

Executive Summary

Keeping a Home

Preventing Families from
Becoming Homeless

Neil Haran and
Seán Ó Siochrú

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

'Apart from the practical support, Focus Ireland also gave me emotional support during what was a really stressful time. They kept me focused. Getting advice on who to contact meant that I wasn't going from post to pillar all the time. The attitude in Focus Ireland was always really positive and very relaxed. I'd come in stressed out of my head and the staff would say "let's ring somebody". They were always on the lookout for solutions. And it was never just one solution. They just added to my confidence.'

Family Interview, Waterford



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In order to protect the identity of our customers, the photographs in this document are of volunteers.

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Abbreviations

A&I	Advice & Information
CIC	Citizens Information Centre
FRC	Family Resource Centre
DSP	Department of Social Protection
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
MABS	Money Advice and Budgeting Service
NTQ	Notice to Quit
PASS	Pathway Accommodation & Support System
RTB	Residential Tenancies Board
SRM	Social Rental Model
TD	Teachta Dála
TSS	Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service

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Executive summary

This publication presents a summary of key findings of an external study of Focus Ireland's services which work to prevent family homelessness.¹ By looking in detail at the experiences of 35 families who had used the services, the report has sought to understand which interventions were successful and to identify strengths and weaknesses in the current prevention services offered by Focus Ireland. It also set out to further Focus Ireland's understanding of prevention in line with its organisational strategy, and to contribute to a wider knowledge on preventing family homelessness.

The overarching conclusion of this research is that Focus Ireland has operated a series of prevention services that have proven effective in the short-term in enabling families to avoid entry or re-entry into homelessness. At the time of interview, between 3 and 15 months after disengaging with Focus Ireland, 34 of the 35 families in the study had succeeded in avoiding homelessness. A critical feature of these prevention services was the creation of holistic, family-orientated interventions, designed to address the immediate and varied presenting needs of families accessing services.

The organisation has managed to create these holistic services in a manner that not only meets the practical housing needs of families but also a broader range of social, economic and emotional needs that accompany the risk of being made homeless. Organisational staff have provided these services in a respectful, non-judgemental and humane manner, demonstrating deep empathy for families and considerable commitment to their work.

Context

As Ireland witnesses growing levels of family homelessness, it is apparent that there is a greater need for prevention services, as offered by Focus Ireland. However, family-orientated prevention services can only provide short-term solutions to family risk. They do not – and cannot – address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness. Greater policy commitment from the State is required to bring about longer-term and more sustainable solutions to the incidence of family homelessness.

¹ The full report is available in PDF format online at <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>

The number of families becoming homeless in Ireland has grown consistently in recent years, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. 1,429 families were accessing emergency accommodation across the country in July 2017, inclusive of 2,973 children.²

Recent years have brought an increased international policy focus on the prevention of homelessness as opposed to policy that is centred on responding to the incidence of homelessness. Prevention policies and practices have tended to operate along a three-tiered continuum:³

- *Primary prevention* aims to reduce the risk of homelessness among the general population through measures associated with, for example, housing supply, access and affordability, and poverty reduction.
- *Secondary prevention* focuses on individuals and families who are potentially at high risk of becoming homeless because of certain risk characteristics⁴ or because of crisis situations in their lives likely to lead to homelessness.
- *Tertiary prevention* targets interventions at those who have already experienced homelessness, seeking to resolve their homelessness as quickly as possible through measures such as rapid re-housing.

Prevention within an Irish context has tended to operate within secondary measures. The national Homeless Preventative Strategy (2002) devoted specific attention to a number of 'at-risk' groups, including adult and young offenders, people leaving mental health residential facilities, people leaving acute hospitals and young people leaving care.

The study: aims and objectives

This study was qualitative in design. A total of 35 families were interviewed across a range of locations – including Dublin, Waterford, Sligo, Limerick and Kilkenny – to ascertain their perspectives on the manner in which the services of Focus Ireland had impacted on their avoiding homelessness. In this way, the voice and direct experience of families who had been at risk of homelessness acted as the central vehicle for gathering robust data in this research process. These families sought support from Focus Ireland to prevent their becoming homeless or, in some cases, to prevent their return to homelessness through *Advice and Information Services*; *Tenancy Sustainment and Settlement Services*; and *Social Rental Model*.

In addition, seven structured interviews were conducted with Focus Ireland staff members who were involved either in the management and/or frontline delivery of prevention services to client families. Interviews with prevention service staff were conducted before engaging with families and informed the research instruments for engaging with families whilst also informing the research team's sampling strategy for recruiting families into the study.

² <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness> accessed on 26 September 2017.

³ Busch-Geertsema, V. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2008) 'Effective homelessness prevention? Explaining reductions in homelessness in Germany and England', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2, pp. 69–95.

⁴ For example, those with a history of institutional care.

Following the initial consultation with staff, it was decided that selection of families would be based on the following criteria:

- families who accessed Focus Ireland prevention services (Advice & Information, Tenancy Support and Sustainment, Social Rental Model) between January 2016 and September 2016;
- families who accessed Focus Ireland prevention services both in Dublin and in regional services;
- families who had been case managed over time;⁵ and
- at the point of disengagement from Focus Ireland services, the family had been recorded by staff members as having avoided entry into homeless/emergency services.

In undertaking this study, the research team committed to ensuring the highest level of research ethics in its engagement with all research participants, particularly participating families. Central to this commitment was the research team's adherence to the Ethical Protocol of Focus Ireland. Participants were advised before all interviews that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and that they could withdraw from the process at any time. Their consent to taking part in the interviews was sought after (i) the purpose of the research was fully explained to them and (ii) they were informed of what would happen to the information they provided. Procedures for recording interviews were also agreed with participants prior to the commencement of interviews. Only issues of relevance to the research were explored during interviews and the anonymity of participants has been protected.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify the co-occurrence of particular themes in response to specific questions within the research interviews. These were coded, reviewed and combined to produce overarching themes from the data. Themes were subsequently examined and analysed to ensure that their later presentation in this report would (i) give an accurate reflection of the data and (ii) ensure their relevance to the overall research objectives. Themes identified as significant by the research were written up and presented as the core results of the research through this report.

Profile of participating families

The families who participated in this research were diverse in terms of profile and had accessed prevention services in Dublin, Waterford, Kilkenny, Sligo and Limerick (see Table 1). They were led by heads of household of varied age, but with a significant proportion of female-headed and lone parent-headed households. The households interviewed also presented a large proportion of families reliant on social welfare as their primary income-source. The profile of families participating in the research is broadly in line with the known profile of homeless families from both the Focus Ireland Quarterly survey and data of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

In keeping with the higher concentration of family homelessness in the capital, the research prioritised families located in Dublin for interview over and above other areas.

⁵ Families who engaged with the service for a minimum of three meetings/conversations/engagements as opposed to families who simply accessed information over one visit to the organisation and then addressed their accommodation difficulties independently of Focus Ireland.

As a result, just under half of family interviews in the study were conducted with families residing in Dublin.

Location	Number of interviewed families
Dublin	16 (46%)
Waterford	6 (17%)
Sligo	5 (14%)
Limerick	5 (14%)
Kilkenny	3 (9%)
Total	35 (100%)

Table 1 • Profile of families interviewed by location

Gender of participants

Interviews were conducted with the adult family member who had approached Focus Ireland for support and who was the primary contact within the family for the organisation. Against that backdrop, 28 (80%) of the 35 interviewees were female, while the remaining 7 (20%) respondents were male.

Age

Almost half (n=16, 46%) of those interviewed during this research process were aged between 36 and 45 years. One in three (n=11, 31%) were aged between 26 and 35. The full age profile of respondents was as follows:

Age	Number of participants	% of participants
> 25 years	3	9%
26–35	11	31%
36–45	16	46%
46–55	4	11%
55 +	1	3%

Table 2 • Age profile of family respondents

Family status of respondents

Seventy percent (n=25) of those interviewed during the research were parenting alone, 22 of whom were single mothers and three single fathers. The remaining 30% (n=10) of the study participants were two-parent households.

Given the focus on the prevention of *family* homelessness in this study, all interviewees were accompanied by dependent children. In that regard, 60% (n=21) of interviewees were parenting two children or less, with the remaining 40% (n=14) parenting more than two dependent children.

Nationality and ethnicity

Sixty-eight percent (n=24) of those participating in the study were Irish nationals. This included two individuals born in Africa who, in recent years, had secured Irish citizenship. A further 23% (n=8) identified themselves as EU nationals,⁶ while the remaining 9% (n=3) were non-EU nationals.⁷

Four of the 35 (11%) respondents identified themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic group. Three individuals referred to their membership of the Muslim faith, while a further individual highlighted her membership of the Traveller community in Ireland.

Main source of income

Seventy percent of respondents (n=25) in this study identified themselves and their families as social welfare dependent. Fourteen percent (n=5) noted that they were working full-time while a further 14% (n=5) highlighted that they were working part-time.

Ten of the respondents were in two-parent families; of these one respondent noted that their partner was in full-time employment, while two others noted their partners' participation in part-time employment.

Reasons for approaching prevention services

An important aspect of understanding what works in the prevention of family homelessness involves understanding the context for families' risk of becoming homeless from the perspective of the families and also staff members. It is important to highlight that the contexts of individual families involved in this study inevitably varied from one to the other. In all cases, however, each participating family experienced a standout reason which forced them to the brink of homelessness and which ultimately led to their contacting Focus Ireland. That said, respective standout reasons were compounded in the cases of many families by a series of other, inter-linked difficulties that substantially increased their vulnerability to becoming homeless.

- Fourteen families (40% of all families interviewed) who had been in private rental accommodation had received Notices of Termination due to landlords selling the properties. Families suggested that landlords proceeded to sell their properties in thirteen of the fourteen cases. All families engaging with Focus Ireland prevention services were struggling subsequently to find alternative accommodation.
- A further two families in private rental accommodation (6%) had received similar Notices of Termination from their respective landlords, noting that family members of the landlord would be moving in and taking up residence in those properties.

⁶ This includes two British nationals.

⁷ Of African and Middle Eastern origin.

- Six families (17%) had been presented with eviction notices – either by a private landlord or the local authority – for substantial arrears in the payment of rent.
- A further five families (14%) had also received eviction notices because of their inability to meet rent increases imposed by private landlords.
- One family was forced to leave the accommodation in which they had been living because a family member was accused of anti-social behaviour, having damaged part of the property.
- Another family had received a similar Notice of Termination from a private landlord who suggested that the property s/he was renting to the family was too small for the family in question.
- A further three families (9%) felt compelled to leave the private rental properties in which they had been residing due to what they considered to be substandard accommodation and the landlords refusing to address significant maintenance issues, thereby placing health risks on family members.
- One family had experienced substantial mortgage arrears in their own home property and ultimately had to declare themselves personally insolvent and in need of alternative accommodation.
- One family, who had been residing in a self-catering centre of the Reception and Integration Agency, was asked to move on from the centre, having secured their refugee status in Ireland.

These details are captured in Figure 5 below.

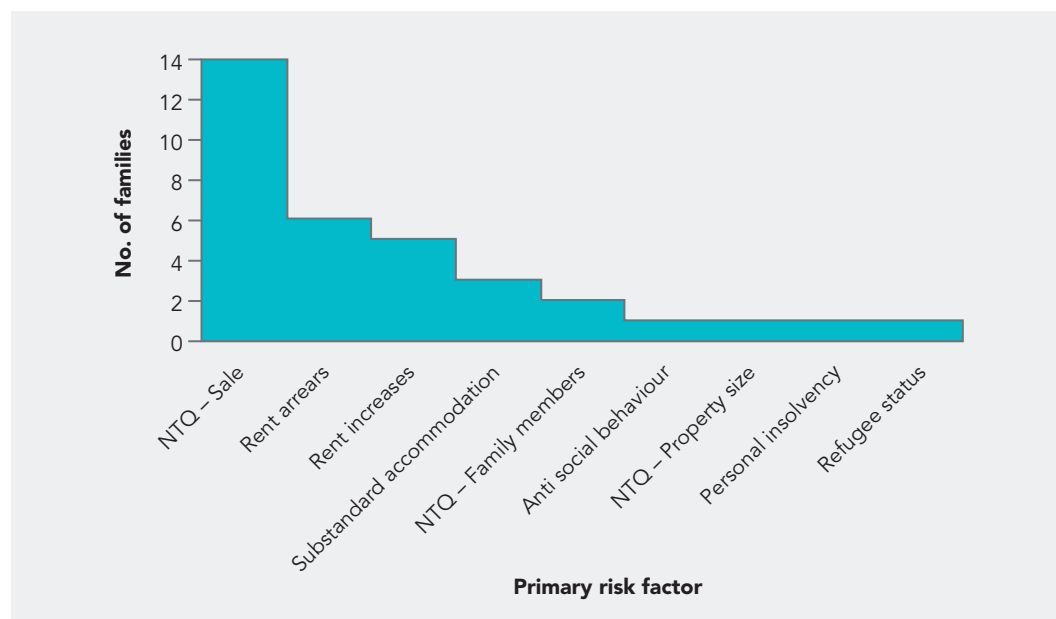
Five (14%) of the families in the study received support from Focus Ireland to prevent their re-entry into homelessness.⁸

Interviews revealed that those families who had received Notices of Termination from landlords in the private rented sector responded proactively to these situations and made concerted efforts during their respective notice periods to secure alternative accommodation. However, they experienced significant complexity in the private rental market and struggled to find suitable and affordable alternative accommodation. This resulted in their need to approach Focus Ireland prevention services for assistance. Contacting Focus Ireland frequently came at the end of their notice periods, placing the families in question at increased risk.

Six (17%) of the participating families reported individual and/or family difficulties which contributed to their risk of homelessness. A number described chaotic circumstances in their family lives, which, among others, included children being in trouble with the law; the involvement of social workers in family life; difficulties over guardianship of children; and substance misuse concerns. These circumstances contributed to instability in the family and were recognised as increasing the families' risk of homelessness.

⁸ All of whom are currently residing in Limerick and all of whom are supported by Focus Ireland through its Social Rental Model prevention service, enabling particularly vulnerable families to avoid a return to homelessness.

Figure 5 · Primary reason for risk of homelessness



These complex experiences of losing and trying to secure alternative accommodation contributed to high levels of stress for all of the 35 families engaged in this research. Many of the participants in this process referred to themselves and, in some cases, their children experiencing significant mental health difficulties throughout the period of trying to avoid homelessness, including depression, anxiety and stress.

Housing histories

Those who had been living in private rental accommodation prior to finding themselves at risk of homelessness had varied lengths of tenure in those properties, some families renting the same accommodation for up to eight years. Families outlined mixed experiences of security and insecurity in those tenancies.

Thirteen families (37% of all families interviewed) described themselves as having had secure tenancies prior to receiving Notices of Termination from their respective landlords. Five of those families (14%) highlighted very positive relationships with their past landlords, affording them what proved to be a false sense of security in those tenancies. All commented that this false sense of security amplified the difficulties they experienced when given Notice of Termination from their properties.

By contrast, five families (14%) described their prior tenancies in the private rental sector as precarious. Three of those families (9%) referred to living in substandard accommodation and to feeling insecure throughout the periods of their respective tenancies. All commented on not complaining about their respective situations, afraid that their landlords might not give them a favourable reference if seeking out alternative rental accommodation in future.

The private rental histories of a further four families (9%) indicated considerable chaos throughout their tenancies which increased their risk of vulnerability. The personal

circumstances of these families during those tenancies were characterised by family breakdown; continuous moving from one tenancy to another over a prolonged period; addiction and financial difficulties. All were addressing those difficulties or were seeking out support to do so.⁹

During conversation, ten of the families (29%) referred to having been on the Housing List with their respective local authorities at the time of making contact with Focus Ireland. Their lengths of time on the Housing List varied from two to twelve years. Three families commented on the frustration of being on the Housing List for a number of years in one local authority area while then having to start from scratch after moving to another local authority area. This situation increased families' sense of vulnerability. Staff members of Focus Ireland also commented on significant delays in getting families on the Housing List and the consequent delays in families qualifying for accommodation-related support such as HAP. They highlighted the apparent inconsistencies in State agencies', particularly local authorities', interpretations of policies which had a significant impact on families' immediate access to entitlements and rights.

Focus Ireland prevention services

Focus Ireland delivers three primary prevention services to families, as follows:

Advice and Information Services (A&I): The central feature of this service involves the provision of advice and up-to-date information on housing-related matters to families at risk of homelessness, including information on legal rights, accommodation and social welfare entitlements. A&I is a flexible service that responds to the unique needs of each family that seeks out its support. It is an open-door service to which households refer themselves on the basis of their need, and awareness of the service.

Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service (TSS): TSS provides settlement support to households who are at risk of homelessness and/or moving out of homelessness into a new home. It assists these families by providing ongoing practical supports around accessing entitlements, facilitating access to health and budgeting services, and establishing routines that strengthen families' capacities to sustain their respective tenancies into the longer term.

Social Rental Model (SRM): The Social Rental Model is provided to families who have experienced homelessness and have been residing in emergency accommodation. Its purpose is to enable families to avoid re-entry into homelessness. Under SRM, Focus Ireland acts as the tenant and secures a tenancy with a private landlord on the understanding that the organisation can sub-let the property to a family at risk of homelessness.

The work of Focus Ireland prevention services is family-orientated. It provides timely responses to the immediate presenting needs of families approaching the organisation for support. A core feature of Focus Ireland's prevention services is that they are constructed in response to the unique and respective circumstances of individual families. Greater detail on each of these services is provided in the main body of the report in Chapter 3.

⁹ The 22 families whose secure, precarious and chaotic prior tenancies are outlined above all sought the support of Focus Ireland through its A&I service.

Success in homeless prevention

Interviews during this study revealed that between 3 and 15 months after disengaging from Focus Ireland services, 34 out of 35 participating families had succeeded in avoiding homelessness through their engagement with Focus Ireland prevention services. In addition to levels of success, extremely high levels of satisfaction were expressed by families with regard to the services received from the organisation.

Identifying what works and why

In the context of Focus Ireland's Prevention Services, five primary prevention strategies emerge from this study as both hugely important to families and as successful in the short term in enabling families to avoid homelessness. These are:

- 1 *Building family awareness of their rights and entitlements*, i.e. providing clear direction to families on their rights and entitlements as tenants and building their capacities to deal more effectively with landlords, local authorities, Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) on housing matters relevant to their respective circumstances;

'I haven't a clue of any of this. My key worker has been a rock in advising me on all these things.' (Family Interview, Limerick)

'The main thing for me was that Focus Ireland knew the full story. They knew to look at my situation from all different angles.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'The general connection and the ongoing support of somebody with the know-how was really so important. Focus Ireland was like a mentor to me.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

- 2 *Enabling families to access their rights and entitlements by supporting them in navigating a complex range of public services and supports*, i.e. representing families as required, and advocating on their behalf, with landlords and State agencies to ensure that families' rights and entitlements as tenants are accessed and secured;

'Like in July of last year, there was some change to the HAP payment. I had no idea what was going on ... One of the great things about Focus Ireland's support was having somebody to almost hold my hand to help me through this mess of a system. That's what Focus Ireland does really well.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'Focus Ireland also gave me really sound advice; who to speak to in the Council or in Welfare. They had the contacts. They knew the sympathetic people in those places who'd offer me support. Those people knew Focus Ireland was doing good so they were willing to help. Focus Ireland had a network of supportive people in those agencies.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

- 3** *Coaching families in their search for alternative private rental properties and in their dealings with landlords in the private rental market, i.e. guiding and preparing families in advance of engagements with landlords and agencies, building families' capacity to present themselves effectively and to justify their need for supports. This research finding featured to a greater extent across the observations of Focus Ireland prevention service staff, especially those involved in A&I, who described coaching as a critical support in ensuring families' success in both sourcing accommodation and sustaining tenancies.*

'A lot of time is spent coaching clients for how to deal with things. Going through the forms and preparing them for dealing with the system; about contacting landlords looking for a place; on gaining HAP pre-approval, etc.'
(Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

'A lot of A&I work involves coaching clients about entitlements or coaching them on how to search for alternative accommodation – i.e. have they references, if they get a viewing what to bring with them, how to present themselves at a viewing and so on ... Many of the families that are accessing FI's services will have been staying with family members for a long period. Then there's a breakdown in the relationship and then they are without accommodation ... Many of them end up telling landlords about the chaos in their life story and that reduces rather than increases their chances of securing accommodation. Focus Ireland advises them to pull back; that they don't have to tell their life stories to landlords. This is where coaching is key.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Limerick)

- 4** *Supporting families to access the necessary financial assistance to enable them to meet the increasing costs of rent in the private rental market, i.e. advising families on their entitlements to housing assistance payments and supporting families, as necessary, in the administration of applications for those payments.*

'He [Focus Ireland A&I staff member] submitted the papers for the HAP for us and later he got back to me and said 'Well done, you have been approved.' But really he did the work – even though I had put a lot of time in. Now I am more aware and I feel more secure because of the HAP.'
(Family Interview, Dublin)

'So I contacted Focus Ireland after being with the Council. The lady there recommended the Homeless HAP and took care of everything. She filled out all the forms. This was just a couple of weeks after I got the letter to leave. She told me I was approved for the Homeless HAP and that I had a threshold of €1,425.' (Family Interview, South Dublin)

'Me and my partner went in to Focus Ireland. [The staff member] took all our information, our PSI number, our passport etc. He took care of all that for the Homeless HAP. He said we would be approved for €1,500. We met him just once. He said to go off and find a house and to let him know. He was very helpful.' (Family Interview, Dublin)

- 5** *Tailoring an integrated package of services to the needs of individual families, i.e. applying the strategies listed above, along with other activities as required, in a manner that not only addresses families' primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining tenancies.*

In essence, these strategies respond comprehensively to the immediate presenting needs of families. In other words, what works in the prevention of family homelessness is when the services on offer directly match the immediate presenting needs of families.

The strategies above are contextualised and explained in considerable detail in Chapter 4 of the full report.

Recommendations for prevention practice

In addition to identifying practical strategies that emerge as consistently effective in supporting families to avoid homelessness, the interviews conducted during this study suggested that attention also be devoted to the manner in which prevention services are offered. In effect, conversations with families indicated that the ‘how’ of service delivery was as important as the actual practical supports offered. Among others, the following were noted:

- *Prevention requires a non-judgemental approach:* It became clear from the research data that a non-judgemental approach to homeless prevention builds families’ emotional and psychological confidence during a very distressing period. Judgement shames and reduces family capacity to address difficulties. Respect strengthens family resilience and motivates families to persist with their search for suitable accommodation.
- *Effective prevention involves addressing families’ presenting needs:* As outlined above, a central feature of effective prevention services involves (i) assessing the respective accommodation needs of individual families, along with other potential difficulties that increase the families’ risk of homelessness and (ii) implementing a set of responses that match the presenting needs of families.
- *Effective prevention involves a complex response to a complex problem:* Successful prevention strategies involve the tailoring of an integrated package of supports to individual families in accordance with their respective presenting needs. This package of supports, increasing families’ access to information, capacity-building and entitlements, not only addresses their primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining their tenancies. The approach is both immediate and long-term in its perspective, seeking to ensure that families remain in secure accommodation, both in the immediate and longer-term future. It is a complex response, as required, to a complex problem.
- *Complex responses require a case management approach:* Providing families with an integrated package of supports that matches their risk of homelessness requires time and flexibility. It rarely involves a one-off engagement whereby families simply receive advice and information and are able, thereafter, to resolve their housing concerns. Effective prevention tends to require multiple and ongoing engagements with families at risk.
- *Effective prevention services are available to all families at risk of homelessness:* Effective prevention approaches recognise the changing structural and economic contexts for family homelessness in Ireland and acknowledge that the threat of homelessness is faced by a wider cohort of families than might otherwise have been considered possible in previous years. The premise of a *universalist* approach is that any family can be at risk of homelessness and that supports should be available to all such families irrespective of background; family status; economic status; ethnicity and cultural background, etc.

These recommendations are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5 of the full report.

The need for longer-term solutions

This research has examined effective short- and medium-term solutions that enable families at risk to avoid entering homelessness. One of the most striking features of this research process has been the recognition that prevention services working directly with families – and to a lesser degree with landlords and systems of the State – can only hope to achieve short- and medium-term solutions.

Short-term solutions support families in crisis. They do not – and cannot – in any way address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness: the absence of regulation within the private rental market; the absence of affordable rental properties and quality social housing; difficulties associated with access to the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the adequacy of HAP in the private rental market, etc. Longer term solutions are therefore rooted in significant structural change; change that needs to take place at a national policy level.

Feedback from families interviewed during this study, along with feedback from prevention service staff members, suggested that effective State action on the following would go a long way to ensuring longer-term solutions to the risk and incidence of family homelessness:

- *Ensuring effective implementation of HAP:* Address current challenges within the implementation of HAP, most notably (i) knowledge gaps among tenants and landlords on the provisions and requirements of HAP; (ii) HAP thresholds rarely meeting the full rents requested by landlords; (iii) delays in families accessing HAP payments; (iv) ensuring landlords' compliance with the provisions of HAP; and (v) removing the condition that HAP tenants lose their place on the housing list, by integrating priority on housing and transfer lists.
- *Regulation of the private rental market:* Interviewees commented on the need for greater State regulation of the private rental market, some recommending that the State should regulate and standardise rents so that a fairer rental system could be put in place that would not disadvantage families. They highlighted the need for greater enforcement of existing tenancy legislation to ensure that the rights of families were not being undermined. And they repeated calls for greater efforts to ensure that landlords were deterred from discriminating against families accessing HAP.
- *Increasing supply of social housing:* Interviewees proposed that greater State effort is needed to increase the availability of social housing, thereby facilitating the clearance of housing lists. Within that context, interviewees argued that policy needs to be in place that obliges local authorities to free up empty properties swiftly and make them available to families in need of accommodation.



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