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# **An Evaluation of Focus Ireland's Advice and Information Services**

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## The findings in summary

There are many reasons – both individual and structural – why people may find themselves homeless. Ireland's homelessness problem has reached crisis proportions, due largely to a scarcity of social housing, increasing rental costs and inadequate State support to meet these costs through the mechanism of Rent Supplement. Homelessness is a complex issue and it follows that responses to the problem should also be multi-faceted, encompassing both preventative activity and the provision of supports enabling those who are already homeless to exit this situation as speedily as possible.

It is believed that the provision of information, advice and personal advocacy has a key role to play in preventing and resolving homelessness, although there is at present only limited evidence to substantiate this view. Whilst the increasing emphasis on prevention is welcome, it should be remembered that such interventions are only one form of preventative activity, which must be supplemented by schools education, mediation, help for prisoners, help for people experiencing domestic violence, etc. Furthermore, advice and information services delivered by voluntary organisations must be seen within the broader context of advice and information services provided by other players, both statutory and private.

When judging the success of advice and information services, the main focus should be on outcomes, not on outputs; and undoubtedly, better outcomes are more likely to be achieved where there is quality service provision. In an advice and information context, the primary outcome strived for should be solving the problem presented, although there may be other secondary outcomes. This is a different approach to that taken in a 'key working' context, which focuses on the totality of the issues presented by the person experiencing homelessness.

Since 1985, Focus Ireland has worked tirelessly to prevent people becoming homeless, remaining homeless or returning to homelessness. In addition to the provision of advice and information in its long-established Coffee Shop in central Dublin, Focus Ireland set up a number of new advice and information services in 2011, followed by a second tranche in 2013. These were developed as an extension of existing local Focus Ireland services. There are currently advice and information services in Cork, Dublin, Dungarvan, Kilkenny, Limerick, South Dublin, Waterford and Wexford. These vary significantly in terms of: location; premises; facilities; opening hours; resourcing; degree of dedication to advice and information as opposed to other interventions; and integration with other services. As a result, the eight services at which customers may present are very different from each other.

It is vital that the people tasked with providing homeless advice and information services have not only the passion to help, but also the right skills, knowledge and experience to

perform this difficult work. It was found that senior management has not yet provided its advice and information workers with sufficient direction and support to deliver consistently high quality services on the ground. Although there are notable exceptions, performance of the advice and information services could be improved in a wide range of areas: needs assessment; choice of intervention; data management; internal communication; and inter-agency communication. Staff members tend to adopt a holistic support role, rather than one that is consistent with a robust rights-based advice and information service.

Focus Ireland's advice and information services are under increasing pressure from growing customer numbers. Statistically, most customers are male and in the 26-40 age group; many have addiction and mental health problems and are repeat users of the service. There are significant referral rates, including many cross-referrals. Interviews with customers revealed that they are mostly satisfied with the service received from Focus Ireland. The organisation's advice and information services can and do result in positive outcomes, but the absence of a planned and managed national strategy, lack of a well-considered theory of change, and poor data systems do not allow for the accurate measurement of outcomes. It is particularly difficult to assess the extent to which homelessness is being prevented.

As it considers the next phase of the development of its advice service, the challenge for Focus Ireland is to build on its strengths and on the opportunities that undoubtedly exist, whilst tackling any weaknesses and minimising the effects of external threats. In this context, its primary goal should be the consistent delivery of a high quality service. The consultants thus make the following readily actionable recommendations:

1. That an individual at senior management level be assigned the responsibility to drive and implement an effective strategy for the future development of the advice service.
2. That an Advice Service Steering Group be established that has the necessary authority to implement change, and very clear written terms of reference.
3. That the steering group considers carefully how the existing organisational structure can be adapted to support the development of a high quality advice service.
4. That a systematic and thorough skills audit be undertaken of all staff members who provide advice.
5. That, following the skills audit, a comprehensive capacity-building and support plan be developed to include all aspects of the skills and knowledge required to provide a high quality advice service.
6. That a detailed good practice manual be developed to ensure consistently high standards in advice service delivery.
7. That data systems be reviewed in order to determine the most effective way of ensuring good case management that stresses customer confidentiality and advice service accountability.
8. That an audit be undertaken of all the premises and equipment used for the advice service around the country, including any associated risks.

## Chapter 1

### Background and methodology

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#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a background to the need for advice and information amongst people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. It also offers introductory information about Focus Ireland's response to this need. Finally, it explains the rationale for, and scope of, the evaluation and outlines in some detail the methodologies adopted.

#### 1.2 Ireland's homelessness problem

The programme under evaluation must be viewed within the extremely challenging and highly political context within which it currently operates. Over the years, both the State and not-for-profit sector have proposed ambitious goals, including commitments to end rough sleeping and long-term homelessness, sometimes within short timelines. These goals have in the main not been achieved, and now appear even more difficult to attain, given the reported increase in the number of people presenting to services as homeless. Department of Environment, Community and Local Government figures indicate that the number of people in Section 10 funded emergency homeless accommodation rose from 2,477 individuals in April 2014 to 2,720 in November 2014, which is an increase of almost 10%<sup>1</sup>. This places a corresponding pressure on homeless services. The degree to which homelessness is now a critical issue is reflected by the significant media coverage in recent months of 'the homeless crisis'<sup>2 3 4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Breakdown of homeless persons in emergency accommodation  
<http://www.envron.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople>

<sup>2</sup> *Homeless crisis in need of urgent action*, Irish Times, 26 April 2014  
<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/homeless-crisis-in-need-of-urgent-action-1.1774572?page=1>

<sup>3</sup> *Homeless crisis out of control in Dublin*, Irish Examiner, 24 September 2014  
<http://www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/homeless-crisis-out-of-control-in-dublin-288366.html>

<sup>4</sup> *Joan Burton indicates the ban on providing bedsit accommodation in the capital may be lifted to tackle homeless crisis*, Irish Independent, 3 December 2014  
<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/joan-burton-indicates-the-ban-on-providing-bedsit-accommodation-in-the-capital-may-be-lifted-to-tackle-homeless-crisis-30795027.html>



Homelessness is not confined to those without work, nor is it limited to a particular age group or household size. There is evidence that more families are becoming homeless<sup>5</sup>, with many of these currently residing in emergency hotel accommodation. Prior to becoming homeless, some people may believe that they can find alternative housing relatively easily and/or that the State will intervene with support. Conversely, others may feel that there is nothing that can be done to prevent them from becoming homeless. Many are not aware of the services that exist to help them, and even if they do know of them, they often feel that they cannot access services until they have actually lost their homes.

The causes of homelessness are complex but can be divided into individual and structural factors. Individual explanations tend to focus on the behaviour, personal characteristics and needs of people who are homeless<sup>6</sup>. Structural explanations emphasise external social and economic factors, such as poverty and housing market inadequacies. A number of structural factors are certain at this time, including an inadequate supply of social housing, increased rental costs and the absence of adequate State support to meet those costs in the form of Rent Supplement<sup>7</sup>. These have been well reported. There are critical supply issues, with a severe shortage of social housing units due to an absence of investment over many years, as evidenced by a local authority waiting list of approximately 100,000 households. In Ireland, the private rented market has historically acted as the supplier of short- to medium-term social housing. This market is now increasingly inaccessible, due in part to supply issues, but mainly due to increased costs, with evidence of particularly sharp rent rises in Dublin and other urban areas. The rent limits specified by the State are unrealistic, and the present way in which the Rent Supplement system operates means that people are inevitably becoming homeless and staying trapped in that situation<sup>8</sup>. There is also significant political resistance to increasing the amount of Rent Supplement that is paid by the State.

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<sup>5</sup> Focus Ireland, *Preliminary Findings of a Study into the 'Reasons for Family Homelessness in Dublin'*, November 2013 <http://www.focusireland.ie/files/preliminary%20findings%20of%20a%20study%20into%20the%20reasons%20for%20family%20homelessness%20in%20dublin.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Fitzpatrick, S. et al, *The Homelessness Monitor: England*, 2012 [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/HomelessnessMonitor\\_England\\_2012\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/HomelessnessMonitor_England_2012_WEB.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Rent Supplement is financial support provided under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme (<http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/SWA---Rent-Supplement.aspx>). It is a statutory scheme administered by the Department of Social Protection.

<sup>8</sup> Most rental contracts require one month's rent in advance, as well as a deposit, and the Department of Social Protection does not ordinarily cover these costs. Legally, this assistance can be provided, but the administration is not structured in such a way so as to facilitate this, and there is, in any case, considerable institutional resistance to doing so. In Dublin, the administration of Rent Supplement has been centralised, with the result that there is no face-to-face contact and there are considerable delays in receiving assistance.

Clearly, the most desirable approach is to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first instance, and it is likely that the provision of effective advice and information services plays a crucial role in any prevention strategy. However, it must be acknowledged from the outset that no amount of advice and information will alter the fact that, against the current backdrop, it is inevitable that some people will become homeless.

### **1.3 Focus Ireland’s advice and information services**

#### **1.3.1 Addressing the need**

Focus Ireland is a national charitable organisation that has been working since 1985 to prevent people becoming homeless, remaining homeless or returning to homelessness. In 2011, Focus Ireland published its current five-year strategy<sup>9</sup>. Two of the strategy’s key themes are an increased shift towards preventing homelessness and a stronger emphasis on information, advice and personal advocacy.

*Our research<sup>10</sup> has shown that early access to information on rights and entitlements is crucial to providing a route out of homelessness or preventing people from becoming homeless. It also helps to support people who are homeless to access accommodation as quickly as possible. (p. 1)<sup>11</sup>*

From its early days onwards, the giving of advice and information has been an integral part of the organisation’s well-known Coffee Shop service in the Temple Bar area of central Dublin. In 2011, Focus Ireland also merged with the long-established Tallaght Homeless Advice Service, as part of a reconfiguration of homeless services in Dublin. Focus Ireland’s more formalised advice and information services in other parts of the country are more recent developments arising directly from the current five-year strategy.

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<sup>9</sup> Focus Ireland, *Holding on to a Place You Can Call Home: Strategy 2011-2016*  
<http://www.focusireland.ie/files/publications/10%20info%20pack%20insert%204pp%20strategy.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Focus Ireland has confirmed that ‘research’ in this context refers to internal monitoring data and anecdotal evidence.

<sup>11</sup> Focus Ireland, *Advice & Information – Strategy Implementation Plan*, undated

The advice and information service is one of a number of services designed to prevent homelessness. These include:

- Prison in-reach services in Dublin, Cork and Limerick
- Case management tenancy sustainment approaches to support local authority and private rented tenants who are at risk of homelessness in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South County Dublin
- Tenancy settlement and sustainment services for people being discharged from psychiatric hospitals in Cork, Kildare, Limerick and South County Dublin
- Aftercare services for young care-leavers in Dublin, Waterford and Limerick.

### **1.3.2 Planning and implementing the intervention**

The initial strategic development of Focus Ireland's advice and information services was overseen by an internal subgroup that met on an occasional basis <sup>12</sup>.

The subgroup recognised the well-developed services that were in existence in the Coffee Shop and Tallaght. The subgroup was also aware that tenancy sustainment workers in some services were already available at certain times to deal with 'drop-in' requests for housing advice. Furthermore, throughout the organisation, there was experience of giving housing and related advice as a normal part of the interaction with people using the organisation's services. This form of information and advice provision largely took place in the context of a care and case management model ('key working'). Advice and information services, which are the subject of this evaluation, are ordinarily delivered using a right-based model. They tend to be open access services at which people present with a more narrowly focused need. The nature of the interaction is different, in that a more specialised and less holistic support is required.

The subgroup then undertook a review to identify where in the country there was an unmet demand for advice and information services, both in terms of level and type of need <sup>13</sup>. This review showed a lack of expert housing advice in Athlone, Navan and Castlebar, and also identified the need for an enhanced range of all homeless services, most particularly access to housing.

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<sup>12</sup> The most recent meeting of this group was held in September 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Forsyth, N., *Advice and Information Subgroup Scoping Document: Athlone, Navan, Castlebar*, Focus Ireland, October 2012

The subgroup decided that, in the first instance, the most cost-effective approach for the organisation would be to develop advice and information services in each of the localities where Focus Ireland already had a presence, because resources were not available to open new offices. The consultants were advised that each Services Manager was at that time asked to examine the practical aspects of setting up an advice and information function that would provide a service to members of the public, accessible by appointment and/or via a drop-in facility. Where possible, existing offices would be adapted for the new service. In some places, additional staff members were recruited to take on the role of giving advice and information, whereas in others, existing tenancy sustainment staff members with advice and information experience were redeployed on a full-time or part-time basis. Service Level Agreements were renegotiated with several local authorities to fund these new services. Where appropriate, Focus Ireland sought to develop partnerships with other information service providers.

The full service model can be found in Appendix 1. This service model was intended as a starting point for further discussion prior to the development of policies and procedures, but these were put on hold pending the results of this evaluation. The organisation's guidelines for the operation of drop-in services <sup>14</sup> also apply to its advice and information services (see Appendix 2).

In order to respond to the wider need for guidance on advice and information that had been identified, Focus Ireland decided to supplement these services with an online Prevention Hub, comprising an information guidebook for frontline general advice providers <sup>15</sup>, a list of useful organisations, and a range of pertinent government circulars <sup>16</sup>.

There are currently eight active advice and information services in:

- Cork
- Dublin (Coffee Shop)
- Dungarvan
- Kilkenny
- Limerick
- South Dublin
- Waterford
- Wexford.

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<sup>14</sup> Focus Ireland, *Day Drop-In Services Policies and Procedural Guidelines*, October 2009

<sup>15</sup> This was disseminated to all Citizen Information Centres throughout the country.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.focusireland.ie/our-services/hub>

By late 2013, the subgroup recognised that whilst a significant number of new services had been initiated that were engaging with large numbers of customers, the limits of this organic growth had been reached. It was decided that a thorough and independent evaluation would be conducted of the progress achieved to date and the lessons for the future.

### **1.3.3 Towards a theory of change?**

Focus Ireland's advice and information services are not presently underpinned by an explicit 'theory of change'. A theory of change is a description and graphical depiction of a change process, showing all the interconnected building blocks required to bring about long-term goals, including assumptions and limiting factors <sup>17</sup>.

The organisation takes the view that, although there are certain rights and protections to help people sustain the occupancy of their homes, many people are unaware of these or do not know how to exercise them. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assert that providing those who are at risk of losing their homes with access to advice and information on their rights and entitlements will help to reduce the number of people who become homeless. Whilst this approach could form the basis of a theory of change, to date it has not been explicitly developed to provide a perspective that is shared across all services within Focus Ireland.

Although not identical, a similar system of 'logic modelling' is in use within Focus Ireland, as part of the annual service review process undertaken across the organisation. Since 2013, each of the local services has been asked to create its own logic model showing the link between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes. An attempt has been made by the consultants to summarise and refine this information in the graphic below. This was challenging, as there was significant variation amongst the local service providers in terms of their understanding of the terminology, the thoroughness with which they completed the template, and indeed, their responses. This raises questions about how the annual service reviews in individual services might be more closely integrated to ensure a consistency in approach. The alignment of the logic models to the actual service provided was tested as part of this evaluation (see Section 1.4).

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<sup>17</sup> More details can be found here: <http://www.theoryofchange.org>

## Inputs

- Time, skills, knowledge, experience and attitude of paid staff and volunteers
- Secure and accessible premises, including reception and private meeting space
- Adequate equipment, including well-functioning information and communication technology and access to vehicles for essential transport
- Organisational policies, procedures, processes and other internal supports
- External contacts/services
- Funding and in-kind supports

## Activities

- Researching need, gathering relevant information, updating information
- Assessing client needs, providing information, providing advice, advocating on their behalf
- Other client work: crisis intervention, behaviour management, emotional support, key working, service user involvement, home visits, form filling, sourcing accommodation, providing food
- Providing play opportunities for children, modelling behaviour in front of parents and children, monitoring child protection concerns
- Working with other parts of Focus Ireland and with external agencies
- Administration, including record-keeping, publicising service, report writing, facilities management
- Other tasks, including training, team communication, supervision, covering absences

## Outputs

- Information materials
- Publicity materials, external presentations, outreach clinics
- Meetings, telephone calls, emails, letters, case conferences, key working sessions
- Referrals, internal and external
- Client records, PASS and MIPS data, other day-to-day records, reports
- Evidence of satisfaction with quality of service delivery amongst different stakeholders

## Outcomes

- Homelessness is averted, rough sleeping is stopped or prevented, clients establish a safe, functional and secure home environment
- Clients resolve social welfare or other financial and/or legal problems
- Clients improve their knowledge and/or learn life skills
- Clients enter education, training or employment
- Clients have improved self-esteem, are more independent, show increased resilience
- Clients have better interpersonal relationships, settle well into their neighbourhoods, participate more positively in the community, engage in less anti-social behaviour
- Positive disengagement from the service

## 1.4 Evaluating Focus Ireland's advice and information services

In December 2013, Focus Ireland contracted two external consultants to undertake an evaluation of its advice and information services. Ciara Murray, Public Information Consultant, specialises in advice work, advocacy and the operation of the social protection system. Sandra Velthuis, Whitebarn Consulting, specialises in the planning and evaluation of not-for-profit sector impact.

The stated objectives for the evaluation were <sup>18</sup>:

1. *To establish the effectiveness of Focus Ireland's nine <sup>19</sup> Advice and Information services in preventing individuals/households from becoming homeless and in maintaining their current homes, and in increasing people's access to information about their rights and available support services.*
2. *To analyse data on the Advice and Information services, including:*
  - *The number of individuals/households prevented from becoming homeless.*
  - *The type of information provided to individuals.*
3. *To determine if the information and support provided prevented households from becoming homeless.*
4. *To provide a profile and history of Focus Ireland's nine Advice and Information services.*
5. *To identify the views of individuals/households, Focus Ireland management and staff, Local Authorities, and key stakeholders on the effectiveness of the services.*
6. *To assess how these services are meeting the actions set out in Pathway to Home and the Homelessness Policy Statement, which states that "to prevent...the occurrence or recurrence of homelessness...requires a range of measures from identifying households at risk, to working with people who are losing tenancies and ensuring that adequate advice, advocacy and sustainment measures are in place in the context of overall social housing policy as set out in the Government's Housing Policy Statement."*
7. *To highlight the strengths of the services, and identify existing/potential barriers (practice, policy and resources) that might block the services in helping individuals/households to maintain their current home.*
8. *To make recommendations on the future direction of Focus Ireland's Advice and Information services and preventative strategy based on the evaluation's findings and conclusions."* (pp. 1-2)

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<sup>18</sup> Focus Ireland, *Project Brief: Evaluation of Focus Ireland's Advice and Information Services*, 2013

<sup>19</sup> This was subsequently modified to eight (see Section 1.3.2). A service in George's Hill in Dublin 7 was combined with the Coffee Shop in Dublin 2. A pilot in Sligo was discontinued and a new service was developed in Dungarvan.

**In essence, therefore, the evaluation question posed was: is the intervention in its current guise working?** The consultants drew up an evaluation framework to answer this question, which can be summarised as follows:

- An understanding of the context (international, national, organisational)
- An assessment of service efficiency and quality (inputs, activities and outputs)
- An assessment of service effectiveness and change (outcomes) <sup>20</sup>
- Discussion, conclusions and recommendations.

Work on the evaluation commenced in January 2014.

## **1.5 Methodology**

### **1.5.1 Scoping**

The scope of the evaluation was refined in consultation with Focus Ireland. It would have been interesting to explore in detail the history and changing nature of Focus Ireland's advice and information services from its origins in the Coffee Shop. However, this was not felt to be a good use of limited resources and it was agreed that the qualitative component of the evaluation would focus on the status quo, with an analysis of quantitative data being limited to the years 2012 and 2013.

A stakeholder mapping exercise was undertaken, which identified a vast range of potential stakeholders. It would be useful to gauge the views of all of these stakeholders at some point in the future, but budgetary constraints meant that it was not possible to do so in any meaningful way on this occasion. This is the first evaluation of Focus Ireland's advice and information services. It was agreed that the primary stakeholders in this instance were the customers <sup>21</sup> who are the direct beneficiaries of the services, as well as those working on the frontline delivering the services. It was therefore decided to limit consultation principally to these parties, but to supplement this by seeking the views of a number of other key internal stakeholders.

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<sup>20</sup> In theory it should also be possible to identify longer-term and broader 'impacts' as well as outcomes, but given the resource limitations of this contract, it was recognised from the outset that the possibility of doing so on this occasion was limited.

<sup>21</sup> Unusually, Focus Ireland has adopted the use of the term 'customers' to describe those who use its services, in preference to the far more common 'service users' or 'clients'. Its rationale appears to concern the provision of good 'customer service'. However, the word customer implies a choice/freedom that, in reality, is denied to the vast majority of those who find themselves in need of homeless services. It is an artificial term for a relationship in which no money is normally exchanged. As such, the consultants have strongly advised against its use. Notwithstanding, Focus Ireland continues to employ the term, which has therefore been used throughout this report.



## **1.5.2 Methodological choices and ethical considerations**

The choice of methods was informed by the need to gather essential data in the most efficient, yet most illuminating, way possible. Through a discussion process between Focus Ireland and the consultants, the most effective evaluation methodologies were agreed. Any evaluation method has benefits and drawbacks. By using a range of methods, the potential disadvantages of any one method were minimised. It was agreed that Focus Ireland's research ethics<sup>22</sup> would be adhered to at all times.

## **1.5.3 Literature and documentation reviews**

Desk-based work was undertaken at the start of the evaluation process, which comprised a brief review of key UK research and Irish policy, as well as a detailed review of all relevant internal documentation.

## **1.5.4 Engagement with advice and information staff**

The bulk of data was collected from direct engagement with the advice and information services. This comprised:

- Initial contact with key staff, as identified by Focus Ireland's Research Officer
- Nine<sup>23</sup> site visits for observation and consultation purposes
- Seven one-to-one face-to-face interviews with frontline information providers (see Appendix 3)
- Six one-to-one face-to-face interviews with staff who have responsibility for managing the advice and information services on a local/regional basis (see Appendix 3)
- Follow-up emails and telephone calls seeking supplementary information as necessary.

## **1.5.5 Engagement with customers**

In order to assess the effectiveness of the service it was proposed to make contact with a random sample of customers a number of weeks after their engagement with the service, to ascertain their experience of the service and whether it had made any impact on their housing status.

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<sup>22</sup> Focus Ireland, *Ethical guidelines for conducting research involving people at risk of or experiencing homelessness*, 2011

<sup>23</sup> Although there were only eight sites, the Coffee Shop required two separate visits.

For sampling purposes, all advice and information services were requested to ask every customer they engaged with during a four-week period in February/March 2014 for their permission to be contacted by the consultants some weeks hence. The Research Officer in Focus Ireland disseminated the necessary information and relevant consent forms to services for the purpose of this contact.

Unfortunately, not only were significant delays experienced in receiving these contact details; the comprehensiveness of the information itself was also problematic. Two of the services decided that it was not appropriate to ask customers for their consent to participate in the evaluation, mainly because of the vulnerability of customers. Of the remaining services, it became apparent that the process of seeking consent was not undertaken systematically. Different time periods were used and the response rates were so minimal and variable as to suggest that not all customers were asked if they would like to participate in an interview. Because of these factors, Focus Ireland and the evaluators agreed that this aspect of the research would not provide reliable evidence about the overall effectiveness or otherwise of the services. However, it was nonetheless agreed to proceed with the process of ascertaining individual experiences of the services.

Notwithstanding, a total of 72 customers agreed to make their contact details available for this purpose. It was decided that these would be sampled until saturation point was reached in their responses. The list was randomised and attempts were made to contact customers by telephone<sup>24</sup>. Of those for whom an attempt was made to establish contact, ten numbers were found to be inoperational, one number was incorrect, one number was missing, and a further five customers did not answer their phones. Contact was nevertheless made with 15 customers, all of whom agreed to be interviewed for the evaluation (see Appendix 4). This represents a response rate of more than 20%. Nine were male and six were female and the geographical representation was as follows:

•	Cork	2
•	Dublin (Coffee Shop)	1
•	Dungarvan	0
•	Kilkenny	0
•	Limerick	5
•	South Dublin	1
•	Waterford	2
•	Wexford	4.

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<sup>24</sup> For six customers in Wexford their contact telephone number was a Society of St Vincent de Paul hostel. On dialling this number, one of the consultants was given – entirely unrequested – the addresses and telephone numbers of former hostel residents. This clearly comprised their privacy. On reflection, it was not considered appropriate to contact these customers.

### **1.5.6 Engagement with other Focus Ireland staff**

The engagement with customers and with advice and information staff gave rise to a number of further questions. As a result, contact was subsequently made with a handful of other Focus Ireland staff members in an attempt to seek answers to these questions. Face-to-face tailored interviews then took place with:

- Director of Advocacy, Communications and Research
- Director of Services and Housing
- Research and Policy Analyst x 2
- Services Resource Officer
- Service Standards Officer.

### **1.5.7 Data analysis and report writing**

All data gathered were analysed carefully using the agreed evaluation framework. A report was drafted for consideration by Focus Ireland. In finalising the report, feedback from Focus Ireland was considered and incorporated where appropriate.

## **1.6 Key learning points**

- Past responses to the homelessness problem have not solved this complex issue.
- There is an increasing emphasis on the prevention of homelessness.
- It is believed that the provision of information, advice and personal advocacy has a key role to play in preventing and resolving homelessness, but it is difficult to establish robust evidence to support this hypothesis and quantify the impact.
- There is a need to build on the logic model approach and develop an agreed and clearly articulated theory of change across all services.
- There is a tension between the care and case management model used in tenancy sustainment and the rights-based model ordinarily used in advice and information services.
- Evaluations must be undertaken with integrity and must consider both efficiency and effectiveness.

## Chapter 2

# The landscape for homelessness advice and information services

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## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter is the product of the literature review that was undertaken at the start of the evaluation process. It broadly paints the landscape in which the Focus Ireland advice and information services are situated. There is remarkably little information about the efficacy, or otherwise, of advice and information services in the prevention or management of homelessness. With a number of exceptions, the most useful research comes from the UK and is summarised here. This is followed by a brief description of the Irish context for policy and practice.

## 2.2 International lessons

### 2.2.1 Independent advice services

The UK has a long and strong track record of independent advice<sup>25</sup> services, with the Citizens Advice Bureaux being particularly noteworthy components of the country's advice-giving infrastructure. However, independent advice services are now under acute pressure, due to three drivers:<sup>26</sup>

- Value demand (the economic recession has caused an increase in demand for independent advice services)
- Failure demand (independent advice centres find themselves addressing failures of the public system)
- Revolving door demand (statutory agencies are under pressure to meet short-term targets, meaning that citizens' problems are not solved properly and people keep having to come back for help from a range of providers).

Johnson and Steed praise the role that independent advice services can play, but note that such services are part of a complex system and that their most significant contribution will come through collaborative working with other public, private and voluntary services, to identify and remove preventable systems failures:

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<sup>25</sup> Note that the term used in the UK is almost exclusively 'advice service' and not 'advice and information service'.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, S. & Steed, S., *Advice Services: What Next?*, new economics foundation, 2011  
<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/advice-services-what-next>

*Advice sits within a wider system involving central and local government, the private sector (for example, banks and financial institutions) and other service providers, all of whom impact on individuals' lives. As the services to which many of those individuals turn when systems fail to work for them, advice organisations are in a unique position to help understand where things go wrong. Of course, advice organisations have undertaken social policy evidence gathering and presentation for a long time. However, by working collaboratively to understand the system and the ways in which clients pass through it, the interdependencies and the flow of work, advice organisations can support public service providers to tackle the waste in their systems. This can improve the quality of service for users; increase effectiveness and efficiency in delivering services; and reduce preventable demand for advice, freeing capacity to undertake more productive 'value' work. (pp. 10-11)*

### **2.2.2 An increasing focus on outcomes**

As in other fields, the advice sector is increasingly recognising that being outputs-driven is not enough and that far greater attention must be paid to the outcomes of services. There are at least five reasons why an outcomes focus for advice services is important:<sup>27</sup>

- To check with clients whether problems are resolved or whether further involvement is needed (and, indeed, wanted)
- To provide feedback to givers of advice, and their managers, about the effect of their work and pointers towards improving systems and practice
- To provide an overall picture of the scale and profile of service delivery and the aggregated outcomes achieved for clients
- To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of advice on clients' lives
- To assemble information needed to justify advice work or meet funders' requirements or expectations.

Shuker outlined the challenges of measuring outcomes, stating that short-term 'hard' outcomes were easier to account for than longer-term 'soft' outcomes. She recognised that there were many useful tools for measuring outcomes for individuals<sup>28</sup> but that most of these were more suitable for settings that involved regular client interaction over an extended period of time. She wrote:

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<sup>27</sup> Shuker, T., *Client outcomes: Recommended approach and resources*, Citizens Advice, November 2009

<sup>28</sup> For example, the Homelessness Star, <http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/homelessness>

*However, when giving advice, the advice worker's focus is on solving the problem for which the client has sought help. Therefore, getting information about the client's non-advice needs would take up time that the advice worker cannot afford to spend. Moreover, whilst solving the client's problem may mean that they are less prone to drinking or offending, it is not the purpose of Citizens Advice Bureaux to achieve this.*  
(p. 8)

For this reason, Citizens Advice has developed its own toolkit for collecting outcomes<sup>29</sup>. Whilst outputs are still captured, they have also begun to track the outcomes of their services to a far greater extent. Given the high numbers of clients dealt with (for example, in the period 2010-2011, they helped 2.1 million people with 7.1 million problems), it is not feasible to track outcomes for all of them. However, they do collect and analyse outcomes data for a large sample of clients, to get an indication of the type and extent of change they are effecting for their clients through their advice services. In 2010-2011 they identified 199,000 outcomes for 135,000 clients. They divided these into five categories (income gain, benefit gain, debt written-off, repayments rescheduled, employment, and housing<sup>30</sup>) and differentiated between three types of outcomes:

- Known outcomes (where they were directly involved in the resolution of the problem)
- Anticipated outcomes (where they made a reasonable assumption<sup>31</sup> about what happened next)
- Established outcomes (verified after follow-up research).

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<sup>29</sup> Citizens Advice, *The outcomes of Citizen Advice Bureau advice*, 2010/2011  
[http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/outcomes\\_of\\_advice.htm](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/outcomes_of_advice.htm)

<sup>30</sup> The latter of which refers to homelessness being prevented or averted

<sup>31</sup> This approach is not without its potential problems. Although subsequent verification research showed that in three out of every four cases, advisers correctly predicted the outcome, they were wrong every fourth time. Specialist housing advisers were most likely to be correct in their predictions, pointing to the importance of specialist staff.

### 2.2.3 Preventing homelessness

Given the high personal and public cost of providing emergency accommodation, governments on both sides of the Atlantic have increasingly come to see preventative strategies as both cost-effective and socially progressive<sup>32</sup>. Along with the adoption of housing-led<sup>33</sup> approaches such as Housing First, the increased attention on preventing homelessness can be regarded as a paradigm shift in homeless policy.

However, Culhane et al have argued that in contrast to Housing First, investment in prevention is being pursued without an adequate conceptual or empirical basis<sup>34</sup>. They note two fundamental practical problems in designing and evaluating homeless prevention programmes, namely: effectiveness (assessing whether any particular intervention is successful) and efficiency (selecting those who would most benefit from intervention). Whilst it is possible to identify certain categories of people who have a higher risk of homelessness (such as ex-prisoners or care-leavers), it has not proven possible to predict which individuals are most likely to become homeless. It is therefore impossible to state with any certainty that any particular intervention has prevented an individual from becoming homeless. Only recently have large-scale, controlled experiments – such as the American research undertaken by Shinn et al<sup>35</sup> – begun to give an empirical basis for evaluating certain types of intervention.

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<sup>32</sup> Mackie, P. K., Homelessness Prevention and the Welsh Legal Duty: Lessons for International Policies, *Housing Studies*, 2014

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2014.927055>

<sup>33</sup> O'Sullivan, E., *Ending Homelessness – A Housing-Led Approach*, May 2012

[http://www.homelessdublin.ie/sites/default/files/publications//Eoin\\_O\\_Sullivan\\_Housing\\_Led\\_Approach\\_May\\_2012.pdf](http://www.homelessdublin.ie/sites/default/files/publications//Eoin_O_Sullivan_Housing_Led_Approach_May_2012.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Culhane, D.P., Metraux, S. and Byrne, T., A Prevention-Centred Approach to Homelessness Assistance: A Paradigm Shift? *Housing Policy Debate* 21 (2) pp. 295-315, 2011

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10511482.2010.536246?journalCode=rhpd20#.VIBap766org>

<sup>35</sup> Shinn, M., Greer, A., Bainbridge, J., Kwon, J. and Zuiderveen, S., Efficient Targeting of Homelessness Prevention Services for Families, *American Journal of Public Health* 103 (S2) pp. S324-S330, 2013

<http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301468>

A critique of the Australian Homelessness Prevention Strategy<sup>36</sup> highlights that interventions such as advice or case management tend to focus on individual risk factors and the service interventions to respond to these factors. This approach shifts attention away from the underlying structural causes of homelessness. It implies that if we identify and 'fix' each individual who is 'at risk', we would be able to end homelessness. It is argued that genuinely effective preventative measures would concentrate on structural issues, such as ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing. Such an approach would seek to reduce the overall incidence of homelessness rather than simply transfer the experience of it from one group to another.

Homeless Link has identified three ways in which homelessness can be averted:<sup>37</sup>

- Initial prevention (stopping it happening in the first place – also referred to as 'stopping flow')
- Preventing escalation (preventing homelessness becoming rough sleeping, or rough sleeping becoming entrenched behaviour – also referred to as 'reducing stock')
- Preventing reoccurrence (preventing people who previously slept rough from doing it again – also referred to as 'reducing returners').

Prevention measures are known to be cost-effective. For example, a 2010 review of statutory provision showed that the unit cost of prevention was £826 whilst the unit cost of acceptance<sup>38</sup> ranged from £2,112 to £8,505<sup>39</sup>. Other research in Coventry applied Social Return On Investment methodology to four case studies, two of which were related to debt, and two of which were housing cases<sup>40</sup>. Both early and late interventions were studied. Where it was possible to calculate a value for the advice given, there was a social return of approximately £9 for each £1 invested; the figures were especially striking for early intervention in housing cases.

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<sup>36</sup> Parsell, C. and Marston, G., Beyond the 'At Risk' Individual: Housing and the Eradication of Poverty to Prevent Homelessness, *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 71 (1) pp. 33-44, 2012  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2012.00758.x/abstract>

<sup>37</sup> <http://homeless.org.uk/prevention#.UwTWwXmJLBH>

<sup>38</sup> 'Service as usual'

<sup>39</sup> Acclaim Consulting & Shelter, *Value for money in housing options and homelessness services*, 2010  
[http://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/297224/VFM\\_in\\_housing\\_options\\_and\\_homelessness\\_services\\_full\\_report\\_Oct\\_2010.pdf](http://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/297224/VFM_in_housing_options_and_homelessness_services_full_report_Oct_2010.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, S. & Steed, S., *Advice Services: What Next?*, new economics foundation, 2011  
<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/advice-services-what-next>



Prevention initiatives can and do work. A useful example is provided by one of Scotland's leading homelessness charities. In 2008, the Edinburgh Cyrenian Trust established its Homelessness Prevention Service, which has been shown to be very effective<sup>41</sup>. It comprises a range of interventions over a four- to six-month period, including key work, formal mediation from an accredited mediator, volunteer befriending and employment support. The positive outcomes arising from these are sustained even one year later.

The Edinburgh Cyrenian Trust has mapped the full range of prevention activity in three categories, namely: early intervention; pre-crisis intervention; and preventing recurring homelessness. Whilst they recognise that advice and information provision is part of the prevention spectrum (and an example of early intervention) they stress that it needs to be seen in the context of other activities, which are equally important:

- Schools education
- Housing options
- Visiting support
- Family mediation
- Assisted access to the private rented sector
- Support for people experiencing domestic violence
- Help for prisoners
- Mediation, including landlord/tenant and community/neighbour.

It is crucial, therefore, that advice and information work is balanced carefully with other interventions.

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<sup>41</sup> Edinburgh Cyrenian Trust, *Prevention Saves Misery and Money*, November 2011, [http://www.cyrenians.org.uk/wmslib/PDFs/HPS\\_impact\\_report.pdf](http://www.cyrenians.org.uk/wmslib/PDFs/HPS_impact_report.pdf)

## 2.2.4 The role of advice in tackling homelessness

Citizens Advice has significant experience in dealing with housing and related advice. In 2010-2011, for example, over 270,000 people presented 500,000 housing problems (these figures do not include clients who fell into mortgage or rent arrears)<sup>42</sup>. After advice given by the bureaux, one in three clients recorded a positive outcome, the most common of which was that homelessness was prevented<sup>43</sup>. Thus:

*Many of the personal negative impacts of housing problems and related impacts can be eased by good advice. As a result of bureau advice, clients with housing problems can retain their home, resolve disputes and improve property conditions. (p. 1)*

Follow-up research showed that there had been numerous other effects on clients' lives:

- 81% said it made a difference to their understanding of the housing system
- 78% said it improved their peace of mind
- 77% said it made a difference to their ability to help themselves
- 72% said it made a difference to their confidence
- 57% said it improved their health
- 43% said it made a difference to their relationships with friends/family.

## 2.2.5 The importance of quality advice

The importance of establishing and maintaining high quality in advice services has already been alluded to on a number of occasions. Simply put: services that are run to a high standard result in better client outcomes.

Sharp and Robertson, writing about good practice in homelessness prevention on behalf of the Scottish Government, stressed the vital importance of monitoring and evaluation in this context<sup>44</sup>. They noted that there is a pervasive resistance to evaluation, but stated:

*... evaluation need not be viewed as a threat if it is approached as a built-in way of getting feedback, improving practice and ultimately outcomes for service users and communities. (p. 3)*

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<sup>42</sup> Citizens Advice, *The value of housing advice at Citizens Advice Bureaux 2010/2011*  
[http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/outcomes\\_of\\_advice.htm](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/outcomes_of_advice.htm)

<sup>43</sup> Delaying homelessness was also classed as an outcome, which is arguable.

<sup>44</sup> Sharp, C & Robertson L, *Homelessness Prevention: Lessons for programme development and evaluation practice*, Scottish Government Social Research, 2008  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/244731/0068589.pdf>

The authors made a number of other important points. They stated that a well-thought out theory of change, developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, is essential (see also Section 1.3.3). This involves spelling out assumptions about typical pathways of clients, or links between certain activities, behaviours and the risk of homelessness. They recommended that organisations adopt a formative (not summative) approach to project design, implementation and evaluation and that they ensure that day-to-day practice is evidence-informed. They felt that it is important to distinguish between the primary outcomes of an intervention and any secondary outcomes. They also pointed out that the focus of evaluation should not be on definitive proof of attribution – which is impossible to achieve – but rather that the emphasis should be on ongoing process improvement.

The Advice Services Alliance, which is the umbrella body for independent advice centres in the UK, has developed the Advice Quality Standard<sup>45</sup>. This distinguishes between generalist services, that are able to provide basic initial legal advice in most areas of law, and ‘advice with casework’ services, that are also able to provide clients with ongoing help with their problem (for example, corresponding with third parties on the client’s behalf). The summarised quality framework is worth including here:

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<sup>45</sup> The full standard is available for download <http://www.advicequalitystandard.org.uk>

Quality Framework	
A. Access to service	The aim of the Advice Quality Standard is to improve access to legal services and to base the delivery of services on local needs and priorities. Members of the Advice Quality Standard should be aware of the environment in which they operate and develop their services to meet the needs of their community.
B. Seamless service	Where a member of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available.
C. Running the organisation	Members of the Advice Quality Standard must have structures and procedures that ensure effective management of the organisation and its resources.
D. People management	Members of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff possess or acquire the skills and knowledge required for meeting the clients' needs.
E. Running the service	Members of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.
F. Meeting clients' needs	Clients using a [sic] Advice Quality Standard provider are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.
G. Commitment to quality	All members of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to improving the quality of their service.

The report about value for money in housing and homelessness services<sup>46</sup> referred to in Section 2.2.3, focused primarily on statutory providers. However, many of the lessons learnt from the detailed quality reviews that were undertaken as part of this research can also be applied to independent advice providers. It was found that there was:

*...a clear link between quality outcomes and a better standard of client handling, advice and case management. (p. 7)*

<sup>46</sup> Acclaim Consulting & Shelter, *Value for money in housing options and homelessness services*, 2010  
[http://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/297224/VFM\\_in\\_housing\\_options\\_and\\_homelessness\\_services\\_full\\_report\\_Oct\\_2010.pdf](http://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/297224/VFM_in_housing_options_and_homelessness_services_full_report_Oct_2010.pdf)

Regardless of whether the organisation providing the advice is a local authority or a voluntary service provider, it has been shown that access to specialist advice is often required. To this end, the National Homelessness Advice Service<sup>47</sup> has been established in the UK. This is a partnership between Shelter and Citizens Advice that is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The partnership offers free specialist services to frontline housing advisers, as follows:

- Telephone consultancy for on-the-spot support
- Casework referral service for mortgage debt advice
- Training on a range of housing subjects
- Updates and information on legislation and policy
- Resources to support and promote best practice.

The above model, as well as the rest of the UK experience, are all worthy of consideration in Ireland.

## 2.3 The Irish context

This section does not seek to provide a full history of the Irish advice-giving sector, nor of the homelessness sector. However, it does point to current homelessness policy documents, references a number of practice tools, and notes relevant players in the present context.

### 2.3.1 Pathway to Home<sup>48</sup>

The *Pathway to Home* document states that prevention and early intervention are important for many reasons: they curb unnecessary hardship; they are more cost-effective; and they are better for society as a whole. It differentiates between the provision of homeless accommodation and the provision of homeless support services, one of these being the giving of advice and information (especially advice relating specifically to housing). It states:

*... the importance of effective, quality housing information and advice in relation to preventing homelessness is increasingly acknowledged .(p. 19)*

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.nhas.org.uk>

<sup>48</sup> Homeless Agency, *Pathway to Home*, 2009  
<http://www.casemanagementguidebook.ie/getattachment/Key-Support-Interventions/Accommodation/Pathway-to-Home-2009.pdf.aspx>

It notes that there is a range of service providers that includes local authorities, community welfare services <sup>49</sup>, the Private Residential Tenancies Board, Citizens Information Centres, and voluntary homeless services. Particularly in relation to the latter, it states:

*Notwithstanding the importance of local authority-led centres for housing information and advice, an important additional facet of the take-up of these services is the role of community-based actors who deliver complimentary [sic] services. Their role is critical in generating specialist knowledge of target client groups and they also ensure the choice of an independent information and advice service is available to service users. (p. 20)*

The proposed model of working recognises that a range of service providers is needed, who must each undertake mutually reinforcing (but non-duplicative) work, for which they are to be held fully accountable. The sought-after outcome is the prevention of homelessness, to be realised through advocacy for the individual client. However, there is recognition that there may be gaps or blocks in the system where people are unable to access the services that they need in time, and these obstacles must therefore be addressed.

The importance of raising awareness of advice and information services is highlighted and it is stressed that any information given must be relevant, accurate and up-to-date. Aligning the provision of advice and information with day services provided by voluntary homeless organisations is recommended. It is also noted that clients with complex needs living in long-term supported housing may have unmet advice and information needs.

### **2.3.2 Homeless Policy Statement <sup>50</sup>**

This short statement makes clear that current government policy is for a housing-led (as opposed to emergency accommodation-led) approach, but it reiterates the following key messages:

*While all homeless people have a need for adequate, sustainable and affordable housing, it is also recognised that homelessness is a complex phenomenon, and that a variety of other supports can be required by individuals to meet their individual needs.*

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<sup>49</sup> These were previously provided through the Health Service Executive but now operate under the auspices of the Department of Social Protection.

<sup>50</sup> Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, *Homelessness Policy Statement*, 2013 <http://www.environ.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,32434,en.pdf>

*Effective action is required to prevent, as far as possible, the occurrence or recurrence of homelessness. This will require a range of measures from identifying households at risk, to working with people who are losing tenancies and ensuring that adequate advice, advocacy and sustainment measures are in place in the context of overall social housing policy as set out in the Government's Housing Policy Statement. (p. 2)*

The importance of integrated, consistent and efficient service delivery is emphasised.

### **2.3.3 Homelessness Oversight Group**

The Homelessness Oversight Group published its *First Report* at the end of 2013<sup>51</sup>. It noted that homelessness is an enduring problem. There is a paucity of quality data at both national and local levels, but the limited figures available suggest that the numbers of people experiencing homelessness have remained largely static over time<sup>52</sup>. In terms of prevention, the group feels that more work should be done amongst vulnerable people who are exiting institutional settings (especially prisons and care institutions). They note:

*Advocacy and the provision of information appear to offer a significant opportunity to prevent individuals becoming homeless. We would welcome the extension of funding available under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to advocacy and information services. (p. 23)*

### **2.3.4 Implementation Plan on the State's Response to Homelessness<sup>53</sup>**

February 2014 saw the establishment of the Homelessness Policy Implementation Team and a Central Implementation Unit: a multi-agency structure tasked with implementing the Homelessness Oversight Group's *First Report*. Its plan, which is for the period May 2014 – December 2016, seeks to make the transition from a shelter-led to a sustainable housing-led response to homelessness and to achieve the national objective of ending involuntary long-term homelessness by 2016. It reiterates that advocacy and information provision are important in the prevention of homelessness. It also references social workers, local authorities and Family Resource Centres as potentially important actors in the prevention sphere. Furthermore, it mentions a pilot housing advice centre in Cork set up to address the specific housing needs of people with disabilities<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Homelessness Oversight Group *First Report*, December 2013  
<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,34865,en.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> As noted in Section 1.2, however, evidence suggests that numbers are now increasing.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.environ.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,38053,en.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Focus Ireland is a partner in this pilot service.

### 2.3.5 Quality services

The above documents imply that quality is important but provide no direct guidance in this regard. A 1999 good practice handbook<sup>55</sup> published by the then Homeless Initiative, addressed the issue of quality in homeless services, but the standards contained within it were never made mandatory. The current website of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive states that national quality standards for homeless services are being developed<sup>56</sup>. The consultants were advised that a steering group to draft the national quality guidelines has been established, with a view to delivery in 2015. A Focus Ireland customer and the organisation's Service Standards Officer are members of this steering group. In the absence of these new guidelines, the 16-year old stance on quality for advice and information services is worth restating here:

*Vision: The vision of the future is one where people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, receive full information on their rights, the range of options available to resolve their housing difficulty and seamless access to other relevant services.*

*Purpose: The role of information and advice services for people who are homeless is to listen, to provide clear information and advice on rights, accommodation options, and other relevant services that will enable them to improve their housing situation.*

*Quality Standards: Information and advice services should aim to achieve best practice standards in the following areas:*

- *Providing information materials*
- *Providing advice*
- *Telephone*
- *Face to face interview*
- *Correspondence.*

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<sup>55</sup> Courtney. R., *Putting People First: A good practice handbook for homeless services*, Homeless Initiative, 1999

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/putting-people-first>



The broader issue of quality is increasingly being discussed within the Irish not-for-profit sector, with voluntary codes of practice for governance<sup>57</sup>, financial reporting<sup>58</sup> and fundraising<sup>59</sup>, and the adoption of quality systems such as PQASSO<sup>60</sup> and ISO9001<sup>61</sup>. However, none of these specifically address the giving of advice and information.

### 2.3.6 Other not-for-profit providers

It was stated in Section 2.3.1 that homeless advice and information services of voluntary organisations like Focus Ireland complement those provided by the State (and also, as noted in Section 2.2.1, those of private providers). A brief online search was undertaken to gauge how many other community and voluntary organisations offered similar services.

Although working within strict parameters set out by the Citizens Information Board<sup>62</sup>, the 42 independently governed Citizens Information Services provide information at 268 locations throughout the country. Likewise, there are 60 Money Advice and Budgeting Services around Ireland, also under the auspices of the Citizens Information Board.

FLAC runs legal clinics throughout the Republic (often in conjunction with Citizens Information Services)<sup>63</sup>. There are also a handful of independently-run local law centres, with the Mercy Law Resource Centre<sup>64</sup> in Dublin 8 standing out, because it:

*provides free legal advice and representation, in an accessible way, to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the areas of Social Housing and Social Welfare Law.*

The Mercy Law Resource Centre runs a weekly clinic in the Focus Ireland Coffee Shop and, where appropriate, the South Dublin service also refers cases to that centre. Threshold is the main other voluntary organisation providing housing advice to those who are at risk of homelessness and currently has services in Cork, Dublin and Galway<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.governancecode.ie>

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.charityscorp.org>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.ictr.ie/content/fundraising-codes-practice>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/PQASSO>

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.nsai.ie/our-services/certification/management-systems/iso-9001.aspx>

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie>

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.flac.ie/gethelp/legaladvicecentres/centresmap.html>

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.mercylaw.ie>

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.threshold.ie/advice/advice-services.html>

Very few voluntary homeless organisations explicitly state that they provide advice and information services. Exceptions are COPE Galway<sup>66</sup>, Merchants Quay Ireland<sup>67</sup>, the Peter McVerry Trust<sup>68</sup> and the South-East Simon Community<sup>69</sup>.

## 2.4 Key learning points

- Homeless prevention is a key goal, but it must be remembered that advice and information is only one form of preventative activity.
- Voluntary advice and information services must be seen within the broader context of information services provided by other players.
- The focus should be on outcomes, not on outputs.
- In an advice and information context, the primary outcome strived for should be solving the problem presented, although there may be other secondary outcomes.
- Quality services lead to better outcomes.

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<sup>66</sup> <http://www.copegalway.ie/homelessness>

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.mqi.ie/services/open-access-homeless-and-drug-services> (see also Section 6.2)

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.pmvtrust.ie/our-services/open-access-centre>

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.southeastsimon.ie/en-us/servicesweprovide.aspx> (see also Section 3.8)

## *Chapter 3*

### **The Focus Ireland advice and information services**

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a description of Focus Ireland's eight advice and information services, prior to evaluating them in subsequent chapters. Although there were commonalities between services, it quickly became apparent during the course of the research that each service was in fact unique. Any assessment of efficiency and effectiveness must take into consideration the local factors that may have led to these results. For example, some have a long and independent history, whereas others are provided as part of a range of services under a Service Level Agreement with a local authority.

#### **3.2 Cork**

This service was opened in early 2011. Since 2012, it has been based in 80a Hibernian House on the South Mall, which is one of the city's main thoroughfares and therefore offers good visibility to the public. The move from the previous premises to this location was largely driven by the desire to give the advice and information service a higher profile. The light and airy premises are modern and attractive, with a reception desk, a comfortable glass-partitioned waiting area and two rooms for private interviews to the rear. There is one full-time member of staff dedicated to the provision of advice and information services, who reports to a Project Leader. She works alongside a handful of other Focus Ireland staff members who provide the following services: prison in-reach, accommodation, and tenancy sustainment and support. There are also Community Employment trainees and occasional interns and volunteers. This is a drop-in service, operating Monday to Thursday between the hours of 9.00 – 17.00 and 9.00 – 16.00 on Fridays (closed for lunch every day 13.00 – 14.00). Appointments can also be scheduled. Monthly outreach services are provided in the towns of Bandon and Macroom, with follow-up, if necessary, taking place back in the Cork office.

### **3.3 Dublin**

The Coffee Shop service was opened in 1985. It is based at 15 Eustace Street in the Temple Bar area of the capital, and as such, is an extremely busy environment. The service operates on a first-come-first-served basis. There is no dedicated private space for interviewing, although it was stated that – security and staff resources permitting – customers are occasionally interviewed upstairs. There is one staff member with primary responsibility for advice and information <sup>70</sup>, reporting to a Project Leader who, in turn, is assisted by three Assistant Project Leaders. There are a further seven contact staff who run the food area, but who do not provide advice and information. Staff members from the Extension Service that works with the 18-26 age group provide some additional ad hoc support. This is a drop-in service, operating Monday to Friday between the hours of 10.30 – 17.00.

### **3.4 Dungarvan**

This service was opened in early 2013 as a result of a successful tender in the South East region. It is based at the Convent Lodge, Mitchell Street, behind a block of Focus Ireland apartments. It has two staff members who provide advice and information as an add-on to their roles in housing and tenancy sustainment and support, under the terms of the Service Level Agreement with the local authority. Additionally, there is a Project Leader who also supervises the services in Kilkenny and Wexford. Although ostensibly a drop-in service, operating Monday to Friday between the hours of 9.00 – 17.00, the nature of the premises and the fact that staff undertake other work, mean that there is in fact very little walk-in traffic and that the phone line is not staffed constantly.

### **3.5 Kilkenny**

This service was also opened in early 2011. It is based at 1 Garden Row, which is located in a somewhat hidden alley in Kilkenny city. There is space for private interviews. There are two staff members who undertake advice and information work in addition to a range of other tasks. There is a Project Leader who also supervises the services in Dungarvan and Wexford. This is a drop-in service, operating Wednesdays and Fridays 10.00 – 13.00. Advice and information clinics are also held in local authority offices.

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<sup>70</sup> Since the consultation process for the evaluation, an additional staff member has been added to the team to deal with the workload of more complex cases.

### **3.6 Limerick**

This service was opened in early 2011 as well. It is based at 7a Catherine Place, which also houses a number of other Focus Ireland services (there is a second Focus Ireland site elsewhere in the city). There is a good reception area, but the space available for the advice and information service is very cramped. The service has one full-time staff member and a full-time temporary intern (plus a Project Leader). This is a drop-in service, operating Monday to Thursday between the hours of 9.00 – 17.00 and 9.00 – 16.00 on Fridays. However, as this is a very busy service, access is primarily by appointment.

### **3.7 South Dublin**

The Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit had a long independent history, but was relaunched as a Focus Ireland service after a merger between the two organisations in early 2011. It is based in a building that was originally a residential premises, at 510 Main Street in Tallaght Village. It has two advice and information staff. These report to a Project Leader, who is supported by an Assistant Project Leader. A full-time Jobs Initiative worker and a part-time Community Employment trainee provide further support. Other Focus Ireland services are provided in the same building. A drop-in service operates Monday to Friday between the hours of 11.00 – 13.00. The service is by appointment at all other times. An outreach clinic is run in Clondalkin Citizens Information Centre each Wednesday afternoon.

### **3.8 Waterford**

This service was also opened in early 2011. Initially, it was located in Focus Ireland's Grange Cohan development in St John's Park. It moved to its current site in 2014, at the request of the local authority. It is based at a former Health Service Executive premises on Waterside that houses a number of related services offered by various statutory agencies and voluntary organisations. Visitors enter from the street into a small space with several seats where there is a glass hatch to the advice and information service reception. There are two rooms that can be used for interviews. A significant difference between this service and the other seven services is that it is run as a joint venture between Focus Ireland and the South-East Simon Community. Focus Ireland employs a full-time person, who reports to a Project Leader, to deliver the advice and information service. She provides frontline cover three days per week (undertaking other advice and information related work at other times) and two different Simon staff members provide frontline cover on the remaining two days of the week. A drop-in service operates Monday to Friday between the hours of 10.00 – 12.00 and 14.00 – 16.00. Appointments are also available.

### 3.9 Wexford

Like Dungarvan, this service was opened in early 2013 arising from a successful tender for tenancy sustainment service. The provision of advice and information was added to the Service Level Agreement at the request of the local authority. It is based in County Hall, Carricklawn, a local authority premises that is large and modern. It is located at the city's edge. It is staffed by one person, whose role encompasses all Focus Ireland's services in County Wexford; not just the advice and information service. She reports to a Project Leader who also supervises the services in Dungarvan and Kilkenny. The service is offered by appointment only <sup>71</sup>, but supplemented by a weekly outreach clinic in a hostel run by the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Private meeting rooms are available, but the staff member shares an open plan office with local authority staff dealing with matters such as anti-social behaviour and Traveller accommodation.

### 3.10 Key learning points

- In addition to one long-established service, a number of new services were set up in early 2011, followed by a second tranche of new services in 2013.
- Most of the newer services have developed as extension of tenancy sustainment services in consultation with the relevant local authorities.
- The eight advice and information services across the country vary significantly in terms of: location; premises; facilities; opening hours; number of staff; degree of dedication to advice and information as opposed to other interventions; and integration with other services, either Focus Ireland or external services.

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<sup>71</sup> The Focus Ireland website advertises all eight advice and information services as being 'drop-in services', which is therefore not correct <https://www.focusireland.ie/our-services/services-in-your-local-area>.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Assessing service efficiency and quality: inputs**

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#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter assesses the adequacy, or otherwise, of the inputs that were invested into the eight advice and information services. In so doing, it refers back to the inputs of the logic model diagram in Section 1.3.3.

#### **4.2 Financial resources**

At present, the eight services are funded through a variety of sources, including reserves, statutory contracts/grants, in-kind support and fundraising. Each service's funding structure is different. The absence of a single funding mechanism has obvious consequences in terms of service uniformity, as Focus Ireland attempts to balance the demands of different funders with its own stated priorities. Staff in several services expressed the view that achieving this balance is especially challenging in terms of local government funding, because the primary function of local authorities is to physically house people. A fully developed advice and information service would not necessarily be regarded as a critical component of local authority housing services.

Some staff members were uncertain how their positions were funded. Others mentioned feeling constrained, and to a degree censored, by funder requirements. This is of concern and clearly indicates that the organisation needs to internally communicate the precise terms of any Service Level Agreements with funders and address any impacts these terms have, or are perceived to have, on the operation of advice and information services.

Although the lack of adequate funding for addressing the country's homelessness problem was raised numerous times, there was little criticism per se about the level of funding invested into the Focus Ireland advice and information services. This is positive, but is possibly also indicative of a lack of true understanding of the resources needed to run an effective service of this kind (see Section 4.4).

### 4.3 Capital resources

The wide range of premises that is used for the advice and information services was detailed in Chapter 3. Locations varied from high street to back alleyway, and from city centre to edge of town. As noted in Section 1.3.2, Focus Ireland developed its advice and information services primarily by extending existing regional offices. The current locations of some services reflect the compromises arising from this process. Not all services are located in premises that are currently suitable for the purpose of providing high quality advice and information services, including insufficient total space or unsuitable space, lack of privacy or access issues for those with mobility difficulties.

At the next stage in the development of its advice and information services, Focus Ireland will need to agree a minimum standard that will apply to the physical premises from which these services operate. At a minimum, the consultants suggest that the premises of an advice and information service require:

- A visible and physically accessible location
- An appropriate reception area
- Access to desk(s) away from the reception area, equipped with modern information and communications technology
- A suitable space in which private meetings can be held.

Ideally, the environment will be welcoming and appealing, without being so ‘corporate’ as to be off-putting to the target group. Some of the Focus Ireland services met the basic criteria for functionality and attractiveness. The Cork service stands out as exceptional. Most others could be improved in some way, often with minimal intervention. However, the consultants have four main concerns:

- The Coffee Shop in Dublin presents a physical environment that is currently not compatible with the provision of a fully functioning advice and information service. This is due largely to the practical constraints of the premises, which has a dual service function; that is, the provision of a beverage/meal service and an advice and information service. This is a public space that is crowded and noisy, with little if any private meeting space, and no provision for the storage of customer files. In addition, the normal functioning of the Coffee Shop service involves regular disruptive incidents, and whilst trained to deal with these issues, staff expressed the view that increased pressures on the service are leading to very real health and safety concerns<sup>72</sup>. The consultants recommend that Focus Ireland management consult with frontline staff in order to remedy the practical constraints evident in this service.

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<sup>72</sup> One of the consultants witnessed an incident where the building had to be closed for a short period because of safety risks to customers and staff. Whilst reflecting good risk management, this is not conducive to the giving of advice.



- There is insufficient physical space in the Limerick office; to the extent that one staff member is required to 'float' within the building for three days per week. Responding to this issue should be a high priority in the implementation plan arising from this evaluation.
- The consultants recommend that Focus Ireland give urgent consideration to the appropriateness of the reception arrangements in the Waterford service. Whilst recognising that the reception area is shared with other statutory and non-statutory services in a 'one-stop-shop', the presence of a physical barrier that hampers customer communication and that does not allow for privacy in all instances, is not an acceptable component of a modern rights-based advice and information service.
- Because the Wexford service is located within local authority offices, in the same room as local authority staff, there is a real risk the service will be perceived as a statutory service instead of an independent service offered by a voluntary organisation<sup>73</sup>. This type of service co-location raises the potential for conflicts of interest to emerge. It is understood that the location of Focus Ireland staff in local authority offices is an increasingly common service arrangement (also seen, for instance, with prevention case workers in Dublin). Focus Ireland is urged to clearly think through the benefits and drawbacks of any such arrangements and develop internal policy and staff supervision procedures to safeguard against potential risks to the independence of its services, most particularly its advice and information services. It is advised that any such policies and procedures are in written format.

The equipment available to staff is, in general, sufficient, although information and communications technology should be improved as a matter of urgency in Dublin and in Limerick. For instance, some staff referred to very slow computers and unstable internet connections. In addition, it is unclear why there is no landline for the Waterford service, as having this would provide a far more professional image (instead, there is a mobile phone that is passed between the three members of staff employed by the two organisations).

Some services, especially Wexford and Cork, cover wide geographic areas and require regular use of personal vehicles. Whilst staff members are reimbursed with Civil Service travel rates, this does not compensate for the time lost to the service. In this regard, Wexford is of particular note, as there is only one staff member to cover the entire county and consequently, travel time hampers her ability to delivery the service within the hours available.

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<sup>73</sup> The staff member in this service advised that she had access to private meeting rooms to see customers. However, if she were to make calls from her desk to customers, or on behalf of customers, there would be no privacy, as the office is open plan and shared with local authority staff. As such, she aims to avoid doing so, instead making calls when away from the office.

## 4.4 Human resources

A job description dated 2012 for a Focus Ireland 'Advice and Information Worker' was provided to the consultants (see Appendix 5). These posts are, in general, graded on the Focus Ireland salary structure at 'Project Worker' grade and an organisational chart dated 2014 indeed refers to those staff delivering the advice and information services as 'Project Workers', supervised by Project Leaders. The Project Leaders report to one of six Services Managers, who in turn are accountable to the Director of Services and Housing<sup>74</sup>.

As has been noted, the advice and information services were developed from existing service hubs. Perhaps for this reason, it is difficult to gauge exactly how many staff members are spending how much of their time specifically on the planning, delivery and review of the advice and information services. For some it is their sole function, whereas others split their time between this work and other roles (generally tenancy sustainment, in line with Service Level Agreements with local authorities). This makes it difficult to know where the giving of advice and information begins and where it ends.

It should be noted that, without exception, the staff interviewed during this process were deeply committed to improving the lives of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In this prevailing culture, it would be fair to assume that all staff, interns/trainees and volunteers associated with the service share this positive attitude. This is commendable. However, the recruitment and retention of suitably committed and skilled staff is likely to be tested by the arguably low starting salary for a Project Worker, which the consultants understand is on a scale from €31,798-€40,770 per annum (although it should be noted that this salary is probably comparable with similar positions in the sector).

In developing the first phase of the advice and information service, an emphasis was placed on responding to the immediate needs of customers in each location, and finding an appropriate role for the service in order to complement any existing services provided by other advice and information providers in the locality. At this stage in the development of the advice and information service, attention needs to be given to ensuring a common standard across the services in terms of competencies and training. In this regard, part of the purpose of this evaluation was to address the degree to which there is uniformity in the skill-set of advice and information staff throughout the country.

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<sup>74</sup> Referred to as Director of Services in the organisational chart

Providing an effective service of this kind requires specific competencies, including, but not limited to: a thorough grasp of applicable law/regulation; the ability to keep meticulous records; good analytical and problem solving skills; the ability to make high quality written and oral submissions on behalf of customers; and an understanding of when to call in specialist support<sup>75</sup>. In this regard, varying levels of knowledge and experience were in evidence.

These are challenging positions that demand recruitment of the right personnel, high quality induction, the take-up of professional development opportunities and ongoing support and supervision. No information was sought during interviews about the recruitment and induction processes, nor did stakeholders subsequently mention these. However, training and supervisory processes were discussed in some detail. It is important to stress that any limitations in the ability of staff to undertake their jobs is not a consequence of their inaction or unwillingness to acquire skills. Quite the contrary: most staff members expressed a keen desire for training and support to improve their ability to do their jobs effectively.

#### **4.4.1 Training**

An October 2012 meeting of the subgroup that oversaw the roll-out of the advice and information services committed to the provision of advocacy training for all (new) staff that needed it. A further meeting of this group in September 2013 explored the delivery of a foundation level course for all staff during 2014. The consultants were advised that it was decided to await the outcome of this evaluation before putting in place a systematic training needs analysis, a training plan, and a dedicated budget for the professional development of advice and information staff.

In 2013-2014, Focus Ireland's Advocacy team<sup>76</sup> convened three joint meetings of advice and information staff from around the country. These meetings were described to the consultants as 'training sessions' but in practice were information-sharing gatherings. Given that staff had not previously met on a structured basis to pool their experience, and examine methodologies used in their work, these sessions provided useful networking opportunities and to some degree presented an opportunity to work through case-related issues. The meetings also served a role in informing head office staff of emerging issues and case studies that would inform the public policy work of the organisation.

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<sup>75</sup> Although the job description (Appendix 5) includes a number of essential and desirable selection criteria, on the basis of the research undertaken, these should be reviewed.

<sup>76</sup> Referred to in full as the Advocacy, Communications and Research team/department in the Focus Ireland organisational chart.

Whilst useful, the meetings did not form part of coherent training plan, and there is no record of the purpose and content of these sessions from a training perspective<sup>77</sup>. The consultants have been informed that, on the basis of feedback from the participants, it has been agreed to continue these meetings on a six-monthly basis. The consultants recommend that the aims and objectives of any future meetings be clearly articulated.

When discussing training, frontline staff, without exception, referred to the need for job-specific training as a matter of urgency. It became clear during the consultation that whilst some staff attended training, it was not training specifically designed to meet the skills and competencies required for advice and information work. Staff referred to attending occasional in-house events (for what one interviewee referred to as ‘soft skills’ training) or external events (for example, a child protection seminar).

In considering their training needs, some staff members presented as not being cognisant of what they do not currently know and need to know, whilst others were very aware of their unmet training needs. On the whole, there is considerable appetite for training. Gaps that have already been identified include:

- Written communication skills
- Legal know-how (especially around housing and social protection law)
- An understanding of the nature of ‘the system’ and the role of individual advocacy within this
- General case management.

As a key component of the next stage of development of this service, Focus Ireland must put in place a programme of appropriate training to ensure that all staff can carry out their advice and information function to a high standard.

#### **4.4.2 Supervision and support**

The advice and information staff (Project Workers) were on the whole positive about their immediate line managers (Project Leaders), although it would appear that the role of the Project Leader is that of a line manager with respect to all Focus Ireland’s services and general staff issues, rather than providing direct supervision of advice and information work. In a number of services, there is no direct hands-on supervision in place to support and monitor written communications, case management, etc.

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<sup>77</sup> There is a record that a representative from FLAC spoke briefly about the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process in March 2014.

Within Focus Ireland, the advice and information function operates as a frontline service at the end of an extended management line. The more senior levels of this management line (Services Managers and Directors) have a very wide range of responsibilities of which the specialist concerns of the advice and information service are only a small part. Whilst this ensures that advice and information staff members are integrated into existing local systems, there are real challenges in ensuring that this management structure is fit for purpose in developing what is arguably a relatively new national service in Focus Ireland. Whilst the existing structure *may* be effective in managing other services delivered by Focus Ireland (such as tenancy sustainment or aftercare), the consultants believe that the advice and information service requires dedicated management if it is to develop coherently and to a sufficiently high standard. In this regard, Focus Ireland needs to examine what changes might need to be made to the current management structure. As a first step, there is definite scope for an intensive mentoring system for advice and information staff, although it is not clear that the skills to provide such a facility are presently available in-house.

#### **4.5 Other resources**

The logic model in Section 1.3.3 also lists as inputs ‘external contacts/services’ as well as ‘organisational policies, procedures, processes and other internal supports’. Whilst fair suggestions, the research undertaken by the consultants showed that these are in fact an integral part of the *systems* that underpin the *activities* of the advice and information services. They are therefore analysed in the next chapter.

#### **4.6 Key learning points**

- The eight advice and information services have been developed as an extension of existing local Focus Ireland services, rather than in accordance with a planned and managed national strategy.
- The resources invested into the advice and information services vary across the country.
- As a result, the eight services at which customers may present are rather different from each other.
- It is vital that the people tasked with providing homeless advice and information services have not only the passion to help, but also the right skills, knowledge and experience to perform this difficult work.

## Chapter 5

### Assessing service efficiency and quality: activities

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#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter assesses the activities undertaken by the staff overseeing and delivering the advice and information services. Reference is naturally made to the *tasks* listed in the logic model in Section 1.3.3 (the ‘what’). However, these tasks are inextricably linked with the *systems* that are used in the planning and delivery of the services (the ‘how’). The chapter therefore looks at both of these factors.

#### 5.2 Planning and oversight

The provision of advice and information has always been an integral, though ad hoc, part of all Focus Ireland services. This in part explains why the first phase of the development of a standalone service evolved organically from existing services. However, because the added value of a distinct rights-based advice and information service has not yet been clearly articulated, the organisation may have underestimated the challenges it would face in terms of management and service delivery requirements.

Although there is evidence of broad goals for the service, to date, its development has taken place without the benefit of a coherent and robust vision and a detailed plan as to the means of achieving specific objectives. Referring to the record of the meetings held by the subgroup charged with establishing the service, it is evident that the group did not meet with sufficient frequency, nor did its agenda pose the questions necessary to ensure effective planning and implementation.

It was stated by staff that in some instances, work that was previously described as ‘tenancy sustainment and support’ was simply reclassified as ‘advice and information’<sup>78</sup>, suggesting that the case management approach used in tenancy sustainment was not clearly distinguished from the more delineated engagement appropriate to the provision of advice and information. Some attempts were made at exploring different ways of delivering advice and information (for example, via the organisation’s website and by developing a guidebook for advice givers on how to deal with customers experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness – see Section 1.3.1). However, the relative merits and drawbacks of different approaches have not yet been tested fully, nor have the various outcomes of these ways of working been compared.

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<sup>78</sup> This was done under the renegotiated Service Level Agreements.

At senior management level, there is clearly a commitment to developing the advice and information function of Focus Ireland, not least because it has the potential to offer important data for the organisation's social policy remit. However, there is no consistent understanding within the organisation of what a high quality rights-based advice and information service looks like. Coupled with, in many instances, a lack of resources to do the work – as shown in this and in the previous chapter – it means that when high quality advice and information work does take place<sup>79</sup>, it is more a generalised reflection of Focus Ireland's approach to working with customers, rather than as a result of detailed consideration of the needs of this particular service.

In the next phase of development of the service, Focus Ireland must address the extent to which senior management is informed by what is happening on the frontline. In so doing, senior management must be particularly cognisant of the support needs of its staff on the coalface who serve customers on a day-to-day basis.

As outlined in Section 4.4.2, supervisory systems are in place, but the Project Workers are relatively isolated in terms of the demanding content of their day-to-day service delivery. In addition, staff both at head office and on the frontline, described 'blockages' at middle management level. A new service requires a coherent and dedicated management framework in order to develop. In this regard, the consultants suggest that the multi-layered management structure of the organisation may pose an obstacle.

In order to address some of these structural limitations, and in addition to the information seminars (Section 4.4.1), members of the Advocacy team have attended local team meetings in order to familiarise themselves with the issues being addressed on the frontline. Relevant matters were then passed to Services Managers who meet regularly. Whilst this kind of interaction is essential, it is at present somewhat ad hoc, and it does not immediately translate into the type of practical support and supervision that staff members require in order to deliver an effective advice and information service.

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<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that, despite significant concerns expressed by the consultants, there was evidence of staff doing a good job in difficult circumstances. However, such examples of good practice were largely driven by individual instinct and effort, rather than organisational expectation and planning.

In this context, several staff members expressed the opinion that ‘head office’ was constantly chasing them for service data and other information, without showing a corresponding interest in the actual work taking place on the ground, or providing the means to address how this work could be improved. Whilst it is clearly not the case that head office is uninterested in the frontline, neither is it evident that the relevant parts of the organisation have grasped fully what is required by frontline staff; that is, the practical ‘hands on’ expert support and supervision needed to effectively address customer needs.

At present there is a strong sense of a ‘disconnect’ between those delivering the service and other parts of the organisation and this, in turn, is impacting negatively on staff morale. Though worrisome, the consultants believe that this can be remedied once there is a clear strategic plan for the development of the service, which prioritises an effective means of supporting the frontline staff to deliver a high quality service to customers.

### 5.3 Needs assessment

People can find out about, and subsequently present at, one of the eight services in a number of different ways. They may be new customers or they may have interacted with Focus Ireland previously. They may be referred by another organisation or they may self-refer. They may make contact face-to-face or via the phone; sometimes they will make contact by email <sup>80</sup>, via the organisation’s website or via its Facebook page.

On presenting, the staff member must begin by ascertaining the customer’s needs, which can be wide-ranging. At first contact, an initial query sheet is completed (see Appendix 6 <sup>81</sup>). A check is also made to see if the customer is already on the PASS/HSM system (see Section 5.5.3), and if not, they are registered on this database. Whilst consent is sought in relation to PASS/HSM registration, written consent is not sought for Focus Ireland to advocate on the client’s behalf (should that become necessary); this is an omission that should be rectified (see also Section 5.5.4).

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<sup>80</sup> There was discussion at various advice and information subgroup meetings about the use of information and communications technology for the management of customer queries, but this issue does not seem to have been fully resolved. The Focus Ireland website features a prominent ‘looking for help?’ tab, which directs customers to the phone number and email address of local services. However, it is understood that emails from customers who use the less prominent ‘contact us’ feature on the website come to Focus Ireland’s head office and are then forwarded to the relevant local service.

<sup>81</sup> This sheet describes the service as providing advice, information *and* advocacy. It needs to be amended to ensure that there is consistency in the language used – see also Section 5.4.



Before considering any sort of assistance, it is the job of the staff member to assess the needs that are being presented. This must be done in a calm, rational and detached manner in order to establish the following:

- What is the actual problem?
- Is it possible to solve the problem?
- Can the facts being presented be verified?
- What do the official papers say?
- What does the law say?
- What is the range of possible responses to the problem (including non-action)?
- What is the most appropriate strategy at this point in time?

Unfortunately, it was found that the assessment and diagnosis of customer needs are often flawed and that due to time pressures, staff members often feel obliged to respond in a rushed and otherwise suboptimal manner, as explored below.

## **5.4 The intervention**

Given the 'open door' nature of the services and the vulnerability of the customer group, staff members encounter a broad range of issues. It follows that the interventions to these issues will also vary.

Some work can be planned for. For example, in Cork and Dublin, daily trawls are made of relevant websites to find accommodation for which landlords are willing to accept Rent Supplement, and these are listed in a factsheet that customers can either take away or which staff can use to make telephone calls on their behalf.

It is arguably more difficult to plan for a lot of the other work. Most of it involves assisting customers in navigating the housing/homelessness and social protection systems. However, it may also include dealing with issues such as repatriation, utilities, insurance, education, and more.

Customers mostly present to the advice and information service when they are already in crisis situations. For instance, they may soon face eviction due to non-payment of rent, anti-social behaviour, or a landlord's decision to sell the property in which they live. Many are already homeless, with the attendant problems that this brings. They are understandably stressed and may require emotional support as well as advice as to how to proceed. They may also be frustrated and angry and, as such, advice and information staff must manage this aspect of some clients' behaviour when they are using the service.

Furthermore, staff may find themselves providing food and play opportunities for customers who come in with children, as well as monitoring child protection concerns.

Given this context, only a minority of customer need is likely to be resolved through the simple provision of *information*, whether verbal or written<sup>82</sup>. The vast majority of customers require actual *advice* in order to get onto a local authority housing list, source private rented accommodation, receive welfare payments, etc. Furthermore, a substantial subset of customers requires personal *advocacy* services to achieve their rights and entitlements, or otherwise address their problems.

Some support is very practical, ranging from providing a telephone to make calls and arranging internet access to look at relevant websites, to filling in forms and typing up CVs, to negotiating with a wide range of third parties, by phone, email, letter or in person.

On the whole, the consultants found that the approach taken by staff is reactive. This is at its most evident in the Coffee Shop, where the frenetic pace of the advice and information service is not unlike a busy accident and emergency department of a hospital. The worker(s) in the Coffee Shop try to help as many customers as possible, as speedily as possible, but there is no room for structured follow-up in the current set-up, let alone the provision of effective personal advocacy services<sup>83</sup>. In services that are presently less busy, such as Dungarvan, more time can be devoted to customers.

The prevailing approach of staff is to react to the client's expressed problem and then act. On the face of it, such a client-centred approach seems highly positive. However, the requested intervention may not necessarily be in client's best interests or in fact reflect the actual problem. It is the role of the professional advice and information worker to dispassionately and rigorously analyse the client's problem *and* the system, in order that a relevant and effective strategy can be pursued.

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<sup>82</sup> It was learnt during the supplementary interviews with staff working in head office, that Focus Ireland is considering the establishment of a national call centre for homeless customers, along the lines of the Citizens Information Phone Service. The effectiveness of such an approach has not been proven in any other similar contexts and the consultants actively caution against progressing this idea.

<sup>83</sup> In response to the current family homelessness crisis in Dublin, Focus Ireland's Open Access Case Management Team was reconfigured into the New Presenters Team to work solely with newly presenting homeless families. This has resulted in advice and information workers in the Coffee Shop having to take up the outstanding caseload for the Open Access Case Management Team, as well as attempting to support newly presenting single homeless people who have not been allocated a key worker in other homeless services.

Clearly the strategy will vary from customer to customer. Sometimes what is needed is a very direct and very firm intervention with a third party. At other times, success lies in a far more nuanced and negotiated intervention that recognises the very real barriers that exist for different parties<sup>84</sup>. The consultants witnessed good examples of both these approaches.

However, far more common is a third approach, and this is much weaker. The consultants discussed a number of cases when meeting with frontline staff, in order to ascertain how they approached the presented problem and their level of knowledge for dealing with that problem. Unfortunately, many deferred to the authority and knowledge of officials without question, working on the premise that the State<sup>85</sup> holds the relevant knowledge required to answer the customer's question/need. Whilst there were notable exceptions, the general approach was to accept at face value the official interpretation of relevant rules, and to respond with requests for administrative discretion, rather than assert an alternative position based on facts, evidence and law. This was particularly evident in written communications, which often lacked authority and the level of professionalism required in order to effectively challenge decisions by State officials.

The approach of many staff is to develop relationships with those who they perceive to be in control, to 'make enquiries' and to seek 'favours'. To illustrate, on more than one occasion the consultants heard statements such as '[official X] is very helpful, s/he usually gives us the answer'. This holds especially true in rural Ireland, where 'everyone knows everyone'. In a number of instances, it became evident that staff had been essentially 'carried along' by the relevant State agency. As a consequence, the proper and effective means of addressing the problem had not been identified. Thus, a course of action was entered into without knowledge of the law, and more importantly, with a presumption that the official must be operating the rules correctly. The consequences were that the clients' best interests were not served.

Whilst at times this approach does result in a positive outcome for the customer, accepting officials' interpretation of 'the rules' and relying on their goodwill is neither effective nor sustainable in the long term. Furthermore, it is completely at odds with a rights-based, independent advocacy role that puts clients' needs front and centre, which by definition involves holding officials to account, and which refers first and foremost to the rule of law.

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<sup>84</sup> For example, in a small country and especially in a small town, being too adversarial may have detrimental consequences for the customer in question, future customers and Focus Ireland itself.

<sup>85</sup> To a lesser extent, this also applies to non-statutory third party stakeholders.

Each time a Focus Ireland staff member adopts this approach, the balance of power shifts more and more in favour of the State. Furthermore, State officials are unlikely to truly respect the work of the organisation if Focus Ireland staff members are perceived as well-meaning, but not equal. If the organisation is determined to establish a good advice and information service, it will require a major shift in thinking and in practice from a model that was heretofore focused on support to an approach that is much more focused on rights. Additionally, State officials will likely resist any change in ways of working, as they may have come to expect a 'softer' approach from Focus Ireland staff.

## **5.5 Data management**

One of the cornerstones of an effective advice and information service is good data management. Although valiant efforts are being made, the current system is not designed for the purpose for which it is currently being used. Amongst other things, it is not fully understood by all, lacks integration, is inefficient and is unnecessarily time-consuming. To illustrate, the busy service in Limerick confirmed that the task of completing MIPS and PASS/HSM information (see Sections 5.5.2 and 5.5.3) took an extraordinary three to four days each month. Whilst minor improvements could be made to the existing systems, the organisation would be well served by a radical rethink on why and how customer data is maintained, used and shared.

### **5.5.1 Case notes**

There has been little, if any, discussion on the purpose of keeping written records of customer interactions or on what constitutes good case management in the context of advice and information provision. The consultants noted that not enough information is being written down and that there is too much reliance on working from memory <sup>86</sup>.

Because the use of PASS is a contractual obligation imposed on all Section 10 funded homeless services, Focus Ireland has worked to adapt the system to its needs rather than operate a parallel case management system. On the face of it, this approach seems sensible, but it nonetheless has drawbacks. In order to remedy the limitations of the PASS/HSM systems (see Section 5.5.3), services at local level are developing their own systems, which are heavily reliant on handwritten notes.

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<sup>86</sup> As stated in Section 4.3, this is particularly true for Dublin, where there is no physical space to store records of customer interactions.

Record-keeping using the existing systems is relatively systematic. At the time of writing, it is understood that Focus Ireland has contracted a technology firm to deliver an electronic archiving system for all organisational documents, including those relating to individual customers, but it is not yet clear if and how this will increase efficiency for advice and information staff.

### **5.5.2 MIPS**

MIPS stands for Management Information Processing System. It is a means of tracking the movement of customers, but only in order to provide high-level statistical data, which are used primarily to satisfy the need to report to funders, for planning and to provide an overview to the Board of Focus Ireland. MIPS pre-dates PASS and the HSM system (see Section 5.5.3). There is some duplication between the two systems; there is thus potential scope for streamlining. Members of staff are required to provide MIPS data each month, which their Project Leader inputs into the system; these data are then monitored centrally. Staff expressed the view that this aspect of their job is time-consuming and they find it difficult to see the value of doing it for their day-to-day work. In such a climate, it is almost inevitable that insufficient care will be taken when performing this task, which can lead to data sets that may not be as complete or meaningful as they could be.

### **5.5.3 PASS and the HSM system**

PASS stands for Pathway Accommodation and Support System. It is a shared homeless client database operating throughout the State that is coordinated by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (Dublin City Council). It is therefore a system that is designed to be accessible by all services, with varying levels of administrative access depending on the user.

HSM refers to the Homeless Services Management System, which was previously known, and is still referred to internally as 'Focus PASS'. This system is designed and managed by the same company that has responsibility for PASS. It was developed to record customers in Focus Ireland services that are not Section 10 funded and to provide data fields that are relevant to Focus Ireland's work but that are not available on PASS. Both databases are accessed through a single user interface and so to the user they appear as a single database. Certain information entered onto the HSM system is automatically exported into PASS. HSM offers the opportunity to make notes of cases, key working sessions, support plans, visits, etc. However, it is understood that the current system does not allow for the upload of relevant documentation relating to cases. Consequently, the HSM cannot be regarded in its present form as a fully functioning case management system. It is therefore of limited value to staff in their day-to-day work and this raises the same type of concerns as described for MIPS (see Section 5.5.2).

The two systems are not without their problems. Firstly, there is a mismatch between the questions asked on the initial query sheet (see Section 5.3/Appendix 6) and the fields that must be populated on PASS/HSM systems. The fields in PASS are defined nationally for all users of the system and are difficult to get amended. Often they do not reflect the categories of information that Focus Ireland seeks to collect. Secondly, staff complained that duplication of customer records can and does occur. Thirdly, different staff members have a different understanding of the operation of the HSM system and how it is distinct from PASS. Fourthly, staff members do not appear to be completing the PASS/HSM systems in a consistent manner, as evidenced by the data limitations described in in chapters 6 and 7.

The consultants' most significant concern, however, relates to customer privacy and consent to having personal data entered onto the PASS and HSM systems, and discussion of this issue warrants a separate section.

#### **5.5.4 Confidentiality and consent**

The consultants are fully aware that the issue of electronic record keeping is not straightforward. They understand that the very reason PASS was developed was to ensure greater efficiency and more effective interagency working. They appreciate that PASS was not specifically designed for advice and information services. They have also been advised that the Dublin Region Homeless Executive went through a long process with the Data Protection Commissioner to get approval for the operation of the PASS system.

PASS offers a single system for a complex environment in which there are many different types of players, and in which non-governmental organisations are to a large extent 'subcontracted' by the State to provide homeless services. In further developing its advice and information service, Focus Ireland must now determine the degree to which its services in fact operate independently.

Referring to the PASS Information and System Security Protocols, the 2012 Training Manual for the system states:

*The following basic information can be captured on PASS for all service users without consent:*

- *Name*
- *Date of Birth*
- *Gender*
- *Current Homeless Accommodation*
- *Outreach actions (in the event that the service user is not in homeless accommodation)*

*To capture further information the service user must provide explicit consent, verbal<sup>87</sup> or written.*

*In the event that a service user does not consent to PASS, this will not preclude the service user from accessing any services. (p. 5)*

The vast majority of customers consent to having their details entered onto PASS and the HSM system. However, the consultants do not believe that customers are giving genuinely informed consent. The consent form used (see Appendix 7) is highly jargonised and vague in its meaning, to the degree that no customer could be considered to be providing her/his informed consent. The form does not specify what information is stored on the HSM system as distinct from PASS, what information is shared between the two systems, who has access to what information, and there is no suggestion that separate consent is sought for the two different systems. Moreover, different staff members have different interpretations of administration and access rights, and not all are aware of the confidentiality implications of this. This is unacceptable, because this is a situation in which there is clearly a right and a wrong answer.

A number of staff members very honestly pointed out that the issue of consent is not discussed as fully as it should be with customers, as to do so would likely result in customers not giving consent to have their information stored, with the consequence that staff would be unable to input data into the system other than basic details outlined above.

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<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to envisage a situation where verbal consent on its own would suffice.

Certain designated local authority staff members have access rights to all information on the PASS system. Even if these staff are carefully selected and personally irreproachable, this is inconsistent with the principles that should underpin data management in an independent advice service. It was alleged that there had been cases where other agencies had been privy to customer information that was meant to be restricted to Focus Ireland.

If customer information is shared with the State as a matter of routine, and can be traced by different organs of the State, then the service is by definition not independent. If Focus Ireland continues to provide a service under this type of structural compromise, then logically, information sharing must be minimised and data entry practices must be consistent across all services. Focus Ireland's existing data protection policies should be updated to reflect these concerns. Most importantly, and in line with data protection legislation<sup>88</sup>, the customer must know what information about them is being stored on each system, who can see it, and why. In considering future record keeping policies for the advice and information service, Focus Ireland should focus on the expectation of confidentiality that would ordinarily be associated with an independent advice and information service. In practice, this means that no information would be available to a third party and PASS would not be used when providing an advice and information service.

At the most basic level, a very clear distinction needs to be made between what is stored on the HSM system and why, and what is stored on PASS and why. Once this is crystal clear, then at organisational level, the following must be carefully examined:

- The consent form refers to the HSM system 'feeding into' PASS. What does that mean precisely? Can and should the HSM system effectively 'lock out' PASS, so that less information is available to the state?
- What is the minimum amount of information that can be fed into PASS and still allow the HSM system to be used effectively? The consultants suggest that staff acting in an advice capacity should not be entering any information onto PASS, unless it is established that this is necessary in order to give effective advice *and* the customer has given informed consent.
- Is there any possibility of developing the HSM system into an effective case management system?

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.dataprotection.ie/ViewDoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2Flegal%2FLawOnDP%2Ehtm&CatID=7&m=l>



- Can a fully functioning and secure electronic system be guaranteed that avoids the multiple localised systems currently in use and that helps to minimise paper based filing?

In light of the above and referring back to Section 5.3, there are three separate instances where properly informed consent should be sought from customers:

- Consent to authorise Focus Ireland staff to act on the client's behalf
- Consent for the entering of personal data onto the HSM system (for which Focus Ireland is the data controller)
- Consent for the entering of personal data onto PASS (for which Focus Ireland is the data processor).

## **5.6 Internal communication**

Successful organisations tend to grow and in so doing invariably face challenges relating to internal communication. Focus Ireland is no exception. Such challenges are by no means insurmountable.

It is clear that during the first phase of development, Focus Ireland concentrated on getting the advice and information services 'up and running'. In order to further develop the services, Focus Ireland must put in place effective internal communication mechanisms. Up until now, there has evidently been a lack of policies, procedures and processes that are specific to the advice and information function within Focus Ireland. As a result, the staff members in each of the eight locations are trying their best to formulate and run an effective service, but there are nonetheless significant differences in the style of service delivery and in service quality.

There appears to be quite good internal communication at local level, especially in places where various Focus Ireland services are co-located, such as Cork and South Dublin. However, there is a lack of connection between advice and information services in different locations within the organisation. This can be explained partly by the physical distances between services. Better use of group emails would help overcome these problems to some extent. The introduction of an intranet would also be of assistance. The occasional group meetings of advice and information staff mentioned in Section 4.4 are a positive development and should be built on.

Another issue that emerged is the potential for a conflict of interest between different Focus Ireland services. For example, as an accommodation provider and therefore ‘landlord’, it is plausible that Focus Ireland may have to evict tenants from time to time. In these cases, customers may then present at Focus Ireland advice and information services, where it is the role of the staff to try and house them and advocate on their behalf. Protocols need to be put in place, and effectively implemented, in order that this type of scenario can be managed if it arises. In circumstances such as these, where possible, a person should be referred to an external organisation for independent advice.

## **5.7 Inter-agency communication**<sup>89</sup>

Given the nature of the issues being tackled, it is inevitable that Focus Ireland will need to interact and collaborate with external agencies. These may include representatives from the Department of Social Protection, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Probation Service, the Health Service Executive, local authorities, Money Advice and Budgeting Services, domestic violence services, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, embassies, etc. There was evidence that some strong working relationships have been developed at local level. In some regions, multi-disciplinary inter-agency Homeless Action Teams appear to be working effectively. However, the very real concerns expressed in Sections 5.4 (choice of intervention) and 5.5 (management of data), which are also relevant to inter-agency communication, remain.

In Section 3.8, it was noted that in Waterford, Focus Ireland co-delivers the advice and information service with the South-East Simon Community. It is indeed presented as a joint service (for example, business cards and leaflets contain both organisations’ logos). One of the consultants has, as part of a separate contract with Focus Ireland, raised a number of concerns (see also Section 4.3) regarding the effective operation of this joint service and these were submitted to management in March 2014. It is vital that Focus Ireland determines if, and how, any such partnership services can be run effectively to meet the needs of customers.

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<sup>89</sup> See also referrals, Section 6.4

## 5.8 Second-tier support

Not all staff can be expected to have expert knowledge of all of the issues that are presented. Access to specialist support is therefore a clear necessity. Staff members already seek such support. They mentioned consulting various websites<sup>90</sup>, contacting State officials, and seeking advice from fellow Focus Ireland staff. In relation to the latter, the advice and information worker in Limerick – who has a legal background – was mentioned several times, indicating that there are definite legal support needs amongst the organisation’s advice and information staff. The Research and Policy Analysts based in head office are also frequently called upon, but it was acknowledged that these do not currently have all the skills to offer effective second-tier support. They have begun to provide useful resources (such as legal documents and templates) on a shared drive for use by all advice and information staff. However, this work has not yet been completed and is in any case not sufficient by itself. Staff expressed the need for a person, or persons, who could guide them on what to do, how to do it, and provide whatever tools necessary, be that knowledge, strategy advice, writing support, etc.

## 5.9 Other activities and systems

In addition to the various activities and systems already explored in this chapter, staff members undertake a range of other tasks. For example, they: engage in basic administration; publicise the service; cover colleagues’ absences; manage work facilities; write reports, etc. They also make home visits where necessary and encourage customers to get involved in activities either within Focus Ireland or elsewhere in the community.

## 5.10 Key learning points

- Senior management has not provided the advice and information workers with sufficient direction and support to deliver high quality services on the ground.
- Although there are notable exceptions, performance is suboptimal in a range of areas; namely: needs assessment; choice of intervention; data management; internal communication and inter-agency communication.
- In line with pre-existing ways of working, staff members, with some notable exceptions, generally adopt a holistic support role, rather than one that is consistent with a robust rights-based advice and information service.

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<sup>90</sup> For example: <http://www.citizensinformation.ie>, <http://www.flac.ie>, <http://www.inou.ie>, <http://www.threshold.ie>, <http://www.welfare.ie>

## Chapter 6

### Assessing service efficiency and quality: outputs

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#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter assesses the immediate outputs arising from the provision of the advice and information services. It uses quantitative MIPS and PASS <sup>91</sup> data, as well as qualitative data gathered as part of the stakeholder engagement process.

The limitations of the data sets for answering the evaluation question became apparent during the course of the consultants' work. The underlying methodological problems that prevent ready assessment of the effectiveness of prevention services have already been noted in chapter 2. As there has been no systematic research to identify the exact levels and types of need that the advice and information services were set up to address, it is not possible to measure how much of that need was subsequently met. In addition, the consultants were advised that, given the developmental nature of the services, it was difficult to set targets at either national or local level, and therefore it cannot be ascertained if outputs matched expectations. Furthermore, data was not collected for certain aspects of service delivery (such as the amount of time staff spend with customers <sup>92</sup>), which therefore does not allow for a complete picture to be constructed. Moreover, as has been noted, there is inconsistency in the way different services record their client contact, making overall totals highly questionable and comparisons across services very challenging.

All outputs listed in the logic model (Section 1.3.3) are covered in this chapter, with the exception of information materials, publicity materials, external presentations and outreach clinics, which fall outside the scope of this evaluation.

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<sup>91</sup> It is not clear if the data refer to PASS or to 'Focus PASS' (the HSM system).

<sup>92</sup> Instead, there is an over-reliance on the number of 'case note' actions made, which ultimately is not very meaningful as there is no information detailing what the substance of the issue was.

## 6.2 Customer profile and service use

It can be stated with confidence that the customers of the advice and information service are indeed the intended target group – that is, people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. However, since there is no research in Ireland that identifies the number of people who are at risk of homelessness, it is not possible to comment on reach. In other words, we cannot know what proportion of those people in the target group has engaged with Focus Ireland. Many of those presenting have mental health and addiction problems. Many have been in the homeless system for a long time and are thus already known to Focus Ireland.

MIPS data show the numbers of individual customers Focus Ireland worked with in 2012-2013:

Service <sup>93</sup>	2012	2013	Change
Cork	108	264	+144%
Dublin (Coffee Shop)	1,474	2,749	+86%
Dungarvan	n/a	29	n/a
Kilkenny	117	183	+56%
Limerick	108	229	+112%
Sligo <sup>94</sup>	176	249	+41%
South Dublin	295	468	+59%
Waterford	150	174	+16%
Wexford	n/a	73	n/a
<i>Total for all services</i>	<i>2,428</i>	<i>4,418</i>	<i>+82%</i>
<i>Average per service</i>	<i>347</i>	<i>491</i>	<i>+73%</i>

There is considerable variation in the numbers presenting to services, being, for instance, nearly 100-fold higher in Dublin than Dungarvan in 2013 <sup>95</sup>. Service use for all locations increased significantly from 2012 to 2013, with proportional increases peaking in Cork and Limerick.

<sup>93</sup> Focus Ireland describes these in its documentation as ‘projects’.

<sup>94</sup> Sligo no longer operates as a public advice and information service.

<sup>95</sup> Obviously, higher population centres will be dealing with greater demand, but current resource allocation does not appear to reflect that differential in demand (see Chapter 4).

2012 PASS figures show that Focus Ireland’s ‘advocacy and advice’<sup>96</sup> services catered for between 2,282 and 2,558 customers<sup>97</sup>. However, these figures include the Extension<sup>98</sup> and Extended Day Services<sup>99</sup>, neither of which are under evaluation here. PASS data also show that there were approximately twice as many male as female customers and that these most commonly came from the 26-40 age group, closely followed by those aged 41 years and older.

### 6.3 Nature and amount of advice and information provided to customers

Although the name of the service would suggest that there are two different types of offering (‘information’ and ‘advice’), in practice there is no such division, and monitoring data do not differentiate between the two. Although at times members of staff do simply provide a signposting function, this is rarely likely to be sufficient, as indicated earlier (Section 5.4).

Until 2012, MIPS data did not distinguish between customers who were homeless and those who were at risk of homelessness. In line with current organisational strategy, the database was revised so that MIPS data now differentiates between the two types of support offered:

Service	Prevention support 2013	Homeless support 2013
Cork	176	88
Dublin (Coffee Shop)	separate data not collected until later	
Dungarvan	10	19
Kilkenny	112	71
Limerick	separate data not collected until later	
Sligo	170	79
South Dublin	361	107
Waterford	separate data not collected until later	
Wexford	36	39

<sup>96</sup> It is not clear if ‘advocacy and advice’ are interpreted the same as ‘advice and information’, as these terms appear to be used interchangeably.

<sup>97</sup> The fact that there is a potential difference of 276 shows the limitations of PASS.

<sup>98</sup> The 2012 Focus Ireland annual report states that an advice and information service is run at this location. The consultants understand that this was the George’s Hill service that subsequently amalgamated with the Coffee Shop – see Section 1.4.

<sup>99</sup> This was a Monday to Friday daytime service run in partnership with Merchants Quay Ireland <https://www.mqi.ie>, as described in the 2012 and 2013 Focus Ireland annual reports. The consultants were informed that the advice/information function was discontinued after a change of service location, due to the unsuitability of the layout of the service.

It would appear from the above table that much of the work done by Focus Ireland's advice and information services is to prevent people from becoming homeless, as opposed to dealing with them when they are already homeless<sup>100</sup>. For example, MIPS data show that in 2013, the advice and information services received 3,062 telephone calls in relation to prevention and only 1,872 in relation to homeless support.

PASS data highlight that, unsurprisingly, the bulk of work relates to accommodation matters (for example, accounting for 79% of customers in 2012), with a much smaller proportion being in relation to social protection<sup>101</sup> (for example, accounting for 20% of customers in 2012). PASS data also show that staff dealt with a range of other issues, including, but not limited to: access to education, training and employment programmes; crisis intervention; job seeking; alcohol; drugs; gambling; financial issues; health and hygiene; mental health; medical services; legal affairs and pastoral support. Furthermore, it was shown that the service was delivered through, amongst other things: phone contact; street contact; home visits; meetings with individual customers; group sessions; accompaniment; case conferences; joint care planning meetings; and care plan reviews.

During interviews, staff confirmed that the nature of support provided included: explaining basic rights and processes; assisting with accommodation searches; negotiating with landlords; making sure customers are in receipt of the social protection payments to which they are entitled; and so on.

In many instances there would be scope to do far more, but due to the capability and capacity limitations outlined earlier, there is less personal advocacy work/representation than would be expected<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> However, these figures must be treated with extreme caution, because they exclude three services (Dublin, Limerick and Waterford) that do not distinguish between the two types of support provided, and these account for 71% of the total number of customers.

<sup>101</sup> Still referred to as 'social welfare'

<sup>102</sup> As stated earlier, there are exceptions to this. For instance, the service in Limerick workload includes regular attendance at social protection oral hearings, preparing cases for the Ombudsman, briefing local solicitors, using the Freedom of Information Acts, etc.

## 6.4 Nature and amount of referrals to other services

MIPS includes data on onward referrals, as shown in the table below for the years 2012-2013:

Referred to	2012	2013
Crisis Intervention Services Partnership	2	0
Day services	41	22
Detox or rehab	4	2
Drug treatment services	23	73
Education/vocational training	47	76
External emergency accommodation	595	1,211
External supported accommodation	26	69
Focus Ireland emergency accommodation	13	11
Focus Ireland supported accommodation	65	26
Health Service Executive	203	236
Homeless Persons Unit	304	469
Local authority	612	1,218
Other Focus Ireland services	136	301
Other housing	96	482
Private rented accommodation	533	687
Tenancy sustainment and support	37	28
Tenancy sustainment and support (prevention)	19	23
<i>Totals</i>	<i>2,756</i>	<i>4,934</i>

The vast majority of onward referrals are thus to local authorities and external providers of emergency accommodation, and rates of these referrals have increased considerably in recent years. Local authorities are the 'gateway' to emergency accommodation and this reflects the role that advice and information services provide in supporting customers to negotiate that gateway. It is not clear to what extent a referral to the local authority for this purpose is simply a 'signpost' or whether it involves any form of representation or advice work. There have also been noticeable increases in referrals to other housing providers, drug treatment services and other Focus Ireland services.



PASS also includes a section on referrals, but the information is different to that of MIPS. PASS provides figures on the number of case notes that have been kept for specific types of referrals. However, the numbers are relatively low and would suggest that rather than there not having been many referrals, they have not necessarily been consistently entered onto PASS.

Interviews with staff revealed that there are indeed many referrals into and out of the Focus Ireland advice and information services. Relevant organisations and individuals include the Department of Social Protection, Legal Aid Board, Probation Service, Citizens Information Services, Money Advice and Budgeting Services, local authorities, auctioneers, landlords, Crosscare, Society of St Vincent de Paul, etc. The effectiveness of these relationships varies from place to place. There are many cross-referrals. Whilst these can prove beneficial, care must be taken that customers are not sent on a 'merry-go-round' of service providers<sup>103</sup>. Overall, there is an absence of formal referral protocols, but at local level, some relatively clear boundaries have been established with a number of external agencies.

## **6.5 Level of satisfaction with service quality**

Customers that were interviewed as part of this evaluation were asked how satisfied they had been with the service provided by Focus Ireland. The majority of customers responded positively, with the service provided in Limerick receiving the most positive response. A minority was not satisfied, but this was not translated into customers making formal complaints. MIPS data show that in 2012-2013 there was only one formal complaint. Whilst Focus Ireland has a complaints procedure that is advertised in its service locations, not all forms of customer dissatisfaction are likely to be captured by such a policy. This problem may be exacerbated by the disenfranchised nature of the customer base.

It is understood that Focus Ireland carries out a 'customer satisfaction' survey every few years, but capturing the feedback of users of the advice and information services is challenging and Focus Ireland may need to explore other methods of gaining feedback from this group of customers.

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<sup>103</sup> One staff member used the startling term 'client table tennis'.

On the whole, staff members are trying their very best to deliver a good service to their customers. However, there are many obstacles in their way and these can have a negative impact on the level of their own satisfaction with service quality. The overriding reason is the extremely difficult social and political context in which these services are operating, as described to in Section 1.2. Some expressed the view that ‘the system is broken’ and that they feel that they are simply ‘going round in circles’. People are becoming homeless at an escalating rate and once there, find it extremely difficult to exit homelessness, primarily because of social housing supply issues and the irrational way the current Rent Supplement system works. This can impact negatively on staff morale.

## **6.6 Key learning points**

- Focus Ireland’s advice and information services are under increasing pressure from growing customer numbers.
- Customers are mostly male and in the 26-40 age group; many have addiction and mental health problems and are repeat users of the service.
- There are significant referral rates, including many cross-referrals.
- Customers are mostly satisfied with the service received from Focus Ireland.
- Staff members are concerned by the failures of the social protection system, the consequences of which they witness daily (especially in the operation of the Rent Supplement scheme).

## Chapter 7

### Assessing effectiveness and change: outcomes

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#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to determine if the Focus Ireland advice and information services are actually resulting in change in the lives of customers. It is not possible to give hard facts about medium- and long-term outcomes – let alone impact<sup>104</sup> – because customers are not tracked over long periods of time, unless they remain active users of homeless services<sup>105</sup>. An attempt is nevertheless made at estimating the extent to which customers are experiencing short-term change. This is done using qualitative data from staff and customers, as well as quantitative MIPS and PASS/HSM data. The absence of a proper theory of change hampers the effective measurement of outcomes. If such a change model were in place, it would be far easier to understand the various pathways that customers might pass through and show the distance they had travelled (forwards or backwards).

#### 7.2 Staff interview data

When drawing up their logic models (see Section 1.3.3), staff had indicated that they expected to witness the following outcomes for customers:

- Homelessness is averted, rough sleeping is stopped or prevented, customers establish a safe, functional and secure home environment
- Customers resolve social welfare or other financial and/or legal problems
- Customers improve their knowledge and/or learn life skills
- Customers enter education, training or employment
- Customers have improved self-esteem, are more independent, show increased resilience
- Customers have better interpersonal relationships, settle well into their neighbourhoods, participate more positively in the community, engage in less anti-social behaviour
- Positive disengagement from the service.

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<sup>104</sup> When drafting the original evaluation framework, the following were proposed as potential ‘impacts’ resulting from Focus Ireland’s advice and information services:

- Fewer people at risk of experiencing homelessness
- Fewer people experiencing homelessness
- More people settled (into home, relationships/family, community)
- Increased quality of life.

<sup>105</sup> Or they may return to the homeless system; it is known that even if customer experience a good outcome, their new situation often remains precarious for a significant time afterwards.

It is doubtless that examples of each of these can be identified, such as successful social protection appeals and the avoidance of potential evictions. However, anecdotal evidence cannot be relied on for the purpose of truly measuring overall outcomes. Equally, a good result is not the same as a job well done. A person could do a less than competent job and achieve a positive result or, could do a superb job and fail to get a positive result.

Some staff members expressed the opinion that the very fact that Focus Ireland exists is highly positive for marginalised people, because it makes them feel less abandoned and provides them with a practical avenue for help. On the other hand, one staff member stated that because of the enormity of the homelessness problem, ultimately, the advice and information services hardly made any difference at all.

### **7.3 Customer interview data**

The limitations of the customer interview data were alluded to in Section 1.5.5. The 15-person sample is not representative of the total customer base and the answers only provide a snapshot of individuals' lives. The following self-identified outcomes nonetheless make for interesting reading.

#### **7.3.1 Positive outcomes**

Of the 15 customers consulted, Focus Ireland helped:

- Four to improve their morale
- Two to find accommodation
- One to get onto the local authority housing list
- One to 'get dole sorted'
- One to access a range of social services for a sibling with a disability
- One to get a positive outcome in a Disability Allowance appeal.

### 7.3.2 'Neutral' outcomes<sup>106</sup>

Of the 15 customers consulted:

- Four found their own accommodation without the help of Focus Ireland/other agencies<sup>107</sup>
- One was found accommodation by the Society of St Vincent de Paul after a referral<sup>108</sup>.

### 7.3.3 Negative outcomes

Of the 15 customer consulted, Focus Ireland was unable to help:

- Five customers to source suitable accommodation.

## 7.4 MIPS data

MIPS identifies a range of possible customer outcomes, which are detailed below for the years 2012-2013:

Outcome	2012	2013
Engaged in drug treatment	5	12
Entered residential detox or rehab facility	3	3
Engaged with tenancy sustainment and support	20	18
Engaged with tenancy sustainment and support (prevention)	4	2
Engaged with case management	12	17
Engaged with intensive family settlement	0	0
Number of formal customer complaints dealt with successfully <sup>109</sup>	0	0
<i>Totals</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>52</i>

<sup>106</sup> Although these are in fact positive outcomes, they are not necessarily outcomes that arose as a result of the interventions of Focus Ireland staff.

<sup>107</sup> This raises the important concept of 'deadweight' (how much of the change would have happened anyway, without Focus Ireland's intervention or the intervention of other service providers?)

<sup>108</sup> This raises the important concept of 'attribution' (who else, other than Focus Ireland, contributed to the change?)

<sup>109</sup> See Section 6.5

These data are of concern for a number of reasons. Firstly, if they were to be relied upon, they suggest that the number of customers experiencing positive outcomes is a tiny proportion of the overall number of customers using the advice and information services (1.8% in 2012 and 1.2% in 2013). Secondly, the success rate, already minimal, in fact decreased from 2012 to 2013. If these low figures are in fact underestimates due to poor recording, this raises serious questions about the validity of the service data. It could also be argued that the list of outcomes utilised in MIPS is neither adequately comprehensive, nor sufficiently ambitious (why, for example, is there no outcome relating to being housed?). Moreover, it could be argued that these are, mostly, simply internal referrals instead of true customer outcomes. Added to the extensive referrals described in Section 6.4, these paint a picture of customers moving from service to service, but not necessarily having their problems resolved.

However, in discussing outcomes, it is also important to point to the extremely disadvantaged nature of the customer base. Some people are on a long, slow journey to recovery and in such cases, a 'win' might, as one staff member observed, constitute something seemingly minor such as agreeing to attend a counsellor.

## 7.5 PASS data

It is difficult to use PASS in order to ascertain customer outcomes. The most definitive data are the number of customers under the heading 'case closed'. These are shown below for the years 2012-2013:

Case closed	2012	2013
Successfully discharged	5	47
Voluntary disengagement – outcome unknown	4	14
Voluntary disengagement – moved to other accommodation	1	4
Disengaged – returned to family	0	3
Service withdrawn	2	5
Deceased	0	1
<i>Totals</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>74</i>

Most of the critique of the MIPS dataset (see Section 7.3.4) also applies here, although the number of successfully discharged cases has increased significantly between 2012 and 2013. However, it should be stressed that, incredibly, all of the 47 successful cases successfully discharged in 2013 were from the Limerick service.

## 7.6 Other outcomes identified

There can be no doubt that people presenting at the eight services have benefitted from increased access to information, advice, and sometimes, representation. Large numbers of internal and external referrals take place, and it is likely that many of these referrals result in an increased use of support services (although it is impossible to know the extent of this and/or whether the services were in fact appropriate). It can also be shown with some confidence that certain customers have moved out of homelessness.

However, it is far more difficult to state with certainty that the actions of Focus Ireland are *preventing* an increase in homelessness. Certainly one can point to success stories. But these must be viewed in a context in which the numbers of people presenting as homeless for the first time is increasing, and in which services encounter very many repeat customers. Focus Ireland is trying to stem a rising tide. Unfortunately, the data systems it uses can only shed limited light on the extent to which it is being successful in achieving its goal of preventing homelessness<sup>110</sup>.

## 7.7 Key learning points

- Focus Ireland's advice and information services can and do result in positive outcomes for customers.
- The absence of a proper theory of change and poor data systems do not allow the accurate measurement of outcomes.
- It is particularly difficult to assess the extent to which homelessness is being prevented.

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<sup>110</sup> A number of staff members pointed to the need to be able to more easily share service outcomes.

## *Chapter 8*

# **Conclusions and recommendations**

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### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter synthesises the context within which the advice and information services operate (Chapters 1 and 2) with the findings of the evaluation (Chapters 3 to 7). It commences with a SWOT analysis, which is a summary of the internal strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by the services, as well as an overview of the opportunities and threats that are evident in the external environment. It discusses the key findings that have emerged from the evaluation and draws evidence-based conclusions, before making a number of recommendations that are readily actionable by Focus Ireland.

### **8.2 SWOT analysis**

#### **8.2.1 Strengths**

- Focus Ireland is a ‘household name’.
- The organisation understands the needs of its customers and has demonstrated that it can build strong relationships with them, with an emphasis on holistic support.
- Considerable resources have been invested into the services, showing that the organisation believes that advice and information have a valuable role to play.
- There are examples of suitable premises, such as in Cork.
- There are examples of good practice, such as in Limerick.
- There are examples of good internal communication at local level.
- There are examples of appropriate and effective work resulting in positive outcomes for customers.
- Frontline staff members have demonstrated an enthusiasm for increasing their knowledge.
- More customers than not express satisfaction with the service they have received from Focus Ireland.



### 8.2.2 Weaknesses

- The advice and information services currently lack the strategic direction and effective oversight necessary to develop the service.
- The absence of an agreed change model means that there is a lack of clarity about the step-by-step processes necessary to achieve high-level outcomes.
- The service model (see Appendix 1) is not being fully implemented.
- There are few, if any, agreed policies, procedures and processes for the advice and information service.
- There is a lack of understanding of the concept of independent rights-based advice work, with too much deference being shown to the State.
- There is a lack consistency in service delivery meaning that customers have very different experiences depending on where they present.
- The Coffee Shop service in Dublin stands out in terms of being overly pressurised, without the resources needed to operate.
- Although there are exceptions, staff members do not have all the correct skills in order to provide an effective advice service, with legal skills being in especially short supply.
- Staff members have not received tailored advice and information training in order to do their jobs and are lacking access to vital specialist support.
- Customer needs assessment and subsequent intervention choices are often weak.
- There is no comprehensive, secure case management system and the current systems for managing customer data are not fit for purpose.
- Overall, there is poor internal communication.
- The 'success rate' of the advice and information services is low.
- The relationship between the organisation's advice and social policy roles is not sufficiently robust and mutually beneficial.
- Focus Ireland is a large organisation with staff in multiple locations, which presents challenges in terms of implementing change.

### 8.2.3 Opportunities

- There is a significant, and growing, demand for good independent advice services.
- Public policy favours preventative measures, including the provision of advice and information.
- The Homelessness Oversight Group has recommended that more money be invested into advocacy and information services.
- Homeless Action Teams and other forms of inter-agency working have the potential to deliver positive results for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
- There is an increasing emphasis on 'quality'.
- There is a growing 'outcomes' movement.

### 8.2.4 Threats

- There is a lack of political will to properly tackle some of the issues that are giving rise to the growing homelessness problem (especially the housing shortage and the current operation of the Rent Supplement system).
- In a system where there are so many players and such a high rate of referrals, there is a danger of people not being properly served and/or 'falling between the cracks'.
- PASS cannot be said to properly serve the needs of customers, nor those who have to use it during the course of their work (with the issue of consent and access rights being particularly problematic).
- There are potential and actual conflicts of interest between Focus Ireland and its funders (who are often the very agencies that must be held to account).

## 8.3 Conclusions

Mirroring the situation experienced by Citizens Advice in the UK (see Section 2.2.1), demand for advice work is increasing in Ireland. In the UK, however, far more attention has been paid to the question: what constitutes effective rights-based advice work? The very use of the simple term 'advice' is an indication of far greater clarity of thought. Focus Ireland would do well to adopt this term in preference to the more vague 'information' and/or 'advice' and/or 'advocacy'<sup>111</sup>. The consultants thus use this term from here onwards.

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<sup>111</sup> Not least because Focus Ireland also chooses to employ the term 'advocacy' to refer to its role in educating policy-makers and the media on social policy issues.

In order to describe in simple terms what an effective advice service looks like, it may be helpful to compare it with medicine, because the process is almost identical:

- A patient/customer presents with a problem
- The doctor/advice worker thoroughly investigates the problem
- The doctor/advice worker makes a diagnosis
- The doctor/advice worker decides whether any potential action falls within her/his responsibility or whether specialist advice or referrals are needed
- The doctor/advice worker discusses the treatment options (if any) with the patient/customer
- Treatment/intervention takes place
- The patient/customer is discharged.

Specifically, both a doctor and an advice worker's actions must be governed by a dispassionate assessment of the facts (whilst being sensitive to the vulnerabilities of the patient/customer). In situations that appear 'unsolvable', the need for clarity and discipline of thought and action becomes even more necessary.

Within Focus Ireland, it is imperative that it is made crystal clear how the advice service is different from the range of other supports that the organisation already offers to its customers, and where the boundaries between the various services lie. We know that it is not just about prevention, as many customers who present to the service are already homeless. We also know that it is not just about dealing with the advice needs of new presenters, but also with those who are ongoing or habitual users of Focus Ireland's services. Furthermore, we know that it is not just a question of providing a quick 'in-and-out' service, because many customers require intensive one-to-one support (and if their cases require third party representation, this may take many months). Finally, as highlighted in Section 2.2.3, we know that whilst access to good advice is important, it is only one piece in a far bigger puzzle.

Focus Ireland customers are likely to need advice at all stages of their interaction with the organisation. As such, in planning the next phase of development, the organisation must ask itself if the way in which the advice and information services are presently modelled best serves the needs of its customers. It would also be healthy for the organisation to ask itself, if, faced with resource constraints and the obstacles to successful client outcomes, it has accepted compromises in relation to standards of service provision.

Alternative ways of delivering the service could be explored. At a minimum, current frontline staff could be brought together to discuss ways of improving the services, but in-depth site visits could also be undertaken at advice services provided by UK homeless services, such as the Edinburgh Cyrenian Trust (Section 2.2.3) and Shelter (Section 2.2.5).

It is worth noting again that the Advice Services Alliance in the UK recognises that not all providers are in position to offer specialist advice and it therefore differentiates between 'generalist advice' and 'advice with casework' services (Section 2.2.5). Focus Ireland should decide what type of advice it wishes, and is realistically in a position, to offer. Without pre-empting the results of further research and development, it could be recommended, for instance, that all staff dealing directly with customers would have a shared understanding of the role of advice work and would be able to provide generalist assistance, but that anything requiring individual advocacy would be escalated to a more highly trained member of staff. No doubt, other options exist.

Regardless of the service model pursued, ways will have to be found to ensure that customer service is consistent across different localities. Focus Ireland needs to work towards having one national advice service (singular), not eight separate advice and information services (plural). At times, it may be necessary to pursue locally tailored responses to customer need or to deal with organisational limitations. However, the ethos, purpose and standards of any service must be consistent across all locations. Crucially, services must be of high quality and there must be a culture of ongoing process improvement. In conclusion, it is worth reiterating the following statement from Section 2.2.5:

*Simply put: services that are run to a high standard result in better customer outcomes.*

## 8.4 Recommendations

The recommendations below are confined to the priority issues that the consultants believe must be addressed in order to develop a fully functioning Focus Ireland service that meets the advice needs of its target group. No recommendations have been made in relation to the far bigger societal and structural issues that are leading to the problem of homelessness, as discussed in Section 1.2.

### Recommendation 1:

**That an individual at senior management level be assigned the responsibility to drive and implement an effective strategy for the future development of the advice service.** That individual should have the necessary autonomy to begin articulating the remit of the service in precise terms; that is, the needs of the customer group and the purpose and goals of the Focus Ireland advice service in meeting that need, and crucially, how that relates to the other services provided by Focus Ireland. This will by necessity involve undertaking further research (including organising site visits to similar services in the UK) and initial work on developing a theory of change.

Recommendation 2:

**That an Advice Service Steering Group be established that has the necessary authority to implement change and very clear written terms of reference.** The role of the steering group should be one of oversight, guidance and ensuring ‘buy-in’. The steering group should naturally include the senior management individual described above, as well as at least two staff members who are already working on the frontline providing advice and information (Project Workers) and their immediate line managers (Project Leaders). It should also include one or more representatives from the Advocacy and Human Resources teams. It must meet regularly according to a previously agreed meetings cycle.

Recommendation 3:

**That the steering group considers carefully how the existing organisational structure can be adapted to support the development of a high quality advice service.** This will by necessity include the removal of any perceived or actual obstacles.

Recommendation 4:

**That a systematic and thorough skills audit be undertaken of all staff members who provide advice.** Before doing so, there must be absolute clarity about the skills that are needed for the type of advice service that Focus Ireland is proposing to deliver. It is important that as part of that process, staff members are asked directly what they feel their own training/support needs are.

Recommendation 5:

**That, following the skills audit, a comprehensive capacity-building and support plan be developed to include all aspects of the skills and knowledge required to provide a high quality advice service.** The plan needs to be multi-pronged, including the provision of:

- Facilities to encourage internal communication between Focus Ireland advice staff (group meetings, group emails, an intranet for advice staff, etc.)
- Training courses (on topics such as ethics, specific aspects of the law, writing, record-keeping, etc.)
- Second-tier ‘on call’ advice and mentoring (this type of support has a three-fold benefit: staff are trained on the job; the organisation as whole is more aware of what is happening on the frontline; and a coherence in organisational purpose evolves)
- A centralised repository of resource materials including a good practice manual (see below).

Recommendation 6:

**That a detailed good practice manual be developed to ensure a consistent high standard of advice service delivery.** This manual should be an online resource that can be amended as necessary, ensuring that all staff will always be working from the most-up-to date version. The manual should include:

- A policy document setting out the purpose of the advice service, how it functions and the specific measurable standards it adheres to
- Practical guidelines on case management, including Data Protection and the use of consent forms, making Freedom of Information requests, record-keeping norms, discharging cases, etc.
- Internal referral protocols with a clear framework distinguishing between the advice function of the organisation and other Focus Ireland services
- External referral protocols
- A 'house style' for external communications with other agencies (language, tone, presentation), including template letters
- Central and local government circulars and guidelines, legal briefings and other relevant information documents
- A live 'case base' with a foolproof case sharing template that is directly linked to the case management system. This will allow advice staff to share information about cases and outcomes, both positive and negative. This, in turn, will feed into the organisation's social policy function.

Recommendation 7:

**That data systems be reviewed in order to determine the most effective way of ensuring good case management that stresses customer confidentiality and advice service accountability.** Focus Ireland needs to consider how the current PASS/HSM system can be operated whilst maintaining the integrity of an independent rights-based advice service. This will by necessity involve in-depth consideration of the issue of informed consent.

Recommendation 8:

**That an audit be undertaken of all the premises and equipment used for the advice service around the country, including any associated risks.** Any arising issues (such as inadequate space, poor access for those with a physical disability, slow internet access, perceptions about co-locating with statutory services, etc) should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

## **8.5 Key learning points**

- The challenge for Focus Ireland is to build on its strengths and on the opportunities that exist, whilst tackling any weaknesses and minimising the effects of external threats.
- Consistently high service quality is the primary goal.

## **APPENDIX 1: Service model**

### **Developing a model of Information, Advice and Advocacy Services**

#### **Aims**

1. To deliver the right information, advice and advocacy at the right time enable customers to access their legal entitlements and to improve the customers situation
2. To offer support at the right level of intensity and duration so that the customer is supported through a situation, is not disempowered by the service and builds on their self-advocacy skills
3. To provide an appropriate system of referral on and follow-up to the customer in order to track effectiveness, where practicable
4. To build professional and accountable relationships with statutory and voluntary services to coordinate a pathway through services for customers
5. To identify areas of public policy and legislation that need to be changed to reduce the risk of homelessness or assist exits from homelessness, and build a case for such change.

#### **Objectives**

1. Establish communication with the public and support them to make use of the information, advice and advocacy services in their local area
2. Deliver these service through a range of mediums including: drop-in services, phone lines, outreach services (e.g. MABS), website and literature
3. Offer relevant support to people presenting to the service, appropriate to their level of need
4. Provide relevant, up-to-date and independent information, advice and advocacy on housing and homelessness
5. Continuously review the appropriateness of the format and design of information and ensure upgrades are undertaken
6. Establish positive working relationships with local voluntary and statutory support services that can support customers
7. Provide initial information and assess, in partnership with the customer, the need for higher intensity advice and advocacy



8. Follow up with customers to assess how effective the information, advice and advocacy was in improving their situation and offer further support, as appropriate and where practicable
9. Refer customers to internal and external services as required and advocate with relevant services to ensure customer needs are addressed

### **Service Description**

Providing the right information, advice and advocacy at the right time can prevent a person becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness and alleviate crisis situations for our customers. Focus Ireland aims to make information, advice and advocacy available in a range of ways to those who are experiencing, or are vulnerable to, homelessness.

These include:

- One-to-one Information, advice and advocacy service
- Information, advice and advocacy available over the telephone during service hours
- Information available from Focus Ireland website
- Outreach to relevant services
- Information leaflets and brochures available through other Information Service Providers
- Refer on to another organisation or external service from whom they can get relevant information and support to meet their needs

The aim of the service is to ensure that customers receive information, advice and advocacy on their rights and entitlements that will improve their situation by either preventing them from becoming homeless or by supporting them to move through and out of homelessness as smoothly as possible.

The service operates at three levels. Customer requirements are assessed at each level and the staff member follows up with the customer to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. Follow up can be in person, by phone or by satisfaction survey. The three levels are:

1. Information giving
2. Advice
3. Advocacy

### **Information giving**

In face-to-face or helpline services the staff member assesses if the customer requires immediate information to deal with their situation. The staff member goes through the information with the customer to ensure that it is relevant to their situation and that the customer understands the information. A follow-up appointment in person or by phone is offered.

Signposting to other internal services or relevant external service providers is a key part of the information giving process ensuring that there is “no wrong door” for customers who present to the service.

Focus Ireland also provides printed, audio-visual materials and web based information customers that supports them to deal with their situation.

### **Advice**

The customer and staff gather all the relevant information and assess the advice requirements. The outcome of the assessment is confirmed with the customer and appropriate advice is provided to support the customer to deal with their situation.

Follow up actions are discussed with the customer and recorded in the services database. This ensures that both the customer's needs are met and that there is effective handover between staff, as appropriate.

### **Advocacy**

Customer-based advocacy involves working with or for the customer to achieve an agreed goal. Together the staff member and customer will analyse the issue, identify counter-arguments that the external services might use, set out clear steps to deal with the issue, regularly review progress and continue to work on the issue. All work is recorded in writing to ensure that there is a paper trail to support the case. Advice workers will agree the content of case notes with the customer.

Focus Ireland will seek to use the knowledge it gains from these individual interactions with customers, to develop the case for changes in public policy and legislation to benefit other people who face similar circumstances in future.

### **Referrals**

Depending on the customer's circumstances and needs the staff member may refer the customer on to another service to support them. The staff member works with the customer and the service to ensure a smooth transfer of information.

In line with statutory requirements where a customer is under-18 the staff member refers them to the local HSE Social Work department to ensure appropriate support is available.

Follow up actions are prioritised, agreed, recorded and time-framed. Assignment of responsibility for follow up actions is also recorded and agreed by both the customer and the staff member. Support and assistance is offered to the customer in the achievement of these actions as appropriate. There must be a recognition by services that there will be customers who are transient. This creates difficulties in effectively tracking the outcome of the intervention.

The service is provided in a confidential and supportive environment, centred on customer needs. The information provided, and the staff training in delivery of this information, advice and advocacy, is in line with external quality systems (e.g. Citizens Information Centres).

The service acts as a point of referral and signposting to relevant support services. Customers are also facilitated to self-refer as appropriate.

Staff members making referrals follow up with services to ensure that the referral is accepted. Follow-up provides key information on customer movement and outcomes for the customer. In addition, it can assist in identifying gaps in service provision which can be fed back to the organisation and inform service development. Such referrals are recorded and copies are held in the customer case file. Services that referrals are made to include:

- Emergency accommodation
- Transitional programmes
- Long-term housing
- Case management
- Tenancy support & settlement services
- Education, training and employment services
- Drug treatment services
- Primary care services
- Mental health services

Other key services provided by the Information, Advice and Advocacy service include the following:

- Information, advice and advocacy on behalf of the customer, in relation to accessing services on all relevant aspects of:
  - Housing
  - Social welfare entitlements
- Assistance in reading information and completing forms
- Access to telephones and computers for customer self-advocacy and information gathering

### **Ensuring Quality Information, Advice and Advocacy**

We aim to provide information, advice and advocacy that is:

- Relevant
- Comprehensive
- Up-to-date
- Accurate
- Impartial
- Legally sound

Focus Ireland services that provide information, advice and advocacy use reliable, traceable and, where possible, accredited sources of information. Focus Ireland works in partnership with relevant information provision bodies, such as Citizens Information Centres, to ensure that information provided is accurate, relevant and comprehensive.

Staff members review and update the services information every three months or as required. The Information, advice and advocacy services invite the Focus Ireland Advocacy Team and external organisations to present information on their services to the team and customers. This develops links between the services and provides opportunities to share best practice.

Staff members will be trained to critically analyse information so that they can effectively advocate on customers' behalf. Staff will also work in partnership with the Focus Ireland Advocacy Team to identify issues for public policy advocacy and document instances as they affect our customers. The Advocacy Team will support Advice, Information and Advocacy staff by providing both training in effective advocacy and resourcing staff in relation to public policy developments.

In providing the information orally and in writing staff members assess individual customer requirements such as English not being their first language, literacy difficulties, physical issues, and learning difficulties and mental health issues. Insofar as possible, information is provided in the required format and language and a staff member offers assistance to the customer in understanding the material.

## **APPENDIX 2: Extract from *Day Drop-In Services Policies and Procedural Guidelines***

### **Information and Advice Service**

Providing the right information and advice at the right time can prevent a person becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness and alleviate crisis situations for our customers. Focus Ireland aims to make information and advice available in a range of ways to those who are experiencing, or are vulnerable to, homelessness.

These include:

- One-to-one Information and Advice service
- Information and Advice available over the telephone during service hours
- Information available from Focus Ireland website

The provision of information and advice is an essential aspect of the Day Drop-In services. The aim of the service is to ensure customers receive the services they require to move through and out of homelessness as smoothly as possible through the provision of quality advice, information, and where appropriate, advocacy.

The service is provided in a safe and supportive environment, centred on customer needs. The information provided, and the staff training in delivery of this information and advice is in line with external quality systems (Citizens Information Centres).

The service acts as a **point of referral** to relevant support services including Focus Ireland key working and case management and education services. In partnership with the customer appropriate referrals are made to support services. Customers are also facilitated to self-refer as appropriate.

Staff members making referrals follow up with services to ensure that the referral is accepted. Follow-up provides key information on customer movement and outcomes for customer. In addition, it can assist in identifying gaps in service provision which can be fed back to the organisation and inform service development. Such referrals are recorded and copies are held in the customer case file.

Services referrals are made to include:

- Emergency accommodation
- Transitional programmes
- Long-term housing
- Case management
- Tenancy support & settlement services
- Education, training and employment services
- Drug treatment services
- Primary care services
- Mental health services

For youth who are under-18 referral to local area Social Worker and follow up with Crisis Intervention Service. Please refer to Appendix 4 for detailed steps on the referral and follow-up process.

Other key services provided by the Advice, Information and Advocacy service include the following:

- Information and advocacy on behalf of the customer, in relation to accessing services on all relevant aspects of:
  - Housing
  - Social welfare entitlements
  - Health entitlements and services
  - Education/vocational training opportunities
  - Legal services

- Financial services

- Assistance in reading information and completing forms
- Access to telephones for customer self-advocacy and information gathering
- Support to register with Homeless Persons Unit and/or Local Authority homeless list
- Assisting with fast track applications for medical services and entitlements

When a customer presents to the service in person requiring information and advice a staff member meets with them to discuss this. The customer and staff gather all the relevant information and assess the information requirements. The outcome of the assessment is confirmed with the customer and information and advice is provided in support of the customer. This information can be provided at a designated information desk or a designated meeting room depending on the customers requirements.

If a customer telephones or e-mails the service for advice and information the staff member goes through the same process of assessing their requirements, confirming the assessment and providing the relevant advice and information. Follow up information and actions are discussed with the customer and recorded in the services communication log. This ensures that both the customers' needs are met and that there is effective handover between staff as appropriate.

Depending on the customers' circumstances and needs the staff member may refer the customer on to another service to support them. The staff member works with the customer and the service to ensure a smooth transfer of information. In line with statutory requirements where a customer is under-18 the staff member refers them to the local social worker to ensure appropriate support is available.

In providing the information orally and in writing staff members assess individual customer requirements such as English not being their first language, literacy difficulties, physical issues, and learning difficulties.

Follow up actions are prioritised, agreed, recorded and time-framed. Assignment of responsibility for follow up actions is also recorded and agreed by both the customer and the staff member. Support and assistance is offered to the customer in the achievement of these actions as appropriate.

### **Quality Information**

We aim to provide information that is:

- Relevant
- Comprehensive
- Up-to-date
- Accurate
- Impartial
- Legally sound

Focus Ireland services that provide information and advice use reliable, traceable and where possible, accredited sources of information. Focus Ireland works in partnership with relevant information provision bodies, such as Citizens Information Centres, to ensure that information provided is accurate, relevant and comprehensive. Staff members share information about changes to existing services and new services at weekly staff meetings. A specified staff member is responsible for sourcing new information and material and disseminating this to the team.

Staff members review and update the services information every three months or as required. The Advice and Information services invite external organisations to present information on their services to the team and customers. This develops links between the services and provides opportunities to share best practice.

Insofar as possible, information is provided in the required format and language and a staff member offers assistance to the customer in understanding the material.

## **APPENDIX 3: Framework for interviews with advice and information staff**

### **1. Introductions and general**

- [i] Describe the type of issues/queries [specific info/advice areas] that present to the A and I service
- [ii] Describe, if possible, the type of need that presents to the service [client circumstances]. Provide examples

### **2. Access/Resources**

- [i] Staff  
Full time/part time?  
Paid/voluntary
- [ii] Access  
Opening hours  
Public awareness [how do people know about the service]  
Premises/Visibility  
Appointment/drop in
- [iii] Equipment  
phones [mobile/landline] access  
email  
computer systems  
cars
- [iv] funding

### **3. Interview [first contact]**

- [i] Do you [or can you] check if the client is already a client of Focus Ireland?
- [ii] Referring to the “initial query sheet” - section details of the work undertaken.
  - [a] Do you record detail of the actual question/problem in each case and advice given?
  - [b] “follow up agreed” – please explain
  - [c] Are the record sheets stored electronically?
  - [d] Are you systematic in recording contact details of querist?

- [e] Can you check if the querist has presented to your service on previous occasions?

#### **4. Level of intervention support required/demand**

- [i] To what extent is the querist seeking once off information [e.g. rules governing the award of rent supplement or, process to apply for social housing]

Using examples

- [ii] To what extent does the querist require case support/advocacy?

Please provide examples

#### **5. Level of intervention provided**

- [i] When working with a customer in an advice/advocacy context can you articulate the stages of the advice/advocacy process [ e.g. information gathering, fact finding, rule checking – stage 1.]

- [ii] What do you do before acting?

- [iii] What steps might you take to remedy/resolve the client's position?

- [iv] Do you provide other services that are not directly related to advice/information work?

#### **6. Internal organisational communication**

To what degree is the A and I service integrated with other services within Focus Ireland, which involve direct client contact?

#### **7. Contact with State organisations**

- [i] How much contact would you have with State organisations [e.g. Local Authority, Department of Social Protection.]?

- [ii] What is the preferred method of communication [phone or in writing]?

- [iii] Can you provide an example of written communication with an external organisation?



- [iv] To what extent do you use the Freedom of Information Acts?
- [v] To what extent do you seek papers to verify the client's stated position?

## **8 Contact with other advice services**

[i] How much contact do you have with other advice services [CIC's, MABS, etc].  
Please provide examples of the type of contact?

[ii] Have you developed effective referral procedures, clarity with regard to boundaries and communication systems to avoid duplication and share expertise.

## **9. Record-keeping/case management [refer query record sheet]**

[i] Do you record the advice given and open case files with queries that require more than once off information

[ii] What consent forms do you use

[iii] What case management systems are in place?

## **10. Expertise/Competence**

[i] What information sources do you use on a daily basis?

[ii] How reliable and useful are these sources

[iii] How familiar are you with legislation relevant to your area of work?

[iv] How familiar are you with government circulars/guidelines relevant to your work?

[v] What expertise/knowledge/competence do you believe you bring to your role?

[vi] Are there areas of your work where you believe you lack expertise?  
Please define/explain.

## **11. Support and supervision**

- [i] Do you have access to second tier support/specialist expertise? If yes, please define/explain
- [ii] What current training/forums do you find useful?
- [iii] What training do you believe you need on an ongoing basis?
- [iv] What training have you received to date?
- [v] Is your work supervised on a daily/weekly basis? For example do you meet with your line manager to discuss cases/issues presenting to the service?

## **12. Outcome/benefits of the service**

- i. What material difference to you believe the A and I service makes
- ii. Can you describe, by way of example, what changes as a result of your work.
- iii. What, if any, are the negative outcomes
- iv. Was your intervention the cause of the change or would it have occurred anyway.
- v. When does your role end? Do you have clear boundaries or do customers repeatedly return for assistance following the completion of the advice work. If yes, why.
- vi. What unintended outcomes do you experience?

## **APPENDIX 4: Framework for interviews with advice and information customers**

Introduction to consultant

Explanation of process including commitment to anonymity

Any questions before starting?

Confirmation that information FI provided is correct

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Was it your first time engaging with the FI A&I service or had you been before?

Had you used any of FI's other services previously?

Why did you go to the A&I service?

Had you been anywhere else with the same issue previously?

How did you contact the service (in person, phone, email, etc)?

How easy was it to access the service?

Who helped you?

What were they like?

What did they do?

How happy were you with the quality of the service you received (marks out of 10)?

What happened then?

Thinking back to what things were like when you first presented to the service and what things are like now, what, if anything, has changed (does not have to a big, major change, even small changes are useful to know about)?

How much of that change was due to FI? Who else played a role in that change?

Is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you

## APPENDIX 5: Sample job description Advice and Information Worker



### Job Description

**Title:** Advice and Information Worker

**Reporting to:** Project Leader

**Primary Purpose:** To work directly with people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness with a view to meeting their accommodation needs.

#### Key Responsibilities

1. Work within the framework of the overall objectives of Focus Ireland.
2. To provide clear and precise information and advice on emergency accommodation, housing, Social Welfare and legal rights to people in need.
3. To refer and place people in emergency accommodation.
4. To undertake an assessment of people's personal and accommodation situation needs.
5. To advocate on people's behalf for housing, Social Welfare and other resources.
6. To refer people to external agencies which can more appropriately assist them with their personal, social, legal and accommodation needs.
7. To implement the existing policies and procedures of the project and of the Focus Ireland Agency.
8. To undertake any other responsibilities and duties as may be reasonably be assigned by your Manager or Divisional Head.
9. To engage in supervision sessions on a regular basis with the Project Leader.
10. To participate in relevant training and development courses.
11. To be vigilant to any Health, Safety and Welfare risks in the workplace and bring any concerns to the attention of your line manager or Health & Safety Representative

1 Advice Worker Job Description 2012

12. To undertake such other duties as might be reasonably assigned from time to time in consultation with the Director of Services.

**Focus Ireland is an equal opportunities employer**

**Criteria: Advice Worker, Cork**

**Essential:**

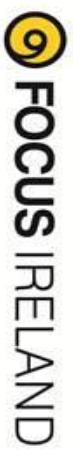
- Working knowledge of services for people experiencing homelessness
- A third level Social Care qualification at degree level or relevant other
- Good knowledge of social welfare and health board systems and payments and have experience of assisting people to access both.
- Proven experience in carrying out case work including assessments and formulating care plans to assist people experiencing homelessness in securing suitable accommodation.
- Excellent communication skills with particular emphasis on written and verbal advocacy while being able to deal with vulnerable and marginalised groups in a very busy environment.
- Excellent knowledge of the principles of good practice for the protection of children, and a good working knowledge of child protection procedures.
- Good knowledge of Local Authority and voluntary housing agencies with experience in referral and advocacy to each.
- A full driving license and own car essential.

**Desirable:**

- Previous experience of dealing with challenging behaviour

**Staff Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Service:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Follow-up agreed:** Yes ☐ No ☐



**HSM**  
**Homeless Services Management**  
**system**  
**&**  
**PASS**  
Pathway Accommodation & Support System

Customer consent Form

**Can I have information about me changed?**

Yes, under the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003, you have the right to have incorrect information about you changed.

**Is there a complaints procedure?**

Yes, Focus Ireland operates a comprehensive complaints procedure. If you are not satisfied with any aspect of the HSM/PASS system, you should contact a member of staff in Focus Ireland.

**For additional information on Focus Ireland's HSM system or PASS, please contact a member of staff or contact Focus Ireland directly at:**

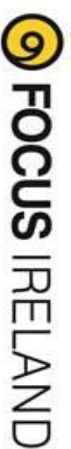
Focus Ireland, 9-12 High Street, Dublin 8  
Phone: 01 8815900  
Fax: 01 8815950

Web: [www.focusireland.ie](http://www.focusireland.ie)



**HSM**  
**Homeless Services**  
**Management system**  
**&**  
**PASS**  
Pathway Accommodation & Support System

Information Leaflet  
& Consent Form



**Working to end homelessness**

**APPENDIX 7: Consent Form**

## Focus Ireland's Database – Homeless Services Management System (HSM)

In order for Focus Ireland to provide you with adequate and appropriate services it is necessary for us to record the information you provide on the HSM system. Focus Ireland staff will enter their actions and interventions with you on the HSM. This information will only be used or shared with relevant bodies involved in your case. HSM also feeds into the national Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS), which is the new national shared client support and bed management system for homeless services, and forms part of the priority actions in the National Homeless Strategy, *The Way Home* and other regional variations of this. PASS has replaced the Link system as the single shared system in operation across statutory and voluntary homeless services.

### What does PASS do?

PASS will provide the Assessment and Placement function of the new Local Authority Housing Service with a central bed management tool. All Supported Temporary Accommodation (STA) and Temporary Emergency Accommodation (TEA) beds will be allocated through PASS. At all times the Assessment and Placement function will have live data on temporary bed occupancy across Ireland, thus ensuring access to all available beds on demand.

Statutory and voluntary partners will utilise PASS as a client support tool which will aid inter-agency working. Frontline workers will enter their actions and interventions with service users. PASS is integrated with the Care & Case Management strategy, and will see the relevant support plan and needs assessment form data return move online, replacing the paper-based versions. As the relevant needs assessment form is a static document, it will remain paper-based and only the existence of same will be logged on PASS.

## Data Protection

PASS was developed with the assistance of the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, and is fully compliant with the Data Protection Acts 1988 & 2003.

### Who sees the information?

Only staff working in core Homeless services have access to PASS. Only Focus Ireland staff have access to HSM. Three levels of passwords protect the information on the secure, certified PASS and HSM website.

### Is my consent required?

Your consent is required to record any information other than your name, date of birth, gender and place of accommodation.

### What if I refuse?

It is your right to refuse to provide consent, in which case no information other than your name, date of birth, gender and place of accommodation will be recorded on HSM/PASS. A refusal will not exclude you from receiving a service.

### How do I provide my consent?

You can provide your consent verbally to a member of staff working in Focus Ireland, or in writing by completing the attached consent form and giving it to a staff member working in Focus Ireland.

### Can I see the information recorded about me?

Yes, under the Data Protection Acts 1988 & 2003, you are entitled to a copy of any information kept on a computer about you. You can get a print out of the information recorded about you on HSM/PASS. You are entitled by law to have any incorrect personal information corrected.

## Consent Form

I consent to have information recorded about me, and my use of services, on HSM/PASS. I also consent to have information about my child(ren) named below recorded on HSM/PASS.

I understand that this information will be shared with other core homeless services providers in the region.

I have been informed of my rights to access all the information recorded about me on HSM/PASS.

### Name of Child(ren)

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### Signed

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### Date

---

### Witnessed by

---

### Project

---

### Position

---

### Date

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