

Observations on the Homelessness Inter-Agency Group's Report to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive's Report to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

Introduction

Focus Ireland welcome the opportunity to provide our observations on these two important reports. As the committee will be aware Focus Ireland is the main provider of support for families experiencing homelessness in the Dublin region and has over 30 years' experience working with families that are homeless across the country.

We were also one of the first organisations to recognize the growing issue of family homelessness. From the early days of the crisis Focus Ireland has funded and engaged in independent research to try and understand the emerging causes and patterns of family homelessness. We have also consistently reviewed, evaluated and learned from our own practice in working with families that are homeless. Perhaps most important of all, we have consistently listened to the views and experiences of the families we support.

On the basis of this we have consistently proposed policy changes and practices which would contribute to a lasting solution to the problem. For instance, insights from one of our earliest studies¹ led to the development of the Dublin Tenancy Sustainment Service, while our Social Impact Bond project established the model for casework with families which is now delivered across the sector.

The commentary we have set out below is informed by our research and analysis in this area. It is important to say that there is much to recommend in each of the reports. The DRHE report puts on the public record important administrative data for the first time, deepening our understanding of the problem. The HIAG group report is a very significant development, re-energising the cross-Departmental approach to homelessness which had been in decline for some time.

This commentary inevitably concentrates on areas where we have different perspective or a difference of analysis from the two reports, as we believe that can provide the best opportunities for insight to the Committee. For this reason, if taken in isolation, we may appear more critical of these papers than is in fact the case. For avoidance of doubt we want to re-iterate our view that both reports make a significant and valued contribution to our understanding of family homelessness.

For ease of understanding we will deal with each report in turn and then provide an overview in conclusion.

¹ TSA Consulting (2012) *Out of Reach: The Impact of the Changes in Rent Supplement*, Dublin, Focus Ireland

The Homeless Inter-Agency Group Report:

Focus Ireland welcomed the establishment of the Homeless Inter Agency Group (HIAG). To be effective policy responses to homelessness must sit within a broad framework of market and State institutions that make up the 'housing system'. While a shortage of affordable, secure housing is at the root of the homeless crisis, the challenges it raises cannot be solved in isolation. The scale of the current homelessness crisis requires all state actors to have a focus on how we can work better together and separately to contribute to ending homelessness. Focus Ireland made a submission to the HIAG, attended a consultation and met with the Chair of the HIAG, all of which proved to be positive open processes.

There is much in the report which brings our common analysis forward, but there are also a number of areas which we believe are problematic and others which are useful to highlight for further attention.

Role for the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

The section outlining the role of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection only refers to the DEASP's income maintenance function; while this is important it fails to mention its central role in tackling the labour market marginalisation of people who are at risk of homelessness or exiting from it. Secure employment is crucial to sustained exits from homelessness for people of working age, and DEASP/Intreo has a critical role to play in this area. In particular, the fact that the DEASP is frequently absent from the TUSLA led "local area steering committees" means care leavers' care plans are not linked to INTREO programmes as well as they might be, and so face the risk of long-term risk of homelessness. Focus Ireland was disappointed at the fact that this DEASP role was not recognized.

Role for the Department of Education and Skills

We also noted with regret that the Department of Education and Skills were not a part of the HIAG, and that the report did not recommend that they be added to the group for future work. There is strong international evidence and much local experience to show that a period homelessness can have very negative impacts on the education of children experiencing it.

There are over 3,000 children in homeless accommodation, most of whom are school aged. A recent report from the Children's Rights Alliance highlighted the impact of homelessness on education and the fact that schools were, in an *ad hoc* fashion putting in contingencies to support families that are homeless².

We believe that there is much to be learned from these local initiatives and that the Department should have a role in creating a more coherent and supportive educational response to the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness in their families. The DES should be full members of the HIAG.

² Scanlon G, McKenna G (2018) *Home Works: A Study on the Educational Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Living in Emergency Accommodation*, Dublin, Children's Rights Alliance

Prevention.

The role of prevention supports are recognised in the report. The model of Tenancy Protection Service such as those provided by Threshold and the need for greater powers for the Residential Tenancy Board were named, both of which were welcome. However, two important approaches to prevention were neglected. First, the use of intensive campaigns targeted at known at risk groups – like the Focus Ireland Dublin 15 campaign³ – are not mentioned. Second the important role that preventative case management can play for particular vulnerable families is not noted⁴. Both these interventions are proven to be effective and require the sort of cross-agency approach the HIAG is ideally placed to promote.

Mental Health

The need for support in the area of mental health was noted in the report however there was no mention of mental health needs of children in homeless families. Focus Ireland research shows that there is a need for such supports⁵.

Young People leaving State Care

The focus of the section on young people leaving state care concentrates predominantly on the role of the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) to secure accommodation for care leavers. CAS is a very exciting development and very welcome, but to have lasting success it requires a strong partnership between the relevant Approved Housing Bodies, Local Authorities, TUSLA and the HSE.

There have been successful examples of this collaborative working, for instance, in Waterford, and the HIAG can have a role in building a momentum around such examples to see it rolled out in other areas but this will need to be named and replicated.

Access to facilities for families utilising emergency accommodation

This section of the HIAG report highlights a number of important issues but it is a significant oversight that the number of occasions in which families have been left with no shelter overnight is not acknowledged or addressed. One of the major reasons why this dreadful failure keeps recurring is because it falls between the housing role of the local authorities and the child protection role of Tusla. As such HIAG was an ideal opportunity to address and finally solve this serious issue.

The only 'protocol' available to respond to this situation is the one created by Focus Ireland itself: where no shelter can be obtained, families are referred to Garda Stations as the only state service open to provide safety. In addition, a report issued to Tusla. After many years of raising this issue the state has given no guidance on how this situation should be addressed by front-line staff, often working late at night in pressured circumstances.

³ Results of a Pilot Project to prevent family homelessness in Dublin 15 (2017) <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/D15-Homeless-Prevention-Report-Summary.pdf>

⁴ Haran N, O'Shiochru S (2017) *Keeping a Home* <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Haran-and-OShiochru-2017-Keeping-a-Home-Full-Report.pdf>

⁵ Walsh K, Harvey B (2017) *Finding a Home Families' Journeys out of Homelessness*, Dublin, Focus Ireland

While we acknowledge, and welcome, that in recent months a number of contingency beds have been provided by the DRHE to try to ensure that still no family has to sleep out it is notable that no guidelines have been issued to local authorities in this area.

Focus Ireland have also raised the fact the legislation in this area does not properly recognise the constitutional rights of the child. On this point we would take the opportunity to welcome the recent Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017 discussed in the Housing Committee 3rd October 2018 which seeks to address the lacuna in the law in this regard. We welcome the fact that this appears to have broad cross-party support.

Date and Research

The HIAG report raises a number of useful points in the area of research and data collection. There are a number of different actors researching the different aspects of homelessness. While there is a good deal of collaboration this could be better managed to the benefit of all those experiencing homelessness. Focus Ireland have long believed that the most productive and consistent research data came when the Data Subcommittee of the National Consultative Committee on Homelessness was used as a forum to pool resources and understanding of the issues in a collaborative manner. This should be reconvened.

Service Delivery

The report sets out a useful discussion on service delivery and raises some important points about service level agreements and this discussion makes its way into the recommendations.

In the body of the document, there is a short but welcome discussion regarding tendering processes and the concern that local authorities are overly concerned with cost rather than quality of service provision. Regrettably, this discussion does not advanced in the recommendations.

Emergency Accommodation

One of the key gaps in Rebuilding Ireland is the absence of timeframes for reducing homelessness or the duration of homelessness for individual families. The HIAG report does not address this weakness and does not refer to the need for an agreed timescale for the wind down of family hubs and other emergency measures.

There is no reference to the practice of self-accommodation. This practice should be ended as it results in families not being offered full support and struggling to get out of homelessness as a result.

Media coverage of the report was dominated by the discussion and recommendation concerning the perceived reluctance of families to take up HAP. Any communications professional reading the report in advance would have seen that this coverage was inevitable given the controversial recommendation that this reluctance should be addressed with punitive measures, including consideration of depriving families of the right to shelter. This recommendation is not in keeping with the rest of the report or the humane approach of the HIAG Chair. Nevertheless, the recommendation does appear and, combined with similar material in the DRHE report, conflictual media coverage was predictable.

We welcome the statement by Minister Murphy during the day in which the report was published that the review of “the continued provision of emergency accommodation to those who refuse to

consider offers of appropriate housing supports” will not lead to emergency accommodation being withdrawn to households who are ‘reluctant’ to take up HAP.

Non-Irish citizens

Finally, there is a consistent use of the term ‘non-national’ in the HIAG report. This dehumanising language can be dismissed as an editing or proofing error. However, before and since this report was published there has been consistent and misleading highlighting of the residency status of non-Irish nationals in reports and press releases. Such reports are entirely disproportionate to the relatively small number of non-Irish nationals in the homeless system who do not have an entitlement to housing support. This worrying trend also occurs in the Dublin Region Homeless Executive Report.

The Dublin Region Homeless Executive Report.

The DRHE report builds upon ‘A Report on the 2016 and 2017 families who experienced Homelessness in the Dublin region’ a report reviewing the administrative data of the DRHE on those families that presented as homeless, were accepted as such and were placed in emergency accommodation.

In our ‘Insights into Family Homelessness’ series⁶ Focus Ireland have produced a number of analysis and qualitative pieces of research with a significant sample of this group. In particular the qualitative research adds important insight into the trends that are identified in the DRHE report.

“47% of homeless families came from the private rental sector (p24-25)”

As noted in the text of the report, this figure is misleading because it only relates to the last place that families lived before becoming homeless. When the longer trajectory in to homelessness is considered (as in the Focus Ireland Insights Series) evictions from the private rented sector can be seen to play a much greater role.

Through capturing the last four accommodations of families, Focus Ireland found that 69% (205 of the 297 families surveyed) reported that their last ‘stable’ home was in the private rented sector.

Focus Ireland found that family and relationship breakdown or overcrowding causing homelessness accounted for 23% (n67) of families. This contrasts with DRHE analysis which found 49-51% of families become homeless due to ‘family circumstances’.

In other words, while ‘family circumstances’ (or family conflict) may be the immediate reason for a family presenting to their local authority as homeless, the conflict may occur because of overcrowding due to the homeless family ‘doubling up’ with other family members. It was a loss of private rented accommodation which originally triggered housing instability – and over weeks or months – ultimately led to the family living in emergency accommodation.

⁶ Insights into Family Homelessness Series available here: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>

Focus Ireland data also reveals that 48% (n=99) of families entered housing instability because the private rented home was being removed from the market (due to the landlord selling; the landlord's property being repossessed or sold by a bank; the landlord moving back in; major renovations; or the landlord giving the property to a family member). These findings emerge in every round of data collection with striking consistency

The DRHE acknowledgement of the limitations of their 47% figure is welcome, but this should have led to a much less prominent presentation of the figure. The tendency of some commentators to quote the headline figure without noting the limitation is now well established.

If we create an erroneous public perception of the causes of homelessness we set back progress on the real solutions.

“Households are unwilling to accept HAP”

The issue of families being unwilling to take up the Housing Assistance Payment is raised in both of these reports. This is an issue which that Focus Ireland teams are familiar with in our frontline work. Case managers spend a considerable amount of time working through with families the real choices that they have and how to overcome the challenges which less attractive options create. Anecdotally families tell frontline workers that the reasons for the reluctance to take up this payment is the lack of security in the private rental sector and their concern that they will be putting their children through the trauma of homelessness again in 12 months' time.

To look at the phenomena in a more scientific way Focus Ireland undertook a small scale study tracking the 70 families who participated in the March 2016 telephone survey.⁷

This research showed that, 19 months after becoming homeless, families who had had a stable housing history before becoming homeless were the most likely to have moved out of homelessness, the majority of those utilizing the HAP payment. Families that had had a more precarious housing history before becoming homeless were more likely to still be homeless after 19 months and less likely to access the private rental market using HAP. DRHE draws the conclusion from similar data that the more vulnerable families are reluctant to take up HAP and are just waiting for social housing. Another and, in our view more likely, explanation is that these families are unattractive to private landlords as they may have other social challenges and have poor housing records and references. There is also evidence to suggest that many of these families would in fact find it difficult to survive in the private rented sector – their best long-term solution is social housing with some form of low-level community/tenancy support. Policies to essentially force such families to constantly seek private rented tenancies through HAP are unlikely to be successful either in the immediate or the long-term.

In addition to these findings it is important that we also recognise that Focus Ireland staff do not report any difficulty in finding takers for any HAP property that becomes available, except in instances where the level of 'topping up' required is excessive to the point of being untenable.

⁷ Sheridan S (2018) Families Exiting Homelessness: An Analysis of March 2016 Telephone Survey Cohort, Dublin, Focus Ireland. Available at <https://bit.ly/2pXGU0J> (Accessed 15th October 2018)

There are real challenges facing these families and we do need to look at the support services and legislative protections that can be put in place to support these families out of homelessness, in the absence of public housing. We should not lose sight of the fact that homelessness is not at its current level because some families are 'unwilling' to accept HAP.

There is an on-going problem with the presentation of the data on exits from homelessness by the DRHE. On several occasions, in the quarterly progress reports and elsewhere, the number of families that are prevented from becoming homeless by being allowed to take up HHAP before entering homeless services are added to the number of families who have exited homelessness. Essentially this procedure means that families are counted as exiting homelessness who have never been counted as entering it in the first place. This is unnecessarily confusing.

It should be noted that the DRHE initiative of offering HHAP to families with a NoT is an important innovation and very welcome. The issue here is how it is reported.

A second issue related to this preventative initiative is the high proportion of HAP placements that it accounts for.

In the DRHE report to the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government it showed that 119 families were prevented from entering homelessness using HHAP. This is a very positive result being 17 more than the 102 families that newly entered homelessness in that month. In other words, 221 families 'presented as homeless or at risk of homelessness' – and more than half of them averted the risk of homelessness.

The Q1 report on the private rental market by the letting website Daft sets out that in April 2018 there were 1250 properties available to rent⁸. The June 7th report of the DRHE to the Dublin City Council Housing Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) reported that in April 2018 131 families were prevented from entering homelessness using HAP and an additional 32 families exited homeless emergency accommodation into the private rental market using HAP.

In the September report to the SPC the exit figure was revised upward to 48 families. So in April 2018 some 13%-14% of the private rental market in Dublin was captured by HAP to prevent families entering homelessness or to support families out of homelessness. Given the well documented competitiveness in the market and the discrimination that a household experiencing homelessness may have to counter this is an impressive tally and suggests that the story of HAP is more complex than is sometimes suggested.

“The number of homeless families increased by only 9% in 2017”

The DRHE report presents the 9% annual increase in family homelessness in 2017 as a sign of the success, particularly drawing attention to the move-on supports that are in place in the Dublin region.

This figure is technically correct but does not take into account the particular variations which occur in family homelessness in the December to February period. As a result of these sudden outflows

⁸ Lyons R, (2018) The Daft.ie Rental Price Report An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market 2018 Q1, Dublin, Daft Media Limited.

and inflows into emergency accommodation over the Christmas/New Year period, year to year comparisons based on year ends can be very misleading – they are very sensitive to the day on which Christmas actually falls. As an example in the month before the report was published (May 2018) the annual increase in families experiencing homelessness was 22% and this was even after 91 families were reclassified⁹.

The December to December comparison is, of course, technically valid, but can be misleading. In fact, it was the sudden January 2018 which led to Minister Murphy to request what became the June 2018 report from the DRHE. As part of our insight series we have provided some analysis on these trends.¹⁰ There is now a clear seasonal pattern to the inflows into family homelessness. It would be helpful if commentary reflected this – instead of seasonally predictable falls and rises being describes as ‘proof of success’ or ‘sudden reversal’.

Non-Irish Nationals Experiencing homelessness

There are two assertions that we believe require attention in this report. The first is that non-Irish families are ‘over represented’ amongst new families experiencing homelessness. This is based upon a comparison between the number of non-Irish nationals resident in the state and the number of non-Irish nationals entering homelessness. Administrative data shows that 33% of families entering homelessness are headed by a non-Irish national. This compares very unfavorably with 11.6% in the general population.

As stated above, the Focus Ireland insight into family homelessness series has shown that the majority of families are becoming homeless from the private rental market. Figures provided to Focus Ireland by the CSO show that migrant headed households account for 41.7% of those renting in the four Dublin local authority areas. Since the crisis in the private rented sector is the primary cause of homelessness it is not particularly surprising that non-Irish families make up 33% of homeless families when they account for 42% of those in the private rented sector.

Focus Ireland analysis finds that the reasons that non-Irish nationals experience homelessness are broadly the same as those of Irish nationals; in short, they are pushed out of the private rental market, though may be true that they have fewer resources (family contacts etc.) to get themselves back into that market.

The second assertion that requires highlighting is ‘It can be *assumed* that a significant percentage of the Non-EU individuals may not have entitlement to housing support.’ (p7 *emphasis added*). This is simply not an acceptable assertion in an official report, it can and should never be ‘assumed’ that a family entering homelessness may not have an entitlement.

In fact, all the evidence available indicates that only a small minority of the non-EU families have no housing entitlement. For the last number of years, the families which present to the Dublin Local Authorities who are not assessed as being eligible for housing supports are referred to the Focus Ireland Coffee Shop team. The Focus Ireland team identifies accommodation for them on a one-night-only basis, which is paid for by the DRHE on what they refer to as a ‘humanitarian basis.’

⁹ If those 91 families had been included it would have been a 30% increase.

¹⁰ Stanley W, Allen M (2018) Family Homelessness End of Year Review, Dublin, Focus Ireland. Available at <https://bit.ly/2pX9lfy> (Accessed 15th October 2018)

From this work we identify that there are in the region of only 25 families who fit this profile as non-EU citizens who may have no entitlement to housing. That is 25 families out of the total of over 1,307 families in homelessness in Dublin. It should be noted that each of these families is actively pursuing a legal case to prove that they too do have housing right in Ireland.

It is to be noted that there is also frequent confusion about the legal rights of people who are not of Irish origin. The legislation and regulations are complex, and this has not been an area where there has been significant investment in staff training. Even non-Irish families who have been long-resident in Ireland and worked here before becoming homeless are frequently treated as if they have to prove their rights and spend some time in the one night only system.

Rate of move on from supported accommodation.

It is noted in page 22 of the report 'Typically when a family is residing in temporary supported accommodation they will exit to a tenancy within a quicker timeframe, as compared to families that reside in commercial hotels.'

This analysis attributes the different rate of exit to the type of accommodations. Focus Ireland believes this is misleading and is sending policy in the wrong direction. Our analysis indicates it is the presence or absence of a skilled case worker, rather than the legal status of the building, which influences exits from homelessness.

The implications of this 'building based' analysis are very significant as they explain the decision to massively invest in new homeless emergency accommodation while failing to provide case managers for over 500 homeless families. Resources are being invested in the wrong place.

Conclusion

There is much for the committee to digest in the two reports, but both would have benefited from a more collaborative form of production. This would have ensured that they enjoyed broader support and incorporated the knowledge and experience of the front-line services and independent research.

Focus Ireland wants to again acknowledge the hard work which is being undertaken by front-line and line-management staff in local authorities and policy staff in the Department of Housing. Our recognition that the housing crisis is getting worse and more needs to be done should not be seen to imply a criticism of the public servants struggling to deal with the crisis. However the strategy and the system are continuing to fail. Unfortunately when systems are overstretched and failing there can be a tendency to transfer the blame back onto the individual or family that is experiencing homelessness.

Across both of these reports there is a worrying trend, which is replicated in the Ministers most recent press release, to portray those families experiencing homelessness as the cause of the housing crisis rather than the victims of it.

Addressing a crisis of the scale of the current housing crisis will require sustained political commitment supported by significant expenditure.

The political pressure around this issue has the potential to drive that sustained commitment and investment. But there is also a risk that it can have the opposite effect. Administrative systems under pressure in the face of a crisis can blow issues out of proportion, resulting in the wrong policies being applied. In our view, the issue of 'non-Irish nationals with no access to housing

supports' and 'families refusing HAP's' are such issues. The attribution of high exit rates to certain types of building, as opposed to recognizing the value of support, is a similar case. The evidence-free assertions about families 'gaming the system' were a previous case. Some of these assertions can be taken up by the media as way of explaining our housing and homeless crisis through the 'faults' of the victims of the crisis. An alternative approach, which placed greater emphasis on collaboration and evidence-based policy is more likely to provide the positive results that 10,000 human beings desperately require.