

Focus Ireland Submission Department of Children and Youth Affairs Action Plan on Housing June 2016

Introduction

Focus Ireland has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to Government discussions on the issue of Housing and Homelessness and how best to tackle the current situation. We fed into the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness and addressed members on the importance of homelessness prevention. Members also visited one of our supported temporary accommodation sites and met with some of our customers. Many of our recommendations were reflected in the final report. We have made a submission to the Department of Environment on the forthcoming Action Plan on Housing, focusing on preventative policies, housing allocations and family homelessness.

We are aware that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) has been tasked with drafting the chapter of the Action Plan on Youth Homelessness. As one of the State's leading service providers to families and young people experiencing homelessness, we hope that this submission will assist the Department in developing its chapter.

We believe that the current scale of homelessness requires joined-up thinking and the collaboration of every Government department. We hope that the DCYA and the Department of Environment can pull together the requisite actors to develop a comprehensive plan to tackle the housing and homelessness crisis. Our recommendations therefore cover a number of Departmental competencies.

Focus Ireland welcomed many of the recommendations made in the final report of the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness. In particular, we would congratulate the Committee on the publication of innovative recommendations related to youth homelessness. We urge the DCYA to support these recommendations in the chapter they are drafting. In particular, we support the introduction of a 'sustainable long term system of supports' for young people under 26 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.¹ Focus Ireland believes that long-term preventative planning is vital in eliminating youth homelessness.

¹ Houses of the Oireachtas, Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness, June 2016

For the purposes of this submission we are considering three separate cohorts of children and youth at risk. The first are children and young people who are experiencing homelessness with their families. The second are children under 18 who are experiencing homelessness alone. The third are young people leaving care. Our submission will follow these headings and will begin with recommendations which we believe would help tackle youth homelessness more broadly.

General

Housing Supply

While targeted services are necessary to support children and young people experiencing homelessness, stable accommodation is critical. This must be reflected in the chapter of the Action Plan concerning youth homelessness.

Focus Ireland operates Housing First for Youth programmes in a number of regions across the country. These services are a variant on the traditional Housing First model which take into account the needs of young people, particularly in relation to the types of housing offered and the level of support provided. Housing First for Youth operates on the premise of no preconditions for a tenancy and wrap-around supports once the young person is housed. The latter are vital in ensuring tenancy sustainment and require collaboration from other statutory and non-governmental service providers. Our current services in Cork and Waterford and our partnership services in Limerick, Clare and North Tipperary which involve Tusla, local authorities and HSE Social Inclusion, are demonstrating positive outcomes. The ‘Alliance’ approach in the latter services is proving very successful and our partners are reporting a reduction in young people accessing homeless services. One of the main barriers to the full success of these projects is the lack of access to affordable housing. It is hoped that this issue will be further addressed in the Action Plan. We are in the process of formally evaluating our Housing First for Youth services.

The DCYA should include a provision acknowledging Housing First for Youth as a positive development in the Irish context and urging its expansion.

In order for Housing First for Youth and other initiatives to be successful, we need access to housing. The Committee recommended that the State’s social housing stock be increased by 50,000 units and we would welcome such a commitment by the Department of Environment. In our submission to the Minister for Housing we have advocated for the reinstatement of the 50% allocation rule for homeless and other vulnerable households. This will help ensure that families and individuals experiencing homelessness can move into stable accommodation as quickly as possible.

In addition to this allocation, a number of units must be ring-fenced for young people experiencing homelessness. Research has shown that young people who experience a period of homelessness can be trapped in a repeated cycle of entries into emergency accommodation.² While some young people experiencing homelessness will wish to access the private rented sector, and should be supported to do so, others will require social housing and more sustained supports. Given the impact that even short periods of time spent homelessness can have on

² Mayock & Corr, 2013

young people, it is vital that DCYA recommend a ring-fencing of social housing. More details can be found below.

The DCYA should acknowledge that the provision of housing is key to tackling child and youth homelessness. Housing types must be varied and must include supportive youth housing models.

Domestic Violence Services

The DCYA is the department responsible for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services which were previously delivered by the HSE. A recent Focus Ireland survey of 70 families experiencing homelessness found that 11 reported domestic violence as being the main cause, with a further 5 reporting that domestic violence had negatively impacted on their housing stability in the past.³ Domestic violence refuges report being at capacity and having to turn away hundreds of women and children as a result of the housing crisis.⁴

The DCYA should call for a review of domestic violence services to ensure that sufficient refuge accommodation is available to those who require it.

The numbers of individuals and families residing in domestic violence refuges are not included in the official homelessness figures released by the Department of the Environment. The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) specifically includes individuals living in insecure housing due to domestic violence. These individuals and families must not be overlooked in policies which tackle homelessness.

The DCYA should ensure that families residing in domestic violence refuges are classified as homeless and counted in official figures.

Family supports

Focus Ireland recognises that communication with family members or other supportive adults, while often overlooked, can be a vital support for young people even if they have left the family home due to conflict. While returning to that accommodation may not always be possible or even safe, there may still be individuals within the family who could provide an important point of support for a young person. Service providers must acknowledge the strong bond which can remain despite conflict, and should support young people and families to safely explore communication. Focus Ireland has recently piloted a Family Mediation service in conjunction with Tusla. We hope that demonstrating positive outcomes from this preventative service will allow its wider expansion.

Youth Homelessness

The most recent figures released from the Department of Environment show that in May 2016, 646 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were experiencing homelessness in the State. This figure likely fails to reflect the reality of youth homelessness, with many young people reporting staying with friends and family in unsuitable accommodation. When we advocate on

³ <http://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-4-2016.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/galway-refuge-turned-away-700-women-children-in-2015-1.2565180>

behalf of young people experiencing homelessness we are referring to both young people who have left the care system and young people who do not qualify for aftercare supports but are experiencing homeless separate from family.

Care Leavers

There is a well-documented link between young people leaving care and subsequent experiences of homelessness.⁵ Focus Ireland is working with over 180 young care-leavers and supporting them to make the transition into independent living. State care ends when a young person turns 18 and while an intensive planning stage is meant to precede this, many care-leavers are effectively thrown into independence. Coupled with the recommendation around housing above, below are some of the ways in which the Department of the Environment and the DCYA should effectively support young people leaving care.

Housing supports

It has been estimated that 1 in 3 young people leaving State Care will experience homelessness.⁶ Some of the young people currently experiencing homelessness would be happy to access housing in the private rented sector, if such housing was available. It is hoped that commitments to increase supply coupled with an increase in rent supplement rates will help a considerable number of these young people.

The Child and Family Agency estimates that between 400 and 500 young people reach the age of 18 and leave the care of the State each year. While the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 provides for statutory aftercare planning for young people leaving care, we believe that this commitment would be all the more effective if the young people being supported knew that they were guaranteed secure and stable accommodation. The numbers of young people who are leaving care each year and who require social housing are comparatively small, but the preventative impacts of such a policy would be considerable. The Committee made a similar recommendation in their final report.

The DCYA should include a provision that, dependent on figures from Tusla, a specific number of social housing units be ring-fenced for young people leaving care each year.

Aftercare Services

The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 provides a statutory right to an aftercare plan for young people leaving care. However, in order to qualify for such a plan, young people must have been in the care of the State for a period not less than 12 months since the age of 13 years.⁷ A number of young people enter the care of the State (under Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991) at the age of 17. These young people would be unable to accrue the 12 months necessary, although they may require aftercare support.

The DCYA should acknowledge that under a rights-based approach to service provision, every young person who requires aftercare support should be able to access it. We hope that this is reflected in the implementation of the Child Care (Amendment) Act.

⁵ Johnson & Mendes, 2014 and Stein, 2006

⁶ Left Out Alone

⁷ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/45/enacted/en/print>

While it is hoped that the above Act will enable more young people to benefit from aftercare services, this commitment must be coupled with sufficient numbers of aftercare workers. Delays in the allocation of aftercare workers can understandably have a detrimental impact on the young people concerned. The Child and Family Agency should be in a position to advise on the number of young people who will turn 18 each year.

The DCYA should include a provision that a review be undertaken to determine how many aftercare workers will be required in the coming years in order to provide equitable service provision to all care leavers.

Non-Care Leavers

While a considerable number of young people aged 18-24 experiencing homelessness in the State have experience in State Care, others do not. Young people experiencing homelessness who do not have aftercare support can often find themselves trapped in emergency or unstable accommodation. In part, this is due to constriction in the market and a general lack of affordable housing. While commitments made in the Programme for Partnership Government should help to alleviate some of this pressure, additional support must be provided to young people who have experienced homelessness. This should encompass tenancy sustainment support and support in accessing employment and training.

Social Welfare Rates

Since 2009, young people in receipt of jobseeker's allowance have been subjected to a much lower rate than adult claimants. Those aged 18-24 receive €100 each week, compared to €144 for those aged 25 and €188 for those aged 26 and over.

While the rationale for this reduced rate is arguably to deter young people from remaining reliant on welfare supports, for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness such a low payment only serves to trap them in unstable and insecure accommodation with myriad untold consequences. The Minimum Essential Budget Standards Research Centre advise that for a single adult of working age the core minimum weekly expenditure budget, *excluding housing*, is over €240.⁸ The current rate of jobseeker's allowance for young people is seriously inadequate, although even the increased rate would not meet MESL recommendations.

The DCYA should call for the introduction of a mechanism to enable young people experiencing homelessness to receive an increased rate of payment.

Family Homelessness

All available evidence demonstrates that the majority of families accessing homeless services had their last secure home in the private rented sector. As such, increasing supply and ensuring that families can access the market is vital. However, while we await the completion of much needed housing children and their families are spending months, if not years, residing in emergency accommodation. Family homelessness was an issue which Focus Ireland placed

8

http://www.budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/MESL_Update_Paper/VPSJ_2016_MESL_2016_Update_Report_Appendix.pdf

significant emphasis on in 2011. Following intensive support work, there were no families in long term homelessness by 2013. This problem has reappeared in recent years and continued resources must be put into tackling it. The following are ways in which the DCYA and other Departments can support children and young people experiencing homelessness with their families.

Support for Children in Emergency Accommodation

The Focus Ireland Family HAT (Homeless Action Team) supports children and families while they are residing in emergency accommodation and as they move into secure accommodation. Below are some of the additional supports which would assist children during their time in homeless services:

- An increased number of child support workers, so that each child who would benefit from this support can access it.
- Transport should be provided where necessary to ensure that children can continue to attend their school of choice.
- Provisions must be made so that children and families can access healthy and nutritious food and cooking facilities.
- Provisions should be made to ensure that families can access the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme. Focus Ireland is currently examining whether families residing in emergency and unstable accommodation are precluded because of their situation.

The DCYA should include the above provisions, as well as the recommendations made by the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness.

Educational Welfare Services

Given that Educational Welfare Services (EWS) sit within the remit of the Child and Family Agency, and therefore DCYA, we believe that this is a particularly pertinent issue which needs to be addressed in the Action Plan. International research has shown a strong correlation between homelessness and a withdrawal from education.⁹ Given the recognised importance of education, it is vital that children residing in emergency accommodation are supported to attend school regularly and perform to the best of their ability. School principals are required to notify EWS if children are absent for more than 20 days in a school year.¹⁰ Should this occur as a result of housing instability or homelessness, EWS should work collaboratively with parents to support increased attendance.

Educational welfare supports are particularly important for children residing in emergency accommodation who are not attending DEIS designated schools. Research conducted by Focus Ireland found that 45% of children experiencing homelessness were not attending DEIS schools.¹¹

The DCYA should include provisions to extend Educational Welfare Services to specifically support children residing in emergency accommodation.

⁹ Youth Homelessness in the UK, Rowntree Foundation, 2008

¹⁰ Education Welfare Act 2000

¹¹ <http://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-3-2016.pdf>

The above recommendations are primarily concerned with supporting children and youth people during a period in homeless services. It is hoped that the current levels of family homelessness will be drastically reduced in the near future, thanks to Government and sectoral interventions. This would enable us to move beyond a crisis response. Early intervention programs aimed at keeping children and young people at home, in school and linked to their community are vital. One such programme is The Geelong Project, which is an Australian initiative that we shortly be piloted in Canada.¹² The project uses a ‘student needs survey’, administered to all students, to identify those at risk of homelessness and offer them targeted support. Focus Ireland believes that a similar pilot project in Ireland could enable targeted ‘upstream’ prevention work.

The DCYA should examine the possibility of investing in a pilot prevention project based in schools.

Children Experiencing Homelessness Alone

The Youth Homelessness Strategy (2000) aimed to reduce and ‘if possible eliminate’ youth homelessness. It is certainly true that the phenomenon of children under the age of 18 sleeping rough has largely ceased. Demand for emergency hostel places for children has also decreased substantially. While the numbers are decreasing, a significant number of children continue to access Tusla’s Crisis Intervention Service. In 2014, CIS (which operates in Dublin and a number of other counties) provided accommodation for 174 referrals. The children accessing CIS supports are often the most vulnerable.

Social Worker Supports

Focus Ireland operates a residential care centre in conjunction with the Crisis Intervention Service. Grange Lodge provides accommodation for up to 6 children under the age of 18, and placements typically last between six and nine months. Focus Ireland hopes to increase the preventative mandate of this service in the near future. Some of the children accommodated in the service move into long term care placements while others enter at the age of 16 or 17 and subsequently ‘age out’ of the system. Focus Ireland meets the majority of the young people who aged out of this youth service in adult homeless services. For children who are formally taken into the care of the State, many have to wait for a social worker to be allocated as they proceed through a crucial period of stress and potential trauma. Recent figures released by Tusla show that some 5,579 open cases are awaiting the allocation of a social worker.¹³

The DCYA should include a provision increasing the number of social workers employed to ensure that children have immediate access to a social worker when they need it.

Conclusion

As stated above, ending youth and family homelessness requires joined-up thinking and innovative approaches. We believe that all the recommendations outlined above are vitally important. However, we would highlight the following as being the most pressing and deserving

¹² <http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/early-intervention/>

¹³ http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Monthly_Performance_Activity_Dashboard_Mar_2016_Final.pdf

of immediate attention. Access to housing, and to youth housing in particular, is something that most other recommendations and rights are dependent on. Secure and safe accommodation is critical and a prerequisite for many forms of service provision and support. While such housing comes on stream, support for families residing in emergency accommodation must be prioritised. Finally, if we are to ensure that we never again see family and youth homelessness figures climbing as they have in recent years, we must focus our attention on prevention. This must be the cornerstone of our work and we must aim to support families and young people long before emergency responses are necessary.

Ends