

## Submission to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

### Public Consultation on Proposals to Modernise the Electoral Registration Process

#### **Introduction**

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department's consultation on the proposed reform of the electoral registration process. We believe that the consultation is an important step in modernising our electoral registration process and that many of the proposals continued within are positive.

We note that one such proposal refers to 'specific provision for people with no fixed address to ensure a standard procedure across the country'. While the consultation's supporting documents do not go into detail about what such 'specific provision' would entail, we believe that this is a necessary and important intervention.

While the stated aims of the reform plan are positive, we note that there is no mention of increasing voter participation or widening the voting base. As voting is the cornerstone of our democracy, we believe that encouraging participation should be a key function of Government voting policy.

As the Department will be aware, Focus Ireland works with individuals and families experiencing different levels of homelessness and housing insecurity. Some of our customers are in supported temporary accommodation or other longer-term placements. Others are in shorter-term placements. Some customers are residing in night-by-night emergency accommodation and a small cohort are sleeping rough. The impact of accommodation circumstances on engagement with bureaucratic and political processes cannot be overstated. Individuals in chaotic and unstable accommodation may be too focused on safety and survival to engage with the mechanics of the State.

For many though, the fact that they do not vote is due to administrative barriers placed before them. It is important that any reforms to the registration process remove these barriers and ensure a meaningful right to vote in the State.

#### **ETHOS**

The European Typology of Homelessness (ETHOS) has been accepted as the best definition of homelessness in Ireland and much of Europe. For the purposes of the Department's consideration of an inclusive electoral registration system operational Categories 1-8 should be taken into consideration.

#### **Voting while Homeless in Ireland**

Many other jurisdictions provide detailed information about how those experiencing homelessness can register and vote. This is not the case in Ireland. The complexity of the current registration process is

exacerbated for those experiencing homelessness, particularly for those residing in temporary or one-night-only accommodation.

### **Voter Registration**

Individuals experiencing homelessness and residing in emergency accommodation do not have access to an address through which they can register to vote or receive a polling card. We noted with interest the announcement by An Post that people experiencing homelessness will be offered an address at their local post office to enable them to access services which require a postal address.<sup>1</sup> We have communicated with An Post who noted that while there had not been discussions about using 'Address Point' to enable voter registration, it was an interesting question. We believe that this new service provides an excellent opportunity to ensure those experiencing homelessness can register to vote, without requiring the development of new procedures.

### **Information and Engagement**

It is also important that procedures around registering and voting are clear and that accessible communications are developed to explain them. Posters and information leaflets should be developed and distributed to homeless services and emergency accommodation. Information online should be reviewed by NALA to ensure that it is accessible to those with literacy issues. More generally, information about registering and voting should continue to be made available in a variety of languages.

It is disappointing that to date Ireland has failed to adequately inform individuals experiencing homelessness about their right to vote and how they can do so. In developing communications in the future, the Department might consider reviewing campaigns from other jurisdictions, such as the 'You Don't Need a Home to Vote' campaign in the US.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Homeless to be provided with address at local post office to access services' Irish Independent, 14 March 2019

<sup>2</sup> You Don't Need a Home to Vote: <https://nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/voting/>