.

Preventing homelessness, particularly for people who are at most risk and supporting people who have been homeless to stay in secure homes for good – are the ways we can change lives and take on the challenge.

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