

Executive Summary

Keeping a Home

Preventing Families from
Becoming Homeless

Neil Haran and
Seán Ó Siochrú

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

'Apart from the practical support, Focus Ireland also gave me emotional support during what was a really stressful time. They kept me focused. Getting advice on who to contact meant that I wasn't going from post to pillar all the time. The attitude in Focus Ireland was always really positive and very relaxed. I'd come in stressed out of my head and the staff would say "let's ring somebody". They were always on the lookout for solutions. And it was never just one solution. They just added to my confidence.'

Family Interview, Waterford



Keeping a Home

Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless

Neil Haran and Seán Ó Siochrú

October 2017

© Focus Ireland, 2017

Published by Focus Ireland, Dublin

ISBN 978-1-9997657-4-3

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

In order to protect the identity of our customers, the photographs in this document are of volunteers.

Focus Ireland Family Prevention Services which featured in this research report are funded by Dublin Region Homeless Executive; Kilkenny County Council; Limerick City and County Council; Sligo County Council; and Waterford City and County Council. Bord Gáis Energy (BGE) funds Focus Ireland Family Homelessness Prevention Services in Dublin, Kilkenny and Waterford. BGE also partially-funded this research study.

Contents

Abbreviations	2
Tables and figures	2
Executive summary	3
Context	3
The study: aims and objectives	4
Profile of participating families	5
Reasons for approaching prevention services	7
Housing histories	9
Focus Ireland prevention services	10
Success in homeless prevention	11
Identifying what works and why	11
Recommendations for prevention practice	13
The need for longer-term solutions	14

Abbreviations

A&I	Advice & Information
CIC	Citizens Information Centre
FRC	Family Resource Centre
DSP	Department of Social Protection
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
MABS	Money Advice and Budgeting Service
NTQ	Notice to Quit
PASS	Pathway Accommodation & Support System
RTB	Residential Tenancies Board
SRM	Social Rental Model
TD	Teachta Dála
TSS	Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service

Tables and figures

Tables

Table 1 · Profile of families interviewed by location	6
Table 2 · Age profile of family respondents	6

Figures

Figure 5 · Primary reason for risk of homelessness	9
--	---

Executive summary

This publication presents a summary of key findings of an external study of Focus Ireland's services which work to prevent family homelessness.¹ By looking in detail at the experiences of 35 families who had used the services, the report has sought to understand which interventions were successful and to identify strengths and weaknesses in the current prevention services offered by Focus Ireland. It also set out to further Focus Ireland's understanding of prevention in line with its organisational strategy, and to contribute to a wider knowledge on preventing family homelessness.

The overarching conclusion of this research is that Focus Ireland has operated a series of prevention services that have proven effective in the short-term in enabling families to avoid entry or re-entry into homelessness. At the time of interview, between 3 and 15 months after disengaging with Focus Ireland, 34 of the 35 families in the study had succeeded in avoiding homelessness. A critical feature of these prevention services was the creation of holistic, family-orientated interventions, designed to address the immediate and varied presenting needs of families accessing services.

The organisation has managed to create these holistic services in a manner that not only meets the practical housing needs of families but also a broader range of social, economic and emotional needs that accompany the risk of being made homeless. Organisational staff have provided these services in a respectful, non-judgemental and humane manner, demonstrating deep empathy for families and considerable commitment to their work.

Context

As Ireland witnesses growing levels of family homelessness, it is apparent that there is a greater need for prevention services, as offered by Focus Ireland. However, family-orientated prevention services can only provide short-term solutions to family risk. They do not – and cannot – address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness. Greater policy commitment from the State is required to bring about longer-term and more sustainable solutions to the incidence of family homelessness.

¹ The full report is available in PDF format online at <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>

The number of families becoming homeless in Ireland has grown consistently in recent years, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. 1,429 families were accessing emergency accommodation across the country in July 2017, inclusive of 2,973 children.²

Recent years have brought an increased international policy focus on the prevention of homelessness as opposed to policy that is centred on responding to the incidence of homelessness. Prevention policies and practices have tended to operate along a three-tiered continuum:³

- *Primary prevention* aims to reduce the risk of homelessness among the general population through measures associated with, for example, housing supply, access and affordability, and poverty reduction.
- *Secondary prevention* focuses on individuals and families who are potentially at high risk of becoming homeless because of certain risk characteristics⁴ or because of crisis situations in their lives likely to lead to homelessness.
- *Tertiary prevention* targets interventions at those who have already experienced homelessness, seeking to resolve their homelessness as quickly as possible through measures such as rapid re-housing.

Prevention within an Irish context has tended to operate within secondary measures. The national Homeless Preventative Strategy (2002) devoted specific attention to a number of 'at-risk' groups, including adult and young offenders, people leaving mental health residential facilities, people leaving acute hospitals and young people leaving care.

The study: aims and objectives

This study was qualitative in design. A total of 35 families were interviewed across a range of locations – including Dublin, Waterford, Sligo, Limerick and Kilkenny – to ascertain their perspectives on the manner in which the services of Focus Ireland had impacted on their avoiding homelessness. In this way, the voice and direct experience of families who had been at risk of homelessness acted as the central vehicle for gathering robust data in this research process. These families sought support from Focus Ireland to prevent their becoming homeless or, in some cases, to prevent their return to homelessness through *Advice and Information Services*; *Tenancy Sustainment and Settlement Services*; and *Social Rental Model*.

In addition, seven structured interviews were conducted with Focus Ireland staff members who were involved either in the management and/or frontline delivery of prevention services to client families. Interviews with prevention service staff were conducted before engaging with families and informed the research instruments for engaging with families whilst also informing the research team's sampling strategy for recruiting families into the study.

² <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness> accessed on 26 September 2017.

³ Busch-Geertsema, V. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2008) 'Effective homelessness prevention? Explaining reductions in homelessness in Germany and England', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2, pp. 69–95.

⁴ For example, those with a history of institutional care.

Following the initial consultation with staff, it was decided that selection of families would be based on the following criteria:

- families who accessed Focus Ireland prevention services (Advice & Information, Tenancy Support and Sustainment, Social Rental Model) between January 2016 and September 2016;
- families who accessed Focus Ireland prevention services both in Dublin and in regional services;
- families who had been case managed over time;⁵ and
- at the point of disengagement from Focus Ireland services, the family had been recorded by staff members as having avoided entry into homeless/emergency services.

In undertaking this study, the research team committed to ensuring the highest level of research ethics in its engagement with all research participants, particularly participating families. Central to this commitment was the research team's adherence to the Ethical Protocol of Focus Ireland. Participants were advised before all interviews that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and that they could withdraw from the process at any time. Their consent to taking part in the interviews was sought after (i) the purpose of the research was fully explained to them and (ii) they were informed of what would happen to the information they provided. Procedures for recording interviews were also agreed with participants prior to the commencement of interviews. Only issues of relevance to the research were explored during interviews and the anonymity of participants has been protected.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify the co-occurrence of particular themes in response to specific questions within the research interviews. These were coded, reviewed and combined to produce overarching themes from the data. Themes were subsequently examined and analysed to ensure that their later presentation in this report would (i) give an accurate reflection of the data and (ii) ensure their relevance to the overall research objectives. Themes identified as significant by the research were written up and presented as the core results of the research through this report.

Profile of participating families

The families who participated in this research were diverse in terms of profile and had accessed prevention services in Dublin, Waterford, Kilkenny, Sligo and Limerick (see Table 1). They were led by heads of household of varied age, but with a significant proportion of female-headed and lone parent-headed households. The households interviewed also presented a large proportion of families reliant on social welfare as their primary income-source. The profile of families participating in the research is broadly in line with the known profile of homeless families from both the Focus Ireland Quarterly survey and data of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

In keeping with the higher concentration of family homelessness in the capital, the research prioritised families located in Dublin for interview over and above other areas.

⁵ Families who engaged with the service for a minimum of three meetings/conversations/engagements as opposed to families who simply accessed information over one visit to the organisation and then addressed their accommodation difficulties independently of Focus Ireland.

As a result, just under half of family interviews in the study were conducted with families residing in Dublin.

Location	Number of interviewed families
Dublin	16 (46%)
Waterford	6 (17%)
Sligo	5 (14%)
Limerick	5 (14%)
Kilkenny	3 (9%)
Total	35 (100%)

Table 1 • Profile of families interviewed by location

Gender of participants

Interviews were conducted with the adult family member who had approached Focus Ireland for support and who was the primary contact within the family for the organisation. Against that backdrop, 28 (80%) of the 35 interviewees were female, while the remaining 7 (20%) respondents were male.

Age

Almost half (n=16, 46%) of those interviewed during this research process were aged between 36 and 45 years. One in three (n=11, 31%) were aged between 26 and 35. The full age profile of respondents was as follows:

Age	Number of participants	% of participants
> 25 years	3	9%
26–35	11	31%
36–45	16	46%
46–55	4	11%
55 +	1	3%

Table 2 • Age profile of family respondents

Family status of respondents

Seventy percent (n=25) of those interviewed during the research were parenting alone, 22 of whom were single mothers and three single fathers. The remaining 30% (n=10) of the study participants were two-parent households.

Given the focus on the prevention of *family* homelessness in this study, all interviewees were accompanied by dependent children. In that regard, 60% (n=21) of interviewees were parenting two children or less, with the remaining 40% (n=14) parenting more than two dependent children.

Nationality and ethnicity

Sixty-eight percent (n=24) of those participating in the study were Irish nationals. This included two individuals born in Africa who, in recent years, had secured Irish citizenship. A further 23% (n=8) identified themselves as EU nationals,⁶ while the remaining 9% (n=3) were non-EU nationals.⁷

Four of the 35 (11%) respondents identified themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic group. Three individuals referred to their membership of the Muslim faith, while a further individual highlighted her membership of the Traveller community in Ireland.

Main source of income

Seventy percent of respondents (n=25) in this study identified themselves and their families as social welfare dependent. Fourteen percent (n=5) noted that they were working full-time while a further 14% (n=5) highlighted that they were working part-time.

Ten of the respondents were in two-parent families; of these one respondent noted that their partner was in full-time employment, while two others noted their partners' participation in part-time employment.

Reasons for approaching prevention services

An important aspect of understanding what works in the prevention of family homelessness involves understanding the context for families' risk of becoming homeless from the perspective of the families and also staff members. It is important to highlight that the contexts of individual families involved in this study inevitably varied from one to the other. In all cases, however, each participating family experienced a standout reason which forced them to the brink of homelessness and which ultimately led to their contacting Focus Ireland. That said, respective standout reasons were compounded in the cases of many families by a series of other, inter-linked difficulties that substantially increased their vulnerability to becoming homeless.

- Fourteen families (40% of all families interviewed) who had been in private rental accommodation had received Notices of Termination due to landlords selling the properties. Families suggested that landlords proceeded to sell their properties in thirteen of the fourteen cases. All families engaging with Focus Ireland prevention services were struggling subsequently to find alternative accommodation.
- A further two families in private rental accommodation (6%) had received similar Notices of Termination from their respective landlords, noting that family members of the landlord would be moving in and taking up residence in those properties.

⁶ This includes two British nationals.

⁷ Of African and Middle Eastern origin.

- Six families (17%) had been presented with eviction notices – either by a private landlord or the local authority – for substantial arrears in the payment of rent.
- A further five families (14%) had also received eviction notices because of their inability to meet rent increases imposed by private landlords.
- One family was forced to leave the accommodation in which they had been living because a family member was accused of anti-social behaviour, having damaged part of the property.
- Another family had received a similar Notice of Termination from a private landlord who suggested that the property s/he was renting to the family was too small for the family in question.
- A further three families (9%) felt compelled to leave the private rental properties in which they had been residing due to what they considered to be substandard accommodation and the landlords refusing to address significant maintenance issues, thereby placing health risks on family members.
- One family had experienced substantial mortgage arrears in their own home property and ultimately had to declare themselves personally insolvent and in need of alternative accommodation.
- One family, who had been residing in a self-catering centre of the Reception and Integration Agency, was asked to move on from the centre, having secured their refugee status in Ireland.

These details are captured in Figure 5 below.

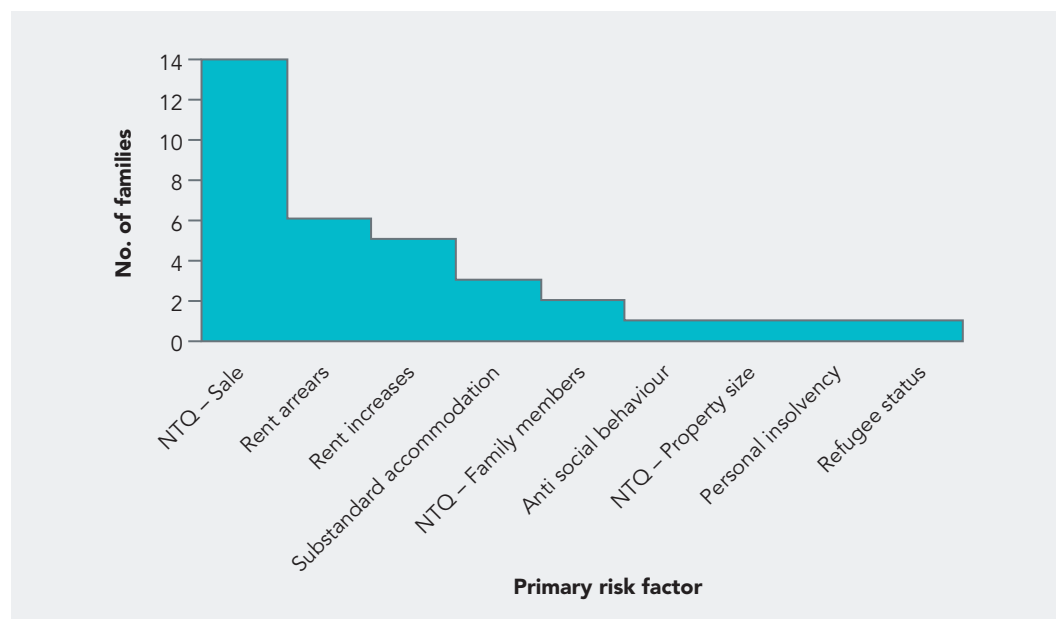
Five (14%) of the families in the study received support from Focus Ireland to prevent their re-entry into homelessness.⁸

Interviews revealed that those families who had received Notices of Termination from landlords in the private rented sector responded proactively to these situations and made concerted efforts during their respective notice periods to secure alternative accommodation. However, they experienced significant complexity in the private rental market and struggled to find suitable and affordable alternative accommodation. This resulted in their need to approach Focus Ireland prevention services for assistance. Contacting Focus Ireland frequently came at the end of their notice periods, placing the families in question at increased risk.

Six (17%) of the participating families reported individual and/or family difficulties which contributed to their risk of homelessness. A number described chaotic circumstances in their family lives, which, among others, included children being in trouble with the law; the involvement of social workers in family life; difficulties over guardianship of children; and substance misuse concerns. These circumstances contributed to instability in the family and were recognised as increasing the families' risk of homelessness.

⁸ All of whom are currently residing in Limerick and all of whom are supported by Focus Ireland through its Social Rental Model prevention service, enabling particularly vulnerable families to avoid a return to homelessness.

Figure 5 · Primary reason for risk of homelessness



These complex experiences of losing and trying to secure alternative accommodation contributed to high levels of stress for all of the 35 families engaged in this research. Many of the participants in this process referred to themselves and, in some cases, their children experiencing significant mental health difficulties throughout the period of trying to avoid homelessness, including depression, anxiety and stress.

Housing histories

Those who had been living in private rental accommodation prior to finding themselves at risk of homelessness had varied lengths of tenure in those properties, some families renting the same accommodation for up to eight years. Families outlined mixed experiences of security and insecurity in those tenancies.

Thirteen families (37% of all families interviewed) described themselves as having had secure tenancies prior to receiving Notices of Termination from their respective landlords. Five of those families (14%) highlighted very positive relationships with their past landlords, affording them what proved to be a false sense of security in those tenancies. All commented that this false sense of security amplified the difficulties they experienced when given Notice of Termination from their properties.

By contrast, five families (14%) described their prior tenancies in the private rental sector as precarious. Three of those families (9%) referred to living in substandard accommodation and to feeling insecure throughout the periods of their respective tenancies. All commented on not complaining about their respective situations, afraid that their landlords might not give them a favourable reference if seeking out alternative rental accommodation in future.

The private rental histories of a further four families (9%) indicated considerable chaos throughout their tenancies which increased their risk of vulnerability. The personal

circumstances of these families during those tenancies were characterised by family breakdown; continuous moving from one tenancy to another over a prolonged period; addiction and financial difficulties. All were addressing those difficulties or were seeking out support to do so.⁹

During conversation, ten of the families (29%) referred to having been on the Housing List with their respective local authorities at the time of making contact with Focus Ireland. Their lengths of time on the Housing List varied from two to twelve years. Three families commented on the frustration of being on the Housing List for a number of years in one local authority area while then having to start from scratch after moving to another local authority area. This situation increased families' sense of vulnerability. Staff members of Focus Ireland also commented on significant delays in getting families on the Housing List and the consequent delays in families qualifying for accommodation-related support such as HAP. They highlighted the apparent inconsistencies in State agencies', particularly local authorities', interpretations of policies which had a significant impact on families' immediate access to entitlements and rights.

Focus Ireland prevention services

Focus Ireland delivers three primary prevention services to families, as follows:

Advice and Information Services (A&I): The central feature of this service involves the provision of advice and up-to-date information on housing-related matters to families at risk of homelessness, including information on legal rights, accommodation and social welfare entitlements. A&I is a flexible service that responds to the unique needs of each family that seeks out its support. It is an open-door service to which households refer themselves on the basis of their need, and awareness of the service.

Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service (TSS): TSS provides settlement support to households who are at risk of homelessness and/or moving out of homelessness into a new home. It assists these families by providing ongoing practical supports around accessing entitlements, facilitating access to health and budgeting services, and establishing routines that strengthen families' capacities to sustain their respective tenancies into the longer term.

Social Rental Model (SRM): The Social Rental Model is provided to families who have experienced homelessness and have been residing in emergency accommodation. Its purpose is to enable families to avoid re-entry into homelessness. Under SRM, Focus Ireland acts as the tenant and secures a tenancy with a private landlord on the understanding that the organisation can sub-let the property to a family at risk of homelessness.

The work of Focus Ireland prevention services is family-orientated. It provides timely responses to the immediate presenting needs of families approaching the organisation for support. A core feature of Focus Ireland's prevention services is that they are constructed in response to the unique and respective circumstances of individual families. Greater detail on each of these services is provided in the main body of the report in Chapter 3.

⁹ The 22 families whose secure, precarious and chaotic prior tenancies are outlined above all sought the support of Focus Ireland through its A&I service.

Success in homeless prevention

Interviews during this study revealed that between 3 and 15 months after disengaging from Focus Ireland services, 34 out of 35 participating families had succeeded in avoiding homelessness through their engagement with Focus Ireland prevention services. In addition to levels of success, extremely high levels of satisfaction were expressed by families with regard to the services received from the organisation.

Identifying what works and why

In the context of Focus Ireland's Prevention Services, five primary prevention strategies emerge from this study as both hugely important to families and as successful in the short term in enabling families to avoid homelessness. These are:

- 1 *Building family awareness of their rights and entitlements*, i.e. providing clear direction to families on their rights and entitlements as tenants and building their capacities to deal more effectively with landlords, local authorities, Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) on housing matters relevant to their respective circumstances;

'I haven't a clue of any of this. My key worker has been a rock in advising me on all these things.' (Family Interview, Limerick)

'The main thing for me was that Focus Ireland knew the full story. They knew to look at my situation from all different angles.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'The general connection and the ongoing support of somebody with the know-how was really so important. Focus Ireland was like a mentor to me.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

- 2 *Enabling families to access their rights and entitlements by supporting them in navigating a complex range of public services and supports*, i.e. representing families as required, and advocating on their behalf, with landlords and State agencies to ensure that families' rights and entitlements as tenants are accessed and secured;

'Like in July of last year, there was some change to the HAP payment. I had no idea what was going on ... One of the great things about Focus Ireland's support was having somebody to almost hold my hand to help me through this mess of a system. That's what Focus Ireland does really well.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'Focus Ireland also gave me really sound advice; who to speak to in the Council or in Welfare. They had the contacts. They knew the sympathetic people in those places who'd offer me support. Those people knew Focus Ireland was doing good so they were willing to help. Focus Ireland had a network of supportive people in those agencies.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

- 3** *Coaching families in their search for alternative private rental properties and in their dealings with landlords in the private rental market, i.e. guiding and preparing families in advance of engagements with landlords and agencies, building families' capacity to present themselves effectively and to justify their need for supports. This research finding featured to a greater extent across the observations of Focus Ireland prevention service staff, especially those involved in A&I, who described coaching as a critical support in ensuring families' success in both sourcing accommodation and sustaining tenancies.*

'A lot of time is spent coaching clients for how to deal with things. Going through the forms and preparing them for dealing with the system; about contacting landlords looking for a place; on gaining HAP pre-approval, etc.'
(Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

'A lot of A&I work involves coaching clients about entitlements or coaching them on how to search for alternative accommodation – i.e. have they references, if they get a viewing what to bring with them, how to present themselves at a viewing and so on ... Many of the families that are accessing FI's services will have been staying with family members for a long period. Then there's a breakdown in the relationship and then they are without accommodation ... Many of them end up telling landlords about the chaos in their life story and that reduces rather than increases their chances of securing accommodation. Focus Ireland advises them to pull back; that they don't have to tell their life stories to landlords. This is where coaching is key.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Limerick)

- 4** *Supporting families to access the necessary financial assistance to enable them to meet the increasing costs of rent in the private rental market, i.e. advising families on their entitlements to housing assistance payments and supporting families, as necessary, in the administration of applications for those payments.*

'He [Focus Ireland A&I staff member] submitted the papers for the HAP for us and later he got back to me and said 'Well done, you have been approved.' But really he did the work – even though I had put a lot of time in. Now I am more aware and I feel more secure because of the HAP.'
(Family Interview, Dublin)

'So I contacted Focus Ireland after being with the Council. The lady there recommended the Homeless HAP and took care of everything. She filled out all the forms. This was just a couple of weeks after I got the letter to leave. She told me I was approved for the Homeless HAP and that I had a threshold of €1,425.' (Family Interview, South Dublin)

'Me and my partner went in to Focus Ireland. [The staff member] took all our information, our PSI number, our passport etc. He took care of all that for the Homeless HAP. He said we would be approved for €1,500. We met him just once. He said to go off and find a house and to let him know. He was very helpful.' (Family Interview, Dublin)

- 5** *Tailoring an integrated package of services to the needs of individual families, i.e. applying the strategies listed above, along with other activities as required, in a manner that not only addresses families' primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining tenancies.*

In essence, these strategies respond comprehensively to the immediate presenting needs of families. In other words, what works in the prevention of family homelessness is when the services on offer directly match the immediate presenting needs of families.

The strategies above are contextualised and explained in considerable detail in Chapter 4 of the full report.

Recommendations for prevention practice

In addition to identifying practical strategies that emerge as consistently effective in supporting families to avoid homelessness, the interviews conducted during this study suggested that attention also be devoted to the manner in which prevention services are offered. In effect, conversations with families indicated that the ‘how’ of service delivery was as important as the actual practical supports offered. Among others, the following were noted:

- *Prevention requires a non-judgemental approach:* It became clear from the research data that a non-judgemental approach to homeless prevention builds families’ emotional and psychological confidence during a very distressing period. Judgement shames and reduces family capacity to address difficulties. Respect strengthens family resilience and motivates families to persist with their search for suitable accommodation.
- *Effective prevention involves addressing families’ presenting needs:* As outlined above, a central feature of effective prevention services involves (i) assessing the respective accommodation needs of individual families, along with other potential difficulties that increase the families’ risk of homelessness and (ii) implementing a set of responses that match the presenting needs of families.
- *Effective prevention involves a complex response to a complex problem:* Successful prevention strategies involve the tailoring of an integrated package of supports to individual families in accordance with their respective presenting needs. This package of supports, increasing families’ access to information, capacity-building and entitlements, not only addresses their primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining their tenancies. The approach is both immediate and long-term in its perspective, seeking to ensure that families remain in secure accommodation, both in the immediate and longer-term future. It is a complex response, as required, to a complex problem.
- *Complex responses require a case management approach:* Providing families with an integrated package of supports that matches their risk of homelessness requires time and flexibility. It rarely involves a one-off engagement whereby families simply receive advice and information and are able, thereafter, to resolve their housing concerns. Effective prevention tends to require multiple and ongoing engagements with families at risk.
- *Effective prevention services are available to all families at risk of homelessness:* Effective prevention approaches recognise the changing structural and economic contexts for family homelessness in Ireland and acknowledge that the threat of homelessness is faced by a wider cohort of families than might otherwise have been considered possible in previous years. The premise of a *universalist* approach is that any family can be at risk of homelessness and that supports should be available to all such families irrespective of background; family status; economic status; ethnicity and cultural background, etc.

These recommendations are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5 of the full report.

The need for longer-term solutions

This research has examined effective short- and medium-term solutions that enable families at risk to avoid entering homelessness. One of the most striking features of this research process has been the recognition that prevention services working directly with families – and to a lesser degree with landlords and systems of the State – can only hope to achieve short- and medium-term solutions.

Short-term solutions support families in crisis. They do not – and cannot – in any way address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness: the absence of regulation within the private rental market; the absence of affordable rental properties and quality social housing; difficulties associated with access to the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the adequacy of HAP in the private rental market, etc. Longer term solutions are therefore rooted in significant structural change; change that needs to take place at a national policy level.

Feedback from families interviewed during this study, along with feedback from prevention service staff members, suggested that effective State action on the following would go a long way to ensuring longer-term solutions to the risk and incidence of family homelessness:

- *Ensuring effective implementation of HAP:* Address current challenges within the implementation of HAP, most notably (i) knowledge gaps among tenants and landlords on the provisions and requirements of HAP; (ii) HAP thresholds rarely meeting the full rents requested by landlords; (iii) delays in families accessing HAP payments; (iv) ensuring landlords' compliance with the provisions of HAP; and (v) removing the condition that HAP tenants lose their place on the housing list, by integrating priority on housing and transfer lists.
- *Regulation of the private rental market:* Interviewees commented on the need for greater State regulation of the private rental market, some recommending that the State should regulate and standardise rents so that a fairer rental system could be put in place that would not disadvantage families. They highlighted the need for greater enforcement of existing tenancy legislation to ensure that the rights of families were not being undermined. And they repeated calls for greater efforts to ensure that landlords were deterred from discriminating against families accessing HAP.
- *Increasing supply of social housing:* Interviewees proposed that greater State effort is needed to increase the availability of social housing, thereby facilitating the clearance of housing lists. Within that context, interviewees argued that policy needs to be in place that obliges local authorities to free up empty properties swiftly and make them available to families in need of accommodation.



Focus Ireland Head Office
9-12 High Street
Christchurch
Dublin 8

Tel 01 881 5900
LoCall 1850 204 205
Fax 01 881 5950
Email info@focusireland.ie

focusireland.ie
Registered charity CHY 7220

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

FOCUS
Ireland

Keeping a Home

Preventing Families from
Becoming Homeless

Neil Haran and
Seán Ó Siochrú

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

'Apart from the practical support, Focus Ireland also gave me emotional support during what was a really stressful time. They kept me focused. Getting advice on who to contact meant that I wasn't going from post to pillar all the time. The attitude in Focus Ireland was always really positive and very relaxed. I'd come in stressed out of my head and the staff would say "let's ring somebody". They were always on the lookout for solutions. And it was never just one solution. They just added to my confidence.'

Family Interview, Waterford



Keeping a Home

Preventing Families from Becoming Homeless

Neil Haran and Seán Ó Siochrú

October 2017

© Focus Ireland, 2017

Published by Focus Ireland, Dublin

ISBN 978-1-9997657-4-3

Both the executive summary and full report are available in PDF format online at <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/>

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

In order to protect the identity of our customers, the photographs in this document are of volunteers.

Focus Ireland Family Prevention Services which featured in this research report are funded by Dublin Region Homeless Executive; Kilkenny County Council; Limerick City and County Council; Sligo County Council; and Waterford City and County Council. Bord Gáis Energy (BGE) funds Focus Ireland Family Homelessness Prevention Services in Dublin, Kilkenny and Waterford. BGE also partially-funded this research study.

Contents

Abbreviations	2
Tables and figures	2
Chapter 1 Introduction	3
1.1 Focus Ireland	3
1.2 Homelessness in Ireland	3
1.3 Preventing homelessness: what the literature tells us	6
1.4 Focus Ireland prevention services	8
1.5 Report structure	9
Chapter 2 Research methodology	10
2.1 Qualitative approach	10
2.2 Research phases and activities	11
2.3 Strengths and limitations of methodology	15
2.4 Profile of families participating in the study	16
Chapter 3 Risk of family homelessness – the context	21
3.1 Primary reason for contacting Focus Ireland	21
3.2 Other factors	22
3.3 Families' response to the risk of homelessness and further complexity	24
3.4 Prevention services	27
Chapter 4 Effective strategies in the prevention of family homelessness	29
4.1 Generalisations	29
4.2 Experience of participating families	31
4.3 Identifying what works and why	33
4.4 Other important factors	41
4.5 Emphasising the short-term nature of solutions	43
Chapter 5 Conclusions and recommendations	44
5.1 Recommendations for Focus Ireland practice	45
5.2 Recommendations for prevention practice	47
5.3 Longer-term solutions: research participant perspectives on public policy implications	49
5.4 Concluding remarks	53
Bibliography	54
Appendix 1 Template for interviews with Focus Ireland prevention service staff members	55
Appendix 2 Template for family interviews	56

Abbreviations

A&I	Advice & Information
CIC	Citizens Information Centre
FRC	Family Resource Centre
DSP	Department of Social Protection
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
MABS	Money Advice and Budgeting Service
NTQ	Notice to Quit
PASS	Pathway Accommodation & Support System
RTB	Residential Tenancies Board
SRM	Social Rental Model
TD	Teachta Dála
TSS	Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service

Tables and figures

Tables

Table 1 · Profile of families interviewed by location	16
Table 2 · Age profile of family respondents	17

Figures

Figure 1 · Number of homeless families nationally July 2014–July 2017	4
Figure 2 · Nationality of respondents	18
Figure 3 · Respondents by length of time in current accommodation	19
Figure 4 · Respondents by nature of current tenancy	19
Figure 5 · Primary reason for risk of homelessness	23
Figure 6 · Information source for Focus Ireland prevention services	26
Figure 7 · Principal practical support provided by Focus Ireland to participating families	32

Chapter 1

Introduction

This document comprises the report of a study undertaken on behalf of Focus Ireland into effective prevention strategies that keep families out of homelessness. The study was undertaken in the first half of 2017 and set out to satisfy the following objectives:

- › to understand effective prevention interventions to keep families out of homelessness;
- › to evaluate Focus Ireland prevention services to understand areas of strengths and weaknesses; and
- › to further Focus Ireland's understanding of prevention in line with its organisational strategy, and to contribute to a wider knowledge on preventing family homelessness.

1.1 Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland is a voluntary organisation that has been working to prevent and respond to homelessness in Ireland for the past thirty years. Driven by the fundamental belief that the existence of homelessness is wrong, the organisation works with individuals and families who are either homeless or at risk of losing their homes in a variety of locations across the country. The organisation also undertakes a substantial advocacy and research function, seeking to increase understanding of homelessness and advocating for more effective policy solutions to the issue nationally.

1.2 Homelessness in Ireland

The number of individuals and families becoming homeless across Ireland has grown consistently in recent years, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. Statistics pertaining to homelessness in Ireland indicate that:

- › 8,160 individuals were officially recorded as homeless across Ireland in July 2017, the highest number of homeless people ever recorded in the State.¹ This figure included adults and children with their families. The total number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 25% in the year preceding July 2017.

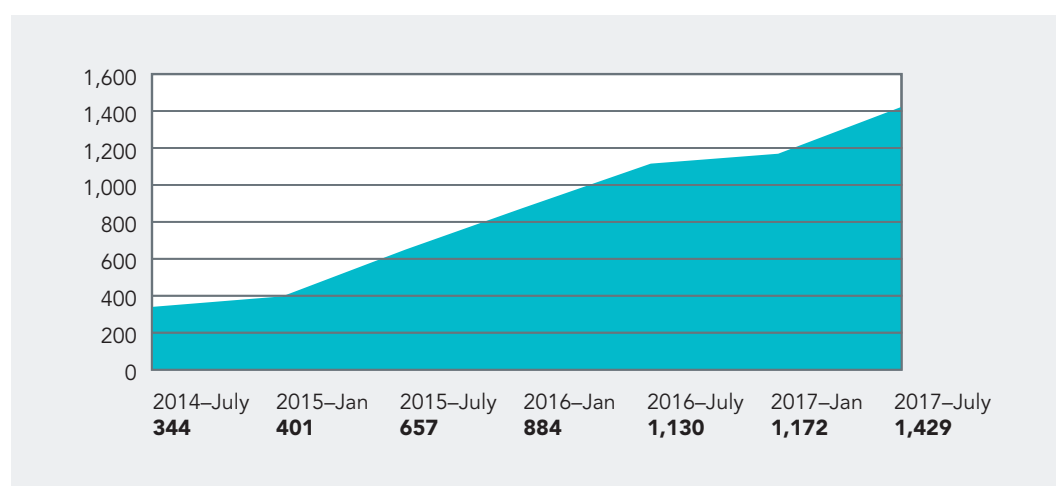
¹ Information accessed on <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness> 26 September 2017.

- Official homelessness data is produced by local authorities through the Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS). The data produced captures details of individuals in State-funded emergency accommodation, but does not include refuges accommodating survivors of domestic abuse and direct provision centres accommodating asylum seekers.² Moreover, official homelessness data do not capture details of 'hidden homelessness' which refers to people living in squats or 'sofa surfing' with friends, or households living in accommodation not funded by the Department of Housing. Therefore, the official data cannot be assumed to give a complete picture of households experiencing homelessness.
- In April 2017 the official rough sleeping count confirmed 161 people sleeping rough in Dublin,³ with an additional number in the Merchant's Quay Night Café, without a place to sleep.

1.2.1 Family homelessness⁴

The last three years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of families entering homelessness in Ireland, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. The number of homeless families nationally increased by 315% during the period July 2014 and July 2017.

Figure 1 · Number of homeless families nationally July 2014–July 2017



Source: Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government⁵

² Information accessed <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data> on 26 September 2017.

³ The Dublin Region Homeless Executive carries out official counts on rough sleeping every six months. The street count is a way of confirming a minimum number of people sleeping rough on the night in question in the Dublin region and assists in measuring the effectiveness of the regional strategy, in addition to planning for services. Further information can be accessed on <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/rough-sleeping-count>.

⁴ Those accompanied by dependents – typically children under the age of 18 years.

⁵ Information from <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/> accessed on 26 September, 2017.

Focus Ireland notes that the number of families entering homeless services in Dublin increased by over 25% from July 2016 to July 2017.⁶ One in three people experiencing homelessness in Ireland is now a child.⁷ The official number of homeless children in Ireland has risen by 27% between July 2016 and July 2017.

As of the end of July, 1,429 families were accessing emergency accommodation, inclusive of 2,973 children.⁸ The surge in family homelessness has placed enormous pressure on local authorities in the Dublin region in particular. In July 2017 a total of 99 families became newly homeless in the Dublin region alone.⁹ The increase in family homelessness in recent years has resulted in large numbers of families being accommodated in commercial hotels due to shortages of family emergency accommodations. Sixty-four percent of all homeless families in the Dublin region were accommodated in commercial hotels during July 2017.¹⁰ In response to this the Government has introduced a new policy of commissioning 'Family Hubs', which provide more suitable emergency accommodation than commercial hotels.

Similarly, the most recent official assessment of social housing need,¹¹ which was published in December 2016, indicated that 91,600 households qualified for social housing, of which 47% had been on the list for more than four years.

Focus Ireland notes that the causes of homelessness are complex. Homelessness can be caused by *structural* factors¹² and/or *personal* factors¹³. The organisation asserts that the current rise in family homelessness is driven primarily by structural economic factors. This is reflected in other studies¹⁴ which suggest that the majority of families who have lost their homes had been living in private rented accommodation, citing problems of affordability, issues in accessing accommodation whereby landlords accept Rent Supplement/HAP, difficulties securing follow-on housing, and/or landlords selling their properties.

⁶ Information from <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/> accessed on 26 September 2017.

⁷ <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness>, accessed on 26 September 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Information from <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/> accessed 26 September 2017.

¹⁰ Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2017) *Dublin Region Families who are Homeless – July (week of 25–31)*. Dublin: Dublin Region Homeless Executive.

¹¹ The Housing Agency (2016), accessible at <https://www.housingagency.ie/Housing/media/Media/Publications/Summary-of-Social-Housing-Assessment-Needs-2016.pdf>

¹² Such as lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, inadequate mental health services, etc.

¹³ Including addictions, mental health issues, family breakdown, etc.

¹⁴ For example, Walsh, K. and Harvey, B. (2015) *Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness: The Families' Perspective*. Dublin: Housing Agency, and The Insights into Family Homelessness series produced by Focus Ireland, accessible at <https://www.housingagency.ie/getattachment/Our-Publications/Latest-Publications/Family-Experiences-Report-PDF.pdf>

1.3 Preventing homelessness: what the literature tells us

Recent years have brought an increased policy focus internationally on the prevention of homelessness as opposed to policy that is centred on responding to the incidence of homelessness. Apart from the common-sense argument of prevention being better than cure, there were a number of strategic reasons for the prioritisation of homelessness prevention. Mackie (2015) suggests that the case for policy prioritisation of prevention was driven by three primary factors. These are presented below in the order in which they have tended to be prioritised:

- › the cost effectiveness of prevention strategies, particularly in terms of reduced exchequer expenditure on the provision of temporary, emergency accommodation¹⁵ and on the socio-economic consequences of homelessness – for example, poor physical and mental health; increased social care needs; crime arising from homelessness, etc.
- › the societal and political stigma associated with large numbers of the population being homeless;¹⁶ and
- › the benefit conferred to the individual as a result of preventing homelessness, particularly in terms of avoiding the detrimental consequences associated with homelessness.

Prevention policies and practices have tended to operate along a three-tiered continuum internationally (Culhane, Metraux and Byrne, 2011; Maher and Allen, 2014; Mackie, 2015), ranging from primary through to tertiary prevention measures. According to Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008):

- › *Primary prevention* aims to reduce the risk of homelessness among the general population through measures associated with, for example, housing supply, access and affordability, and poverty reduction. In effect, primary prevention is designed to prevent new entrants to homelessness.
- › *Secondary prevention* focuses on individuals and families who are potentially at high risk of becoming homeless because of certain risk characteristics¹⁷ or because of crisis situations in their lives likely to lead to homelessness.
- › *Tertiary prevention* interventions are targeted at those who have already experienced homelessness. The intention of tertiary prevention is to resolve the homelessness of these individuals as quickly as possible through measures such as rapid re-housing.

Considerable attention has been devoted in international literature to assessing the impact and effectiveness of measures to prevent homelessness. In a study to examine local authorities' approaches to homelessness prevention in England, for example, Pawson et al. (2007) highlighted that most of the homelessness prevention initiatives that could be assessed appeared to be cost-effective, in that savings in the costs of temporary accommodation and administration associated with homelessness exceeded the operating costs of prevention services. This was particularly evident among services in the Greater London area.

¹⁵ See, for example, Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008) and Culhane, Metraux and Byrne (2011).

¹⁶ See, for example, Crane, Warnes and Fu (2006) and Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008).

¹⁷ For example, those with a history of institutional care.

Prevention within an Irish context has tended to operate within secondary measures (Maher and Allen, 2014). The national Homeless Preventative Strategy (2002) focused on the identification of, and assistance to, priority groups at risk of becoming homeless. It located that 'risk' was associated with people moving out of or between state institutions such as detention centres, psychiatric institutions and acute hospitals, and care settings for young people.

Literature offers considerable critique of the emphasis on secondary prevention measures. While secondary prevention measures may reduce the prevalence of homelessness (Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper, 2001), commentators suggest that they do not reduce the number of new cases entering homelessness (Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper, 2001; Culhane, 2011). In effect, because of their focus on those at high risk of homelessness, it is asserted that secondary prevention measures inevitably fail to prevent individuals and families from entering homelessness.

When undertaking research on the implementation of second-tier homelessness prevention in Wales, Mackie (2015) outlined three core concerns. Firstly he highlighted that there had been a tendency to deliver prevention services selectively, noting that in light of the emphasis placed on cost-reduction in prevention policy, it was inevitable that interventions would be restricted to individuals and groups where cost savings could be made. This naturally resulted in the exclusion of those potentially capable of resolving their accommodation situations as well as those of highest vulnerability to homelessness for whom a successful intervention would have been unlikely.¹⁸

Mackie also highlighted that secondary prevention measures tended to individualise the causes of homelessness, focusing almost exclusively on the problems of individuals and families without adequate or balanced attention to the structural or underlying functional causes of homelessness. And, thirdly, Mackie noted the absence of whole-system changes necessary to respond effectively to the prioritisation of prevention in policy.

Other commentary pointed the spotlight at concerns regarding the efficient targeting of prevention measures (Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper, 2001; Maher and Allen, 2014). Focusing attention only on those at risk of homelessness was observed to increase the likelihood that 'people who adopt behaviours that place their homes at risk are more likely to receive support than those who make reasonable efforts to sustain their homes' (Maher and Allen, 2014: 122). Against this backdrop, Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper (2001) argued that the most effective preventative measure would be to ensure the ready availability of affordable housing – a tier 1 intervention – thereby eliminating reliance on targeting. Similarly, Mackie (2015) argued for a universalist obligation on local authorities to make all reasonable efforts to assist anyone at risk of homelessness.

In the context of interventions that work directly with individuals and families at risk of homelessness Pawson *et al.* (2007) noted that the most widely adopted approaches to homelessness prevention were enhanced housing advice, rent deposit and similar schemes to enhance access to private tenancies, family mediation, domestic violence victim support and tenancy sustainment. Gaetz (2013) highlighted the importance of information-sharing and a case management approach as essential features of effective prevention.

¹⁸ Pawson *et al.* (2007) made similar findings in their study of local authority prevention measures in England.

This assertion is endorsed by Maher and Allen (2014: 132) who contended that effective prevention required early intervention through person-centred case management, a process that sought to confer positive legal rights on citizens and legal obligations on institutions.

Maher and Allen also argue that voluntary agencies have a significant role to play in assisting state institutions to integrate their services through a case management approach and this is a central feature of the prevention services operated by Focus Ireland.

1.4 Focus Ireland prevention services

This study is primarily concerned with what works in the prevention of family homelessness.¹⁹ In addition to a portfolio of services to support those experiencing homelessness to move into sustainable homes, Focus Ireland operates a range of prevention services that seek to support families at risk to avoid homelessness. These are:

- **Advice and Information (A&I) Services:** The central feature of this service involves the provision of advice and up-to-date information on housing-related matters to families at risk of homelessness, including information on legal rights, accommodation and social welfare entitlements. However, the A&I service does much more than this in practice, often identifying and enabling solutions that go well beyond information provision and including extensive representation, coaching and personal support. In effect, A&I is a flexible service that responds to the unique needs of each family that seeks out its support. It is an open-door service to which households refer themselves on the basis of their need, and awareness of the service.
- **Tenancy Support and Sustainment (TSS) Service:** TSS provides settlement support to households who are at risk of homelessness and/or moving out of homelessness into a new home. It assists these families by supporting them in physically moving into new homes, as well as providing ongoing practical supports around accessing entitlements, facilitating access to health and budgeting services, and establishing routines that strengthen families' capacities to sustain their respective tenancies into the longer term. Households access this service through a referral, either from a local authority, another agency or from another Focus Ireland service. In some areas, because of the funding arrangements, all referrals are made by the local authority.
- **Social Rental Model (SRM):** The Social Rental Model is provided to families who have experienced homelessness and have been residing in emergency accommodation. Under SRM, Focus Ireland acts as the tenant and secures a tenancy with a private landlord on the understanding that the organisation can sub-let the property to a family at risk of homelessness.

Separate to SRM, in a few cases, in agreement with the local authority, Focus Ireland accommodates particular families with high support needs in properties owned by the organisation itself, offering those families an open-ended lease in accordance with their particular level of vulnerability.

¹⁹ The provision of critical, short- and medium-term supports to families that have enabled them to avoid entering into homelessness as opposed to supports provided to families who were already experiencing homelessness and/or the provision of critical supports to families who have prior experience of homelessness to enable them avoid re-entry into homelessness.

Greater detail on each of these services is provided in section 3.4 below.

These services operate in a context in which prevention of homelessness is an increasingly acknowledged priority of Government policy, and a service objective of public services such as local authorities and the Community Welfare Service. A number of other NGOs provide support to prevent households becoming homeless. These services include the national network of Citizens Information Centres, Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC), various community law centres and the Threshold Tenancy Protection Service.

1.5 Report structure

The remainder of this report is presented as follows:

Chapter 2 of the report presents a short overview of the methodology employed in undertaking this research and outlines how the principal conclusions of this research report were reached.

Chapter 3 explores the risk of family homelessness and outlines the context and trajectories experienced by families who have accessed the homeless prevention services of Focus Ireland. Against that backdrop, Chapter 3 also explains the range and nature of prevention services offered by Focus Ireland.

Chapter 4 names key effective strategies and processes, identified by families with first-hand experience, along with Focus Ireland prevention service staff, that have been consistently shown to enable families at risk to avoid entry into homelessness. Similarly, Chapter 4 seeks to unpack how and why these strategies prove successful. As such, Chapter 4 acts as the principal section of the report.

Chapter 5 draws together the material of Chapters 3 and 4 to present a series of conclusions and recommendations with regard to the effectiveness of Focus Ireland prevention services; the identification, operation and continuation of effective prevention strategies; the ongoing monitoring of families who have been in receipt of support from Focus Ireland prevention services; and the identification of larger policy and advocacy issues. Some concluding remarks are also offered at the end of Chapter 5, drawing this document to a close.

Chapter 2

Research methodology

The core purpose of this research exercise was to facilitate a deeper understanding of effective preventative solutions to family homelessness, especially short- and medium-term solutions. The research sought to engage with, and understand, strategies that had enabled families to avoid homelessness.

As noted above, the objectives of the study were to:

- understand effective prevention interventions to keep families out of homelessness;
- evaluate Focus Ireland prevention services to understand areas of strengths and weaknesses; and
- further Focus Ireland's knowledge of prevention in a broader sense, in line with the organisational strategy, and for the purpose of wider advocacy work.

In addition to identifying effective solutions to the prevention of family homelessness, this research process was also to consider the issue of a monitoring framework for Focus Ireland's prevention services. Through this study, Focus Ireland was interested in exploring how it might enhance its knowledge of what happened to families after their period of contact with the organisation ended and, in particular, its understanding of whether or not families had succeeded in remaining out of homelessness in the medium to longer term.²⁰

2.1 Qualitative approach

A core feature of this study involved examining the experiences of families who were recorded by Focus Ireland as having avoided entering homelessness, and ascertaining their perspectives on the manner in which the services of Focus Ireland had impacted on their avoiding homelessness and remaining in their homes.²¹ In this way, the voice and direct experience of families who had been at risk of homelessness acted as the central vehicle for gathering robust data in this research process.

²⁰ This item is touched on in section 5.1 below. However, given that the development of a monitoring framework is more relevant to the internal workings of the organisation, a document pertaining to monitoring is submitted separately to this report.

²¹ Or securing alternative accommodation without entering into emergency accommodation.

This emphasis on family experience, observation and perspective necessitated a research approach that was primarily *qualitative* in nature. It was considered that a qualitative research approach would be most effective in analysing and interpreting why consistently effective strategies had such success rates, particularly from the perspective of understanding the diverse family, social and community contexts in which those strategies – and their respective features – had been most successful. Against that backdrop, the research set out to engage client families in structured conversations that facilitated the full articulation of their respective experiences, observations and perspectives. A total of 35 families who had engaged with Focus Ireland prevention services were interviewed during this research process.

Similarly, the research team also conducted a series of structured interviews with Focus Ireland staff members from a range of locations²² involved either in the management and/or frontline delivery of prevention services to client families. Interviews with prevention service staff were conducted before engaging with families and both informed the research instruments for later consultations with families, while also informing the research team's approach to selecting and including families in the study.

The findings and conclusions outlined in this report are, therefore, fundamentally informed by a qualitative research approach that involved in-depth dialogue with seven staff members involved in the provision of Focus Ireland prevention services and thirty-five families²³ who had availed of those services.

2.2 Research phases and activities

The research team undertook its research activity over three distinct phases, as follows:

2.2.1 Induction/preparation phase

The preparation phase of the research largely took place over the first quarter of 2017. During this time the research team engaged in discussions and documentary review to familiarise itself with Focus Ireland prevention services, placing particular emphasis on understanding the contexts for families approaching Focus Ireland.

The preparation phase also involved the development of a framework to govern research activities, including the design of standard interview instruments: one for interviews with staff members and one for interviews with families. Particular attention was given to the development of the template for family interviews. As noted above, this was informed by consultations with frontline prevention services staff and was agreed with Focus Ireland prior to any face-to-face engagements.

²² Dublin, Limerick, Sligo, Kilkenny and Waterford.

²³ The principal informants.

In addition, this phase involved consideration of an appropriate study sample for family interviews. Selection criteria included:

- families had accessed Focus Ireland prevention services (A&I, TSS, SRM) between January 2016 and September 2016;
- families had been case managed over time;²⁴ and
- at the point of disengagement from Focus Ireland services, the families had been recorded by staff members as having avoided entry into homeless/ emergency services.

Family interviews were to be conducted at a range of locations where Focus Ireland prevention services were in operation. To adequately reflect the proportion of families accessing prevention services across the country, it was agreed with Focus Ireland that the breakdown of families by location would – in as far as possible – be as follows:

- Dublin (40%)
- Waterford (20%)
- Kilkenny (20%)
- Sligo (10%)
- Limerick (10%).

2.2.2 Interview phase

The interview phase was the critical phase of the research and the central data gathering mechanism.

Interviews with Focus Ireland Staff

In addition to interviews with families, Focus Ireland proposed to the research team that it would be important to engage with staff members within the organisation who either managed or provided frontline prevention services to families across the country. The purpose of these interviews was primarily to understand (i) the context for families approaching Focus Ireland prevention services and (ii) the nature of services provided by the organisation in response. A total of seven interviews were conducted with seven staff members²⁵ across each of the aforementioned locations: Dublin,²⁶ Kilkenny, Waterford, Sligo and Limerick.

²⁴ Families who engaged with the service for a minimum of three meetings/conversations/ engagements as opposed to families who simply accessed information over one visit to the organisation and then addressed their accommodation difficulties independently of Focus Ireland.

²⁵ One staff member in Dublin was interviewed on two occasions, the second interview to gain greater clarity on some of the issues raised in the initial discussion. A further interview in Limerick involved two staff members, while the remainder involved one-to-one discussions.

²⁶ Inclusive of Dublin City and South Dublin A&I services.

Interview discussions centred on examination of:

- individuals' respective roles and the prevention services offered by them on behalf Focus Ireland;
- the types of families at risk of homelessness who approach Focus Ireland for assistance and the nature of the difficulties being faced by families;
- the agencies to which Focus Ireland prevention services refer families for additional support;
- what constitutes success in prevention services and the extent to which families return to prevention services for support;
- current recording and monitoring practices;
- support in accessing families for interview as part of this study.

Interviews with staff took place during the first quarter of 2017. The full template for staff interviews, inclusive of actual research questions, is appended with this report as Appendix 1.

Interviews with Families

It was initially proposed that this research would have been completed in the first half of 2017. Therefore, it was decided to focus the research on families who had concluded engagement with Focus Ireland by September 2016. This would allow the research to examine if families had succeeded in remaining out of homelessness following a reasonable period without support from Focus Ireland.

To ensure high ethical standards were practised at all times, Focus Ireland staff made initial contact to inform families of the study and assess their willingness to participate in research interviews. Staff within Focus Ireland were invited to select families who matched the aforementioned criteria²⁷ from their respective files and to make initial contact to secure families' consent to take part in the study. The staff members called all families who had come into their respective services during the prescribed period of January – September 2016 and those families who agreed to be consulted were subsequently interviewed.

As the research evolved, it proved difficult to secure adequate numbers of families who had completed their engagement with Focus Ireland within the January to September 2016 criterion. Therefore, it became necessary to include families who had engaged with Focus Ireland right up to the end of 2016 and, in some cases, into the early parts of 2017.

A total of 35 families across the locations listed above were successfully interviewed. A detailed profile of the families who participated in the research is offered in Section 2.4 below.

Interviews with families were conducted between March and June 2017, predominantly in the residence of the participating families or in public spaces selected by the interviewees. All discussions were conducted with the head of household, i.e. the individuals who had approached Focus Ireland on behalf of their respective families. Interviews typically lasted one hour and covered the following key topics:

²⁷ Families who had accessed Focus Ireland Prevention Services between January and September 2016; were case managed by Focus Ireland and, at the time of disengaging from service were – according to Focus Ireland records – prevented from becoming homeless.

- family profile;
- context for approaching Focus Ireland;
- consideration of support provided by Focus Ireland and impact of that support;
- family situation since disengagement from Focus Ireland service; and
- ongoing monitoring of family's accommodation situation.

The full template for family interviews, inclusive of actual research questions, is appended with this report as Appendix 2.

2.2.3 Ethics

In undertaking this study, the research team committed to ensuring the highest level of research ethics in its engagement with all research participants, particularly participating families. Central to this commitment was the research team's adherence to the Ethical Protocol of Focus Ireland, ensuring that all research engagements were underpinned by the following principles:

- Informed consent;
- Privacy;
- Confidentiality;
- Fairness and equity;
- Avoidance, prevention or minimisation of harm to others;
- Professional competence;
- Integrity;
- Respect for human rights, diversity and equality; and
- Social responsibility.

Participants were advised before all interviews that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and that they could withdraw from the process at any time. Their consent to taking part in the interviews was sought after (i) the purpose of the research was fully explained to them and (ii) after they were informed of what would happen to the information they provided. Procedures for recording interviews were also agreed with participants prior to the commencement of interviews. Only issues of relevance to the research were explored during interviews and the anonymity of participants has been protected.

2.2.4 Analysis and reporting phase

The final stage of the research process, which took place during the summer of 2017, involved the combination and analysis of information gathered through the series of interviews outlined above. Data from across the aforementioned interviews were recorded in detail, transcribed and reviewed. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify the co-occurrence of particular themes in response to specific questions within the research interviews. These were coded, reviewed and combined to produce overarching themes from the data. Themes were subsequently examined and analysed to ensure that their later presentation in this report would (i) give an accurate reflection of the data and (ii) ensure their relevance to the overall research objectives. Themes identified as significant by the research were written up and presented as the core results of the research through this report.

2.3 Strengths and limitations of methodology

There were a number of clear methodological strengths and limitations to this study. The most obvious strength was the use of a qualitative approach as the primary mechanism for gathering data. A central tenet of this study involved capturing learning from the experiences of receiving and delivering homeless prevention services with a view to furthering Focus Ireland's understanding of prevention. This capturing of learning was best enabled through the employment of a qualitative methodology. The adoption of a qualitative interview-based approach allowed for a full and frank reflection on the supports provided by Focus Ireland in response to the presenting needs of families at risk – both from the perspectives of families and Focus Ireland service providers. It facilitated a deeper exploration of nuances, perspectives and interpretations and provided a richness to the data that is presented in this document.

In contrast, a significant limitation of the study pertained to the research team's difficulty securing adequate participation among families who had concluded engagement with Focus Ireland during the January–September 2016 period and succeeded in remaining out of homelessness. This resulted in the research having to invite the participation of families who had completed their involvement with Focus Ireland later in 2016 and, in some cases, into the early stages of 2017. Engaging with families who had disengaged more recently with Focus Ireland services inevitably led to selection bias. It increased the likelihood that those participating in the study were in stable accommodation while also reducing the capacity of the study to examine if families had succeeded in remaining out of homelessness following a reasonable period without support from Focus Ireland. This is evidenced by the fact that 34 of the 35 families participating in this study were, at the time of interview, living in stable accommodation.

Equally, the primary focus of this study involved assessing and identifying effective strategies that prevented family homelessness. Consequently, the study sought to engage with families who, at the point of disengagement from Focus Ireland services, had succeeded in avoiding entry on to the homeless list. The final selection of families interviewed presented some anomalies in this regard, however. As will be noted below, one interviewee identified herself and her family as homeless at the point of disengagement. At the time of interview, this family was living in a refuge for women and children affected by domestic violence. Similarly, five families supported under Focus Ireland's SRM in Limerick were officially homeless at the point of contact with Focus Ireland, and Focus Ireland staff worked with them to (i) ensure they exited as quickly as possible and (ii) prevent their re-entry into homelessness. Therefore, six of the families participating in the research fell outside the inclusion criteria of the study but were included as it was felt that these families offered insight into preventing returns to homelessness and the supports required for families with higher needs.

2.4 Profile of families participating in the study

As noted above, a total of 35 families participated in this study. All had been supported by one of the aforementioned Focus Ireland prevention services – A&I, TSS and SRM – and, on the basis of their needs, all had been case managed by the organisation over a period of time. The following highlights the primary characteristics of the families interviewed:

2.4.1 Location

Families were interviewed across five urban locations in which Focus Ireland prevention services are offered. These were:

Location	Number of interviewed families
Dublin	16 (46%)
Waterford	6 (17%)
Sligo	5 (14%)
Limerick	5 (14%)
Kilkenny	3 (9%)
Total	35 (100%)

Table 1 • Profile of families interviewed by location

In keeping with the higher concentration of family homelessness in the capital, the research prioritised families located in Dublin for interview²⁸ over and above other areas. As a result, just under half of family interviews in the study were conducted with families residing in Dublin.

2.4.2 Gender of respondents

Interviews were conducted with the adult family member who had approached Focus Ireland for support and who was the primary contact within the family for the organisation.²⁹ Against that backdrop, 28 (80%) of the 35 interviewees were female, while the remaining 7 (20%) respondents were male.

²⁸ Including families residing in the Dublin City and South County Dublin Local Authority catchment areas.

²⁹ Both partners took part in the interviews in three of the two-partner households involved in the study. For the purposes of this report, the primary contact only is recorded in terms of demographic profile. However, the narrative of both participants was recorded during interviews and used for analysis.

2.4.3 Age

Almost half (n=16, 46%) of those interviewed during this research process were aged between 36 and 45 years. One in three (n=11, 31%) were aged between 26 and 35. The full age profile of respondents was as follows:

Age	Number of participants	% of participants
> 25 years	3	9%
26–35	11	31%
36–45	16	46%
46–55	4	11%
55 +	1	3%

Table 2 · Age profile of family respondents

2.4.4 Family status of respondents

Seventy percent (n=25) of those interviewed during the research were parenting alone, 22 of whom were single mothers and three single fathers. The remaining 30% (n=10) of the study participants were two-parent households.

Given the focus on the prevention of *family* homelessness in this study, all interviewees were accompanied by dependent children. In that regard, 60% (n=21) of interviewees were parenting two children or less, with the remaining 40% (n=14) parenting more than two dependent children.

2.4.5 Nationality and ethnicity

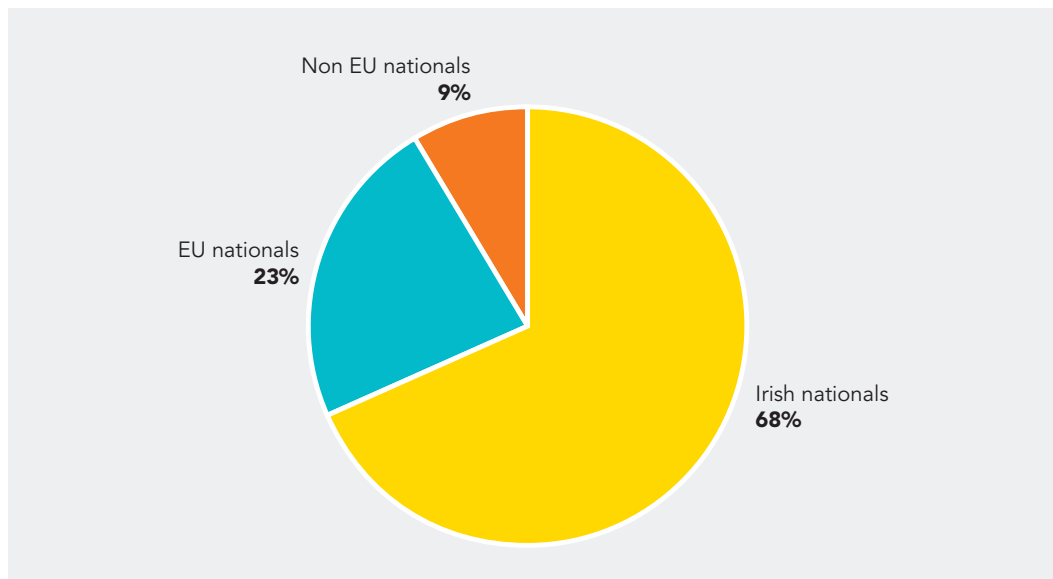
Sixty-eight percent (n=24) of those participating in the study were Irish nationals. This included two individuals born in Africa who, in recent years, had secured Irish citizenship. A further 23% (n=8) identified themselves as EU nationals,³⁰ while the remaining 9% (n=3) were non-EU nationals.³¹ These figures are presented diagrammatically in Figure 2 below.

Four of the 35 (11%) respondents identified themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic group. Three individuals referred to their membership of the Muslim faith, while a further individual highlighted her membership of the Traveller community in Ireland.

³⁰ This includes two British nationals.

³¹ Of African and Middle Eastern origin.

Figure 2 · Nationality of respondents



2.4.6 Main source of income

Seventy percent of respondents (n=25) in this study identified themselves and their families as social welfare dependent. Fourteen percent (n=5) noted that they were working full-time, while a further 14% (n=5) highlighted that they were working part-time.

One respondent among the ten households with two partners noted that their partner was in full-time employment, while two others noted partners' participation in part-time employment.

2.4.7 Current accommodation

At the time of interview, respondents had been living in their respective latest residences for varied lengths, as illustrated below in Figure 3.

Two out of every three (n=23, 66%) families participating in the study were residing in a house, while approximately 31% (n=11) of families were accommodated in apartments. One interviewee identified herself and her family as homeless. At the time of interview, this family was living in a refuge for women and children affected by domestic violence.³²

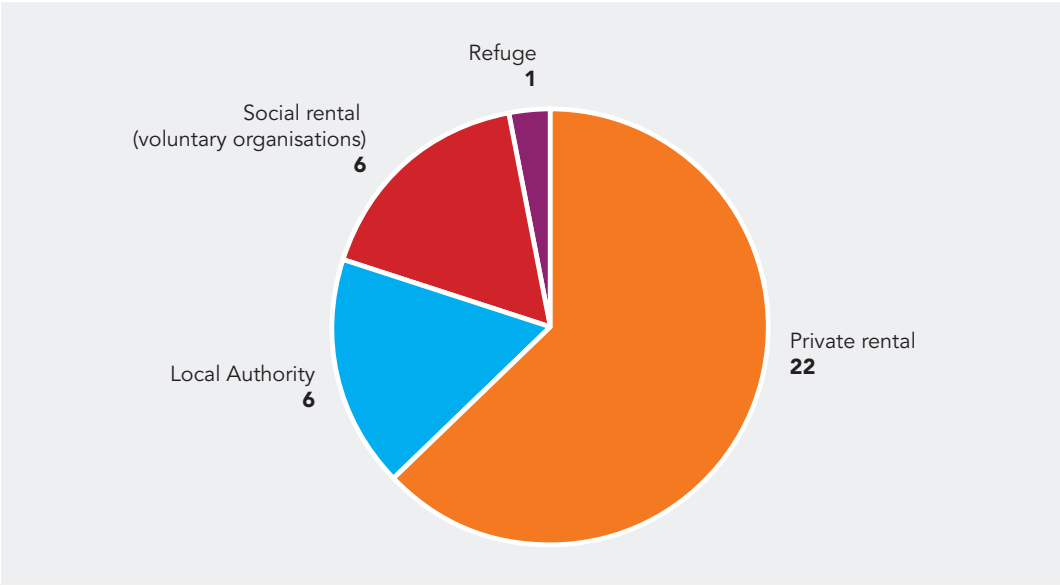
³² Even though the interviewee in question had no experience of domestic abuse. Having being declared homeless, her local authority offered her the option of being accommodated in either a refuge or in a commercial hotel. She considered that the refuge would be a better environment than a hotel for herself and her young child and so opted to be accommodated in a local refuge.

Figure 3 · Respondents by length of time in current accommodation



The majority of families (n=22 or 63% of total) interviewed were in private rental accommodation. Six of the 35 families (17%) were accommodated in Local Authority Housing. Five families (14%) were living in accommodation owned³³ or rented³⁴ by Focus Ireland and leased to the interviewees on a social rental model. All interviewees living in this category were Limerick-based. A further family (3%) in Waterford was leasing a home from Respond Housing. These figures are illustrated graphically below in Figure 4:

Figure 4 · Respondents by nature of current tenancy



³³ Two participating families.

³⁴ Three participating families.

Almost all of the families in private rental accommodation were in receipt of financial support with their rent. Twenty of the 22 families renting accommodation from private landlords (91% of such families) were in receipt of HAP,³⁵ while one other was in receipt of Rent Supplement.

The above profile therefore reveals a diverse group of families across varied locations, led by heads of household of varied age, but with a significant proportion of female-headed (n=22, 63% of respondents) and lone parent-headed (n=25, 70%) households. The households interviewed also present a large proportion of families reliant on social welfare as their primary income-source. This profile of participating families is broadly in line with the known profile of homeless families from both the Focus Ireland Quarterly survey and data of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

³⁵ This included six families whose head of household indicated during interview that they were in receipt of Homeless HAP.

Chapter 3

Risk of family homelessness – the context

An important aspect of understanding what works in the prevention of family homelessness involves understanding the context for families' risk of becoming homeless. This chapter examines the trajectories into risk experienced by families who have accessed the homeless prevention services of Focus Ireland. It does so through an analysis (i) of the experiences of the 35 families interviewed during this study and (ii) through an analysis of the observations made by Focus Ireland staff members involved in the provision of prevention services.

Against the backdrop of this analysis, the chapter then proceeds to detail the types of services offered by Focus Ireland in response to the varied needs of families presenting to the organisation's prevention services.

It is important to highlight that the contexts of individual families involved in this study inevitably varied from one to the other. In all cases, however, each participating family experienced a standout reason which forced them to the brink of homelessness and which ultimately led to their contacting Focus Ireland. That said, respective standout reasons were compounded in the cases of many families by a series of other, inter-linked difficulties that substantially increased their vulnerability to becoming homeless. The following attempts to synthesise those experiences across the families interviewed.

3.1 Primary reason for contacting Focus Ireland

The following were highlighted by participating families as the principal reasons for their risk of homelessness and as the principal reasons for their approaching Focus Ireland:

- › Fourteen families (40% of all families interviewed) who had been in private rental accommodation had received Notices of Termination due to landlords selling the properties. Families suggested that landlords proceeded to sell their properties in thirteen of the fourteen cases. One, however, was later shown to be invalid.³⁶ All families engaging with Focus Ireland prevention services were struggling subsequently to find alternative accommodation.

³⁶ Focus Ireland staff interviewed during this study also reported that the primary reason for families presenting to Focus Ireland prevention services was their receipt of notice to vacate their existing rental properties from their respective landlords – either for onward sale or handover to a family member.

- A further two families in private rental accommodation (6%) had received similar Notices of Termination from their respective landlords, noting that family members of the landlord would be moving in and taking up residence in those properties.
- Six families (17%) had been presented with eviction notices – either by a private landlord or the local authority – for substantial arrears in the payment of rent.³⁷
- A further five families (14%) had also received eviction notices because of their inability to meet rent increases imposed by private landlords.
- One family was forced to leave the accommodation in which they had been living because a family member was accused of anti-social behaviour, having damaged part of the property.
- Another family had received a similar Notice of Termination from a private landlord who suggested that the property s/he was renting to the family was too small for the family in question.³⁸
- A further three families (9%) felt compelled to leave the private rental properties in which they had been residing due to what they considered to be substandard accommodation and the landlords refusing to address significant maintenance issues, thereby placing health risks on family members.
- One family had experienced substantial mortgage arrears in their own home property and ultimately had to declare themselves personally insolvent and in need of alternative accommodation.
- One family, who had been residing in Direct Provision accommodation for those seeking asylum and who, having secured their refugee status in Ireland was unable to find appropriate long-term accommodation.

This list of primary reasons is presented diagrammatically in Figure 5 below.

3.2 Other factors

As noted above, five (14%) of the families were referred to Focus Ireland prevention teams to prevent repeated episodes of homelessness.³⁹ Three other interviewees (9%) noted that they also had experiences of homelessness in the past.

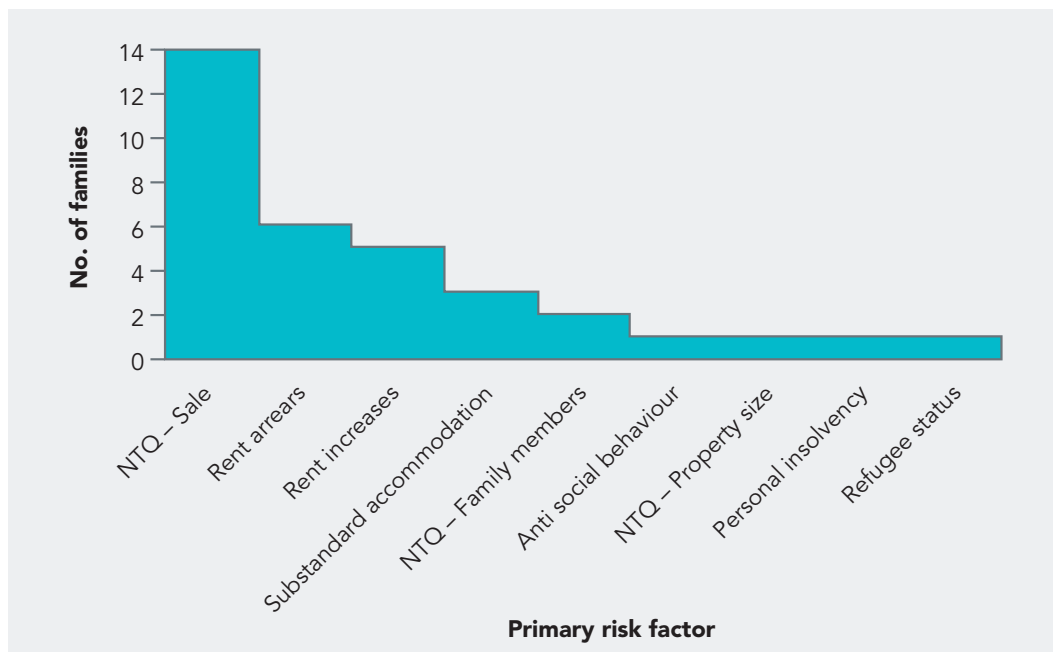
Six (17%) of the participating families reported individual and/or family difficulties which contributed to their risk of homelessness. A number described chaotic circumstances in their family lives, which, among others, included children being in trouble with the law; the involvement of social workers in family life; difficulties over guardianship of children; and substance misuse concerns. These circumstances contributed to instability in the family and were recognised as increasing the families' risk of homelessness.

³⁷ Focus Ireland staff also highlighted that rent arrears was a significant issue placing families at risk while also indicating that some families were approaching the organisation because accommodation-related payments had been stopped and families were unclear about how to address these situations.

³⁸ The family, with the support of Focus Ireland, successfully challenged that assertion. However, the family felt it would be in their best interest to move on from that arrangement.

³⁹ All of whom are currently residing in Limerick and all of whom are supported by Focus Ireland through its Social Rental Model prevention service, enabling particularly vulnerable families to avoid a return to homelessness.

Figure 5 · Primary reason for risk of homelessness



3.2.1 Private rental sector

Those who had been living in private rental accommodation prior to finding themselves at risk of homelessness had varied lengths of tenure in those properties, some families renting the same accommodation for up to eight years. Families outlined mixed experiences of security and insecurity in those tenancies.

Thirteen families (37% of all families interviewed) described themselves as having had secure tenancies prior to receiving Notices of Termination from their respective landlords. Five of those families (14%) highlighted very positive relationships with their past landlords, affording them what proved to be a false sense of security in those tenancies. All commented that this false sense of security amplified the difficulties they experienced when given Notice of Termination from their properties.

By contrast, five families (14%) described their prior tenancies in the private rental sector as precarious. Three of those families (9%) referred to living in substandard accommodation and to feeling insecure throughout the periods of their respective tenancies. All commented on not complaining about their respective situations, afraid that their landlords might not give them a favourable reference if seeking out alternative rental accommodation in future.⁴⁰

The private rental histories of a further four families (9%) indicated considerable chaos throughout their tenancies which increased their risk of vulnerability. The personal circumstances of these families during those tenancies were characterised by family breakdown; continuous moving from one tenancy to another over a prolonged period;

⁴⁰ Focus Ireland staff made similar observations, highlighting that tenant families didn't want to end up in adversarial relationships with landlords, even in situations where landlords were in breach of their obligations to them.

addiction and financial difficulties. All were addressing those difficulties or were seeking out support to do so.⁴¹

During conversation, ten of the families (29%) referred to having been on the Housing List with their respective local authorities at the time of making contact with Focus Ireland. Their lengths of time on the Housing List varied from two to twelve years. Three families commented on the frustration of being on the Housing List for a number of years in one local authority area while then having to start from scratch after moving to another local authority area. This situation increased families' sense of vulnerability. Staff members of Focus Ireland also commented on significant delays in getting families on the Housing List and the consequent delays in families qualifying for accommodation-related support such as HAP. They highlighted the apparent inconsistencies in State agencies', particularly local authorities', interpretations of policies which had a significant impact on families' immediate access to entitlements and rights.⁴²

3.3 Families' response to the risk of homelessness and further complexity

Interviews revealed that those families who had received Notices of Termination from landlords in the private rental sector responded proactively to these situations and made concerted efforts during their respective notice periods to secure alternative accommodation. However, they experienced significant complexity in the private rental market and struggled to find suitable and affordable alternative accommodation. This resulted in their need to approach Focus Ireland prevention services for assistance. However, as will be noted below, contacting Focus Ireland frequently came at the end of their notice periods, placing the families in question at increased risk.

Having received Notice of Termination from their landlords, a number of families approached their respective local authorities for assistance only to be informed that the councils could not assist them until such point as the families were actually homeless. Receiving this information increased families' sense of vulnerability. Eight of the interviewees (23%) highlighted that local authority staff had in fact been the ones to advise them to contact Focus Ireland for more relevant and immediate assistance.

All interviewees who had been living in private rental accommodation sought out alternative housing in the private rented market once they knew their tenancies were under threat. Thirteen (37% of all interviewees) of those individuals emphasised their difficulty in securing alternative accommodation and stressed the time taken to do so. One interviewee in the Waterford area highlighted, for example, that she had viewed 59 properties in the space of three weeks and had not succeeded in securing a suitable property. In many cases, interviewees commented on their experience of a shortage of

⁴¹ The 22 families whose secure, precarious and chaotic prior tenancies are outlined above all sought the support of Focus Ireland through its A&I service.

⁴² Staff made particular reference to local authorities in different areas responding differently to national policy frameworks and directives which should have been implemented consistently across the country, irrespective of geography. For example, thresholds for HAP frequently differed from one Local Authority to the next.

affordable rental properties in their areas. All wanted to remain close to where they had been living previously, particularly those families whose children were already enrolled in local schools.⁴³

Many interviewees reported issues of affordability because of increases in the costs of rental properties locally. They also noted that the market was extremely competitive with many families vying to secure the same accommodation.⁴⁴ Families reliant on social welfare faced a particular disadvantage in this regard, in particular families in receipt of HAP or rent allowance.⁴⁵ For example, eight participants (23%) in the study expressed their belief that they had experienced landlords prioritising non-Rent Supplement/HAP clients over them. They suggested that HAP required landlords to complete a certain amount of paperwork and tied them into two-year leases. Consequently, many found ways of avoiding taking on tenants on Rent Supplement and HAP.

The importance of Rent Supplement and HAP in subsidising family capacity to meet rental costs was highlighted universally across interviews. However, families and Focus Ireland staff both noted that, because of rent caps, Rent Supplement and HAP rarely met the full rent requested by landlords.⁴⁶ Consequently, families were then required to top-up rents – largely from limited means, particularly social welfare. Increases in rents were viewed as placing families on HAP at significant risk of housing instability in the context of the private rental market.

Similarly, a number of families commented on experiencing prejudice and discrimination in the market. This was a particularly notable issue for large families or families headed by a lone parent, either female or male.

Seven (20%) of those interviewed explained how they had sought the support of other family members while in crisis, moving in with parents or siblings while trying to secure more permanent accommodation. In all cases this arrangement proved untenable over time, with families experiencing overcrowding and, frequently, family discord. As a result, these families found themselves moving frequently between living situations while in the process of trying to secure a more permanent home.

⁴³ It could be implied from this information that the restriction of their search to a limited area contributed to families' difficulty in finding alternative accommodation. Interviewees acknowledged this difficulty but emphasised their desire to minimise the disruption caused by a change of home on their children and families.

⁴⁴ Focus Ireland staff members also observed that the private rental market had grown both very expensive and competitive. They noted that there was a shortage of affordable rental accommodation across all of the areas. It was suggested that prices in the private market had risen exponentially in the period preceding the study, with landlords knowing that the market was in their favour, including in Dublin where there are now rent caps and limits to rent increases. Similarly, it was not unusual for Focus Ireland service users to go to property viewings only to find others with the deposit and first month's rent in cash ready to present to the landlord. Many families supported by Focus Ireland prevention services, particularly those dependent on social welfare, were not always able to have the required deposit and first month's rent.

⁴⁵ Focus Ireland staff strongly endorsed this point, stating that tenant families on social welfare or in need/receipt of housing supports such as HAP were very vulnerable in the private rental market.

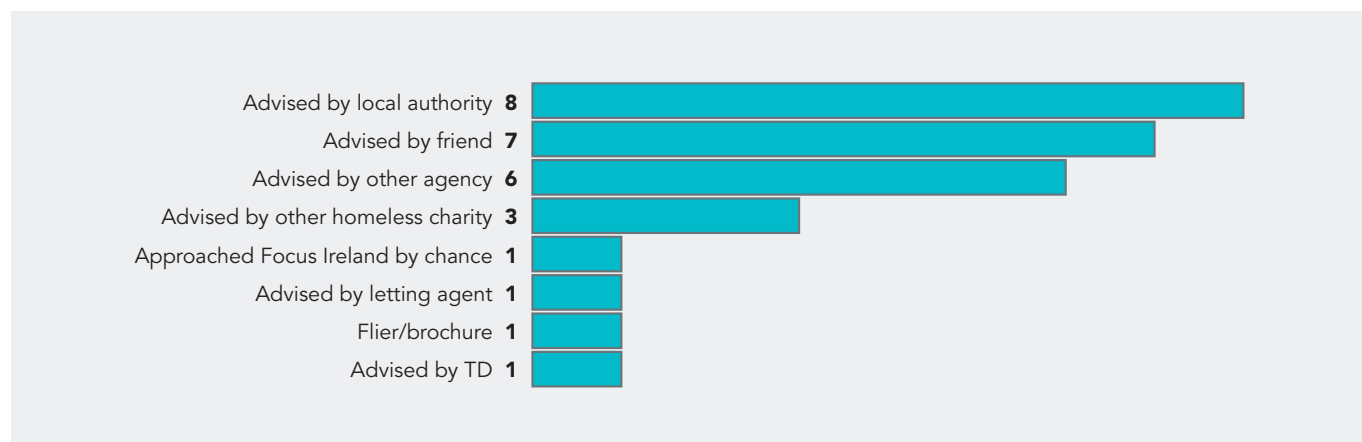
⁴⁶ Though Rent Supplement levels were increased in the summer of 2016.

In consequence to all of the above, many families approached Focus Ireland only in the final weeks⁴⁷ prior to the deadline for them to leave their accommodation. This inevitably brought an increased sense of urgency and crisis to their respective circumstances.⁴⁸

These complex experiences of losing and trying to secure alternative accommodation contributed to high levels of stress for all of the 35 families engaged in this research. Many of the participants in this process referred to themselves and, in some cases, their children experiencing significant mental health difficulties throughout the period of trying to avoid homelessness, including depression, anxiety and stress.

Interestingly, almost half of those interviewed outlined their lack of awareness of rights and entitlements as tenants – either in the private rental market or in relation to dealing with the local authority – and this increased their need for the support of an organisation such as Focus Ireland.⁴⁹ Prior to engagement with the organisation, very few of the families knew about Focus Ireland prevention services and generally only accessed the services of the organisation on advice from a third party. This included the local authority; other charities focused on homelessness; and other agencies such as the DSP, Citizens Information Centre (CIC), Family Resource Centre (FRC), Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), the Courts Service or informal recommendations through friends. See Figure 6 below for more detail in this regard, outlining the responses of 28 participants.

Figure 6 · Information source for Focus Ireland prevention services



Those who knew about Focus Ireland assumed that it was only concerned with addressing the needs of those who were already homeless; these individuals did not consider the organisation as having a preventative function and/or relevant to them.

⁴⁷ And, in some cases, one week.

⁴⁸ Focus Ireland staff also observed that families tended to approach the organisation within days of being expected to vacate properties, frequently at a point when it was too late – from a preventative perspective – for Focus Ireland to do anything substantial in support of those families. In fact, A&I staff noted in particular that families who delayed approaching the organisation required higher levels of support from the service and prolonged case management compared to those who approached the service earlier in their notice period.

⁴⁹ A point echoed in interviews with Focus Ireland prevention service staff members.

3.4 Prevention services

Against that backdrop and, as noted in Chapter 1, Focus Ireland delivers three primary prevention services to families, as follows:

- **Advice and Information (A&I) Services:** The central feature of this service involves the provision of advice and up-to-date information on housing-related matters to families at risk of homelessness, including information on legal rights, accommodation and social welfare entitlements. However, the A&I service does much more than this in practice. Frequently, A&I involves the provision of coaching to client families, guiding their engagements with private landlords and institutions such as local authorities; the DSP and the RTB. The service also frequently involves Focus Ireland staff engaging in advocacy on behalf of client families with a view to either supporting families to access certain entitlements⁵⁰ or with a view to sustaining those families in their existing accommodation in accordance with their legal entitlements. A&I staff frequently attend RTB tribunals with or on behalf of families. A&I staff support families to complete forms associated with housing-related supports as well as writing letters to landlords, local authorities, DSP and RTB in accordance with the particular needs of specific families. The service also links families into other support services as required, for example MABS. In effect, A&I is a flexible, open-door service that responds to the unique needs of each family that seeks out its support.
- **Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service:** Focus Ireland TSS teams provide settlement support to households that are at risk of homelessness and/or moving out of homelessness into a new tenancy (of various tenures including private rented accommodation, AHBs and local authority housing). In some areas, this service is provided as part of broader TSS contracts which Focus Ireland holds with the local authority primarily to support households moving out of homelessness. As a result, preventative TSS, is frequently provided to households living in local authority housing. In the context of homelessness prevention, TSS key workers provide ongoing practical supports to families around accessing entitlements, facilitating access to health and budgeting services, and establishing routines that strengthen families' capacities to sustain their respective tenancies into the longer term. In effect, TSS develops an individual support plan for each family. TSS staff undertake regular visits to families in their homes to monitor and support their tenancies, up to a point whereby staff and families are satisfied that families have sufficient capacity to manage their tenancy independently. The length of engagement with each client varies according to the individual needs of the family. TSS staff note that the minimum engagement tends to last three months but generally supports are provided for six months.

⁵⁰ For example, inclusion on the local authority Housing List.

➤ **Social Rental Model (SRM):** The Social Rental Model is provided to families that have high support needs and/or histories of homelessness and are at risk of repeat entries into homelessness. Under SRM, Focus Ireland acts as the primary tenant, securing a tenancy with a private landlord on the understanding that the organisation can sub-let the property to a family at risk of homelessness. Focus Ireland pays the rent to the landlord. The family pays its HAP or Rent Supplement contribution to Focus Ireland and may be required to pay a manageable top-up between HAP and the rent total. Focus Ireland also has a small maintenance budget under the scheme to upgrade the property and address household problems as they arise. In addition to the rental arrangement outlined above, Focus Ireland also provides TSS-type supports to the families in question to build their capacities to sustain these and future tenancies.

Separate to the SRM, in a few cases, in agreement with the local authority, Focus Ireland accommodates particularly vulnerable families in properties owned by the organisation, offering those families a long-term open-ended tenancy.

As noted above, these service supports – along with the capacities and efforts of families themselves – enabled 29 of the families participating in this research to avoid entering homelessness. Similarly, in the case of 5 families who had been homeless at the point of contacting Focus Ireland, Focus Ireland services had enabled them to avoid re-entering homelessness. The next chapter explores how and why the prevention services of Focus Ireland worked, leading to the identification of short- and medium-term strategies that have proven effective in preventing family homelessness.

Chapter 4

Effective strategies in the prevention of family homelessness

The primary purpose of this chapter is to name key effective strategies and processes, identified by families and staff with first-hand experience, that have been shown to consistently enable families at risk to avoid entry into homelessness. Not only does this chapter seek to identify effective strategies, it seeks to establish how and why certain strategies have proven consistently effective.

An important starting point in exploring how and why preventative strategies support families to avoid homelessness is an understanding of the needs and capacities of families at the time of approaching Focus Ireland prevention services. As noted in the previous chapter, these were varied, but it is both possible and important to draw a number of significant generalisations. By understanding more clearly the needs and capacities of families within the complexities of (i) the private rental market; (ii) local authority housing practices and (iii) tenancy-related supports of the State, it becomes possible to understand more clearly what works in the prevention of family homelessness.

4.1 Generalisations

4.1.1 Advice and information

While there are exceptions to every rule, interviews with families and prevention service-providers of Focus Ireland suggest that those approaching Focus Ireland's A&I service shared many of the following characteristics:

- The majority had a history of renting private properties, in many cases for many years prior to approaching the organisation. One family had a history of home ownership but, having experienced difficulties in sustaining its mortgage as a result of the economic downturn of recent years, ultimately needed to seek out alternative accommodation arrangements.
- The majority of families were not used to seeking advice or information on housing-related matters and had, with some exceptions, not faced the risk of homelessness before. Prior to this the majority had simply got on with their tenancies without much thought. Where difficulties had arisen in the past, they had been both motivated and determined to sort out such issues by themselves – and had generally succeeded in doing so.
- A substantial number of families were caught off guard in an increasingly expensive and competitive private rental market. Upon receiving Notice of Termination, most assumed that they would have little difficulty securing alternative accommodation relevant to the

needs of their respective families. Their searches in the private rental market proved extremely challenging, with most unable to meet the rental prices demanded in the market. This was a particular issue for families reliant on social welfare and on low incomes – most especially those dependent on Rent Supplement and HAP – but also for some families with one adult member in employment.

- The vast majority of these families were unaware of their rights and entitlements as tenants of either their respective local authorities and/or private landlords. Most accepted the instructions of their landlords unquestioningly. When faced with the crisis of losing their homes, the majority sought assistance with finding alternative accommodation as opposed to increasing understanding of their rights and/or entitlements as tenants.⁵¹
- Families reliant on social welfare and/or in receipt of housing-related supports such as HAP or Rent Supplement reported experiencing high levels of discrimination within the private rental market when seeking alternative accommodation during their period of notice. However, families with parents in employment also reported significant difficulties finding alternative accommodation.
- The majority of families had been so busy trying unsuccessfully to secure alternative accommodation that, by the time they reached the Focus Ireland A&I service, they were in a state of desperation. They were overwhelmed by the impending risk of homelessness. Consequently, they were in need of quite substantial supports from the organisation to enable them to understand and access their rights and entitlements; and to enable them to remain in their existing accommodation and/or to continue their search for alternative accommodation.

Against that backdrop, the primary needs of families accessing A&I included, among others, the need for up-to-date information on rights and entitlements; the need for advice and guidance in searching for properties and in dealing with landlords in the private rental market; the need for assistance in navigating the systems of the State, including local authorities, DSP and the RTB; and the need to access financial assistance to enable families afford the substantial costs of rent.

As noted in Section 3.4, these forms of assistance and support are integral features of the A&I service. In other words, the core components of the A&I service are constructed in direct response to the immediate presenting needs of families.

Behind these, however, and often not explicitly acknowledged, was the need of many families for emotional support. Heads of households, especially single parents, attempting to shield their children and maintain normality of home life, experienced significant trauma – some encountering (often for the first time) apparent indifference from overstretched public authorities and discrimination from some landlords, all of which had taken their toll by the time they arrived at Focus Ireland.

4.1.2 Tenancy support and social rental model

As noted above, access to Focus Ireland's Tenancy Support and Sustainment and Social Rental services is through a referral process, so that families engaging in these services tended to have a higher level of need. There was a diversity of families experiencing a mix of local authority and private rental tenancies, depending upon the nature of the

⁵¹ Though this ultimately was an integral aspect of the advice and information they received from the organisation.

local funding/contractual arrangement, with a high concentration of families reliant on social welfare for their primary source of income. The majority, with some exceptions, had experienced difficulties sustaining previous tenancies as a result of varied social and economic circumstances affecting the families in question. Among others, these circumstances included⁵² the involvement of family members in antisocial behaviour and/or illegal activity; significant internal family difficulties, often resulting in the involvement of social workers in family life; relationship breakdown; addiction; difficulties managing money and, by extension, difficulties paying bills. Significant instability was experienced in a number of these households which frequently resulted in the family accessing a range of social supports in addition to housing supports. These included family support and social work services.

In keeping with the role and referral process to these services, families accessing TSS and SRM frequently had a history of moving, often relying on family members to host them for different periods. Many had limited awareness of their rights and entitlements.

In all cases, families accessing both TSS and SRM faced particularly high levels of risk of homelessness and were in need of considerable support to build their capacities to manage tenancies. As noted in Section 3.4, varied supports in managing tenancies and the operation of a social rental scheme are integral elements of the TSS and SRM services. As with A&I above, the core components of TSS and SRM are constructed as a direct response to the immediate presenting needs of families.

This is an important starting point in identifying short- and medium-term solutions that prevent families at risk from entering homelessness, and in understanding why and how those solutions work. In effect, what works in the prevention of family homelessness is when the services on offer directly match the immediate presenting needs of families.

4.2 Experience of participating families

As noted in section 3.1, families participating in this research had presented to Focus Ireland Prevention Services largely as a result of one primary reason which pushed them towards homelessness. Interviews with those families indicated that the services of Focus Ireland were multi-faceted, supporting them in an integrated manner while holding to a primary objective of keeping them out of homelessness.

That said, in keeping with the notion of a primary reason leading to risk of homelessness, families also highlighted what they considered to be the most important practical support received from Focus Ireland in response to their respective needs. These primary practical supports are listed below as follows:

- Mindful of the difficulties of getting landlords to accept HAP in the private rental market, 16 of the 35 families (46%) interviewed highlighted Focus Ireland's assistance with securing HAP as the primary support provided by the organisation.⁵³
- A further family was supported by the organisation to secure an increase in its Rent Supplement allocation from the Department of Social Protection.

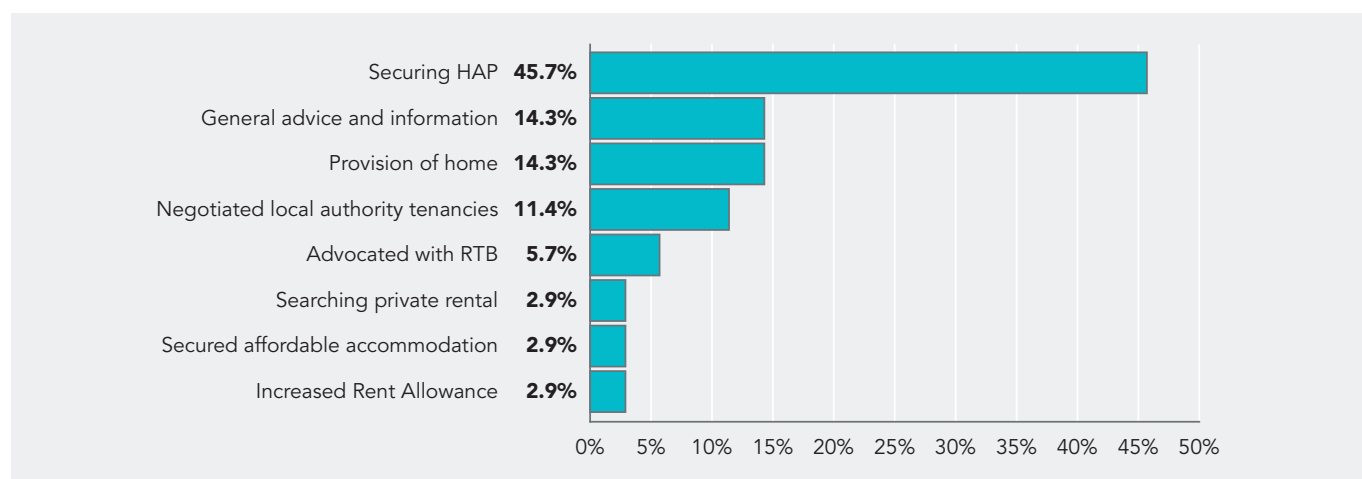
⁵² In no order of importance.

⁵³ This included supporting some families to access Homeless HAP, thereby securing increased rent thresholds for those families.

- Four families (11%) stated that Focus Ireland had negotiated on their behalf and supported them to sustain their tenancies with their respective local authorities.
- Focus Ireland had also successfully advocated on behalf of two (6%) families with the RTB to address invalid eviction notices.
- One family noted that the organisation had supported it to secure affordable accommodation through negotiations with another housing charity.
- Another family outlined that the primary assistance provided by Focus Ireland was in supporting the household to search for suitable private rental properties.
- Focus Ireland provided a home at an affordable rent through the Social Rental Model to five families (14%) at particular risk of re-entering homelessness, including ongoing key-worker/tenancy support with their tenancies and the maintenance of properties when issues arose.
- Five families in the study (14%) noted that their primary need from Focus Ireland had been advice and information and that this had been provided to them in an appropriate, supportive and timely fashion.

Interestingly, many of those interviewed as part of this study did not actually know what supports they needed at the point of approaching Focus Ireland, particularly those approaching the A&I service. Most described themselves as in a state of desperation at the point of engagement with Focus Ireland, searching for any assistance that might come their way and prevent them from becoming homeless. A central feature of Focus Ireland prevention services, therefore, involved listening deeply to the circumstances of each individual family engaging with the services and identifying with heads of household the full nature of supports required to enable the families avoid homelessness. Consequently, though providing a primary support to families, in all of the above Focus Ireland engaged in a wide variety of activities with families. These ranged from providing information and advice on rights and entitlements; assisting families to complete forms necessary for housing supports; advising families on dealing with notices to quit rented properties; arranging appointments; supporting families to access other supports such as counselling or support from MABS; negotiating with landlords and agencies; searching for rental properties and supporting families to apply for placement on the Housing List. In effect, Focus Ireland worked with the families to identify and meet their primary need while also ensuring that other necessary supports were in place to reduce any further risk of homelessness.

Figure 7 · Principal practical support provided by Focus Ireland to participating families



4.3 Identifying what works and why

In the context of Focus Ireland's Prevention Services, five primary prevention strategies emerge from this study as both hugely important to families and as successful in the short term in enabling families to avoid homelessness. These are:

- 1 building family awareness of their rights and entitlements;
- 2 enabling families to access their rights and entitlements by supporting them in navigating the systems of the State, including local authorities, DSP and the RTB;
- 3 coaching families in their search for alternative private rental properties and in their dealings with landlords in the private rented sector;
- 4 supporting families to access the necessary financial assistance to enable them to meet the increasing costs of rent in the private rental market;
- 5 tailoring an integrated package of services to families that not only addresses their primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining tenancies.

4.3.1 Building family awareness of their rights and entitlements

Very few of the families who engaged with Focus Ireland prevention services had consciously approached the organisation with the purpose of seeking information on their rights and entitlements as tenants. And yet it is very clear from interviews with both families and staff of Focus Ireland that this is a fundamental starting point in the prevention of family homelessness, particularly in situations where private landlords have issued invalid notices for families to quit their rental properties and/or in situations whereby families are entitled to rental subsidies that would enable them to meet the costs of rent.

As noted previously, the primary factor affecting the tenancies of families in this study was their receipt of Notices of Termination from their rental properties. Interviews with Focus Ireland A&I staff revealed that landlords frequently issued invalid notices to tenants that breached their rights and entitlements under national legislation. For example, in an interview with an A&I staff member in Waterford it was noted:

'I worked with a lady this week who had been in private rented for a number of years. She received an invalid notice to quit. She was given 28 days to quit the property but she should have been given six months on account of the length of her tenancy.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Waterford)

Families are rarely aware of their rights and entitlements in these situations and, even where they are, many accept these invalid notices because of a fear of antagonising the landlord. This is borne out in many of the interviews with families. The majority of those interviewed did not question their respective landlords' decisions to issue Notices of Termination. Nor did they question the legality of those notices. Most were simply accepting of the landlords' right, as property owners, to issue such notices and were accepting of their fate with no consideration of their own rights in these situations. As the aforementioned staff member noted:

'You sometimes find that if landlords have been nice to tenants, tenants don't want to offend them. You get the mindset of "I have to move out, I don't want to offend the landlord" but we hammer home to families that they have entitlements.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Waterford)

Focus Ireland staff stress that families at risk of homelessness need clear direction on their rights and entitlements. Without that direction they remain extremely vulnerable, especially in the hands of landlords who do not appear cognisant of their responsibilities and obligations:

'If a family has a notice to quit, I will bring them in, have a look at the letter and see if it's legally valid. I will advise families on how to proceed then. A&I makes people aware of their rights in these kind of situations ... I would frequently refer people to the RTB, mainly around illegal evictions. Many people at risk of homelessness don't know their rights. They are very vulnerable and generally don't want to rock the boat with the landlord. The landlord has the power.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff member, Limerick)

Clarity on rights and entitlements is also an essential starting point in enabling a family to transition from a state of desperation and fear to a state of personal capacity and confidence when dealing with landlords, local authorities and State services such as DSP and/or the RTB:

'I advise families, let them know their rights and try to ensure that they are working in a rights-based framework. I encourage them to record everything, to understand how to advocate for themselves. When you get people thinking like that they open their minds again; they are not paralysed by fear as they were when they first approach us. They are thinking again for themselves; they are hustling again. The service can't spoon feed them. This way they are in a better position to help themselves.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

Similarly, a further significant feature of supporting families to understand their rights and entitlements involves enabling families to gain more time in their existing accommodation⁵⁴ and, by extension, more time to seek out an alternative residence:

'My plan would be give support to families so they can breathe again. Basically, I try – within the law – to countermand directives, to give families strategies to stay in the property and ensure they go through due process. If we can keep them in their current accommodation for a while, take the pressure off, then I can motivate and coach them to go in search of alternative private rental. I give them the space and motivation to see that they have power. I show them that they have rights and encourage them to know their rights, to know what options exist for HAP or non-HAP, to know what they are entitled to with landlords and the Council.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

⁵⁴ The property they have been asked to vacate.

Six of the families interviewed during this study (17%) highlighted their appreciation of Focus Ireland's advice and support on their rights and entitlements, especially with regard to eviction notices. As one head of household in Limerick noted:

'I haven't a clue of any of this. My key worker has been a rock in advising me on all these things.' (Family Interview, Limerick)

Another interviewee from Waterford stated:

'The main thing for me was that Focus Ireland knew the full story. They knew to look at my situation from all different angles. They were a legal support on the one hand and an emotional support on the other.' (Family Interview, Waterford).

Six other families (17%) made similar comments, explaining that Focus Ireland's advice to remain on in their existing properties⁵⁵ until due process had been concluded was essential in giving them additional time to source another property and in keeping them out of homelessness.

A further five participants (14%) expressed satisfaction with the manner in which Focus Ireland prevention services had provided them with information on how systems operate, thereby enabling them to deal more effectively with landlords, local authorities, DSP and the RTB. Several interviewees commented on Focus Ireland's *know-how* when dealing with property owners and State systems, stating that the majority of individuals simply did not have this information.

'I was under huge stress at the time. I really was feeling the pressure, so much so that I was forgetting what was scheduled in terms of meetings and so on. I was running around like a headless chicken. The general connection and the ongoing support of somebody with the know-how was really so important. Focus Ireland was like a mentor to me.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

An interesting observation from interviews with family representatives suggests that, in spite of support from Focus Ireland, the vast majority of family representatives remained under-confident with regard to their rights as tenants following disengagement from prevention services. While Focus Ireland had (i) informed them of their rights and entitlements while accessing prevention services and (ii) supported them to secure those rights and entitlements, most did not consider that they had the knowledge or capacity themselves to optimise their rights should similar situations arise for them in future. In other words, Focus Ireland had supported families to address an immediate need; the organisation had not necessarily managed to build families' capacity for potential future challenges.

4.3.2 Assisting families to navigate the systems of the state

As outlined a number of times in this report, by the time they approached Focus Ireland prevention services, the bulk of the research participants were in a state of desperation and panic. The prospect of themselves, their children and/or partners becoming homeless was imminent and, in certain cases, appeared inevitable. Many had approached their local authorities for assistance only to be informed that the local authorities could not assist

⁵⁵ While still paying rent in full.

them until such point as they were actually homeless.⁵⁶ Others had approached the DSP seeking advice on supplements that would enable them to meet the increasing costs of rent in the private market. In a substantial number of these cases families acknowledged that they struggled to get their heads around what was needed by systems of support to enable them to access their rights and entitlements.

Both families and Focus Ireland staff commented on what they perceived as the inconsistency of messages and approaches within State systems. For example, reference was made earlier in this document to local authorities in different areas responding differently to national policy frameworks and directives which should have been implemented consistently across the country, irrespective of geography. An interview with a Focus Ireland staff member in Sligo noted:

'There appears to be very little systems at work in the Council. The Council tells us they are operating to Departmental circulars but we hear of these same circulars being operated differently in other counties.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Sligo)

This type of inconsistency adds to families' confusion and sense of desperation. While participants suggested that the application of policies within the DSP tended to be more clear-cut, families and Focus Ireland staff also acknowledged that families found navigating those policies difficult. In some cases families were faced with the transition from Rent Supplement to HAP and with the need to complete forms to enable this transition to occur. Many were unclear about the difference between Rent Supplement and HAP at the time and found the process confusing. This in turn led to increased insecurity among interviewed families.

One Focus Ireland staff member mentioned during interview that the systems pertaining to social housing and housing supports had 'built up in an incremental and ad hoc way so that no one really knows the rules'. He cited the following example, involving access to Homeless HAP as a prevention measure for households at immediate risk of homelessness. While this is, in general, a very positive development, the example illustrates the confusion facing families at risk of losing their accommodation:

'For instance, I had a woman come in who was 8 years on the Housing List but she was being forced to move by her landlord with higher rent. She is looking for another place but if she applies for the [preventative] Homeless HAP then she would be considered to have adequate housing and she would be "suspended" from the Housing List, even if she just gets a 12-month lease. If she is suspended and then she has to move out again, she can get back onto the Housing List but will have lost some places while being out. Also she has to inform them [the Council] that she wants to be on the "transfer list" – otherwise she might find she is off the Housing List altogether. In fact it is not clear what might happen.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

⁵⁶ In recent months the Dublin Region Homeless Executive has introduced homeless prevention staff who can engage when families first present as homeless. However, no report has yet been published on the impact of this service.

Families frequently referred to experiencing engagements with State agencies – local authorities, DSP and RTB – as difficult and adversarial.⁵⁷ Many noted feeling judged and feeling that they were being forced to justify their circumstances.

Perhaps one of the most striking comments made by families was that they felt they had no power or authority when dealing with State agencies.⁵⁸ They referred to not being taken seriously and to lacking clout in dealings with agency representatives, as illustrated in the following quote from a head of household in Dublin:

‘Nobody listens to an ordinary person. You need someone to fight for your rights. You don’t have a voice on your own.’ (Family Interview, Dublin)

Providing families with assistance in navigating a complex range of public services is an integral feature of Focus Ireland prevention services and one which was hugely appreciated by families who participated in this study. Almost one in three families interviewed commented that it had been an essential support in enabling them to remain out of homelessness. Among others, this support had involved Focus Ireland staff representing families with the RTB; negotiating with local authorities/DSP and administering forms on behalf of families to ensure access to HAP/Homeless HAP/Rent Supplement and thereby securing new tenancies. It also included Focus Ireland staff working closely with agencies to enable families to transition from Rent Supplement to the HAP. Family quotes to this effect included:

‘Yes, I would know what to do. But you need someone to help you fill the forms, and to talk to people.’ (Family Interview, Sligo)

‘It was very confusing even when Focus Ireland was explaining. Going from social welfare to HAP and dealing with [local authority], without Focus Ireland, I would not have been able to cope. I was very nervous all this time and very stressed.’ (Family Interview, Dublin)

‘Like in July of last year, there was some change to the HAP payment. I had no idea what was going on ... One of the great things about Focus Ireland’s support was having somebody to almost hold my hand to help me through this mess of a system. That’s what Focus Ireland does really well.’ (Family Interview, Waterford)

But perhaps more importantly, interviewed families observed that Focus Ireland’s advocacy on their behalf afforded them an authority and influence with agencies that, as individuals, they felt they did not have. Many families felt they could not have navigated these systems on their own:

‘Focus Ireland bought me the time I needed to get over the problems I was facing. They have kudos in the Council. They were able to initiate meetings on my behalf because the Council was refusing to talk directly to me. They were always there in the background ... Focus Ireland has access to people that we don’t. Focus Ireland will get to people who make decisions and will be able to negotiate. We mightn’t get the result we want but they will always ensure we get the answer.’ (Family Interview, Waterford)

⁵⁷ A point endorsed in interviews with Focus Ireland staff members.

⁵⁸ Five families interviewed (14.3%) specifically made this statement.

‘Focus Ireland also gave me really sound advice; who to speak to in the Council or in Welfare. They had the contacts. They knew the sympathetic people in those places who’d offer me support. Those people knew Focus Ireland was doing good so they were willing to help. Focus Ireland had a network of supportive people in those agencies.’ (Family Interview, Waterford)

Focus Ireland staff members endorsed this assertion, highlighting that much of their time was spent advocating directly with State agencies such as the RTB and DSP on behalf of families:

‘Some agencies have got very adversarial lately and a lot of my work is in pointing out to them they have discretion and that people have rights under different provisions, such as Article 38 of the Social Welfare Act where a household can make a payment to supplement the Rent Allowance in an emergency ... I coach people a lot for dealing with the RTB.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

Therefore, having a well-informed organisation advocating on behalf of families in distress emerges as a critical support and solution to the crisis experienced by many families at risk of homelessness.

4.3.3 Coaching families

As noted previously, in the context of rental accommodation, landlords – both the local authority and those in the private rental market – have significant power. While there are many protections for tenants in legislation, which have recently been strengthened, the majority of families included in this study continued to perceive landlords as having the ultimate power and authority over their tenancies.

Reference has been made above to the negative aspects of this power and authority which are manifested in a variety of ways. Among others, these include high levels of discrimination in the private rental market, particularly targeted at social welfare recipients; families on Rent Supplement and HAP; large and single parent families. Many of those interviewed in this study observed the private rental market as operating in favour of professionals without children or with smaller families.

These situations can be compounded by support systems that are frequently experienced by families as harsh and as constantly demanding families at risk to justify their current circumstances.

Given the vulnerability of families at risk of homelessness in this type of market, a central feature of Focus Ireland prevention services, especially A&I, involves coaching families for their engagement with both private landlords and State systems. Focus Ireland staff noted:

‘A lot of time is spent coaching clients for how to deal with things. Going through the forms and preparing them for dealing with the system; about contacting landlords looking for a place; on gaining HAP pre-approval, etc.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

'A lot of A&I work involves coaching clients about entitlements or coaching them on how to search for alternative accommodation, i.e. have they references, if they get a viewing what to bring with them, how to present themselves at a viewing and so on ... Many of the families that are accessing Focus Ireland's services will have been staying with family members for a long period. Then there's a breakdown in the relationship and then they are without accommodation ... Many of them end up telling landlords about the chaos in their life story and that reduces rather than increases their chances of securing accommodation. Focus Ireland advises them to pull back; that they don't have to tell their life stories to landlords. This is where coaching is key.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Limerick)

'We do our best to give people good advice and guidance; to make sure that we prepare people for meeting with landlords – to make sure they have a reference when meeting a landlord, to make sure they go together to viewings if a couple, to make sure what and what not to tell the landlord.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, South Dublin)

Interestingly, few families interviewed during this study commented on the importance of coaching as a strategy in preventing them from entering homelessness. Yet, in the observations of Focus Ireland prevention service staff, especially those involved in A&I, it was viewed as a critical support in ensuring families' success in remaining out of homelessness. Families' capacity to create a good impression; to present themselves as having the capacity to sustain their tenancies; and to justify their need for State supports were viewed by staff as integral to families' avoidance of homelessness.

4.3.4 Supporting families to access the necessary financial assistance

Reference has been made earlier in this document to the importance of families accessing Rent Supplement and, more recently, HAP, as a critical support that prevented families from becoming homeless. These are concrete examples of state-supported exits from homelessness. It is worth noting that all of these responses involve Focus Ireland staff assisting access to supports which have been put in place through Government policy, so that these cases should be characterised as a success for those policies as much as for Focus Ireland services.

Notwithstanding private landlords' reluctance to accept families on Rent Supplement or HAP, the importance of this financial assistance in supplementing family capacity to meet rental costs was highlighted universally across interviews. Just under one in two families interviewed in this research highlighted Focus Ireland's assistance with securing HAP/Homeless HAP and/or securing an increase in Rent Supplement as the primary support provided by the organisation that enabled their avoidance of homelessness.

These forms of financial assistance supported families in a number of ways. Principally, they allowed families either to remain in existing accommodation or to source an alternative property whilst safe in the knowledge that they would have adequate resources to meet higher rental costs.

But there were also additional benefits to families, particularly arising from the HAP. Family members could work and continue to receive HAP benefits. Payments from HAP were made directly to the landlord and thus removed families from this concern. HAP guaranteed

families a minimum of a two-year lease, thus ensuring greater stability for families in their tenancies. Similarly, HAP payments were premised on accommodation meeting a certain standard, thus ensuring the families would experience good quality accommodation.

Staff also commented on the importance of securing HAP for families as an important early step in supporting families to either remain in existing accommodation or to source alternative accommodation:

‘We could have people coming in who are couch surfing or whose children are living separately in the head of household’s family of origin. Our first action is to get them to complete the Housing Application Form and we start from that with them. Then once they are on the Housing List we can support them to apply for HAP.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Sligo)

‘As a preventative measure we support them to get homeless HAP from the Council. This allows them to get higher rates and they get the deposit a month in advance. We’ve had success stories here. Having families on the Homeless HAP increases their chances of securing accommodation.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, South Dublin)

While HAP/Homeless HAP and Rent Allowance emerge as one of the most critical – if not the most critical – strategies preventing family homelessness, its application is fraught with difficulties. These difficulties are clarified in detail in Section 5.3.1 below and emerge as crucial policy concerns if longer-term prevention of family homelessness is to be realised.

4.3.5 Integrated package of prevention services

The landscape in which families are placed at risk of homelessness is complex. By extension, the landscape in which prevention services operate is also complex. There are significant structural obstacles, including shortages of affordable rental properties and/or social housing; the difficulties of escalating rents; the competitiveness of the private rental market and discrimination experienced by certain families; and the complex and often confusing public service systems.

Structural obstacles are often compounded by varied family circumstances which can multiply the risks of their becoming homeless, including situations where the head of household experiences mental health difficulties; addiction concerns or where breakdown of family relationships is a feature. Against that backdrop, simple solutions are rarely possible.

As a consequence, a central feature of Focus Ireland’s prevention responses to the needs of families involves working with the families to identify and meet their primary accommodation need while also ensuring that other necessary supports are in place to reduce any further risk of homelessness. This applies across all prevention services: A&I, TSS and SRM. In all cases, a variety of supports are put in place to meet the diverse presenting needs of families.

While the individual preventative solutions highlighted above have an important effect on the prevention of family homelessness in their own right, it is their combination as a package of integrated supports that offers consistently higher success rates across all services. In the context of TSS and SRM, this integrated package of support enables families to manage tenancies while simultaneously overcoming other significant difficulties in their lives that increase family vulnerability to homelessness. It involves an ongoing supportive

process for as long as that support is needed by each individual family accessing the service. Interviews with Focus Ireland staff also reinforced the point that the organisation's participation on multi-agency Homeless Action Teams (exclusive to TSS), increased the organisation's capacity to address multiple family difficulties.

Though the service is described as providing advice and information to client families, in effect A&I tends to offer much more than once-off advice and information. It delivers a package of support which involves facilitating families to access HAP; manage engagements with landlords and State agencies; and secure their rights as tenants.⁵⁹ In all cases, the services are constructed around the immediate, presenting needs of families. While A&I provides a range of supports to families, it does so in a manner in which the onus is still on families to source and secure their own accommodation. In other words, it provides the inputs that families require while still ensuring that families assume responsibility for their own destiny.

In all prevention activity this focus on wraparound services ensures short- and medium-term solutions that match the complexity of the immediate problems facing families.

4.4 Other important factors

While the strategies outlined above proved pivotal in alleviating the risk of family homelessness in the cases of 34 of the 35 families interviewed in this research process, it is also important to point out that solutions sometimes went beyond the practical.

Fifteen of the families interviewed in this study (43%) highlighted that, apart from the practical supports provided to them, the single most important aspect of Focus Ireland's support in preventing their entry or re-entry homelessness was the reassurance and emotional support provided by its prevention service staff members.

'What was most important? The Focus staff member rang every week. He was a gentleman. He would give you a lift when you were down; always look on the positive side.' (Family Interview, Sligo)

'Knowing there was someone there that I could ring, who would reassure me and tell me that I would get somewhere. Someone to talk to because I could not talk to my family. There is just me, that's all, just me and my son.' (Family Interview, South County Dublin)

'Just knowing that there was someone that could help; to allay the fear that I had that the temporary homelessness could be permanent. Someone who did not judge you because you were homeless. The first time I went in and she just said that she could help, I nearly cried with the relief. It renewed my strength to continue on.' (Family Interview, South County Dublin)

'Apart from the practical support, Focus Ireland also gave me emotional support during what was a really stressful time. They kept me focused. Getting advice on who to contact meant that I wasn't going from post to pillar all the time. The attitude in Focus Ireland was always really positive and very relaxed. I'd come in stressed out of my head and the staff would say "let's ring somebody".'

⁵⁹ And all the other activities that are involved in enabling these solutions.

They were always on the lookout for solutions. And it was never just one solution. They just added to my confidence.’ (Family Interview, Waterford)

‘I think it was more the emotional side of it. Talking to somebody with the knowledge of the system really puts one’s mind at ease and Focus has the knowledge. They really advised me well when I was starting to panic’. (Family Interview, Waterford)

‘But the biggest thing was that Focus Ireland gave us hope, hope that we would get through this.’ (Family Interview, Dublin City)

Families were overwhelmingly positive, and spoke incredibly generously, about the supports they had received from the organisation. They also praised the commitment and passion of the staff who had provided that support to them, observing staff members’ humane approach to them while they themselves were in crisis mode. In essence, family interviews revealed that the manner in which solutions were achieved was often as important – if not more so – than the actual solutions themselves.

Seventeen of the families interviewed (49%) noted that they would return to Focus Ireland prevention services if faced with similar difficulties in the future. Within that number many suggested that they would try to solve their difficulties first but would know to return to the organisation if their own efforts proved unsuccessful. Others highlighted that they would need to return to Focus Ireland immediately. Examples of family perspectives in this regard included:

‘My English is not good. I would need help.’ (Family Interview, South County Dublin)

‘If a problem arose, I’d go back to Focus for support. Now I’d do so responsibly because Focus Ireland has loads of needy cases looking for support. But it’s good to know they are there.’ (Family Interview, Waterford)

‘I think if a problem arose again, I’d try and sort it myself first. I’d rather get on with it myself than fall back on Focus Ireland. And yet I’d go back for help if I was having trouble.’ (Family Interview, Kilkenny)

As a further endorsement of prevention services, nine of the families interviewed highlighted that they either had referred acquaintances or would refer acquaintances with similar difficulties to Focus Ireland services. Among those who had referred acquaintances to Focus Ireland, a number had accompanied their friends to the Focus Ireland office and showed them where to go. A further three interviewees stated that they would like to support the work of Focus Ireland in future if possible.

Many of those interviewed emphasised the importance of Focus Ireland publicising its prevention services more widely. As noted earlier in the report, many interviewees had limited prior knowledge of the organisation’s prevention services and limited understanding of the relevance of those services to their respective circumstances.

From the perspectives of Focus Ireland prevention staff, much of the success in preventing family homelessness was attributed to the efforts, motivation and capacity of families themselves. Staff suggested that Focus Ireland provided the tools to families but that families had to do the hard work themselves to ensure that they maintained their tenancies and/ or secured alternative accommodation. As one staff member noted:

‘A lot of the success is down to families’ own resilience and commitment. You’ll know among families who are intent on avoiding entering into homeless services and they tend to succeed.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, South Dublin)

This view was endorsed by other staff members in other interviews.

4.5 Emphasising the short-term nature of solutions

The purpose of this research has been to identify effective short- and medium-term solutions that enable families at risk of homelessness to avoid entering into homelessness. One of the most striking features of this research process has been the recognition that prevention services working directly with families – and to a lesser degree with landlords and systems of the State – can only hope to achieve short- and medium-term solutions.

With that in mind, the biggest concern to emerge from this research is the possibility – perhaps even probability – that some of the families who have been supported to avoid homelessness may ultimately face that risk again in the future. This point was well articulated in conversations with Focus Ireland staff members across the country:

‘If we can keep them in their current accommodation for a while, take the pressure off, then I can motivate and coach them to go in search of alternative private rental. Focus Ireland service solutions are therefore short-term. Even if I get families over the line, repeat calls to the service are inevitable in this current market. There is not enough security of tenure; there’s not enough law there to protect families ... You get little victories but you expect there to be return difficulties.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland A&I Staff Member, Dublin)

We rarely find return families (i.e. families that we supported to secure a tenancy who come back looking for further support). We had one woman from last year. But this may arise this year and next year as landlords get more familiar with HAP. It’s really a problem of supply and demand; it’s a very competitive market. People on social welfare are at such a disadvantage in the market compared to two people working.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland A&I Staff Member, South Dublin)

‘People returning is an issue. Not a huge proportion of families re-enter difficulties but it is a factor. In most of these cases they need more advice and information.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Waterford)

‘Families returning to our service is inevitable ... If you get six months or a year without re-engagement that’s good but we always keep the door open.’ (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Kilkenny)

Short-term solutions support families in crisis. They do not – and cannot – in any way address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness: the absence of regulation within the private rental market; the absence of affordable rental properties and quality social housing; difficulties associated with access to HAP and the adequacy of HAP in the private rental market, etc. Longer-term solutions are therefore rooted in significant structural change; change that needs to take place at a national policy level.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and recommendations

Chapter 4 of this document reveals that the prevention services provided by Focus Ireland have a positive impact in preventing families at risk of entering homelessness from doing so. As noted previously, this study has shown that, between 3 and 15 months after disengaging with Focus Ireland services, 34 out of 35 families interviewed had succeeded in avoiding homelessness through their engagement with Focus Ireland prevention services. In addition to levels of success, extremely high levels of satisfaction were expressed by families with regard to the services received from the organisation.

The work of Focus Ireland prevention services is family-orientated. It provides timely responses to the immediate presenting needs of families approaching the organisation for support. A core feature of Focus Ireland's prevention services is that they are constructed in response to the unique and respective circumstances of individual families.⁶⁰ This is an important contributory factor facilitating service success.

Consultation with families who have accessed Focus Ireland prevention services across the country, as well as consultation with Focus Ireland prevention service staff members, suggests that the following organisational strategies are consistently effective in supporting families to avoid homelessness. Specifically, these concern:

- *building family awareness of their rights and entitlements*, i.e. providing clear direction to families on their rights and entitlements as tenants and building their capacities to deal more effectively with landlords, local authorities, DSP and the RTB on housing matters relevant to their respective circumstances;
- *enabling families to access their rights and entitlements by supporting them in navigating a complex range of public services and supports*, i.e. representing families as required, and advocating on their behalf, with landlords and State agencies to ensure that families' rights and entitlements as tenants are accessed and secured;
- *coaching families in their search for alternative private rental properties and in their dealings with landlords in the private rental market*, i.e. guiding and preparing families in advance of engagements with landlords and agencies, building families' capacity to present themselves effectively and to justify their need for supports;

⁶⁰ Inevitably, many families have similar needs and therefore there is a consistency to the services offered to presenting families.

- › *supporting families to access the necessary financial assistance to enable them to meet the increasing costs of rent in the private rental market, i.e. advising families on their entitlements to housing assistance payments and supporting families, as necessary, in the administration of applications for those payments; and*
- › *tailoring an integrated package of services to the needs of individual families, i.e. applying the strategies listed above, along with other activities as required, in a manner that not only addresses families' primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining tenancies.*

5.1 Recommendations for Focus Ireland practice

5.1.1 Advertise and promote Focus Ireland prevention services

A common feature in the responses of families was that they were unaware of Focus Ireland as an organisation that could assist them prior to their becoming homeless. Focus Ireland has invested strongly in developing its prevention services, and now needs to develop a strong communications strategy to ensure that families that need its services are aware of them in a timely manner.

5.1.2 Early intervention and awareness

A separate but related finding is the tendency for families to approach services for support only when their eviction notice period is almost expired. It is clear from interviews with staff that earlier engagement with services would reduce stress on families and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. This problem of late engagement persists despite considerable investment in public communication by the Dublin local authorities, Threshold and the Department of Housing (through *Rebuilding Ireland*). It is a challenge not only for Focus Ireland services but for other prevention services also, such as Threshold.

Programmes that directly target communication toward households which are known to be of high risk have proven successful (e.g. Focus Ireland's pilot project with the Department of Social Protection in Dublin 15). Such programmes should be mainstreamed into an overall strategy which involves all agencies involved in delivering homeless prevention services.

5.1.3 Tracking families' progress after disengagement

One of the current shortcomings of Focus Ireland prevention services is that once a family disengages from the organisation's services the organisation no longer has the capacity to monitor that family's progress in sustaining their tenancy and remaining out of homelessness. The organisation is acutely aware of this shortcoming and is anxious to rectify this challenge in the immediate future. In this regard, Focus Ireland has developed a monitoring framework across all its services; a framework that will enable the organisation to enhance its knowledge of families *after* their period of contact with the organisation ends and, in particular, to understand if families have succeeded in remaining out of homelessness.

As part of that commitment, Focus Ireland's advocacy team tracks tenancy sustainment across the organisation since July 2017. This is part of Focus Ireland's Organisational

Strategy 2017–20.⁶¹ Within this tracking process, Focus Ireland will telephone all client families six months after they have disengaged from the organisation's services to conduct a short survey and assess whether they are *still* in stable accommodation (as per when they disengaged) and, if not, to link the families back in with services if required.

This is viewed by the organisation as an important addition to the arsenal of prevention services. Prevention service staff members themselves are excited by this monitoring opportunity and by what it might offer the services:

'The six-month phone call will be a brilliant addition to our monitoring. We know so little about families after they disengage. I sometimes call people back to check in on them but we are just so busy.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Waterford)

Interestingly, families interviewed expressed mixed reactions to the offer of follow-up contact by the organisation, and these mixed reactions might be borne in mind in due course as Focus Ireland reviews the effect of its six-month follow-up call. When asked about their interest in follow-up contact many families expressed concern that Focus Ireland had done enough for them and that, now they were in secure accommodation, the organisation needed to prioritise other families in greater need.

That said, nine families (26%) stated openly that they would welcome follow-up contact with comments including:

'An email every now and then would be fine.' (Family Interview, Dublin City)

'Maybe a phone call or email every now and then to see how things are going.' (Family Interview, Dublin City)

A further fifteen families (43%) commented that they would be open to receiving contact while not having any expectation of the organisation in this regard. Among others, responses included:

'I'm open to any contact but I recognise there are more needy situations than mine.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'I'd have no bother with any monitoring or call back from Focus Ireland but they are on a budget. It's a case of first come, first served. Now that my case is settled, I wouldn't want to clog up the system. That said, I'd always welcome contact.' (Family Interview, Kilkenny)

Four families (11%) stated that they had no need for follow-up contact, noting:

'I've no need for contact. I've always felt the door was open to me if I needed to go back for any more support. Maybe once a year but there are others who need the support more than I do.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'I'd welcome contact from Focus Ireland at any stage though I don't really feel the need for it.' (Family Interview, Waterford)

'Focus Ireland already is doing enough. I like the way they work and I wouldn't want them to do much more. They have enough on their plate. I know I can call back to them if I need them.' (Family Interview, Dublin City)

⁶¹ And, in particular, prioritising prevention and sustained exits.

The comments above also need to be viewed within the context of seventeen families (49%) noting that they would return to Focus Ireland prevention services if similar difficulties faced them in the future. In these cases, families asserted that the onus was on them to follow up with Focus Ireland as needs arose, rather than the other way around.

5.2 Recommendations for prevention practice

In addition to identifying practical strategies that emerge as consistently effective in supporting families to avoid homelessness, the interviews conducted during this study suggested that attention also be devoted to the manner in which prevention services are offered. In effect, conversations with families indicated that the 'how' of service delivery was as important as the actual practical supports offered. The following captures learning from the practice of Focus Ireland prevention services and offers a number of simple guidelines for how prevention might best be delivered:

5.2.1 Prevention requires a non-judgemental approach

Understandably, families at risk of homelessness are extremely vulnerable. A consistent theme across family interviews in this study was that, at the time of approaching Focus Ireland, the majority of families were in a state of complete desperation. Interviewees commented on the pressure, despair and frustration they experienced while they sought to keep themselves and their families out of homeless services. They also spoke of the huge uncertainty experienced by their children, and the associated anxiety that accompanied that uncertainty.

With such vulnerability comes the need for an empathic, respectful and sensitive response, and a recognition of the courage demonstrated by families reaching out for assistance. As noted earlier in this report, a number of the families involved in this study referred to feeling judged when approaching agencies⁶² for support and highlighted the sense of shame that accompanied having to justify themselves for being at risk of homelessness. Rather than building their confidence to address their situations, these experiences of judgement and shame increased their sense of fear and insecurity.

Families' accounts of their experiences of engaging with Focus Ireland prevention services were very different, however. Families referred to being listened to and to being taken seriously. They emphasised the humane, non-judgemental approach of Focus Ireland prevention services and explained how that approach had demonstrated appreciation for their respective situations. In many cases it had provided the motivation for families to persist with their search for suitable accommodation.

In effect, it became clear from the research data that a non-judgemental approach to homeless prevention builds families' emotional and psychological confidence during a very distressing period. Judgement shames, increases fear and reduces family capacity to address difficulties. Respect strengthens people's resilience.

⁶² Particularly state agencies.

5.2.2 Effective prevention involves addressing families' presenting needs

There is no one *quick fix* solution to the immediate presenting needs of families. While there is often consistency to the type of supports provided to families by the prevention services of Focus Ireland, each family is viewed as unique and as presenting with a unique set of circumstances that need to be considered and subsequently addressed.

It has been highlighted consistently throughout this report that a central feature of effective prevention services involves (i) assessing the respective accommodation needs of individual families, along with other potential difficulties that increase the family's risk of homelessness and (ii) implementing a set of responses that match the presenting needs of the family.

5.2.3 Effective prevention involves a complex response to a complex problem

Reference has been made in this document to the complexity that underpins families' risk of homelessness. A critical learning of this research is that solutions to families' risk of homelessness are rarely simple. It has been stated on a number of occasions that a central and effective feature of Focus Ireland prevention services involves the tailoring of an integrated package of supports to individual families in accordance with their respective presenting needs. This package of supports, increasing families' access to information, capacity-building and entitlements, not only addresses their primary objective of securing accommodation but also addresses other needs essential to sustaining their tenancies.

The approach is both immediate and long-term in its perspective, seeking to ensure that families remain in secure accommodation, both in the immediate and longer-term future. It is a complex response, as required, to a complex problem.

5.2.4 Complex responses require a case management approach

Providing families with an integrated package of supports that matches their risk of homelessness requires time. It rarely involves a one-off engagement whereby families simply receive advice and information and are, thereafter, able to resolve their housing concerns. Effective prevention tends to require multiple and ongoing engagements with families at risk. This is perhaps especially true for families who, having exhausted all options in the private rented market, arrive at the latter end of their notice period seeking support to enable them to avoid homelessness. A central feature of effective prevention practice involves supporting families to navigate the complexities of engaging with public services, especially in relation to entitlements; to deal with landlords when seeking out rented properties; and to build awareness of rights and entitlements. All of this requires time and multiple inputs. Effective case management also requires flexibility in the manner in which prevention services are offered. As above, simplistic responses are unlikely to address complex difficulties faced by families.

5.2.5 Effective prevention services are available to all families at risk of homelessness

The review of the literature on prevention approaches to homelessness in Chapter 1 offered critique on the targeting of prevention services to those considered at risk of homelessness. It suggested that targeted prevention services did little to reduce the numbers of new entrants into homelessness while also drawing attention to the exclusion of those potentially capable of resolving their accommodation situations as well as those of highest vulnerability to homelessness, for whom a successful intervention would have been unlikely. In consequence to this, commentators such as Mackie (2015) argue that prevention assistance should be offered to anyone at risk of homelessness.

This universalist approach is an important hallmark of the prevention services offered by Focus Ireland, particularly its A&I service. Effective prevention approaches recognise the changing structural and economic contexts for family homelessness in Ireland and acknowledge that the threat of homelessness is faced by a wider cohort of families than might otherwise have been considered possible in previous years. The premise of a universalist approach is that any family can be at risk of homelessness and that supports should be available to all such families irrespective of background; family status; economic status; ethnicity and cultural background, etc.

5.3 Longer-term solutions: research participant perspectives on public policy implications

Because the work of Focus Ireland prevention services are orientated towards families, it is natural that the solutions provided through these services would be short-term in nature. As noted in Chapter 4 above, short-term solutions support families in crisis. They do not – and cannot – in any way address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness.

And yet it is the longer-term solutions that will reduce the overall incidence of family homelessness. Feedback from families interviewed during this study, along with feedback from prevention service staff members, suggested that effective State action on the following would go a long way to ensuring longer-term solutions to the risk and incidence of family homelessness:

- ensuring effective implementation of HAP;
- regulation of the private rental market; and
- increasing supply of social housing.

5.3.1 Ensuring effective implementation of HAP

Reference has been made in this document to the importance of HAP to many of the families who participated in this study. Apart from assisting lower income families financially in meeting the costs of rent, it also offers families a minimum lease of two years in a property, the quality of which has been approved. But evidence from this study suggests that there are significant gaps in the delivery of HAP which, rather than reduce families' risk of homelessness, actually increase it.

HAP is a relatively new programme. Despite the large number of families reliant on HAP for their tenancies it remains a 'pilot' programme for the Department of Housing, and there is an openness to reviewing its implementation as issues arise in its roll out. This study highlights a number of current difficulties in the implementation of HAP, which would significantly improve its effectiveness if addressed.

Firstly, it is evident from interviews that many families and many landlords are unclear on the provisions and requirements of HAP. There is a considerable knowledge gap of what is required by both sides.

Secondly, interviewees in this research indicated that the amount provided to families under HAP threshold guidelines *rarely*⁶³ met the full rent requested by landlords, thereby requiring families to top-up rent payments from their own means. While a significant level of discretion in applying these rates now exists, there was little evidence of this on the ground. At the time of interview, most families were managing to cover these additional costs. However, several of the prevention service staff members expressed concern in this regard, highlighting that it placed significant demands on low-income families:

'One of the biggest issues for service users is that the rent cap for HAP rarely meets the full rent requested by landlords. With HAP, your rent cap for a one-parent family with three kids is €750 approximately in Limerick. But rents for a three- or four-bed house are likely to be in the region of €1,000. Clients have to pay €33 themselves plus the top-up between the HAP and the rent. This is too much for many families.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Limerick)

Information from another Focus Ireland staff member⁶⁴ revealed that families in Dublin could be paying a weekly top-up of €90 from their social welfare income. Most low-income families simply could not afford this. In other words, many families that had insufficient means to meet private rental costs – thereby justifying their need for HAP – had insufficient means to pay the top-ups required to secure and sustain their rents. There is nothing novel about this problem. This scenario was also a recognised challenge in the provision of Rent Supplement, HAP's predecessor. However, in the case of Rent Supplement the existence of 'top-up' was recognised as a breach of the scheme's policy objectives, while it is unclear whether HAP 'top-ups' are an intentional part of the scheme or a breach of its rules.

In addition, a number of interviews referred to considerable delays in getting families onto local authority Housing Lists,⁶⁵ which in turn delayed families' access to the HAP. This problem was frequently compounded by delays in the issuing of HAP payments, often resulting in families being in arrears with their rent payments:

'It's hard to describe the amount of stress that a family goes through to get over the line, even families that are on HAP. Frequently, the Council has to pay the tenant's first month's rent and possibly the next couple of months until Limerick County Council get issuing the HAP (Limerick does this for the country). Landlords get confused by this as they don't get the HAP payments in time. This places families at risk.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Dublin)

⁶³ And perhaps more correctly, *never* met the full cost of rent.

⁶⁴ Follow-up interview with Focus Ireland A&I staff member, Dublin, 7 February 2017.

⁶⁵ A prerequisite for families accessing HAP.

Perhaps the most significant challenges facing the HAP pertain to landlords' acceptance of, and full engagement with, the scheme. Information from family and staff interviews indicated that many landlords did not like the HAP; it placed additional requirements on them in terms of paperwork, clarification of their tax affairs and ensuring that their properties were up to standard. It was evident that many landlords did not wish to accept HAP tenancies, once again placing lower-income families at increased risk of homelessness:

'The other strand of our case management is trying to find accommodation that's affordable and that accepts HAP. Finding landlords to accept it is difficult because there's paperwork. There are stories of families going to viewings with cash in hand to give to the landlord to secure tenancy. Our families aren't able for that.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Sligo)

'We've had cases of a family approved for HAP, with payments being made to the landlord before inspection of the property. Then the inspection happens and the Council finds the accommodation substandard. The landlord gets a letter of works to do from the Council. Many are not in a position to do the work and as a result the landlord will find a reason to issue a Notice to Quit. The private rental market is so unstable. If families are receiving supports, they are very vulnerable.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, Kilkenny)

The provision under which households which take up HAP are taken off the Housing List (because they are deemed to have their housing need met) also creates a barrier in taking up the scheme, particularly for families who have been on the Housing List for many years. The system adopted by some Local Authorities of integrating priority on their Housing List and transfer list removes this barrier and should become common policy in all local authority areas.

Finally, there is also evidence that some landlords do not abide by the rules of HAP. For example, families accessing HAP are entitled to a minimum lease of two years. A number of the families involved in this study noted that, though on HAP, they had not received any lease from their landlord and simply hoped that s/he would ultimately abide by the requirements of the system. Focus Ireland staff members endorsed this statement:

'HAP tenancies are meant to be for two years. I've not seen any tenancies signed for two years.' (Interview with Focus Ireland Staff Member, South Dublin)

Against that backdrop, interviewees of this study called for substantial change with regard to the implementation of the HAP. They called for increased clarity on the provisions of HAP and increased consistency in its implementation. They called for more efficient issuing of HAP payments. They argued in favour of incentivising landlords' participation in the scheme while also arguing for greater policy to deter landlords discriminating against families accessing HAP.

5.3.2 Regulation of the private rental market

Several of those who participated in this study remarked that the private rental market in Ireland was 'out of control'. These comments were made across the various study sites – Dublin, Waterford, Sligo, Limerick and Kilkenny. Families noted that they had searched long and hard for affordable accommodation but, in many cases, had been unable to afford the exorbitant rental costs being sought by landlords in their locality. Several who

could take advantage of the HAP/Homeless HAP to secure a property were nevertheless keenly aware of the cost to the public, and felt that it was wrong that landlords could take such advantage of the situation.

Focus Ireland staff highlighted that private landlords recognised that the market was entirely in their favour; that there was more demand for rental properties than supply and, in consequence, that they could demand increasing rent prices from tenants. Where tenants were unable to meet the increasing costs of rent, landlords had found creative and often illegal ways of removing tenants, most notably through the issuing of invalid Notices of Termination. It was suggested in one interview with a Focus Ireland staff member in Dublin that certain landlords were willing to disregard tenancy legislation – even at risk of being taken to court – because the costs of fines imposed through the RTB were less than the potential profits to be made by removing tenants and charging increased rents.

Interviewees commented on the need for greater State regulation of the private rental market, some recommending that the State should regulate and standardise rents so that a fairer rental system could be put in place that would not disadvantage families. They highlighted the need for greater enforcement of existing tenancy legislation to ensure that the rights of families were not being undermined. And they repeated calls for greater efforts to ensure that landlords were deterred from discriminating against families accessing HAP.

5.3.3 Increasing supply of social housing

Reference was made throughout interviews that lack of regulation in the private rental market was compounded by the unavailability of social housing. It is worth repeating that many of the families interviewed during this study had been on the Housing List with their respective local authorities, ranging in duration from two to twelve years. Some also had experienced the frustration of dropping down the list as a result of moving from one local authority catchment to another.

It is also important to point out that reference was made in many interviews to the *unavailability* of social housing over and above the *absence*. In a number of cases families commented on knowing of several boarded-up and unused local authority properties, particularly in urban areas, whilst at the time desperately seeking out accommodation.⁶⁶ In all cases, they commented on a lack of clarity from their respective local authorities concerning the councils' plans for these unused properties.

Consequently, interviewees proposed that greater State effort is needed to increase the availability of social housing, thereby facilitating the clearance of housing lists. Within that context, interviewees argued that policy needs to be in place that obliges local authorities to free up empty properties swiftly and make them available to families in need of accommodation.

⁶⁶ One family had actually listed the properties and presented the list to their local authority.

5.4 Concluding remarks

The overarching conclusion of this research is that Focus Ireland has operated a series of prevention services that have proven effective in the short term in enabling families to avoid entry or re-entry into homelessness. A critical feature of those prevention services is the creation of holistic, family-orientated services, designed to address the immediate and varied presenting needs of families accessing services.

The organisation has managed to create these holistic services in a manner that not only meets the practical housing needs of families but also a broader range of social, economic and emotional needs that accompany the risk of being made homeless. Organisational staff have provided these services in a respectful, non-judgemental and humane manner, demonstrating deep empathy for families and considerable commitment to their work. The emotional support they provided at a time of extreme anxiety was cited by many families as very valuable – indeed the single most important support at a personal level – enabling them to continue the search for a home and maintain in some cases their mental well-being.

As Ireland witnesses growing levels of family homelessness, it is apparent that there is a greater need for prevention services, as offered by Focus Ireland. However, as outlined a number of times in this report, family-orientated prevention services can only provide short-term solutions to family risk. They do not – and cannot – address the structural causes that place families at risk of homelessness. Greater policy commitment from the State is required to bring about longer-term and more sustainable solutions to the incidence of family homelessness.

The researchers would like to thank all of those who contributed to this research process and whose input is reflected in this research report. Particular thanks is due to the 35 families who openly shared their stories with the research team and to the prevention service staff of Focus Ireland who both facilitated data collection and eagerly shared their perspectives on the current crisis affecting families. We wish to recognise the commitment and passion of Focus Ireland in delivering relevant, efficient, high-quality and impactful services to families.

We also wish to acknowledge the impact of homelessness – and risk of homelessness – on the health, well-being and development of families, and we salute the courage and capacity demonstrated by families in dealing with the substantial trauma associated with that risk.

Bibliography

- Busch-Geertsema, V. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2008) 'Effective homelessness prevention? Explaining reductions in homelessness in Germany and England', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 2, pp. 69–95.
- Crane, M., Warnes, A. M. and Fu, R. (2006) 'Developing homelessness prevention practice: Combining research evidence and professional knowledge', *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 14(2), pp. 156–166.
- Culhane, D.P., Metraux, S. and Byrne, T. (2011) 'Prevention-Centred Approach to Homelessness Assistance: A Paradigm Shift?', *Housing Policy Debate* 21(2) pp. 295–315.
- Department of Environment and Local Government (2002) *Homeless Preventative Strategy*. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.
- Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2017) *Dublin Region Families who are Homeless – July* (week of 25–31). Dublin: Dublin Region Homeless Executive.
- Gaetz, S. (2013) 'Ending Youth Homelessness in Canada is Possible: The Role of Prevention' in *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice*, pp. 469–501. (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, The Homeless Hub).
- <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/rough-sleeping-count>
- <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>
- <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness>
- <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>
- <https://www.housingagency.ie/Housing/media/Media/Publications/Summary-of-Social-Housing-Assessment-Needs-2016.pdf>
- Mackie P. (2015) 'Homelessness Prevention and the Welsh Legal Duty: Lessons for International Policies', *Housing Studies*, vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 40–59 (accessible at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2014.927055>)
- Maher, C. and Allen, M. (2014) 'What is preventing us from preventing homelessness? A review of the Irish national preventative strategy', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 8, 2, pp. 119–135.
- Pawson, H., Netto, G., Jones, C., Wager, F., Fancy, C. and Lomax, D. (2007) *Evaluating Homelessness Prevention*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
- Shinn, M., Baumohl, J. and Hopper, K. (2001) 'The Prevention of Homelessness Revisited', *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 1(1) pp. 95–127.
- Walsh, K. and Harvey, B. (2015) 'Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness: The Families' Perspective', Dublin: Housing Agency, and The Insights into Family Homelessness series produced by Focus Ireland, accessible at <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/publications-and-partnerships/research/>

Appendix 1

Template for interviews with Focus Ireland prevention service staff members

- 1 Describe Focus Ireland services available in your area, particularly those that deal with families and are focused on preventing families from entering into homelessness.
- 2 What is your role?
- 3 How do you understand the term *at risk of homelessness* in your work in prevention services? Does it apply only to first timers or do you encounter families who have been in and out of homelessness over a period?
- 4 Describe the families approaching Focus Ireland Prevention Services. Is there a particular profile of who is at greatest risk – in terms of nationality, location, family status, ethnic status, employment status? Are they largely in the private rental market?
- 5 What are the key causes and trajectories for families at risk of family homelessness? Why do people contact the Focus Ireland service? What are the barriers they experience in their efforts to remain out of homelessness?
- 6 In your role referring people, guiding people, coaching people, what are the core responses to particular causes and trajectories, i.e. to what extent does Focus Ireland as an organisation row in around individual cases (or do you primarily refer families to services outside the organisation)? Is there an integrated Focus Ireland response?
- 7 Apart from working directly with families, to what agencies do you refer families?
- 8 What, in your view, works for families in helping them to avoid homelessness? Can you give me an example or examples of families who you supported to a successful resolution of their issue? What worked about what you did and why?
- 9 What constitutes success in prevention work?
- 10 Even where you have had successes with families and helped them to avoid homelessness, are the risks still there for them? Do you find families returning after disengagement? What are their issues? What's the best way to monitor families after they have left your service?
- 11 Can you describe the types of information you hold on families who access your service? Where is that information held?
- 12 If there was something else to be provided to families at risk of homelessness? What might it be?

Appendix 2

Template for family interviews

Theme	Possible questions
1 Family profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">1.1 Family structure (i.e. households involving two partners or lone-parent households)1.2 Family size (i.e. those with less than two dependent children or those with in excess of three children)1.3 Nationality and ethnicity1.4 Employment status1.5 Age profile of head of household1.6 Length of time in current residence1.7 Nature of accommodation (flat, apartment, house)1.8 Nature of tenancy1.9 Are you in receipt of Rent Supplement, HAP or any other housing-related support?
2 Context for approaching Focus Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none">2.1 When did you first engage with Focus Ireland?2.2 Why did you engage with Focus Ireland? What was happening for you and your family at that time?2.3 Before you ever thought about contacting Focus Ireland, did you feel that you had secure tenure in your home and that would continue indefinitely?2.4 When did you first begin to get worried about the security of your home and why? Where were you living at that time? Can you describe the conditions you were living in (size and type of accommodation, private or public rental, price of rent, quality and appropriateness of the accommodation for your family needs)?2.5 Describe the sequence of events from that moment up to the time you contacted Focus Ireland, and the actions that you took to address the emerging problems?

- 2.6 How was this impacting on your lives as a family – physically, mentally, emotionally? Were you or your partner (if applicable) experiencing stress or anxiety? Was this situation impacting on your children? If so, how?
- 2.7 How did you know about Focus Ireland? How did you come to approach Focus Ireland and not another organisation? Were you referred to the organisation or did you make the approach yourself?
- 2.8 Were you in receipt of any housing-related supports at that time? From what agency?
- 2.9 When you first approached Focus Ireland what did you expect or hope to get from the organisation? What were you looking for?
- 2.10 What did you know about your rights and entitlements as a tenant at the time?

3 Support provided by Focus Ireland and impact of support provided by Focus Ireland

- 3.1 How did Focus Ireland support you and your family to stay in your home or to find a new one?
- 3.2 What did they do for you? What support did they provide you?
- 3.3 How long were you involved with Focus Ireland?
- 3.4 Were there different stages to your involvement with Focus Ireland? Can you describe what happened during each individual stage?
- 3.5 How did this enable you to stay in your home or to find a new one?
- 3.6 What new obstacles to your housing emerged during the time you were involved with Focus Ireland? How did Focus Ireland support you to address any emerging obstacles or challenges?
- 3.7 Why and when did you finish your engagement with Focus Ireland? Were you secure in your home at the time of finishing your engagement with Focus Ireland?
- 3.8 What supports or entitlements were you able to access as a result of your involvement with Focus Ireland?
- 3.9 What was the most important aspect of Focus Ireland's support that enabled your family to stay within your home or to find a new one? What worked best for your family and why?
- 3.10 As a result of your involvement with Focus Ireland, are you now aware of your rights and entitlements as a tenant? Are you more confident when dealing with a landlord, the County Council, the Department of Social Protection?
- 3.11 Were there aspects to the support of Focus Ireland which were unhelpful or which actually increased the risk of you having to leave your home?
- 3.12 Are there ways in which Focus Ireland could improve their current services to families like yours and/or are there additional services that Focus Ireland might offer?

4 Family situation since disengagement from Focus Ireland service

- 4.1 What's happened for you and your family since? Are you secure in your current home?
- 4.2 If a similar problem arose again, would you be able to address it yourself or would you need to return to Focus Ireland for additional support? Why?
- 4.3 Since ending your involvement with Focus Ireland, have you had any concerns about your family's home? Can you explain? How are you dealing with those concerns? Have you approached Focus Ireland or a similar organisation for support around other accommodation concerns?
- 4.4 If relevant and applicable, how are these concerns impacting on your lives as a family – physically, mentally, emotionally? Are you or your partner (if applicable) experiencing stress or anxiety? Is this situation impacting on your children? If so, how?

5 Monitoring

- 5.1 How might an organisation like Focus Ireland stay in contact with you and ensure that problems don't arise for you and your family in future?
- 5.2 What kind of contact would you welcome and what kind of contact would you not welcome?

6 Concluding questions

- 6.1 Are you aware of other families who have had similar experiences to yours?
- 6.2 What are the obstacles facing families that place them at greatest risk of being homeless?
- 6.3 What needs to be done – and by whom – around those obstacles and risks?



Focus Ireland Head Office
9-12 High Street
Christchurch
Dublin 8

Tel 01 881 5900
LoCall 1850 204 205
Fax 01 881 5950
Email info@focusireland.ie

focusireland.ie
Registered charity CHY 7220

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

FOCUS
Ireland