

FOCUS Ireland

Recommendations to Government: Housing for All Strategy 2021 Introduction

May 2021

Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the drafting of the 'Housing For All' housing and homeless strategy.

Focus Ireland is one of the largest housing and homeless charities in Ireland, with a distinct philosophy and service approach. We believe that homelessness is wrong – both in the sense of being morally wrong, but also in the sense that it is a failure of public policies. Failures of public policy can be learned from and corrected. With the right mix of public policies and service practice homelessness can, over time, be ended.

We believe that while we must, of course, respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of people who are homeless, we must apply most of our resources and energy to supporting people out of homelessness and preventing them from becoming homeless in the first place. While people are homeless, services should not aim to 'manage' their homelessness but to safeguard them and minimise the harm that the experience of homelessness can cause, at the same time working to bring their homelessness to an end.

We are committed not only to delivering the most effective services we can, but to constant evaluation of what we do. We are committed to sharing with and learning from everyone else involved in achieving the same goals.

Every person who experiences homelessness is different and has different needs. But over 30 years of experience have taught us that these needs can be understood within three broad groups:

- the needs of adults who are homeless alone or with another adult;
- the needs of families, where adults experience homeless along with their children and children experience the trauma of homelessness; and
- the needs of young adults who experience homelessness while they are still emerging into independent adulthood.

The submission is divided into each three sections, each dealing with one of these demographic groups. The section on family homelessness is drawn from a Focus Ireland campaign which pre-dates the announcement of the drafting of 'Housing For All' and is part of a public awareness campaign to run from May 2021, designed to addresses a substantial gap in policy and strategic thinking. The sections on family homelessness and adult-only households have the same structure built around five 'workstreams'. The section on Youth Homelessness was initially prepared in response to a request from the High-Level Task Force and as a result takes a slightly different format.

There are several important commitments in the Programme for Government in relation to housing and homelessness which Focus Ireland has already welcomed and are worth mentioning further here.

Firstly, the chapter title 'Housing for All', which is now the title of the new strategy, sets a welcome note of ambition and vision. We believe that this ambition would be appropriately reflected in a commitment to end homelessness, not as a rhetorical statement but as an organising principal driving every aspect of the strategy. We recognise that this cannot easily be achieved and we set out in the submission a process through which we believe this can be a realistic, longer-term national objective.

Closely linked to these ideas of 'Housing for All' and 'Ending Homelessness' is the idea that access to housing is a human right. Focus Ireland has been an advocate of a constitutional recognition of the 'Right to Housing' for many years and is an active member of 'Home for Good', the umbrella organisation dedicated to establishing this right in the Constitution. We welcome the Government commitment to hold a referendum on this issue. If such a referendum is to be successful, the Government must demonstrate its commitment to the concept of housing as a right in the 'Homes for All' strategy and the approaches it sets out. For instance, while passing a Constitutional referendum is a complex challenge, it would be a relatively straightforward contribution to public understanding of this issue to review homeless legislation so that it is underpinned by a right-based (rather than discretionary) approach. This would help the Government to begin to set out what housing/homeless policy would look like after the passing of such a referendum, an essential step in calming the groundless anxieties that can undermine constitutional proposals.

A third key idea in the Programme for Government is the proposal for a 'Commission on Housing' which would aim to establish a broad consensus on the provision of a sustained housing supply over a 20-30 year horizon. Focus Ireland is among the original promoters of the idea and strongly welcomes its adoption by the Government. While 'Housing for All' will work to a shorter timeframe, it would be valuable if it were to set the context in which the Commission will be established and how it will do its work.

We want to draw attention to one further priority which silently underpins the rest of this submission but is crucial if 'Housing For All' is to succeed. It is essential to set out a stable and long-term funding model for the homeless sector, in which the different responsibilities of the Local Authorities and the HSE are clear, co-ordinated and adequately funded. The funding model should recognise the skills and qualifications required to staff effective homeless services. This means ensuring that systems are in place to fund appropriate remuneration, pension arrangements and continued professional development for the skilled and experience staff which are essential to respond to the complex needs of many people who are homeless. Where competitive tendering is to be used to contract out services, a model which does not undermine collaboration in the sector or reward below-cost bidding but does promote high standards and effectiveness should be adopted.

Finally, we would like to draw your attention to the broad coalition of the leading homeless organisations which have commissioned a study by a panel of international experts to look at the positive lessons that can be drawn from the homeless pillar of Rebuilding Ireland, drawing on recent international experience of strategies to tackle homelessness. The international experts will be available to brief officials involved in the drafting of 'Housing For All' about emerging findings from this important study in June 2021. The completed study will be published later in 2021 and will be available to assist the Department and other stakeholders in the implementation and roll out of homelessness dimension of 'Housing For All.'

For our other submissions, please see the following links:

1. [Family Homelessness](#)
2. [Adult Only Households](#)
3. [Youth Homelessness](#)