Strategy 2017-2020

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.

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.
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.

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.

Focus Ireland 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.

We will focus on two pillars:
1. Preventing homelessness
2. Supporting people who are homeless to move on into secure homes

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.
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.

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 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.

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 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.

A stable future
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.

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.

It will take courage and persistence but we will stand up and say what is wrong and unfair.

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.