Finding a Home

Families' Journeys out of Homelessness

Dr Kathy Walsh
and Brian Harvey

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

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I never slept a full night. I never felt the kids were safe.
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Contents

Introduction

1.1   Introduction and background

Over the last four years, the number of families becoming homeless across the country has grown consistently, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. The problem of family homelessness continues to worsen every month. Although some families do leave homelessness, a larger number are becoming homeless. Recent figures published by Focus Ireland reported that 87 families became newly homeless in Dublin in January 2017. This means that an average of 72 families became newly homeless each month in the previous twelve months, culminating in a total of 1,365 families and 2,895 children homeless nationwide in Ireland in June 2017. The number of families who were homeless increased by 54% from January 2016 to June 2017.

To date, no research has been undertaken in an Irish context to document and understand the ways in which families exit homelessness. Little is known about the more medium-term impacts of these experiences on these families, and on the overall well-being of parents and children.

1.2   Literature on families exiting homelessness

Existing research literature on family homelessness, on the complex nature and dynamics of homeless exits, as well the factors that facilitate housing stability over time, remains fragmented and underdeveloped. In the past decade, longitudinal research on homeless populations in Ireland and elsewhere (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Aubry et al., 2013; Jones and Pleace, 2010; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; O'Donoghue Hynes, 2015), as well as on homeless families in particular (Culhane et al., 2007), taught us that homelessness is much more likely to be episodic or transitional, with a large majority of those who experience homelessness returning to stable housing relatively quickly. As a result, research attention has become increasingly focused on the pathways that people take through and out of homelessness in an effort to shed light on the conditions that either impede or promote patterns of residential stability. Central to this research is the investigation of homeless 'exits' and the factors or mechanisms that shape individuals' routes out of homelessness to stable housing. While only a relatively small number of mostly US-based studies have attempted to investigate the paths taken

by families as they transition out of homelessness, the role of welfare receipts, subsidies and affordable housing emerged as the most salient factors in predicting independent exits and facilitating homeless families' stability in the research literature.

This study examines, for the first time in an Irish context, the process of exiting homelessness and sustaining housing among a sample of 25 families who recently exited homelessness in the Dublin region. A core goal is to use qualitative methods to identify and explore the conditions that either promote or inhibit residential stability among families with experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland.

1.3   Aims

This research aims to:

> explore the processes and factors that enable families to exit homelessness;
> understand the factors that enable families to sustain these exits;
> understand which elements of Focus Ireland practice are effective and which ones can be improved; and
> explore the impact of the experience of homelessness on families and children.

The study also has a number of specific objectives:

1 Identify and understand factors that resolve homelessness among families:

> Understand the factors that facilitate or impede how families access and secure housing.
> Appraise the effectiveness of service responses in facilitating exits out of homelessness among families.
> Understand the capacities of families themselves in the process of exiting homelessness.
> Further our knowledge on sustained exits from homelessness among families.
> Understand ways to support families and children after they transition out of homelessness.

2 Provide Focus Ireland with evidence-based strategies, actions and recommendations to help support families out of homelessness and into secure and sustainable housing.

3 Provide key policy recommendations for government on both the practical and emotional supports that assist families in exiting homelessness and in developing positive life outcomes.

Methodology

2.1   The sampling framework

The first task of the research was the development of a sampling framework to ensure that a representative cross-section of 25 families who left homelessness some time over the period from 1 March 2014 to September 2016 was selected for interview across the four Dublin local authority areas.

The sampling framework was designed to ensure a cross-section of family types and characteristics. First, by way of family type, it included two parents with children; single mothers with children and single fathers with children. Some had experience of separation or divorce, with, in some cases, children living with or between different parents. Second, it included different family sizes, from families with a single child to larger families, for example, five children. Third, it took account of the different ages of children, from infants to adult children. Fourth, it included migrant and ethnic minority families.

2.2   Engaging with the families

The initial contact with the families selected was made by a Focus Ireland staff member. Accessing current contact details for many of the families proved a challenge and some of the families randomly selected could not be contacted because of out-of-date contact details. Some families also refused the invitation to participate for a range of reasons, including not wanting to share their information, poor health, or, having moved out of homelessness, they did not want to revisit the experience. Where families declined the invitation to participate, another family with a similar profile was selected and was in turn approached by a Focus Ireland staff member with an invitation to participate in the study.

For a small number (eight) of the approximately 100 families randomly selected, it was found that their tenancy had failed and they had returned to emergency accommodation, while in two further cases the family unit had been separated, with the children either in care or living with a family member, while the parent was living in adult emergency accommodation. A decision was made by Focus Ireland not to include these families in the study, but instead to look at these families in more depth at a later stage.

Once a family consented to participate in the research, they were contacted by the researchers conducting the interviews to arrange a suitable date and location for the interview. The interviews took place in the accommodation where the families were living at the time of the interview. The interview was conducted with the nominated head of the household; where a couple was present, both parties participated in the interview. The length of interviews varied, being typically an hour, but some were shorter and others longer. All of the families interviewed received a €50 'One for All' voucher from Focus Ireland as an acknowledgement of their assistance.

2.3   Profile of the families interviewed

Almost all of the families interviewed had completed family formation and, although their age was not asked, most appeared to be in the age range 20 to 40.

The majority (16 of the 25) became homeless as a result of being required to leave the private rental property where they were living. Other reasons families became homeless included domestic violence or being asked to leave the family of origin home (generally because of overcrowding). Two of the families selected to be interviewed had become homeless as a result of evictions/being forced out, while one parent who had been living in residential care was required to leave as a result of becoming pregnant. Just two families became homeless as a result of not being able to pay their mortgage.

The majority (20) of the families interviewed were one-parent families, while just three had a male head of household. Seven of the families were headed by migrant parents and/or Irish Travellers. The number of children per household ranged from one to five children. See Table 2.1 for a profile of the families interviewed.

Family size		
	One child:	**7** families
	Two children:	**14** families
	Three children:	**2** families
	Four children:	**1** family
	More than four children:	**1** family
Nationality	Irish:	**18**
	Other nationality:	**7**
No. of children under 18	**50**	
	0–<5 years:	**20** children
	5–<10 years:	**20** children
	10–<15 years:	**7** children
	15–<18 years:	**3** children
No. of adult children aged 18 and over	**11**	

Household type	One-parent family (with female head)			**17**
	One-parent family (with male head)			**3**
	Couple			**5**

Breakdown by local authority area	Dublin City Council			**13**
	South Dublin County Council			**6**
	Fingal County Council			**4**
	Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council			**3**

Length of time the family indicated they were homeless	1<3 months			**1** family
	≥6–<9 months			**6** families
	≥9–<12 months			**2** families
	≥12–<15 months			**6** families
	≥18–<21 months			**4** families
	≥24 months			**4** families
	Unknown			**2** families

When the family exited homelessness

	2013	2014	2015	2016
Q 1	**1**	–	**3**	**2**
Q 2	–	**1**	**5**	**1**
Q 3	–	**3**	**3**	**2**
Q 4	–	**2**	**1**	–
Total	**1**	**6**	**12**	**5**

In addition, one family's recollection of when they become homeless was very poor (it was either 2014 or 2015).

Table 2.1 · Profile of the families interviewed

3

Findings: Supports and impediments to exiting homelessness

3.1 Processes and factors that enabled families to exit homelessness

Identification and securing of a suitable rental property

Family exit from homelessness was dependent on the identification and securing of a suitable property, whether private rented, approved housing body or local authority housing. The extent to which families took ownership of this process varied. Some family units were very proactive in keeping in regular contact with their local authority as well as independently seeking suitable private rental accommodation.

All of the families who reported trying to find suitable private rental accommodation found it a challenging process. The primary challenges associated with finding rental accommodation were identified by the families as affordable rent, the property location, the quality and cleanliness of the accommodation on offer, as well as the challenge of finding a landlord willing to accept a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

'We needed to find someplace near to family, as, if I am ever to get back to education and get a job I will need them to help with the kids. Being on your own you really need that backup.'

'We looked at so many places, but the landlords did not want HAP or Rent Supplement. We just could not compete.'

These and other challenges clearly contributed to some families abandoning the process of looking for private rental accommodation relatively quickly. Other families continued with the process of looking for private rental accommodation for well over 12 months until they were able to locate a suitable property.

'We must have looked at 1,000 places. I am not joking. I looked at places every week and in all of those places I only found one agent that would accept me and he only accepted me because he knew the place was not great. I told him I did not care and that I would clean it and sort it out.'

The process of looking for private rental accommodation was generally considered easier where there were two parents.

'It was impossible for me to try and find a rental property. I had no one to mind the children and I could not bring them with me. No landlord wants a one-parent family with young children.'

Table 3.1 provides details of how the families found the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness.

Type of accommodation	How the family found the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness	No. of families
Approved Housing Body (AHB) accommodation	Local authority connected the family with the approved housing body	4
	Local authority connected the family with the approved housing body with the involvement of the key worker	4
Local authority accommodation	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation (with input from key worker)	7
	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation following extensive input from medical staff	1
	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation (The family presented themselves weekly at their offices.)	1
RAS (Rental Accommodation Scheme)	Local authority located the RAS accommodation for the family	1
Private rental	Key worker informed family about HAP and the family found the property	1
	HAP, with key worker input	5
	HAP, without key worker input	1

Table 3.1 · How the families interviewed found their accommodation

Many families found their accommodation through their local authority. Smaller numbers accessed the private rental sector (using HAP) with the support of their key worker.

Once the majority of the families exited homelessness, they reported that the extreme strain of their homeless situation generally lifted relatively quickly, especially for those who relocated to local authority or approved housing body accommodation where they had longer-term security of tenure.

Enablers

The factors that enabled and supported families to exit homelessness included the capacity and the tenacity of the parent/s to engage with the local authority as well as their capacity to seek out and view rental properties. What was very apparent was that this experience

greatly tested the social skills and personal resilience of each of the families interviewed and was particularly stressful for families who did not have the backup of wider family/ community support.

> 'We found the whole experience very stressful and we were lucky my mum and my sister helped us out in every way they could. They were there for the kids and they were there for me. They kept me sane.'

> 'It was so tough to deal with it all and I had no backup. There was just me and my kid. There were nights when I just cried and cried. It was so difficult'.

Three families exited homelessness because of their particular family circumstances (e.g. a new baby with medical complications). For other families, it was the experience of living in very close quarters with one another that provided a key driver to get out.

> 'We had to get out. The kids were driving each another mad and they were driving me mad. The place was too small for the three of us for very long.'

In other cases, families reported that it was the information provided by, and subsequent support from, their key worker that supported their exit from homelessness.

Impediments

The vast majority of the families interviewed reported being deeply negatively affected by becoming homeless. A small number reported finding themselves drawn into activities in which they otherwise would not have engaged, absorbing all of their energies.

> 'I started taking drugs. I was not myself. I see now that I was too easily led. I just didn't care.'

For some families, the impact of being homeless was clearly compounded and exacerbated by particular life events, some of which had contributed to their homelessness, leaving them with limited capacity and energy (e.g. death of a partner/close family member, an unplanned pregnancy). Many of the families interviewed also reported that the day-to-day reality of living in homeless accommodation over an extended period of time had caused them significant stress, affecting both their sleep and ultimately their mental health.

3.2 Processes and factors that enabled families to sustain their exits

Enabling factors

Key enabling factors included affordable rent deducted at source, the location of the new accommodation close to family and friends, and, for families who moved into local authority or approved housing body accommodation, a feeling of security, which in turn saw them seeking to make the place their own. Responsive landlords also helped families to feel secure in their accommodation. It was also very clear from the interviews that the shorter the period of time a family was homeless, the quicker the family members were able to adjust to living independently. Younger children appeared to adapt and settle more quickly in their new accommodation. Older children (teenagers) generally took longer to adapt, particularly where they had to change schools.

'We were very lucky. We were not homeless for very long, especially compared with other people. The kids were very young and were so happy to have space to play when we moved. We were able to quickly make the place feel like home. I am not sure now whether the younger ones realised we were even homeless. All they remember is the hotel and the lift and I am very happy about that.'

Impediments to sustaining exits

Among the most frequently identified impediments indicated by the families in relation to sustaining a tenancy were issues linked with the poor quality and location of the accommodation, money pressures (linked to sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation) as well as the additional challenges some of the families interviewed were dealing with (e.g. no previous history of living independently, very significant health issues, etc.)

'Although it is a modern building, there is no insulation. The walls are cold to the touch on the inside and there is white mould on the outside. There is no communal heating system and, although electric storage heaters are provided, they cost €50 to set up and €13 a day to operate. We cannot afford this, so we use two small mobile electric oil heaters for just a few hours a day (gas heaters are prohibited). There is a water immersion system, but it does not work so there is no hot water. Neither are there vents in rooms, so condensation is a problem. The lift was apparently converted to a ventilation shaft for the building as a whole. It is a multi-storey building with no evident fire escape.'

Other families reported that their accommodation was too small or was going to be too small either because of new children born/due to be born after the family was housed, or indeed siblings getting to the point that it is no longer appropriate for them to share a room. In one case, one of the families was placed in first-floor accommodation with stairs, posing a particular risk for one of their children with significant health and mobility issues. Other families reported that their accommodation was located too far from family supports and that this was proving an issue in terms of access to affordable childcare.

'My ma was going to look after the youngest so I could go back and get my qualification. This cannot happen now as I am two buses away from her and cannot afford other childcare.'

It was also the case that a small number of families reported having to deal with some difficult neighbours and in one case an ongoing campaign of anti-social behaviour.

Many of the families who moved into local authority or private rented accommodation reported that it was sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation or, to all intents and purposes, completely unfurnished. These families were immediately faced with the challenge of obtaining beds, furniture, furnishings, white goods (cooker and/or microwave), washing machine, kettle, and, in many cases, floor covering or a replacement for the existing floor covering which was often in very poor condition.

'There was nothing here and I had no money so for two weeks we slept on the floor. Then I got a loan for some essentials – kitchen appliances, beds and a table and chairs. I am now having to pay this off. I just have to hope nothing else goes wrong or we will be in trouble.'

Many of the families report that money is a struggle. The majority of the families reported being dependent on social welfare payments, with little left over after they have paid their rent, bills and food.

> 'The pressure points always come back to money. We need money to live and we never have quite enough and I am always scared that some emergency will come up that I need money for and that is a slippery slope to losing the house.'

Some of the families reported that they had no previous history of living independently, while others found managing a household (following a period of homelessness) an ongoing challenge.

> 'I was so institutionalised. I had forgotten how to shop, how to budget. I think I was in homeless accommodation for so long that I still find it hard. At one level it is great and at another I am so very lonely. There is no one to talk to when the kids go to bed. I am truly on my own and alone.'

3.3 Services role in supporting families to exit homelessness

The principal services that families selected[1] for interview reported had contributed to their exits from homelessness were on the voluntary and not-for-profit side – Focus Ireland and the Society of St Vincent de Paul – and on the statutory side, their local authority, the Department of Social Protection, and others.

Focus Ireland

The majority of the families reported that their Focus Ireland key worker/s[2] played a central role in supporting them to exit homelessness. The families who were able to differentiate between their key worker and their Support to Live Independently (SLI) worker also believed that the SLI worker had an important role in helping them to get established in their new tenancy. The support provided was both moral and practical and both were regarded as equally important by the families. Many of the families interviewed also particularly valued the role of the key worker as an advocate, regularly contacting the local authority on their behalf and/or telephoning prospective landlords where necessary.

> 'We knew so little on how we could or should respond to our situation, we didn't know what a HAP was or how it worked. That is why our key worker was so important because she explained to us what our options were and what the real wait times were for these different options.'

> 'The [SLI] worker helped me get the bills all in my name and got me sorted with the household budget system so I don't have to worry about bills any more'.

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[1] A robust and random sampling strategy was used (overseen by the researchers to ensure there was no sampling bias in the selection of families for interview).

[2] Note that the term 'key worker' is used throughout, although different titles may be applied to the post (e.g. case worker, case manager, etc.).

Society of St Vincent de Paul

On the not-for-profit side, the other prominent organisation was the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP). The assistance provided by the society took various forms, including money, vouchers for food, help with form-filling, befriending and moral support, furniture – beds, tables, chairs, help with school books and vouchers for new school uniforms as well as Christmas presents and Christmas hampers.

> 'They (SVP) were good to us when we needed it.'

In a few cases the families reported that the SVP did not help. The reasons given for not helping varied from family to family.

> 'There was a SVP van that came around the estate with food, but we stopped it after a while. It was embarrassing. It was like begging.'

The local authority

The most important statutory body in relation to the accommodation of homeless families is the local authority. In the absence of a stock of affordable housing it was not surprising to find that a significant number of the families were frustrated with the inability of their local authority to provide them with (a) access to suitable emergency accommodation and (b) access to suitable long-term accommodation. It was also the case that the processes and practices employed by some local authorities to undertake their housing function attracted strong criticism from the families interviewed. The key problem areas included:

> While government policy (*Rebuilding Ireland*) emphasises the importance of prevention, local authority practice was not perceived by the families to focus on prevention. Families presenting to the local authority as imminently homeless reported being sent away and told not to come back until they were actually homeless. Few families reported being informed by the local authority of agencies that might help to prevent homelessness.

> The families reported presenting to their local authority highly stressed and traumatised, fearful of the family unit being broken up. Many of those interviewed described their treatment by officials as unsympathetic, and found this difficult to deal with. The families also reported that there were a small number of staff who were particularly challenging to deal with because of their moralizing comments, attitudes and behaviour. The families were aware of the significant stress the staff were under but considered these attitudes and behaviour 'unacceptable'.

> The advice of local authorities to some of the families interviewed to locate their own long-term move-on accommodation resulted in some families pursuing, often fruitlessly and for long periods, unavailable opportunities in the private rental sector.

> The practice of some local authorities which requires homeless families to confirm their continuing homelessness with high frequency, either in person or by phone, is, according to the families interviewed, time-consuming, stressful, physically exhausting, expensive and distressing.

> A small number of families were told by their local authority to 'self-accommodate' (i.e. the practice whereby the local authority, after accepting a household as homeless, requires the family to source its own emergency accommodation in a hotel which is paid for by the local authority). This process added considerable stress to families.

> The operation by some local authorities of a refusal policy (which requires families to take the second property they are offered), whilst lawful, is both challenging and subjective. Families interviewed as part of this study reported receiving what they considered to be 'unreasonable' first offers, including properties in locations that were either not in their preference area/s, properties in substandard condition, and/or properties that were located in environments that the parents considered unsafe for children (i.e. with high levels of anti-social behaviour). Under the current system, the determination of what is 'reasonable' is made by the local authority, with no meaningful appeals system, for example, that might be able to consider issues like levels of anti-social behaviour. The consequence of this refusals policy was that the families generally accepted second offers, however unsuitable, rather than face the risk of removal from the housing list.
> Several families reported having direct experience of being removed from the local authority housing waiting list without their knowledge or consent. Given that the removal of a household from the local authority housing waiting list has serious consequences for that household, it is important that this does not happen and that, where it does happen, a transparent appeals system should be put in place to ensure that any errors made can be addressed.

Department of Social Protection

The families who were eligible for support from the Department of Social Protection indicated that the department had provided them with exceptional needs payments to assist with the cost of furnishing and kitting out their new accommodation. While many of the families would have appreciated a larger payment, this system appeared to work speedily and efficiently, with no instances recorded of difficulties or poor staff interactions.

Other groups that supported the families to exit homelessness

Some of the families contacted their local public representatives around the time they were becoming homeless, while some continued to contact them while they were homeless. Other organisations that families received support from included Threshold, their church (various denominations), Depaul Ireland, the health services, local schools and family members.

3.4   Gaps in services

The families identified various gaps in services, including:

> the lack of services for children who are homeless (summer activities, afterschool services, etc.);
> the lack of supports for parents seeking to deal with their children's challenging behaviour when they are homeless;
> the need for parents to be able to access counselling (and relationship counselling) services when they are homeless;
> the need for peer support groups to assist individuals who are homeless to manage their stress levels.

Findings: The impact of homelessness on families

4.1   Impacts on children

Where children were young (five and under), and they were homeless for six months or less, from the perspective of these parents, the impact on many of these children appeared limited. According to the parents, the impact on older children was more significant.

> 'Our 14-year-old didn't do well in school (when we were homeless). He didn't study. There was no place quiet for him to study and he was too tired from all the travelling we had to do to get to school. He was always wanting to sleep. Things are starting to improve but he has lost the good studying habits he used to have, so I have stopped him playing football till things improve.'

> 'My eldest has been deeply affected by it all, by being homeless and now by having to live in an impossible situation (the family is the victim of anti-social behaviour). She was pulled off her bike outside the house and is now afraid to go out.'

Some older children appeared to recover quickly. One of the families reported how, when they were homeless, their daughter attended the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and saw a counsellor. After being relocated to a good apartment, the family reported that their daughter had improved: 'she was much better, more focused, studying and behaving normally – quite a change.'

According to the families interviewed, one of the biggest challenges for their children was dealing with the boredom associated with living in a single room with the rest of the family. One family described how their children (3 and 5 years) were initially excited about the idea of living in a hotel, but quickly got bored. The families described how has it was for them to deal with 'no one speaking to us', 'people keeping themselves to themselves' and 'day-to-day living in poor conditions'.

> 'Our son's behaviour went out of control. He was so bored. There was nothing for him to do.'

> 'My daughter's behaviour changed. She fought with me and with her dad (which was unheard of). She cried a lot and acted out.'

Another issue the parents interviewed were clearly worried about was the impact on their children of exposure to activities that they would not have witnessed were they not in emergency accommodation.

'The fact that we (me and my partner) split up when we were in homeless accommodation means the children heard more than they should. It was hard for them to see their mum and dad fighting and they heard and saw stuff that we both wish they didn't.'

'Living where we did, my children saw things that I did not want them to see. This has marked them. I know it has. They saw children taken off their parents. They saw people shooting up. They saw the ambulance come to treat a woman who had taken an overdose on the landing outside our room. They have had to grow up faster and harder than we would have ever wanted for them.'

One of the one-parent families reported that they had to make the difficult decision to send their youngest child to live with their parents (outside of the country) and continue to worry that this may, in time, have an impact on the child.

For many families, moving into their new home and out of homelessness marked an improvement in behaviour and mood, but this was not the case for all.

'We had to change schools when we moved here but could not find a school very close, so the children may have to move schools again. This is particularly hard on one of the children who finds change hard. She is upset about the first change and is finding it very hard to settle. I am not sure how she is going to cope if she has to change again.'

'When we were homeless we were stuck together in such a tiny space. Now we have more space the boys want to do things in their own rooms. It can be a battle to get them to sit down as a family and eat together.'

One of the families recounted the story of their four-year-old asking them whether being homeless was 'some form of punishment' and if it was what they had done wrong. Several of the families referred to a loss of discipline. One of these families described the impact in the following terms: 'They became bold. It became "I want" instead of "please". It was hard for us to say "no" when we were homeless and they became spoiled in that way.'

4.2   Impacts on parents

All of the families indicated that being homeless had many negative impacts for the parents. For some of the families interviewed, the impacts were practical and economic, with work and study having to be abandoned.

'I lost my job when we became homeless. I just could not get there and get the kids to and from school.'

'I loved college but I had to let it go. Hopefully I will get back to it at some stage when things are more settled.'

Other families and parents indicated that homelessness had a negative impact on their weight.

'When I was homeless I put on a lot of weight. We ate a lot of junk food. This did not make me feel good about myself and I am finding the weight very hard to shift. Sometimes I disgust myself.'

> 'When I was homeless I lost a lot of weight. I had no appetite and I walked everywhere to save money. I looked ill and my clothes were falling off me. I am better now but still don't have much of an appetite.'

For others, the most significant impact was their perceptions of themselves and their emotional well-being, which was in turn linked to their overall health and well-being.

> 'Being homeless was so overwhelming. I never felt safe. I never slept a full night. I never felt the kids were safe. I was a nervous wreck at the end of it all.'

> 'He was easily led and with people in the hotel selling drugs and him with access to our money, he got involved in drugs. Once he was in, it was a slippery slope. He and I spilt up quickly after that and then he was gone. It was just me and the kids.'

> 'My father died in (home country) and because we were homeless I was not able to travel for the funeral. That was so upsetting. It's not something I am ever going to be able to forget.'

Some of the parents indicated that they had to change their behaviour in order to survive when they were homeless.

> 'I had to get tough and toughen up when I became homeless because there were people screaming in your face and you had to defend yourself. I didn't want my son to think that I was weak. He needed me to be strong. I needed to be strong.'

Another parent, describing the impact of the experience of homelessness, contrasted her mental health while homeless and after homelessness in the following terms: 'When I was homeless, I was suicidal. Now my brain is my own again. I felt brand new when I moved in.'

Other parents described how they had 'mood swings', they 'never stopped crying' and in one or two cases how they considered killing themselves and would have done so were it not for their children. Several parents described how they had turned to prescription medication. Quite a number stopped taking these medications quite quickly 'fearful of becoming addicted'; as one parent described it, 'I stopped for fear of turning into a zombie.'

Some of the parents described how they had sought to access psychological help through their GP to cope with the depression, only to be told that the waiting list for an appointment or assessment was 12 months. None of those interviewed who sought this support got it.

Another parent described the impact of homelessness on her in the following terms: 'It was awful. I lost weight. I had a nervous breakdown and I miscarried. I did manage to get psychological in-patient help, followed by three to four months on anti-depressants.' This parent went on to report that she keeps reliving the experience of what she described as the worst winter of her life and never wants to set foot in a hotel again.

Some of the parents had also been clearly distressed and indeed traumatised by what was described as the absence of a 'place of safety and security'.

> 'The accommodation where we were placed was violent and unsafe. One man was killed there and our own child had a fall.'

> 'Where we were, there was a single washing machine for eight or nine families which didn't spin and which you had to stand over "to make sure you got your own clothes back.'

Surviving homelessness was something the majority of parents interviewed were proud that they had been able to do, describing it in the following terms:

> 'I realise I am strong. I am strong because of my daughter and I never want to go back there (homelessness) again.'

> 'For the first time in a long time I am starting to make plans again. I have just got a place on a Community Employment (CE) scheme and am looking forward to starting again.'

Some parents reported being particularly affected by the loss of their personal possessions associated with becoming homeless. Many of the parents made reference to the way in which they 'lost everything', especially regretting losing family photos, while the children reported missing their collectibles and new toys. One large family detailed how when they became homeless all they had was 'one case and the clothes we were wearing'.

The parents interviewed generally found that being homeless was expensive, largely due to food[3] and travel[4] costs. Many of the families reported that the money they had left after food and travel was very limited and was generally spent on purchases for birthdays and Christmas presents for the children. This meant that most of the families left emergency accommodation with little or no savings to help them equip their new homes.

According to some of the families, the quality of the emergency accommodation the family was placed in had a significant impact on parental stress levels. Where the accommodation provided was of good quality, the parents interviewed were clearly less stressed by their situation. Where the accommodation was poor, or where the accommodation was noisy and/or there were levels of anti-social behaviour, this was a significant cause of stress for those parents. For other families interviewed, it was the attitudes of the staff in the different types of emergency accommodation that had the biggest impact on the parents. In some instances, families reported that 'kind' staff in less than ideal emergency accommodation made the accommodation more bearable, while in other better quality accommodation, the negative attitudes of staff – and in some cases their decision to separate the families from regular guests – had a negative impact.

Without exception, the families interviewed were very clear that becoming homeless and being homeless had a very negative impact on their various relationships and particularly between parents and couples. At least two of the families indicated that the

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[3] See Focus Ireland publication by Share, M. and Hennessy, M. (2017) Food Access and Nutritional Health of Families living in Hotel Accommodation.

[4] Meeting the transport costs associated with living in emergency accommodation (at a distance from the schools children are attending) is a challenge for families who are homeless. Families with cars are much better able to get their children to and from school, sometimes travelling long distances to do so. Buses take longer, and the radial nature of Dublin's transport system means that two buses may be involved each way. Often, bus-dependent parents have nowhere to stay when their children are in school, but those with cars can wait in their cars during school hours. These transport issues can have an impact on time use and levels of stress, tiredness and frustration.

parents had separated while becoming homeless and two couples reported that they had split up while homeless.

> 'We stuck it together in homeless accommodation for four months which was very hard. Then there was a fight when he lost it and attacked me. I had to get help and the guards were called. It was horrible, and it was horrible that it happened in such a public place. After it happened he had to leave and that left me alone with the boys.'

> We had so many rows, the relationship went down the drain. Ultimately though he did stick with me and while we don't live together, maybe someday we will. The sad thing is that this also had knock-on effects for our son.'

The impact on adults of the experience of homelessness can be divided into a number of phases, with different levels of intensity:

> ❯ Phase 1 is the immediate impact after declaring homelessness. The first phase impacts as a period of high-intensity stress of short duration. Many reported feelings of panic on becoming homeless, for example, of not being able to sleep and more than one referred to the distress of the immediate period as being 'the roughest week of my life'.
> ❯ Phase 2 is the impact during the period in emergency (B&B or hotel) accommodation, which was a period of lower-intensity but prolonged and accumulating stress.
> ❯ Phase 3 is the settling into new accommodation after leaving emergency accommodation. The impacts of this phase appear to vary depending on the tenure of the accommodation where the family was placed. For those in HAP accommodation with only a short lease, the families clearly remained anxious about the risk of becoming homeless again and reported feeling restricted about what they could do within the property: 'It's frustrating that you can't make it a real home, paint the walls or do anything with it.' In contrast, the majority of the families who had become local authority tenants and for whom the threat of homelessness had finally been lifted appeared very relieved and had, without exception, begun work on making the property their own.

4.3 Impacts on the relationships between children and their parents

Analysis of the interviews with the families found that living in homeless accommodation had clearly impacted negatively on parents' relationship with their children.

> 'I was very angry when we were homeless and I tried to hide it, but it meant that I was always giving out. The boys hated it that I was always angry. It is better now. There is a different atmosphere. There is a bit more team work.'

Most of the parents interviewed reported waiting until they moved out of homeless accommodation before they began to address some of the more negative impacts.

> 'They picked up some very bad language when we were homeless and it was hard to get them to stop using it given they heard so many adults using it.'

The parents also spoke about the challenges associated with re-establishing regular routines in their new home.

'It was hard to adjust to healthy meals and having meals together at the table.'

School was a particular pressure point in the parent–child relationship. Parents reported working hard to avoid uprooting children from their school, either when they were in emergency accommodation or subsequently, fearing that a change would further upset their child's academic progress and/or socialisation. The parents interviewed were also very keen not to have to go through the process of having to get their child/children into a new school. The stress was lowest if schools did not change and if parents had their own cars and had somewhere to wait. Stress levels were higher where children had to either change school and/or make multiple bus journeys, with parents killing time with nowhere to go to, waiting for schools to be over. Where a family was unable to find a place for their child, this was clearly the greatest source of concern and stress.

4.4 Impacts on relationships with others

For some of the families interviewed, their homelessness clearly brought them closer to their immediate family (parents, grandparents and siblings) and close friends.

'Without my brother and my best friend, I do not think I would have coped.'

Many of the families made a decision not to tell people, which resulted in them losing contact or keeping people at a distance.

'The kids never told anyone we were homeless or where they were. We only told the school when the child's behaviour deteriorated and the school principal contacted us to find out what was going on.'

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1   Conclusions

Exiting from homelessness was a challenging process. Key factors that supported the exit included the personal resilience of the mother or father or both, as well as the nature of supports provided by Focus Ireland support workers, and the combination of the two.

Many of the families demonstrated remarkable resilience, given the experience they lived through. When asked what advice they would give to others in their situation, they said, 'keep going, never give up'. Some were already quite skilled in house-hunting and the fact that so many capable people found the experience so fraught was an indicator of just how little housing is available.

For the majority of families (with young children), the impact of the experience of homelessness lifted relatively quickly after leaving emergency accommodation. This was particularly the case for families placed in local authority accommodation and approved housing body accommodation, which were clearly considered by the families interviewed to be 'more secure' and 'more affordable than private rented accommodation'. In contrast, the families who were living in HAP accommodation generally reported finding it 'affordable, but not secure'.

Important enablers that helped the families to exit homelessness included their support worker/s; the location and quality of the accommodation; the direct payment of rent; the duration of the tenancy; and the responsiveness of the landlord. Conversely, threats to exits and tenancy sustainment were identified as unsuitable accommodation, lack of or poor-quality fittings and furnishings, low income, or families with particular additional needs.

The experience of homelessness was cumulatively greatly distressing: in the first instance, a short period of high-intensity stress and panic, followed by prolonged stress of less intensity. Being homeless put enormous stress on the relationship between parents, both those living together and those living apart, and on relationships with their children.

The impacts of the experience of homelessness varied. For very young children, it appeared – from the perspective of their parents – to have had limited impact. These young children appeared largely unaware of the nature or significance of the experience. For older children, the impact was greater and more visible. For the parent/s, it was a

time of considerable stress, intensive at first, then of less intensity, but prolonged and just as potentially scarring, often resulting in significant friction between parents. Personal relationships and family discipline generally deteriorated.

Among the principal problems were the lack of certainty, lack of play space, poor conditions in some locations, overcrowding, boredom and reduced socialisation. Specific impacts on parents were noted as food-related (weight gain/weight loss, deterioration in health), emotional (loss of confidence) and economic (loss of employment, cost of eating out, spending of any savings). Many families lost all of their possessions, bar what they could carry, and this was a cause of emotional distress for some families.

Although some emergency accommodation was of good quality, some was poor, characterised by overcrowding of washing and bathroom facilities and limited/no access to cooking facilities. Getting children to school and keeping them attending their existing schools were also key pressure points. Transport was a particular issue, with families with cars having an advantage in being able to transport their children across town more efficiently and having a location where they could wait until school was over. For those dependent on buses, this process took much longer and was much more physically tiring and ultimately more stressful.

Some families adjusted to their new accommodation quite quickly. Generally, the more secure the tenure within the new accommodation, the quicker families reported being able to adjust. The speed of adjustment did not appear to be linked to the duration of homelessness.

For younger children (but not all), school and social performance generally improved quite quickly, but it took older children and particularly teenagers longer to adjust, especially where they had to move schools, according to their parents. The families worked very hard to try to avoid a school move for their children as the majority believed that moving school could have a negative effect on their child's educational and related social progress. It should be noted that some of the issues related to being homeless only emerged for older children following the move out of homeless accommodation. It was also the case that some families only began the often-difficult process of dealing with the consequences and aftermath of a relationship break-up (often linked with their homelessness/or while homeless) when they moved into their new accommodation. The main services/supports that assisted families to exit homelessness were Focus Ireland workers, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Exceptional Needs Payments administered by the Department of Social Protection.

Local authorities were identified as having a crucial role to play as the provider of both emergency and longer-term accommodation, as well as the administrator of the HAP scheme. The families raised concerns both about the ability of the local authorities to meet growing needs and about the manner in which some local authorities transacted their business, from their apparent lack of engagement in any form of prevention, to the poor treatment of clients by a small number of local authority personnel.

5.2   Recommendations

There are three groups of recommendations, as follows:

1   **At a national level: There is an urgent need for more social housing to enable timely exits from homelessness.**

This study clearly affirms the preference of the families interviewed for local authority accommodation as their optimum long-term solution and, failing that, approved housing body accommodation.

The impact of the experience of homelessness on the families and children can be clearly seen to have influenced their preference for local authority accommodation, which was seen by the families to offer security of tenure, affordable rent, acceptable standards and, in most cases, locations where people can settle in communities in which they are comfortable. Approved Housing Body (the quality of which was found to vary) was the next preferred option. HAP accommodation had the advantage of affordable rent, but did not offer security, and formerly homeless families had a lingering fear that they could become homeless again. Taking a HAP tenancy results in a family being taken off the housing list as their housing need is deemed to have been met. For families who have waited many years on the list, this involves giving up any hope of social housing. HAP households can be included on the 'transfer list', but this is seen as of little value as time already spent on the housing list is not taken into account. Private rented accommodation was identified as the least desired option, because of its high rents, insecurity and often poor standards. These findings are interesting in the context of *Rebuilding Ireland* which contains a commitment to the construction of local authority accommodation, the balance of supply between local authority, voluntary housing, private rented and private sector being a matter of political contention. This research suggests that, from the perspective of homeless families, the construction programme needs to be heavily weighted in favour of local authority accommodation. The relative insecurity of HAP and loss of accumulated priority on the social housing list could be addressed by:

> increasing tenancy security across the private rented sector to the European norm (particularly by removing the right of landlords to terminate a tenancy in order to sell it or move family members into the unit);
> allowing families on the transfer list to retain their existing priority for the allocation of any social housing (i.e. retaining their place in the queue).

There are many factors that enable and inhibit exits from homelessness, with many ways in which the impacts of the experiences of homelessness on adults and their children can be reduced and in some cases minimised. This research came across both good practice (e.g. support workers, and the application and use of exceptional needs payments), which should be accentuated; and bad practice, which needs to be addressed. All of this can make a difference to preventing, diminishing the impact of, and speeding up the exit from, homelessness and sustaining tenancies thereafter. Whilst some of these changes require resourcing, many only require low-cost changes to procedures. These changes are the subject of the remainder of the recommendations.

2 At local authority level: There is a need for changes in a number of local authority practices, including:

> In line with *Rebuilding Ireland*, pillar 1 *Address homelessness*, where it states: 'We must ensure that those most at risk of losing their homes receive support services, so that we can minimize the risk of them becoming homeless in the first place' (p. 38), local authorities need to be proactive and automatically refer families who present themselves with the threat of impending homelessness (e.g. notice of termination) to advice services (e.g. Threshold) and also put in place accommodation options that could be ready once the family is displaced.[5]

> The practice of families being asked to source their own emergency accommodation, referred to as 'self-accommodation' is inconsistent with the expectations of the Housing Act, 1988, and should be discontinued, as should the use of the term. While families may be given the option to pursue their own accommodation, the responsibility for identifying their own long-term accommodation is that of the statutory authority (i.e. the local authority).

> Provide homeless families with access to emergency accommodation that offers them access to cooking and refrigeration facilities and that have play areas for children; end the practice of using substandard and overcrowded emergency accommodation.

> End the practice that exists within some local authorities of requiring daily signing-in, either in person or by phone, by individuals and/or families who are homeless. This could be replaced (with a saving of time for all involved) by electronic signing in.

> Ensure that no households are removed from local authority housing waiting lists without their knowledge or consent. The existing practice associated with the removal of people from these lists must be subject to permanent scanning and quality control, with the outcomes published and an independent appeals system introduced.

> Ensure that all move-on accommodation offered to homeless families is in a reasonable condition and in line with applicant preferences, ending the current two-strikes-and-out practice. The term 'reasonable' must be redefined within the scheme of allocations to include consideration of standards and safe environments for children. An independent appeals system should be introduced.

> Ensure that (local authority and approved housing body) properties provided to families exiting homelessness are furnished with basic facilities, to include adequate and safe floor coverings.

> Ensure that HAP accommodation is inspected quickly and that it meets minimum standards.

Local authority interactions with families who are homeless/at risk of homelessness need to continue to be improved. Some progress has been made in this area since some of the families interviewed became homeless. First, households presenting to the local authority with a valid notice to quit are now entitled to access Homeless HAP before entering emergency accommodation. Second, there is now a three-person prevention team within the local authority which seeks to provide assistance before the family becomes homeless. Third, on behavioural issues, further work could be done in this area through a programme of dialogue with those who experience or have experienced homelessness, with standards set down and training provided accordingly.

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5 Government of Ireland (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland – action plan for housing and homelessness.* Dublin.

3 **Recommendations for changes in relation to the supports provided by Focus Ireland, including:**

› Preparation of a short document detailing the various accommodation options and possibilities available to families when they are homeless, provided to families as soon as they become homeless.

› Identify the number of key workers required for homeless people newly arrived in emergency accommodation within a minimum time, seeking resources from the DRHE to provide this level of support.

› Provide the families with written details of the role of the key worker and the role of the SLI worker as well as details of the timescale and duration and boundaries of the services provided. Ensure that arrangements for disengagement are clearly communicated to all families.

› Identify the number of specialist child support workers required for all children needing such support, seeking resources from Tusla to provide this level of support.

› Explore ways to make counselling services available to families, both during and after homelessness, including relationship counselling.

› Find appropriate solutions to the conflicting demands on the Focus Ireland coffee shop, so that services can be provided (there or elsewhere) for families with young children in a suitable environment.

› Introduce a dedicated helpline that former Focus Ireland clients can contact if they run into problems for a period of time after they take up their new tenancy. It is important to add that those assisted were conscious that other homeless people needed key workers too and that they should not try to hold on to the service indefinitely when others needed help more urgently.

› Explore ways in which the good practices reported in some schools can be extended throughout the school system (e.g. some schools, on their own initiative, helped homeless families by offering parents a waiting room while their children attended school).

› Undertake further research on the families who have been housed but who did not manage to sustain their tenancy.

› There would be value in investigating the feasibility of devising a storage system whereby families who are homeless could store their possessions at a nominal cost for the duration of their homelessness.

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