



Focus Ireland Submission on Statement of Strategy 2016-2018 Department of Education June 2016

Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-2018. Focus Ireland is one of the country's leading housing and homelessness charities. We work with individuals, families, and children. We endeavour to prevent people becoming, remaining, or returning to homelessness through the provision of quality services, supported housing, research and advocacy. We believe that everyone has the right to a place to call home.

Focus Ireland operates the DRHE-funded Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) in the Dublin region.¹ We support families while they are residing in emergency accommodation and help them to move on as quickly as possible. However, the housing shortage means that families are spending considerable periods of time in emergency accommodation. While we are confident that statements from the new Minister for Housing demonstrate a commitment to tackle the issue, houses cannot be built overnight. Additionally, significant numbers of families continue to become homeless each month. We foresee that, even with the introduction of immediate measures, family homelessness will remain an acute issue for the next 3-5 years.

While we recognise that homelessness is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Housing, international research has shown a strong correlation between homelessness and a withdrawal from education.² We believe that this issue is one which requires a whole-of-Government approach. 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. The following proposals aim to support this key objective. It is envisaged that many of the recommendations in this submission will be temporary.

Support for Children in Emergency Accommodation

The most recent figures released by the Department of the Environment show that there are currently 1,037 families with 2,121 children experiencing homelessness in the State.³ In Dublin,

¹ While our submission is applicable nationwide, family homelessness is a particularly acute issue in Dublin and we have considerable expertise in the area. As such, most of our submission will be informed by data and research relating to Dublin. This does not mean that family homelessness does not occur in other regions.

² "Youth Homelessness in the UK" Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2008, available at:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/youth-homelessness-uk>

³ April 2016, available at:

http://www.environ.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_april_2016.pdf

888 families are homeless with 1,786 children.⁴ Of these, 670 families with 1,359 children are residing in commercial hotels (75%). The remaining families are residing in emergency homeless accommodation.

The Department of Education tackles exclusion through its Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, DEIS. This is the policy instrument tasked with addressing educational disadvantage which focuses on 'prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education'⁵. While this is a laudable aim, Focus Ireland is concerned that an over-reliance on community targeted support leaves some children behind. In particular, children residing in emergency accommodation.

Research conducted by Focus Ireland found that 45% of children residing in emergency accommodation are not attending DEIS schools.⁶ This means that these children do not have access to Home School Community Liaison or School Completion services. It means that many do not have access to breakfast clubs, school lunches or after-school programmes. It means they cannot avail of additional grant and funding opportunities which DEIS schools can apply for.

The rationale for DEIS designations being based on relative disadvantage in an area is clear. However, given the unprecedented numbers of children currently experiencing homelessness in the State, the Department must introduce temporary educational supports for this cohort. This support could take the form of educational staff posts within the Family HAT or an increased number of child support workers.

Recommendation 1: Additional educational supports should be available to children residing in emergency accommodation who are attending non-DEIS schools.

School Transport Scheme

Due to the continued pressure on local authorities to find emergency accommodation, families are being placed in commercial hotels which may be considerable distances from their communities and schools. This problem will only intensify during the summer months, when tourist bookings further diminish the number of available rooms. Family HAT staff have experienced families travelling for hours each day to ensure their children get to school. This can necessitate numerous buses and many families have to leave their accommodation before breakfast is provided. This means relying on food purchased on route. The above research conducted by Focus Ireland found that almost 42% of children experiencing homelessness were attending primary school, compared to 12% attending post-primary school. Children who are unable to make their way to school independently are even more in need of transportation support.

The purpose of the current School Transport Scheme is to support transport for children who reside remote from their nearest primary and post primary school and children with special educational needs. In order to qualify for such support, primary school children must be residing more than 3.2km from and attending their nearest school. The distance in respect of post-

⁴ Available at: <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/homeless-families>

⁵ Available at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/>

⁶ Of a cohort of 636 children. Report available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/publications-and-partnerships/>

primary students is 4.8km.⁷ The requirement that children must be attending their 'nearest' school unduly disadvantages children residing in emergency accommodation.

It has been accepted that children experiencing homelessness or other forms of personal upheaval benefit from the stability of staying in their school. In the United States, for example, federal law guarantees children experiencing homelessness the right to stay in their 'school of origin' and to receive transportation to this school if required.⁸ Such a commitment must be extended to children residing in emergency accommodation in Ireland.

Recommendation 2: Funding should be made available to provide whatever transport is necessary to ensure that children can continue to attend their school of choice while experiencing homelessness.

Hunger Prevention in School

Ensuring that children have access to nutritious meals during school is vital to enable them to reach their full potential. This is even more important when you consider that the majority of families experiencing homelessness are residing in single hotel rooms and are without access to cooking facilities.

At present, there is no national hunger prevention strategy for students in Ireland. The Educational Disadvantage Centre have noted that while there are some initiatives in place, such as the School Meals Programme and the Breakfast Clubs facilitated by the School Completion Programme, these are not available for all children who need them.⁹ These programmes are often reliant on the actions of school principals or on DEIS funding.

One way of ensuring that children residing in emergency accommodation have access to nutritious food during the school day would be to expand the School Meals programme, temporarily, so that contracted companies could provide lunches to children regardless of which school they are attending, for example by sending the packs to commercial hotels in the morning.

More generally, the Department of Education should consider wholesale investment in school infrastructure to enable all children to benefit from healthy lunches. This would involve building kitchens in schools and hiring staff. Evidence from the United Kingdom, which introduced pilot programmes in 2009, found that children from less affluent backgrounds and children with lower attainment rates benefited the most from free school meals.¹⁰ The evaluation also found that there were 'social benefits' gained from children sitting down and eating a meal together. Anecdotal evidence from educational welfare professionals in Ireland shows similar results from the existing breakfast clubs.

Recommendation 3: The School Meals programme should be extended to cater for children residing in emergency accommodation, regardless of whether their schools have applied for the scheme.

⁷ Available at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/School-Transport/FAQs.html>

⁸ The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act 1987

⁹ Available at: <http://www.spd.dcu.ie/site/edc/HungerPreventioninSchools.shtml>

¹⁰ Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/184047/DFE-RR227.pdf

Recommendation 4: The Department should consider larger scale investment in food preparation facilities in schools across the country.

Accessibility of School Buildings

Families experiencing homelessness lose much of their freedom when living in emergency accommodation. Some families have reported a different set of rules for them compared to paying guests of the hotel. Children are often precluded from playing in communal areas and are confined to the single room they share with their family. Children rarely have a quiet place to complete their homework. Independent cooking facilities are rarely provided, so children do not experience the benefits of sitting down with their family for dinner at the end of the day. Normal socialisation patterns are disrupted.

School buildings across the country sit idle for much of the evening, all of the weekend, and the entirety of the summer holidays. Focus Ireland welcomes a discussion about how best to use these facilities. There are reports that school buildings may be used to provide afterschool care, homework clubs and other community activities, and we support such measures. The Department of Education should also explore whether existing food preparation facilities in schools could be utilised.

Recommendation 5: School buildings should be fully utilised by the community, children and families when available.

Croke Park Agreement

Focus Ireland is aware that there are on-going discussions about how best to use the Croke Park hours which were introduced in 2011. There have been some reports that these hours could be better utilised to provide extra-curricular learning and support to students. Delegates at a recent ASTI conference argued that the extra 33 non-class contact hours meant that teachers were less willing to engage in extra-curricular activities which they are not paid for.¹¹ When schools run breakfast clubs or after-school activities, they rely on teachers coming in early and staying late.

Focus Ireland understands that the Croke Park hours were introduced for a specific reason. However, if discussions relating to their flexibility are taking place, we would hope that consideration is given to the importance of extra-curricular activities and support for children residing in emergency accommodation.

Recommendation 6: A review of the usage of Croke Park hours should be undertaken and consideration should be given to the importance of extra-curricular activities and support for children residing in emergency accommodation.

Teacher Training

The increasing number of children residing in emergency accommodation means that schools which never before experienced homelessness are now supporting students in this situation. This issue is particularly pertinent for non-DEIS schools, which do not have the benefit of a trained HSCL or school completion officer on the staff.

¹¹ From Irish Independent: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/croke-park-hours-force-teachers-to-cut-back-extracurricular-activities-31126129.html>

The Tusla Educational Welfare Service recently produced a guidance document for these specialist teachers, to enable them to best support children and families experiencing homelessness. Focus Ireland believes that all teachers would benefit from such guidance. Practical considerations include children arriving late to school, children arriving without the correct school uniform, children unable to complete homework, and even children falling asleep during class. It is important that all teachers are able to recognise and appropriately address behaviour which is often the result of immense stress and worry on the part of children. Small changes to a school environment can significantly help children during periods of homelessness. Guidelines from other jurisdictions, including Australia and the United States, contact simple recommendations to help teachers support students.¹²

Focus Ireland knows that classroom teachers are already under enormous pressure and have limited resources to respond to all the problems which society generates. But we also know that teachers play an even greater than normal role in the lives of children experiencing homelessness. Training on the issue of family homelessness should be introduced for all teachers, particularly in the Dublin region. This training could take the form of presentations during in-service training days, and could be supplemented by a guidance document similar to those above.

Recommendation 7: All teachers should receive training as to the impact that periods of homelessness can have on children and their educational outcomes. This training should be supplemented by guidance documents.

Homelessness within the Curriculum

It is widely accepted that education is crucial to the creation of an inclusive society with equality of opportunity and participation.¹³ In order to help students become citizens of a more just and equitable future, our curriculum must acknowledge society's short-comings and support children and young people to discuss and debate their causes and solutions. One such issue is homelessness.

Focus Ireland runs 'school talks' throughout the academic year. Our volunteers, the majority of whom are retired teachers, visit schools and deliver presentations about homelessness. We have seen a significant increase in requests for these talks in line with increasing family homelessness. Children and young people are interested in these issues, and should be taught about them as part of their formal Civic, Social, and Political Education (CSPE) classes, and within the primary curriculum.

Focus Ireland developed a 'school resource pack' in conjunction with the Curriculum Development Unit of the Department of Education. We recommend that the contents of this programme be subsumed within the national curriculum, to ensure that all our young people understand the causes and consequences of homelessness.

¹² For examples, please see: https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/homeless/pdf/teach_help_hmls_stud.pdf, <http://www.stetson.edu/artsci/education/home/media/teacher-help.pdf>, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/participation/homelessnessstrategy09.pdf>

¹³ Department of Education "A brief description of the Irish education system", available at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/A-Brief-Description-of-the-Irish-Education-System.pdf>

Recommendation 8: Modules relating to the causes and effects of homelessness should be introduced into the curriculum, at both primary and post-primary level.

Early Start Programme

Focus Ireland acknowledges that the Early Start Programme aims to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting pre-school children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the education system. The intervention service is offered to some schools in disadvantaged areas. The scheme provides that priority should be given to children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁴ Unlike the DEIS model, the scheme is dependent on an assessment of individual levels of need.

Research conducted by Focus Ireland found that almost 39% of children residing in emergency accommodation were between the ages of zero and four.¹⁵ With this in mind, and given the need to understand poverty and disadvantage in broader and more nuanced terms, Focus Ireland recommends that the Early Start Programme be expanded to allow children from areas not typically classified as 'disadvantaged' to be referred to and access the service.

Recommendation 9: Consideration should be given to an expansion of the Early Start Programme in order to support children experiencing homelessness.

Ends

¹⁴ <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Grants-and-Additional-Support/Early-Start-Programme/Early-Start-Guidelines.pdf>

¹⁵ Of a cohort of 636 children. Report available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/publications-and-partnerships/>