

Lone Parents and Homelessness: Presentation to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social Protection 12th January 2017

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to present before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social Protection on the topic of lone parents and homelessness. As we have noted in previous correspondence with the Committee, Focus Ireland has no special expertise concerning the broad range of complex challenges facing lone parents, but we do have insight and experience concerning the somewhat narrower issue of lone parent families facing homelessness, and are grateful for the chance to address the issue.

Lone Parents and Homelessness

Ireland is currently facing a homelessness crisis which is widely recognized as unprecedented. One dimension of that problem is that there are now a very large number of families who are experiencing homelessness, the majority of them for primarily economic reasons. According to the latest official figures there were 1,205 families experiencing homelessness in Ireland. While the largest number of these, 1,023 (84%) are in Dublin, the fastest increases are now outside Dublin.

As these figures rise it is enormously important to remind ourselves that behind each of these statistics is a human story, one of parents struggling to make a life for themselves and their children. It is important to restate that this is not just another social problem, but it is fundamentally wrong, and we must not tolerate it.

For the purposes of this committee the key fact is that of these 1,205 families in emergency homeless accommodation in November 2016, 65% were lone-parent families. Given that the 2011 Census found that 26% (n=215,315) of all families with children were headed by a lone parent, we can be clear that family homelessness falls disproportionately on lone parents. This has been a broadly consistent statistic since the start of this crisis about three years ago.

The official Department of Housing figures do not tell us the gender of the parents, only the gender of all adults accommodated in homeless services. Our own experience on the ground indicates that, while there are a number of male-headed lone households, the vast majority are headed by a woman. Homelessness has been traditionally seen as a problem predominantly affecting men, and the earliest official homeless figures from the current series show only 33% of homeless adults were female in 2014¹. However, the dramatic increase in the number of lone mothers who are homeless has resulted in the number of women who are homeless

¹ Dept. of Housing, April 2014

approaching parity with the number of men - 47% of adults experiencing homelessness are now women.²

These Government figures are corroborated by Focus Ireland's interaction with the families, both as the designated Homeless Action Team for Families in Dublin and in our quarterly telephone surveys of families who presented to Dublin homeless services during a lone month.³

From this work we know that most of the families in emergency homeless accommodation are in receipt of a social welfare payment, though there is also a significant number who are at work. It is relevant to point out that we do not know for certain whether the lone parent families in homeless emergency accommodation are in receipt of the Department of Social Protection's One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP), but this is likely to be the case.

Causes of family homelessness

In addressing the question of why family homelessness falls so heavily on lone parents it might be useful to restate a little of what we know about family homelessness in general. From our own administrative data, our "Insight" series and from research conducted by the Housing Agency and Dublin Region Homeless Executive, we can broadly state that:

- The majority of families that are in homeless emergency accommodation had their last previous home in the private rental sector.
- The pressure that resulted in homelessness for these families has changed over time, but largely involves rising rent levels, inability to meet rising rents (either because Rent Supplement was not linked to real rents or because wages were too low), or decision of the landlord to sell the property or use it for a member of his/her family.
- Some of the factors leading to termination of tenancies are 'normal' turnover, but are resulting in homelessness because the family are unable to find alternative accommodation, due to very limited supply and high rents.
- There is also an identifiable group of families who had no previous housing tenure, and are 'new family formations', attempting to establish an independent home for the first time, and failing.
- Very few families who were previously owner-occupiers have entered emergency homeless accommodation, as yet.
- There is also an identifiable group whose homelessness has been caused, at least in part, by more complex social factors particularly domestic violence. In this regard it is also important to point out that the figures we have used and the services we provide do not include designed 'domestic violence' services, which are funded by Tusla rather than the Department of Housing. This could result in an underestimation of the extent to which homelessness (in the broader sense) is caused by domestic violence.

² Dept. of Housing, November 2016

³ See Focus Ireland research page: <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/publications-and-partnerships/research/>

One parent families and deprivation

Over the period during which the family homelessness crisis has developed, one of the dominant reasons for people becoming homeless has been inability to pay their rent. This can be caused by a variety of factors including rising rents, reduced income due to welfare cuts or job loss and cost-of-living increases in certain areas.

It is well established that lone parent families are a high risk of experiencing poverty and, according to the ESRI, 60% of lone parent families experience basic deprivation⁴. As a result, all these poverty-related causes of homelessness can be expected to impact disproportionately on such families. Basic deprivation means that individuals are unable to secure at least 2 or more basic necessities through a lack of income.

Furthermore, lone parent families are likely to find it more difficult to benefit from the economic recovery through obtaining employment. The ESRI classifies lone parent families as a social risk group due to their difficulty achieving a satisfactory standard of living because of specific barriers to labour market participation. The report notes that: “the barriers are linked to the challenge combining work and sole-caring responsibilities”⁵.

Evictions

Focus Ireland estimates that during 2016, up to one third of families became homeless because their landlords evicted them either to sell the property or to use the property for their own family. Experience from our front-line prevention services strongly suggests that most of these evictions were by buy-to-let landlords with one or two properties who had been forced to sell up by their lending institution because of mortgage arrears.

This particular factor is likely to result in the loss of the existing home for both one and two-parent families, and indeed impacts equally on working families and those relying on social welfare. However, many households evicted through this process find alternative accommodation within their notice period and never enter homeless services. For all the reasons set out above, it would appear likely that lone parent families are less likely to be able to make alternative arrangements for themselves during this period and are therefore more likely to require emergency homeless accommodation.

New family formation

There is evidence that a proportion of the families entering homeless services are “new family formations” which have failed to access suitable accommodation. The proportion of such families among the newly homeless families appears to vary significantly from month to month. Little is known about the specific characteristics of these families but what evidence is available suggests they are very young parents with young children who have left their own birth family due to factors such as overcrowding, conflict and housing instability. Economic and deprivation

⁴ Social Risk and social Class Patterns in Poverty and Quality of Life in Ireland, 2004-2013

⁵ Above, page 3

factors turn these problems into homelessness when these families are unable to find and secure independent homes.

Focus Ireland has proposed a pilot project which would explore the potential of supporting such households, where appropriate, to return to their broader family at an early stage rather than remain in emergency accommodation for long periods. Again, the problem of finding alternative accommodation is obviously more acute for families relying on a lone income. While Homeless HAP has successfully supported families into the rental market following periods in emergency accommodation, the scheme is not designed to address instances of discrimination or bias from landlords.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence also operates as a cause of homelessness for lone-parent families. In our March 2016 telephone survey, 11 of 70 respondents cited domestic violence as the main cause of their most recent experience of homelessness. All these respondents were women and all were experiencing homelessness as a lone parent. A further 5 reported that domestic violence had negatively impacted on their housing stability in the past.⁶ This domestic violence related to both intimate partner violence and violence in the family home.

As noted above, this data only relates to families entering mainstream homeless accommodation funded by Section 10 of the Housing Act. Specialist services responding to domestic violence are funded by Tusla and are not included in the data. We are not questioning this division of services, funding or reporting, but we do argue for a higher level of governance where these different elements are brought together to provide appropriate responses. One of the most pernicious effects of large scale economic homelessness is that it draws attention away from the social causes of homelessness which continue unabated within the wider crisis.

Lone Parenting in Emergency Accommodation

Focus Ireland has been designated as the Family Homeless Action Team by the DRHE. This now extensive and experienced team supports families experiencing homelessness in the Dublin region. As such, our staff have an in-depth knowledge of the difficulties faced by families living in emergency accommodation. (The role of this team was set out in our Briefing to the Oireachtas in December last year and a copy of this has been made available to the Committee).

These difficulties are often compounded for those parenting alone. Even routine aspects of parenting can become complicated due to living in confined spaces which are not conducive to parenting or family life. Accessing cooking facilities, for example, can be particularly difficult. Much of the accommodation does not provide such facilities so families have to live on costly convenience foods. Some do have access to shared kitchens. Staff from the Family Homeless Action Team report that accommodation regulations frequently state that children are not

⁶ Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-into-Family-Homelessness-No-4-2016-Telephone-Survey-of-Families-that-Became-Homeless-during-March-2016.pdf>

allowed to be present in the kitchen. However, they are also not allowed to be left alone in the room. This leaves lone parents in a difficult and compromised position. We understand that the DRHE are looking at this issue in the context of examining standards and regulations throughout the accommodation they contract.

For families with a number of children, getting children to different schools on time, especially where there are frequent moves of emergency accommodation, can be all the more challenging for lone parents. Balancing employment responsibilities also becomes more demanding. In general, the practical issues experienced by all families are even more problematic for families where there is only one responsible adult available.

The responses to these issues have to be carefully formulated to ensure that supports that are put in place do not lead to institutionalisation or the disempowerment of parents.

It is important to note some important recent initiatives which have been taken, many of them set out under Action 1.5 of Rebuilding Ireland. These include: improved liaison with existing child welfare services, access to early years education, practical supports for daily family life, access to school transport, supports and advice on nutrition.

- Focus Ireland has secured funding from a corporate donor to assist families with travel to school costs. The Focus Ireland Family HAT has been working closely with Tusla and the Department of Child and Youth Affairs to put in place a longer term solution, and an initial programme giving access to LEAP cards was run in last 2016.
- The Family HAT is also working with the DYCA and the Minister's Office in implementing the commitment to facilitate homeless families to obtain the same access to early childhood education as is available to all families. This means that children can have time away from their environment, where they are well cared for, and where they can benefit from interaction with other children and have space to play. It also gives the parents time to set up and attend viewings to help the family move out of homelessness.
- The DYCA and Dept. of Health have funded Focus Ireland to commission research into food access and the nutritional health of families living in emergency accommodation. This research is being undertaken by Dr Michelle Share, Trinity College Dublin, and is currently at the fieldwork stage.

Focus Ireland has also, from its own resources, commissioned further research which should shed some light on the causes and solutions to family homelessness, specifically:

- Qualitative research with 25 families which have exited homelessness to their own home. This is being conducted by Dr Kathy Walsh and Brian Harvey and is at fieldwork stage.
- Qualitative and quantitative research into families who were at high risk of homelessness but where homelessness was prevented. This is being conducted by Neil Haran and Séan O'Shiochru research consultants. This is currently at the research planning and design stage.

- Regular telephone survey reports of the profile and accommodation history of families who enter homelessness (see Insights into Family Homelessness Series on Focus Ireland website)

Key areas for action

General interventions for all homeless families

It is important to note that most of the actions and policy changes that would benefit homeless lone parent families are the same as those which would assist all lone parents and all homeless families. The representative organisations for lone parents are best placed to set out the policy changes which are needed to improve the situation of all lone parents.

Some of the policy changes we have called for to support families that are homeless, which would also be beneficial to lone parent families, include:

Preventing homelessness:

- the reform of the private rented sector to transform it into a stable and secure accommodation option,
- the introduction of family mediation services,
- an increase in basic social welfare rates to bring them in line with inflation,
- more effective and pro-active advice and information programmes. E.g. In June 2016, Focus Ireland ran a very successful pilot prevention campaign targeting families at risk of homelessness in Dublin 15. We collaborated with the local Department of Social Protection to reach families in receipt of rent supplement. An evaluation of the campaign shows that we successfully reached those at risk, and were able to assist them once they contacted us. We believe that similar targeted prevention campaigns in other areas could be as successful.

Supporting exits from homelessness:

- accelerated building of social housing in viable communities, with prioritising of allocation to longer term homeless families, with supports as needed,
- an annual independent review of rent supplement rates to ensure they are keeping pace with the rental market,
- policing of landlords refusing to accept tenants in receipt of social welfare payments,

Actions specifically directed as the needs of homeless Lone Parent families

We do not have reliable information about the specific problems facing lone parent families who are homeless to propose measures targets at their specific needs. However we believe it would be worthwhile to undertake research in two areas in order to provide a better understanding of lone parents and homelessness.

- **Do lone parents face a higher risk of long-term homelessness?** We know the proportion of homeless families that are homeless but we do not know if lone parents are

experiencing additional difficulties in exiting homelessness. Our knowledge of the risk of deprivation among these families would suggest that this is at least a risk. If it is the case it would mean that the average stay in homelessness for lone parent families would be longer than two parent families, with consequent social and educational problems. The limited evidence available to Focus Ireland in fact shows a higher rate of exit among lone parents (77% of families supported out of homelessness in 2016 were lone parents), but a more extensive study of flow patterns would be required to ascertain the broader reality.

- **Does the labour market conditionality rule for OFP Social welfare payments increase the risk of homelessness?** A small number of lone parent families have claimed that the triggering of this conditionality rule when the children reach a certain age contributed to their homelessness. While it is difficult to see how this rule could be a trigger for homelessness, we believe that because the claim has been made by a number of families, it would be worth undertaking a small study to see if there is any problem, in design, delivery or perception which could be responded to.