

FOCUS **Ireland**

**Recommendations to Government:
Budget 2020**

**Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.**

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Introduction

The Irish economy has continued to grow at a remarkable rate in recent years and, notwithstanding the challenges presented by Brexit, appears to be in a strong position to continue in this positive direction. This welcome story of economic and employment growth is counterbalanced by two sets of challenges. First, there is the continued legacy of years of cutbacks and austerity. This can be seen in our public services themselves but also in the wider question of social cohesion, with whole communities, in both rural and urban areas, still experiencing the effects of reductions in income and loss of those services.

The second set of problems relates to capacity, with, for instance, our transport systems and labour supply increasingly presenting real limitations to the growth potential of the overall economy.

The housing and homelessness crisis intersects both these sets of problems. IBEC has argued that that the most likely demographic scenario will involve significant inward migration driven by employment opportunities and skills shortages, contributing to their estimation that 36,000 new homes will be needed each year¹. While economic success drives increased housing demand, there is increasing evidence that the lack of available housing in urban areas is beginning to create a real constraint to economic growth and may increasingly influence the decisions about inward investment. Equally, the shortage of skilled labour creates a significant constriction on the construction of new housing.

This gap between the number of homes and the number of households that need a home inevitably increases the risk of homelessness. But the legacy of austerity leaves us less able – at both an individual and organisational level – to deal with that risk. Many citizens have reduced resilience when faced with rising rents, insecure tenancies or family tensions; and if homelessness occurs our mental health services and community supports are too stretched to help adults or children deal with the damage that it can bring. After ten years of wage freezes and cuts to services, the voluntary homeless and community organisations, who are the front line of this work, struggle to meet growing demand. Most of the increased funding for homeless services ends up in the pockets of private landlords or hotels.

The result of all this is a growing chasm of inequality in our society, with over 6,000 adults and almost 4,000 children experiencing the extreme deprivation of not having a home, while the standard of living for the average citizen is, at last, beginning to improve and a small minority are doing very well indeed. The sense that ‘we are all in it together’ is long in the past and it will take real political leadership to ensure that the needs of those who have been left behind are remembered.

All this raises important questions about how the increased wealth should be shared, how it should be taxed and how it should be spent – or invested. Ireland’s emergence from the global economic crisis has been truly remarkable and we are now suddenly faced with the choice of whether we want to simply rebuild our society as it was before or use this opportunity to build a better, more inclusive and resilient country.

It is easy to over-dramatize the importance of annual budgets. In reality, much of the capital investment is already committed in longer-term strategies and the room for shifts in taxation and expenditure are limited. But they are important, both in terms of the choices they involve and in sense of direction that they set.

Budgets are, in essence, concerned with decisions about expenditure, but the discussion of budgets is also about political priorities and about new initiatives that can be launched. While the bulk of this submission concerns proposals for spending priorities, we start with a number of proposals which, although they have no budgetary cost, should, we believe, be an essential part of the political debate which frames Budget 2020. In Section 2, we go on to set out, Department by Department, the budgetary changes which we believe would ensure that Budget 2020 would be seen as a definitive step in tackling the housing and homelessness crisis which is so undermining our social well-being.

Section 1: Policy recommendations requiring no budgetary allocation

Evidence informed policy	<p>Five years into the homeless crisis, we still know too little about who is becoming homeless and why. This absence of reliable information undermines our ability to plan services and change policies to prevent people becoming homeless.</p> <p>FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, has developed a framework for measuring different aspects of housing insecurity for statistical purposes (see appendix). Much of the required information is available administratively, but has so far been primarily used to make short-term political points rather than collated and analysed to inform long-term policy making.</p>
Publish a database of housing insecurity in line with FEANTSA's ETHOS Light framework	
Proactive prevention	<p>Prevention is more effective than cure -particularly in relation to more vulnerable populations such as children and young people, where homelessness can lead to substance abuse, anti-social or criminal activity, entrenched social exclusion.</p> <p>Creating a legal Duty to Assist, including in relation to preventing homelessness, is an approach being explored or implemented elsewhere. For example, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 (with an implementation fund of £5.6 million) requires local authorities to work with other service providers to ensure the availability of services to prevent homelessness.</p>
The merits of a statutory requirement on local authorities to prevent homelessness should be explored in the Irish context	
End self-accommodation	<p>'Self-accommodation' is the policy of requiring families who are assessed as homeless to find their own emergency accommodation (hotel or B&B). Over 400 families are currently 'self-accommodating' in Dublin.</p> <p>Homelessness is traumatic, for parents and children. At a time when families are extremely vulnerable, self-accommodation heaps further stress on parents and children who are struggling to cope.</p> <p>In this context, the Ombudsman for Children has called for the practice to be ended.</p>
End the practice of self-accommodation by requiring local authorities to source and secure emergency accommodation for homeless families	
Review initiatives on family homelessness and Family Hubs	<p>The Ombudsman for Children (OCO) has highlighted the lack of clarity about the policy objectives of Family Hubs. Because the family homeless crisis emerged so quickly, the entire investment in emergency responses to family homelessness reflects an absence of policy objectives or concern for the interests of the child. The OCO has called for a full independent review of responses to family homelessness, including hubs, so that we can learn about what is working effectively and improve elements that are failing. Large sums of public money are currently being committed without any proper consideration of the most effective approach.</p>
Clarify the objectives of Family Hubs, and before further public funds are committed, commission an independent review of provision for homeless families	
Prioritise homeless households in allocating social housing	<p>Recent Focus Ireland research (Insights into Family Homelessness Series 2019 Vol. 2. No. 1) shows that the majority of homeless families make extensive efforts to find accommodation in the private rented sector. However, despite these considerable efforts, many families struggle to find suitable and affordable homes through HAP.</p> <p>A higher share of families were able to exit homelessness in less than 6 months during the period when homeless households were prioritised in allocating social housing. This is particularly important for families who are unlikely to find accommodation in the private rented sector</p>
Restore priority access to social housing allocations for vulnerable families who are homeless	

Section 2: Expenditure proposals

Department of Housing, Planning, & Local Government

Housing Supply

In Budget 2019, Minister Donohoe forecast that 25,000 units of housing would be added to the national housing stock during 2019, the largest increase in housing supply for several years. Most analysts agreed with this forecast but noted that it still fell significantly short of the 30-35,000 that the ESRI estimate will be needed to meet annual need. This year-on-year shortfall in housing supply inevitably leads to increased pressure throughout the housing market and society in general. It is most keenly felt in the private rental market, where it drives rents to increase faster than general inflation - and indeed faster than the legal maximum of 4% for Rent Pressure Zones. In the absence of adequate countervailing measures these pressures result in an increased risk of homelessness and more households living in emergency homeless accommodation.

Nevertheless, the increased levels of housebuilding were welcome as they were heading in the right direction after the total collapse of house building during the recession. But in recent months, Goodbody's has lowered its projections and now forecasts that the total number of new housing units will be closer to 22,000². This not only has implications in the current year but will also have long run impact on the planning and ambition among private housing developers. It must be seen as a serious warning that the current set of policies are not capable of solving our housing crisis, even if we were to ignore the current level of homelessness and take the longer-term view.

If we are to bring the housing crisis to an end, it is vitally important that the private housebuilding sector is healthy but also that it is building houses at the price range where there is the highest need. There is strong evidence that much of the recent growth in private housing building has been at the higher end of the market, where effective demand is limited. In this context, if the Government is to continue the 'Help to Buy Scheme' for a further year the maximum house price must be reduced, so limiting the number of beneficiaries who would have been able to afford to buy without taxpayers support, and to send a clear message to developers about the price range of housing that will receive public subsidy.

While the state continues to be very actively intervening in the private housing market, through NAMA, the Land Development Agency (LDA), planning short-cuts and various incentive schemes, its direct contribution to the building of new housing stock continues to be very limited and clearly insufficient. The welcome increases in the supply of social housing continues to be far too reliant on housing stock purchased or leased from the private sector. For instance, of the 5,159 social houses which Dublin City Council plans to deliver in 2019 only 302 (6%) will be new build by DCC itself³.

The Government's clear statements that the 'market alone cannot solve the housing crisis' are welcome⁴, but there continues to be a view that what is required is 'the market plus some more public subsidies', when what is required from Government is ambitious and coherent projects to deliver non-market housing.

In this light, it is essential that the state take a more active role in causing non-market housing (housing for social rent or cost rent) to be built. The establishment of the Land Development Agency in 2019 was an important and welcome development. However, the stipulation that the LDA must produce only 10% social housing and 30% affordable housing means that the primary goal of the LDA, as defined by Government policy, is to provide homes for the private market at non-'affordable' prices. The Government has not yet taken the essential step of setting out what it means by 'affordable' housing, but it is generally interpreted to mean housing to be sold on the market at below prevailing market rents. While there are some welcome plans to deliver 'cost rental' housing on LDA land, it is not clear where this fits into the 10/30/60 provision.

The decision to allow up to 60% of the homes to be built on state land to be un-affordable to the ordinary public seems to be justified on the basis of making the LDA 'commercial'. This implies that the balance of 10/30/60 is primarily a question of finance, and certainly no justification on the grounds of social mix, need or the proper role of Government has been

published. Different sites owned by the LDA have different requirements and the proposal from some commentators that all the housing must be social housing would not allow for the needs of particular sites – or indeed for the building of community and shopping facilities. However, a more ambitious overall target for delivering of housing at the prices where the greatest needs is required. In as much as this may need additional state funding to reduce the ‘commercial need’ to build expensive homes on state land, this should be addressed in Budget 2020.

An increased budget allocation to the LDA should be made to ensure that it has the resources to ensure that a minimum of 15% social, 15% cost rental and 30% ‘affordable for sale’ be provided on all LDA land.

Recommendation

- Increase the budget allocation to the LDA should be made to ensure that it has the resources to ensure that a minimum of 15% social, 15% cost rental and 30% ‘affordable for sale’ be provided on all LDA land

Proactive and collaborative homelessness prevention

Prevention is always better than cure, and successful approaches to preventing homelessness have been developed – e.g. Focus Ireland’s Family Homelessness Prevention Team, the collaborative initiative with the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection (DEASP) in Dublin 15⁵ and Threshold’s Tenancy Sustainment Service. Recent Focus Ireland research has identified that, despite the extensive work by many agencies, more than a third of families that become homeless have not sought advice or support before losing their homes, with young parents and non-EU migrants being the least likely to seek help⁶. Along with the continued growth in the number of families becoming homeless, this demonstrates that there is further potential for such innovative prevention initiatives.

In order for preventative measures to succeed they must achieve two goals (i) capacity to connect with at risk families in a timely manner (ii) access to remedies which can prevent the planned eviction or provide alternative accommodation. Three important lessons emerge from evaluations of prevention programmes:

1. Targeting is most effectively delivered by collaborative partnerships which involve both state and NGO actors (harnessing the potential of administrative databases to generate personalised communications to at risk families);
2. Appropriately skilled and resourced Housing and Information services can prevent homelessness in many cases.
3. Prevention initiative must work closely with policy makers: in a significant number of cases, homelessness is caused by circumstances that need policy change rather than information/advocacy (e.g. landlords evicting to sell etc.)

While many agencies are working hard to prevent homelessness, there is limited co-ordination between different agencies and the percentage of the homeless budget spend on prevention has fallen from 10% in 2013 to around 6%⁷.

To deliver a more effective preventative response and reduce the number of households becoming homeless, the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government should establish and resource a Homelessness Prevention Unit to deliver a coherent prevention strategy, co-ordinate and resource actions. Effective prevention requires a cross-government approach, and liaison with the DEASP is particularly important in this regard, given the prominence of affordability in driving housing instability, and to harness this the unit should work under the auspices of the Homeless Inter Agency Group.

Recommendation

- Establish and resource a Homelessness Prevention Unit in the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, linked to the Homeless Inter Agency Group, with an initial fund of €500,000 to support effective prevention actions

Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)

Most households which exit homelessness find their new home in the private rented sector, usually with the support of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). In Dublin, such households can access Homeless HAP (HHAP), which allows a potential 50% 'uplift' above the maximum rent payable under the mainstream HAP scheme. In other cities, homeless families may be able to access up to a 20% 'uplift' on the normal maximum rent level.

For HAP to remain an effective measure to support households into the private rented sector, it is critical that HAP rent caps bear a realistic relationship to actual market rents. Data from the RTB index shows that average rents have increased by 18% since the last increase in the maximum rents payable under Rent Supplement and HAP in July 2016.

A recent survey conducted by Threshold and the St. Vincent de Paul⁸ demonstrated how far behind real rents the maximum rent thresholds have now fallen: for single people, caps were between 50-70% of market rents, while for a family with three children, HAP rent caps ranged between about 60-75% of actual market rents. Even allowing for the 20% 'uplift' on rent caps that can be applied on a case by case basis, the rent caps mean that most tenancies in the private rented sector are simply out of reach of those who need them. While 'Homeless HAP' can provide a further uplift in the allowable rent, this is discretionary and people who are homeless cannot know in advance what rent level will be subsidised.

The maximum level of rent payable was last increased in July 2016, as part of the Confidence and Supply agreement between the Government and Fianna Fáil, and this increase led to a small but marked reduction in the number of families becoming homeless in subsequent months⁹. However, as rents continued to rise the positive impact of the increase was eroded.

For the private rented sector to be a viable exit route from homelessness, HAP rent caps need to be rebased in relation to actual market rents on an annual basis. Given how far the thresholds have fallen behind market rents, and the existence of RPZs, this change would not have an inflationary impact on rents.

Furthermore, ESRI research¹⁰ has recently highlighted that while HAP was to be implemented alongside a National Differential Rent scheme, this has not been progressed. The research found that implementing a National Differential Rent scheme has the potential to improve financial work incentives for most recipients.

Recommendation

- Rebase HAP rent caps to reflect market rents on an annual basis
- Implement a National Differential Rent scheme to improve financial incentives to be in paid employment

The Private Rental Sector

As noted above, the private rental sector is important in tackling homelessness because it is both the main route into homelessness and the most common escape route out of it. Changes in the private rental sector, and in particular the decline in the number of housing units available for rent in the sector, is of grave concern. Given the importance of these changes in the private rental sector, we have remarkably little information about the nature of these changes and the reasons behind them. Recent research by the Residential Tenancies Board is very welcome in this respect, and further more detailed work will also be of great value.

Much of the discussion of the declining number of private landlords has revolved around the assumption that this is driven by choices currently being made by landlords, influenced by regulation and taxation etc. Discussion of policy options to respond to this issue have similarly reflected a short-term consideration of yield and regulatory burden. However, this debate largely ignores the large number of buy-to-let landlords who are in long-term arrears on their

loans and who are essentially being taken out of the market as a result of decisions which took place several years ago. As of March 2019 there were 16,275 buy-to-let mortgages in arrears for over 90 days – accounting for 15% of all buy-to-let mortgages. The detailed statistics for repossessions and rent receivers give no clear insight onto the fate of the tenants, but with 5,398 properties currently with rent receivers and over 1,000 repossessed properties disposed of during the previous year months, it is clear that a significant proportion of the ‘withdrawal’ of landlords can be explained by the policies related to the treatment of buy-to-let arrears.

Where the tenant in these buy-to-let properties is in receipt of HAP or Rent Supplement, the state is already essentially servicing the loan and the arrears problem relates to historical circumstances. In the current crisis for such tenants to be evicted, frequently into homelessness, and the property sold on the open market represents poor value for the exchequer. Where banks are taking repossession proceedings against properties where the tenant is in receipt of HAP/RS, the option of transferring the property to state ownership should be explored.

Recommendation

- Establish a fund to take into ownership buy-to-let units which are being repossessed due to landlord arrears and the tenant is already in receipt of HAP/RS and is at risk of homelessness

Housing First for Families

Data on the duration of family homelessness illustrates that there is a growing share of families becoming trapped for extended periods of time in ‘emergency’ accommodation: while family homelessness has grown by 27% over the last two years, the share of families living in ‘emergency’ accommodation for over two years has grown by over 300% in the same period – with 184 families homeless for more than 24 months at the end of May 2019¹¹. These families are likely to have more complex needs which can make accessing a home, and sustaining a tenancy, much more of a challenge.

No child should live in ‘emergency’ accommodation for years. It has a damaging impact on children at all stages of development – the recent report from the Ombudsman for Children’s Office highlighted many of the harms involved – and leaves them more likely to experience homelessness as adults. Neither is this an efficient resolution: emergency accommodation for a family in a hotel costs approximately €67,000 per annum¹², or just over €2 million per annum for 30 families.

Housing First has been adopted in Ireland as a response to homelessness among single people with high support needs, and is achieving success in addressing long term and entrenched homelessness.

There is considerable international interest in applying the proven practice of Housing First to support families with complex support needs¹³. In this context, Focus Ireland proposes a structured ‘Housing First for Families’ pilot to address the needs of families who have been homeless for more than 24 months. Some of these families will have complex needs which present particular barriers to securing a home, and need intensive support to address these issues and sustain their housing. Focus Ireland estimates the cost of providing these supports at €1.2m.

Recommendation

- Allocate €1.2m to develop, implement and evaluate a pilot ‘Housing First for Families’ response for 30 families with who have been homeless for more than two years

Department of Children & Youth Affairs

The family is a core institution in all welfare states, and one given particular prominence in Ireland. It is the place in which children become adults and acquire the skills needed for independent living. It is a safety net when things go wrong – unless it isn't. The role of family in both in causing and addressing homelessness in Ireland is insufficiently appreciated in both public policy and practice. Where families are not functioning well – e.g. because of poverty, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, substance abuse etc. – individual members, or whole families, are at increased risk of homelessness. For people who are homeless, family can play an important role in exit and recovery. While this dynamic has perhaps not been given sufficient consideration in Irish homelessness policy, Tusla has made some important steps in this direction and provides an institutional framework in which to address such challenges.

An important point, and one with no financial implications, is that most homeless accommodation does not facilitate visits by family members – and this can be particularly important for young homeless adults.

Supporting children in families which are homeless

There is a solid body of evidence that child support workers play a crucial role in mitigating the adverse impacts of homelessness on children. The integration of dedicated child support workers within a multi-disciplinary team was successfully piloted as part of the Government's Social Impact Bond initiative from 2013¹⁴. *Rebuilding Ireland* recognised the importance of this role, and committed to increasing the number of child support workers; additional posts were resourced through Tusla in Budget 2017, adding to the three workers who continued to be funded by HSE (Social Inclusion).

Children and parents consulted by the Ombudsman for Children's Office¹⁵ reported that child support workers were one of the few positive aspects of being in a Family Hub; the Ombudsman recommended that *"further attention should be given to identifying additional practical measures (for example, an increase in therapeutic supports and child support workers) that could be implemented to support the resilience, dignity and self-worth of children and parents while they are living in emergency accommodation"*.

Some children need this support to cope with the trauma of homelessness, either as a result of challenges they were facing before becoming homeless, or as a result of being homeless, or both. *Rebuilding Ireland* (p.36) noted that around 25% of the children in emergency accommodation are assessed as needing this support. The number of children who are homeless has increased by over 50% since October 2016, when funding was provided for an additional three workers; there are now a significant number of children with assessed needs who are unable to access child care supports¹⁶.

Each qualified Child Support Worker has a case load of about 20 children. An allocation of €280,000 would allow Tusla to resource an additional four Child Support Workers, to support to over 100 vulnerable children per year. The best approach to the deployment of these workers should be considered in a review of family homeless services, as recommended above and by the Ombudsman for Children in *No Place Like Home*.

Recommendation

- Provide €280,000 funding to Tusla for four additional Child Support Workers for children who have been assessed as in need of such support

Supporting the education of children who are homeless with their families

Sustaining participation in education can be very challenging for children who are homeless. They often have to travel long distances to school, have limited space in which to do homework and are often acutely aware of the stigma of homelessness and demotivated by the experience of being out of home for long periods of time. International evidence indicates that homelessness can have a very negative impact on children's education, and front-line experience in Ireland confirms this.

Ireland's main policy response to supporting children who are homeless in school has been delivered via the DEIS initiative. However, Focus Ireland's work with families who are homeless reveals that about half of these children are not attending DEIS schools¹⁷: they cannot benefit from measures such as breakfast and other school meal, homework and after-school clubs etc. They cannot benefit from the help available through the Home-School Community Liaison, or the School Completion Programme, because they aren't in DEIS schools.

While Focus Ireland recognises that DEIS is not an appropriate vehicle to provide educational supports to children who are homeless, a response is clearly required: these are children whose educational welfare is at high risk. Notwithstanding the deeper engagement with this issue required from the Department of Education & Skills, the funding of the Educational Welfare Service falls to the DCYA and Tusla, and it should be adequately resourced to support schools and teachers with homeless pupils and to work with children living in emergency homeless accommodation in order to provide educational supports on a needs assessed basis.

Recommendation

- Allocate €500,000 to resource educational supports for children who are homeless, via the Educational Welfare Service

Family mediation for children at risk of homelessness through relationship breakdown

A major longitudinal study into youth homelessness in Ireland – Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion – found that family dysfunction and conflict are significant drivers of youth homelessness: “several decades of research have produced strong consensus on the role of the family environment – including experiences of conflict, abuse and/or violence in the family home – in pushing young people out of home” (Ferguson, 2009; Hyde, 2005)¹⁸.

However, in many instances (i.e. where there is no abuse or neglect) skilled family mediation can resolve the issues that caused the break, support reconciliation, and prevent or end homelessness. The research recommended the establishment of a family mediation service to prevent and address such cases of youth homelessness.

In 2016 Focus Ireland secured private funding to pilot a Family Mediation service, helping young people to return to their family home and supporting improved family relationships. The service was so effective that Tusla has funded two Family Mediator posts within Focus Ireland's Dublin services (and also directly employed the Mediator involved in the successful pilot). The effectiveness of this service can often mean that a child does not have to be taken into care, resulting in a considerable financial saving to the State and avoiding the long run consequences of experiencing homelessness at a young age. The social and financial benefits of this service are so clear that it should be rolled out to other vulnerable young people outside of Dublin as soon as possible.

Recommendation

- Resource three additional Family Mediators for Cork, Limerick and Waterford, at an estimated annual cost of €190,000

Domestic violence refuges

Research recently conducted by Focus Ireland found that domestic or family violence was the declared cause of homelessness for 6% of families in emergency accommodation and may be a factor in a larger number of undeclared cases¹⁹.

While Ireland's decision to finally ratify the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) is very welcome, according to Women's Aid, Ireland currently has only one third of the emergency accommodation required for those fleeing domestic violence recommended by the Convention²⁰. On more than half the occasions in which Women's Aid has tried to find a refuge place for a woman and children escaping violence, all refuge spaces were full. A large number of women and children fleeing domestic violence are living in emergency homeless accommodation, where neither the physical accommodation or staff support are appropriate to their needs.

The Taoiseach has described the scale of violence against women in Ireland as an 'epidemic'²¹. It is an epidemic we have little concrete information about: there is no requirement to report on the numbers seeking and securing places in domestic violence refuges, as is the case with homelessness. In the context of ratifying the Istanbul Convention, Ireland is to develop a plan to expand the number of refuge places and to ensure geographical coverage. Tusla has yet to publish its assessment in this regard. A plan to expand provision to the levels required by the Istanbul Convention, and ensuring geographic coverage, should be published at the earliest opportunity, with appropriate financing provided in Budget 2020.

Recommendation

- Resource a planned expansion of domestic violence refuge spaces in line with Istanbul Convention requirements

Support young people leaving state care

It is well established from national and international research that care experienced young people are at an increased risk of homelessness on reaching adulthood. Planning and resourcing aftercare can play a critical role in helping vulnerable young people avoid homelessness, and establish independent lives. In this context, government has made a welcome commitment to ensuring that every young person leaving state care who needs an aftercare worker should be allocated one.

However, in order to reach this laudable goal the caseload of aftercare workers in some areas has been increased to a level where it is not possible to provide meaningful aftercare support, particularly to those young people with complex needs who are most vulnerable to homelessness. Focus Ireland aims to maintain a caseload of 15-20 young people per aftercare worker, in line with international best practice. However, funding constraints have forced us to operate a case load of 22-25. In the case of aftercare services run directly by Tusla a caseload of up to 50 young people per aftercare worker is not uncommon.

This is a false economy. Vulnerable young people leaving care need meaningful aftercare support to realise a sustainable and independent life. In the absence of such support, the risks of a life of social exclusion, with associated costs, are high.

Recommendation

- Resource Tusla to provide an aftercare worker for every 20 young people who need one in 2020, and to every 18 by 2021.

Support vulnerable young people

Young people aged 18-24 who are homeless rarely have access to youth-specific emergency accommodation or supports, leaving them with little option but to rely on mainstream adult services, an option described as “one of the most significant contributors to ongoing or prolonged homelessness among young people”²².

Research on youth homelessness illustrates the extreme vulnerability of young people in mainstream adult homeless services, noting that *“‘problem’ behaviours, including substance use and criminal activity, invariably intensified subsequent to young people’s first contact with the homeless service system and, in particular, following their entry to adult systems of intervention”*. In contrast, those who had accessed supported temporary accommodation for young people reported more positive experiences, as they had access to support, typically re-engaged with education or training, and began to form trusting relationships with staff, particularly key workers²³.

Given the risks faced by young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, it is critically important that they can access prevention and support services designed to meet their needs in their local communities. Children & Young People’s Services Committees are an appropriate structure through which to coordinate such support, but it is important that services are adequately resourced to be able to meet these needs.

Recommendation

- Resource Tusla to provide key workers for vulnerable adults who are homeless and ensure that they can access the range of youth oriented and community based services they need, through Children and Young People’s Services Committees

National Childcare Scheme

The long awaited National Childcare Scheme is due to be rolled out in the autumn. A core objective of the new scheme is to reduce child poverty. Ireland has the highest share of children living in jobless households in the EU. Ireland also has the most expensive childcare in Europe, not because costs are higher in Ireland, but because comparatively, the level of subsidy we provide is low.

The NCS proposes to impose severe cuts on some of the lowest income workers in need of childcare – for example recipients of the Working Family Payment and the One Parent Family Payment, which would make labour market participation unaffordable for Ireland’s poorest families. While Focus Ireland welcomes the introduction of the NCS, it would be profoundly regressive and counter-productive to cut childcare subsidies for Ireland’s poorest families.

Recommendation

- Ensure that the National Childcare Scheme maintains and increases the level of childcare subsidy available to families currently entitled to the range of targeted childcare schemes.

Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection

Social welfare payments for people of working age

Poverty and housing unaffordability are root causes of homelessness and housing instability, and access to adequate social welfare is a vital safety net.

Social welfare payments should be adequate to meet the basic needs of those relying on them. Using a robust methodology, the cost of a Minimum Essential Budget for a single individual currently stands at €245²⁴₂₃. Had the social welfare rate for working age people kept pace just with inflation, it would currently stand at €215.

Recommendation

- Increase the personal rate of social welfare payments for people of working age from €203 to €210 per week.

Social welfare payments for young people

The recession hit young people particularly hard: not only was it much more difficult to be included in the labour market, but their social welfare entitlements were cut more severely than others.

Those most vulnerable to being 'NEET' are those young people who are already marginalised. While anecdotal evidence is offered to indicate that reducing welfare rates for young people has an incentive effect for more advantaged groups, it is far from clear that it is an effective strategy to support the inclusion of the most vulnerable young people. For example, research from Germany and Denmark finds that "from a preventative perspective, the harsher policies aimed at the young equate to a high-risk strategy, which for the most marginal groups may actually increase the risk of social exclusion"²⁵.

Focus Ireland believes it is poor policy to maintain this strategy in the absence of an evaluation of its impacts on young people; we call for an independent evaluation of the impacts of these policies as they effect all young people.

Aside from the general effect of the reduced welfare rate on young people, there is ample evidence that it has resulted in a significant number of cases where vulnerable young people who were not able to return to a family home have entered homeless services.

The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness has pointed out that young people who cannot return to the family home, but who have identified a route out of homelessness find themselves trapped, because the payment is not sufficient to maintain an independent household²⁶. The cost of this on the young person's development is significant, and compounds labour market exclusion.

This evidence has been provided to DEASP over many years, yet no targeted measures to alleviate this have been implemented.

Recommendation

- Introduce and fund a scheme to exempt young people who have been living in emergency accommodation from the reduced rate of social welfare where this is part of a personal plan to exit homelessness.

One parent families and homelessness

Lone parent families are disproportionately represented among homeless families: almost 60% of families who were homeless in April 2019 were lone parent families²⁷. This compares to 25% in the general population²⁷. 45% of lone parents report a heavy financial burden in relation to housing. This compares to 30% of two parent families²⁸.

In the wake of reforms to the One Parent Family payment, and despite a buoyant labour market, the rate of in-work poverty among lone parents has doubled in the five years since 2012²⁹. Lone parents in Ireland are five times more likely than other households to experience in-work poverty³⁰. Ireland has one of the lowest rates of maternal employment for lone parents in the OECD³¹; childcare in Ireland absorbs more of a lone parent's household income in Ireland than in any other OECD country³².

Focus Ireland welcomes the restoration of the earned income disregard for lone parents which was instituted in last year's budget. As noted by Roantree et al (2019, p.9) "given the finding by Bargain et al (2014) that Irish single mothers have a highly elastic labour supply, there is certainly an economic rationale for having a higher earnings disregard under the OPFP"³³.

Recommendation

- Increase the earnings disregard for the One-Parent Family Payment to €165.

Working Family Payment

The Working Family Payment plays a vitally important role in making work pay in Ireland; such in-work benefits are most effective in countries with high levels of wage dispersion, such as Ireland.

The Programme for a Partnership Government 2016 (p.39), commits to reforming the Working Family Payment so that "every parent working at least 15 hours per week will be guaranteed that every extra hour they work will result in more take-home pay".

Recommendation

- Implement the Programme for Government commitment to reduce the hours threshold to 15 hours per week; increase the income thresholds and/or subsidy rate to ensure that a) an increase in hours work always results in an increase in net income and b) that families relying on the Working Family Payment receive a return in line with the living wage, currently €12.30 per hour.

Activation for people with a history of homelessness

For people of working age moving out of homelessness, access to decent employment plays an important role in sustaining their new home. However, people with an experience of homelessness often experience many barriers in the labour market and even find it hard to access mainstream labour market measures. Ireland has developed a programme of activation support for people who have experienced homelessness and are very distant from the labour market. With the support of Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI), PETE (Preparation for Education, Training and Employment) has been expanded to cover Dublin, Waterford and Limerick

In line with the integration objectives of a Housing First approach, PETE works with people who have moved out of homelessness and who now have housing stability. The PETE programme is tailored to the needs of each individual and provides flexible, wrap-around supports, to enable labour market inclusion for people. The current high demand for

labour provides a unique opportunity for people who have been marginalised from the labour market, if the right supports and programmes are put in place.

Recommendation

- Fund a pilot partnership initiative to support positive activation for those most distant from the labour market, including those with an experience of homelessness.

Rent supplement

The most common route into homelessness is from the private rented sector and affordability is critical to ensuring that those living in that sector can secure their homes. However, like those depending on HAP, people relying on Rent Supplement are finding it increasingly difficult to find properties within the maximum Rent Supplement rent limits, as these have not been reviewed since 2016, despite significant increases in rent over that period. Rent Supplement households frequently find themselves having to make ‘top up’ payments they cannot afford to avoid homelessness.

Focus Ireland calls for a system of regular, predictable and transparent reviews of rent limits under the Rent Supplement scheme.

Recommendation

- Rebase Rent Supplement rent caps to reflect market rents on an annual basis.

Department of Health

Invest in health related Homeless Services

While funding of homeless service through Department of Housing Section 10 funding was largely frozen during the period of austerity budgets, funding from the Department of Health/HSE experienced massive cuts, in some cases of over 40%.

Severe reductions in HSE funding during the course of the recession placed a significant strain on the range of social care, mental health and physical health services which are essential in supporting people who are experiencing homelessness to exit to independent living. These cuts happened in parallel with a massive increase in the numbers of people who were homeless and an increase in the support needs of many groups.

To a large extent, these cuts were absorbed through wage cuts and wage freezes for the staff in the voluntary sector. While the public sector is going through a process of pay restoration, staff in voluntary sector services, particularly those funded by the HSE, have seen little pay restoration and, frequently, no increments for several years. This is leading to recruitment problems in front-line services, just when need is greatest.

While there has been an increase in the HSE Social Inclusion funding for homeless services in recent years, this is almost entirely going into new services. While these services, such as health supports to Housing First, are very welcome, this does not address the now chronic underfunding of the pre-existing core services. There is an urgent need to increase the core funding levels from HSE social inclusion to homeless services in the 2019 budget.

Furthermore, there is growing confusion between local authorities and HSE (Social Inclusion) about which body is responsible for funding front-line homeless services. Some local authorities are attempting to return to 2008 agreement that key workers should be funded by HSE (Social Inclusion), The HSE responds that they do not have the resources to deliver this, as all the budgetary increases in homeless expenditure in recent years has been channelled through DHPLG and, so, to local government. Voluntary sector providers and local services are being left to negotiate the further of vital services in this departmental turf war and services are at considerable risk. This question is first and foremost one for national budgetary policy and it is unreasonable to put the services of the most vulnerable at risk due to a lack of clarity at national budgetary level.

Recommendation

- Increase HSE Social Inclusion funding for homeless related services by 8% in 2020
- Agree at Cabinet level which aspects of homeless services are to be funded by the HSE (Social Inclusion) and which by the DHPLG Section 10 funding, and provide adequate funding accordingly

Inclusion Health

The Inclusion Health initiative piloted at St. James' Hospital under the leadership of Dr Cliona Ní Cheallaigh has demonstrated how to effectively and efficiently provide healthcare to vulnerable populations. The initiative is highly compatible with how Housing First has been implemented in Ireland, targeting the portion of the population with the highest support needs.

Inclusion Health saved almost €1m (£904,000) in direct costs to the hospital and 3,066 bed days in a year-long pilot study. Yet finance for the service remains uncertain, with no promise of extension beyond a two-year funding round.

Recommendation

- Provide on-going secure funding for the Inclusion Health programme in Dublin and pilot a similar programme in Cork.

Invest in youth mental health services

Recruitment of mental health professionals is a key challenge for the health service. While the recently published first report of the Public Service Pay Commission found no evidence of general difficulties in attracting staff to the public service in general, the Commission did find evidence of difficulties in recruitment and retention in a number of health areas, most particularly in mental health. While the Commission noted a number of issues that impact upon health recruitment, including pressurised work environments, clinical support and the ability to address inefficient health systems, it is clear that these issues are exacerbated by recruitment and retention difficulties. In addition, there is strong international competition for health care staff³⁴.

Poor mental health can be both a cause and effect of homelessness for young people. Poor mental health is also a significant factor in inhibiting successful transitions into a secure home and independent living. Ensuring that vulnerable young people can access the support they need to address mental health needs, and develop resilience, is therefore an important component of tackling homelessness among young people.

Focus Ireland provides a housing led response to youth homelessness in Limerick. An independent qualitative evaluation of the service was undertaken to understand how effective the service is at improving the housing and non-housing outcomes of young people in the area. The evaluation found that while “much progress appears to have been made by the young people, the area that emerged as having the greatest unmet need was mental health”³⁵.

Similarly, research into the experience of families while they were homeless showed that parents were unable to obtain mental health supports for children who were experiencing very negative impacts of homelessness. Waiting times were so long that families had not yet received any support 6 months after leaving homelessness.

Mental health supports play a critically important role in preventing and addressing homelessness: poor mental health can result in homelessness, while failure to provide for mental health needs can undermine the impact of housing supports.

Recommendation

- Allocate an additional €1 million to the HSE Social Inclusion budget to provide mental health nurses for youth homelessness programmes and children in homeless accommodation

Appendix: ETHOS Light

FEANTSA has developed a European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) as a means of improving understanding and measurement of homelessness in Europe, and to provide a common 'language' around homelessness.

This typology is intended to provide a framework for debate, for data collection purposes, for policy purposes, monitoring purposes, and in the media. ETHOS Light (<https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>) is intended as a harmonised definition of homelessness for statistical purposes.

ETHOS reflects the realities of homelessness and housing insecurity that service providers engage with on a daily basis, and cover the range of housing insecurity from rooflessness to living in inadequate and/or insecure housing, as summarised below:

1. People living rough	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter than can be defined as living quarters
2. People in emergency accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3. People living in accommodation for the homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where the period of stay is time-limited & no long term housing is provided
4. People living in institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing• No housing available prior to release
5. People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing & is not the person's usual place of residence
6. Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family & friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing & is not the person's usual place of residence.

Notes:

- ¹ IBEC (2019) *Better housing: improving affordability and supply*. <https://www.ibec.ie/-/media/documents/ibec-campaigns/campaign---blbb/better-housing-report.pdf>
- ² Irish Times (17-Jun-19) 'Fewer houses will be built due to price slowdown, economist says'. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/construction/fewer-houses-will-be-built-due-to-price-slowdown-economist-says-1.3927579>
- ³ Dublin City Council Monthly Housing Supply Report, May 2019. <https://www.dublincity.ie/councilmeetings/documents/s23691/154%202019%20Housing%20Supply%20Report%20May%202019.pdf>
- ⁴ Irish Independent (18-May-19) 'Eoghan Murphy: 'The market has never fixed a housing crisis - only the Government will''. <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/eoghan-murphy-the-market-has-never-fixed-a-housing-crisis-only-the-government-will-38123291.html>
- ⁵ Focus Ireland piloted an effective prevention initiative in Dublin 15, funded by corporate partners but delivered in cooperation with the DEASP. Over 165 families receiving Rent Supplement and at risk of homelessness were referred to information clinics staffed by trained prevention officers; nine in ten were supported to either maintain their current tenancy or find a suitable alternative.
- ⁶ Long, A., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L. & Hoey, D. (2019) *Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home*. Insights into Family Homelessness Series 2019 | Vol.2 No.1. <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>
- ⁷ Data from Quarterly Regional Financial Reports published on the Department of Housing website www.housing.gov.ie
- ⁸ Threshold & SVP (2019) *The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP): making the right impact?* <https://www.threshold.ie/news/2019/07/09/hap-topups-are-putting-families-at-risk-of-homelessness/>
- ⁹ Allen, M & Stanley, W (2017) *The growth in family homelessness is beginning to slow down: what is causing this and will it last?* Insights into Family Homelessness 2017 | No.6 <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>
- ¹⁰ Roantree, B., Regan, M., Callan, T., Savage, M., Walsh, J.R. (2019) *Housing Assistance Payment: Potential impacts on financial incentives to work*. <https://www.esri.ie/publications/housing-assistance-payment-potential-impacts-on-financial-incentives-to-work>
- ¹¹ Data from the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive. <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>
- ¹² John McCarthy, Secretary General of the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, told the Public Accounts Committee (25-Oct-18) that it costs €67,000 per annum to provide emergency accommodation in a hotel for each family.
- ¹³ Lanzerotti, L. (2004) *Housing first for families: Research to support the development of a housing first for families training curriculum*. San Francisco, CA: National Alliance to End Homelessness. <http://bit.ly/HF4Families>
- ¹⁴ Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service (2018) *Social Impact Investments in Ireland: Learnings From the Pilot Initiative*. <https://igees.gov.ie/social-impact-investments-in-ireland-learnings-from-the-pilot-initiative/>
- ¹⁵ Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019) *No Place Like Home*. p.30, 33. <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 11-June-19
- ¹⁷ Focus Ireland (2016) *Are the children of families that are homeless attending schools with resources to tackle educational disadvantage (DEIS schools)?* Insights into Family Homelessness 2016 | No.3. <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>
- ¹⁸ Mayock, P., Parker, S. & Murphy, A. (2014) *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*. Dublin: Focus Ireland. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mayock-Parker-and-Murphy-2014-Young-People-Homelessness-and-Housing-Exclusion-FULL-BOOK.pdf>
- ¹⁹ Long, A., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L. & Hoey, D. (2019) *ibid*
- ²⁰ Oral questions to the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs on Domestic Violence, 28-Mar-19. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-03-28/2/#pq-answers-2>
- ²¹ Women's Aid (2019) *Over 20,000 Disclosures of Domestic Violence against Women and Children made to Women's Aid in 2018*. Press release. <https://www.womensaid.ie/about/newsevents/news/2019/04/10/media-release-over-20000-disclosures-of-domestic-v/>
- ²² Mayock & Corr, 2013, cited in Mayock et al, 2014, p.180
- ²³ Mayock, P., Parker, S. & Murphy, A. (2014) *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*, p.180-2. Dublin: Focus Ireland. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mayock-Parker-and-Murphy-2014-Young-People-Homelessness-and-Housing-Exclusion-FULL-BOOK.pdf>
- ²⁴ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, MESL 2019 Update Report: https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2019_update_report.pdf
- ²⁵ Benjaminsen & Busch-Geertsema (2009) 'Labour Market Reforms and Homelessness in Denmark and Germany: Dilemmas and Consequences'. *European Journal of Homelessness*, p.144. https://pure.sfi.dk/ws/files/207207/feantsa_ejh2009_article_5.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.endyouthhomelessness.ie/>

²⁷ Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government – Homelessness Report April 2019

²⁸ Census 2016, Central Statistics Office

²⁹ SVP (2019) *Working, Parenting and Struggling? An analysis of the employment and living conditions of one parent families in Ireland*. <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/6cd5834e-a8cf-48bf-b14c-82227aa5bc61/Working,-Parenting-and-Struggling-Full-Report.aspx>

³⁰ European Survey on Income and Living Conditions data

³¹ OECD Family Database LMF1.3 Maternal Employment by Partnership Status

³² OECD Family Database PF3.4 Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a single-parent family

³³ Roantree, B., Regan, M., Callan, T., Savage, M., Walsh, J.R. (2019) *Housing Assistance Payment: Potential impacts on financial incentives to work*. <https://www.esri.ie/publications/housing-assistance-payment-potential-impacts-on-financial-incentives-to-work>

³⁴ Report of the Public Service Pay Commission (May-017, p.58-9) noted that there were recruitment and retention difficulties in relation to psychiatrists, mental health nursing and psychologists. <https://paycommission.gov.ie/publications/>

³⁵ Lawlor, E. & Bowen, N. (2017) *Limerick Youth Housing Evaluation Report*. Dublin: Focus Ireland. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Limerick-Youth-Housing-Evaluation-2017-Full-Report.pdf>