Finding a Home

Families' Journeys out of Homelessness

Dr Kathy Walsh
and Brian Harvey

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

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20 September 2017

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Introduction

1.1   Introduction and background

Over the last four years, the number of families becoming homeless across the country has grown consistently, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. The problem of family homelessness continues to worsen every month. Although some families do leave homelessness, a larger number are becoming homeless. Recent figures published by Focus Ireland reported that 87 families became newly homeless in Dublin in January 2017. This means that an average of 72 families became newly homeless each month in the previous twelve months, culminating in a total of 1,365 families and 2,895 children homeless nationwide in Ireland in June 2017. The number of families who were homeless increased by 54% from January 2016 to June 2017.

To date, no research has been undertaken in an Irish context to document and understand the ways in which families exit homelessness. Little is known about the more medium-term impacts of these experiences on these families, and on the overall well-being of parents and children.

1.2   Literature on families exiting homelessness

Existing research literature on family homelessness, on the complex nature and dynamics of homeless exits, as well the factors that facilitate housing stability over time, remains fragmented and underdeveloped. In the past decade, longitudinal research on homeless populations in Ireland and elsewhere (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Aubry et al., 2013; Jones and Pleace, 2010; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; O'Donoghue Hynes, 2015), as well as on homeless families in particular (Culhane et al., 2007), taught us that homelessness is much more likely to be episodic or transitional, with a large majority of those who experience homelessness returning to stable housing relatively quickly. As a result, research attention has become increasingly focused on the pathways that people take through and out of homelessness in an effort to shed light on the conditions that either impede or promote patterns of residential stability. Central to this research is the investigation of homeless 'exits' and the factors or mechanisms that shape individuals' routes out of homelessness to stable housing. While only a relatively small number of mostly US-based studies have attempted to investigate the paths taken

by families as they transition out of homelessness, the role of welfare receipts, subsidies and affordable housing emerged as the most salient factors in predicting independent exits and facilitating homeless families' stability in the research literature.

This study examines, for the first time in an Irish context, the process of exiting homelessness and sustaining housing among a sample of 25 families who recently exited homelessness in the Dublin region. A core goal is to use qualitative methods to identify and explore the conditions that either promote or inhibit residential stability among families with experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland.

1.3 Aims

This research aims to:

› explore the processes and factors that enable families to exit homelessness;
› understand the factors that enable families to sustain these exits;
› understand which elements of Focus Ireland practice are effective and which ones can be improved; and
› explore the impact of the experience of homelessness on families and children.

The study also has a number of specific objectives:

1 Identify and understand factors that resolve homelessness among families:

› Understand the factors that facilitate or impede how families access and secure housing.
› Appraise the effectiveness of service responses in facilitating exits out of homelessness among families.
› Understand the capacities of families themselves in the process of exiting homelessness.
› Further our knowledge on sustained exits from homelessness among families.
› Understand ways to support families and children after they transition out of homelessness.

2 Provide Focus Ireland with evidence-based strategies, actions and recommendations to help support families out of homelessness and into secure and sustainable housing.

3 Provide key policy recommendations for government on both the practical and emotional supports that assist families in exiting homelessness and in developing positive life outcomes.

Methodology

2.1 The sampling framework

The first task of the research was the development of a sampling framework to ensure that a representative cross-section of 25 families who left homelessness some time over the period from 1 March 2014 to September 2016 was selected for interview across the four Dublin local authority areas.

The sampling framework was designed to ensure a cross-section of family types and characteristics. First, by way of family type, it included two parents with children; single mothers with children and single fathers with children. Some had experience of separation or divorce, with, in some cases, children living with or between different parents. Second, it included different family sizes, from families with a single child to larger families, for example, five children. Third, it took account of the different ages of children, from infants to adult children. Fourth, it included migrant and ethnic minority families.

2.2 Engaging with the families

The initial contact with the families selected was made by a Focus Ireland staff member. Accessing current contact details for many of the families proved a challenge and some of the families randomly selected could not be contacted because of out-of-date contact details. Some families also refused the invitation to participate for a range of reasons, including not wanting to share their information, poor health, or, having moved out of homelessness, they did not want to revisit the experience. Where families declined the invitation to participate, another family with a similar profile was selected and was in turn approached by a Focus Ireland staff member with an invitation to participate in the study.

For a small number (eight) of the approximately 100 families randomly selected, it was found that their tenancy had failed and they had returned to emergency accommodation, while in two further cases the family unit had been separated, with the children either in care or living with a family member, while the parent was living in adult emergency accommodation. A decision was made by Focus Ireland not to include these families in the study, but instead to look at these families in more depth at a later stage.

Once a family consented to participate in the research, they were contacted by the researchers conducting the interviews to arrange a suitable date and location for the interview. The interviews took place in the accommodation where the families were living at the time of the interview. The interview was conducted with the nominated head of the household; where a couple was present, both parties participated in the interview. The length of interviews varied, being typically an hour, but some were shorter and others longer. All of the families interviewed received a €50 'One for All' voucher from Focus Ireland as an acknowledgement of their assistance.

2.3   Profile of the families interviewed

Almost all of the families interviewed had completed family formation and, although their age was not asked, most appeared to be in the age range 20 to 40.

The majority (16 of the 25) became homeless as a result of being required to leave the private rental property where they were living. Other reasons families became homeless included domestic violence or being asked to leave the family of origin home (generally because of overcrowding). Two of the families selected to be interviewed had become homeless as a result of evictions/being forced out, while one parent who had been living in residential care was required to leave as a result of becoming pregnant. Just two families became homeless as a result of not being able to pay their mortgage.

The majority (20) of the families interviewed were one-parent families, while just three had a male head of household. Seven of the families were headed by migrant parents and/or Irish Travellers. The number of children per household ranged from one to five children. See Table 2.1 for a profile of the families interviewed.

Family size		
	One child:	**7** families
	Two children:	**14** families
	Three children:	**2** families
	Four children:	**1** family
	More than four children:	**1** family
Nationality	Irish:	**18**
	Other nationality:	**7**
No. of children under 18	**50**	
	0–<5 years:	**20** children
	5–<10 years:	**20** children
	10–<15 years:	**7** children
	15–<18 years:	**3** children
No. of adult children aged 18 and over	**11**	

Household type	One-parent family (with female head)			**17**
	One-parent family (with male head)			**3**
	Couple			**5**

Breakdown by local authority area	Dublin City Council			**13**
	South Dublin County Council			**6**
	Fingal County Council			**4**
	Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council			**3**

Length of time the family indicated they were homeless	1<3 months			**1** family
	≥6–<9 months			**6** families
	≥9–<12 months			**2** families
	≥12–<15 months			**6** families
	≥18–<21 months			**4** families
	≥24 months			**4** families
	Unknown			**2** families

When the family exited homelessness

	2013	2014	2015	2016
Q 1	**1**	–	**3**	**2**
Q 2	–	**1**	**5**	**1**
Q 3	–	**3**	**3**	**2**
Q 4	–	**2**	**1**	–
Total	**1**	**6**	**12**	**5**

In addition, one family's recollection of when they become homeless was very poor (it was either 2014 or 2015).

Table 2.1 · Profile of the families interviewed

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Findings: Supports and impediments to exiting homelessness

3.1 Processes and factors that enabled families to exit homelessness

Identification and securing of a suitable rental property

Family exit from homelessness was dependent on the identification and securing of a suitable property, whether private rented, approved housing body or local authority housing. The extent to which families took ownership of this process varied. Some family units were very proactive in keeping in regular contact with their local authority as well as independently seeking suitable private rental accommodation.

All of the families who reported trying to find suitable private rental accommodation found it a challenging process. The primary challenges associated with finding rental accommodation were identified by the families as affordable rent, the property location, the quality and cleanliness of the accommodation on offer, as well as the challenge of finding a landlord willing to accept a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

'We needed to find someplace near to family, as, if I am ever to get back to education and get a job I will need them to help with the kids. Being on your own you really need that backup.'

'We looked at so many places, but the landlords did not want HAP or Rent Supplement. We just could not compete.'

These and other challenges clearly contributed to some families abandoning the process of looking for private rental accommodation relatively quickly. Other families continued with the process of looking for private rental accommodation for well over 12 months until they were able to locate a suitable property.

'We must have looked at 1,000 places. I am not joking. I looked at places every week and in all of those places I only found one agent that would accept me and he only accepted me because he knew the place was not great. I told him I did not care and that I would clean it and sort it out.'

The process of looking for private rental accommodation was generally considered easier where there were two parents.

'It was impossible for me to try and find a rental property. I had no one to mind the children and I could not bring them with me. No landlord wants a one-parent family with young children.'

Table 3.1 provides details of how the families found the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness.

Type of accommodation	How the family found the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness	No. of families
Approved Housing Body (AHB) accommodation	Local authority connected the family with the approved housing body	4
	Local authority connected the family with the approved housing body with the involvement of the key worker	4
Local authority accommodation	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation (with input from key worker)	7
	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation following extensive input from medical staff	1
	Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation (The family presented themselves weekly at their offices.)	1
RAS (Rental Accommodation Scheme)	Local authority located the RAS accommodation for the family	1
Private rental	Key worker informed family about HAP and the family found the property	1
	HAP, with key worker input	5
	HAP, without key worker input	1

Table 3.1 · How the families interviewed found their accommodation

Many families found their accommodation through their local authority. Smaller numbers accessed the private rental sector (using HAP) with the support of their key worker.

Once the majority of the families exited homelessness, they reported that the extreme strain of their homeless situation generally lifted relatively quickly, especially for those who relocated to local authority or approved housing body accommodation where they had longer-term security of tenure.

Enablers

The factors that enabled and supported families to exit homelessness included the capacity and the tenacity of the parent/s to engage with the local authority as well as their capacity to seek out and view rental properties. What was very apparent was that this experience

greatly tested the social skills and personal resilience of each of the families interviewed and was particularly stressful for families who did not have the backup of wider family/ community support.

> 'We found the whole experience very stressful and we were lucky my mum and my sister helped us out in every way they could. They were there for the kids and they were there for me. They kept me sane.'

> 'It was so tough to deal with it all and I had no backup. There was just me and my kid. There were nights when I just cried and cried. It was so difficult'.

Three families exited homelessness because of their particular family circumstances (e.g. a new baby with medical complications). For other families, it was the experience of living in very close quarters with one another that provided a key driver to get out.

> 'We had to get out. The kids were driving each another mad and they were driving me mad. The place was too small for the three of us for very long.'

In other cases, families reported that it was the information provided by, and subsequent support from, their key worker that supported their exit from homelessness.

Impediments

The vast majority of the families interviewed reported being deeply negatively affected by becoming homeless. A small number reported finding themselves drawn into activities in which they otherwise would not have engaged, absorbing all of their energies.

> 'I started taking drugs. I was not myself. I see now that I was too easily led. I just didn't care.'

For some families, the impact of being homeless was clearly compounded and exacerbated by particular life events, some of which had contributed to their homelessness, leaving them with limited capacity and energy (e.g. death of a partner/close family member, an unplanned pregnancy). Many of the families interviewed also reported that the day-to-day reality of living in homeless accommodation over an extended period of time had caused them significant stress, affecting both their sleep and ultimately their mental health.

3.2   Processes and factors that enabled families to sustain their exits

Enabling factors

Key enabling factors included affordable rent deducted at source, the location of the new accommodation close to family and friends, and, for families who moved into local authority or approved housing body accommodation, a feeling of security, which in turn saw them seeking to make the place their own. Responsive landlords also helped families to feel secure in their accommodation. It was also very clear from the interviews that the shorter the period of time a family was homeless, the quicker the family members were able to adjust to living independently. Younger children appeared to adapt and settle more quickly in their new accommodation. Older children (teenagers) generally took longer to adapt, particularly where they had to change schools.

'We were very lucky. We were not homeless for very long, especially compared with other people. The kids were very young and were so happy to have space to play when we moved. We were able to quickly make the place feel like home. I am not sure now whether the younger ones realised we were even homeless. All they remember is the hotel and the lift and I am very happy about that.'

Impediments to sustaining exits

Among the most frequently identified impediments indicated by the families in relation to sustaining a tenancy were issues linked with the poor quality and location of the accommodation, money pressures (linked to sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation) as well as the additional challenges some of the families interviewed were dealing with (e.g. no previous history of living independently, very significant health issues, etc.)

'Although it is a modern building, there is no insulation. The walls are cold to the touch on the inside and there is white mould on the outside. There is no communal heating system and, although electric storage heaters are provided, they cost €50 to set up and €13 a day to operate. We cannot afford this, so we use two small mobile electric oil heaters for just a few hours a day (gas heaters are prohibited). There is a water immersion system, but it does not work so there is no hot water. Neither are there vents in rooms, so condensation is a problem. The lift was apparently converted to a ventilation shaft for the building as a whole. It is a multi-storey building with no evident fire escape.'

Other families reported that their accommodation was too small or was going to be too small either because of new children born/due to be born after the family was housed, or indeed siblings getting to the point that it is no longer appropriate for them to share a room. In one case, one of the families was placed in first-floor accommodation with stairs, posing a particular risk for one of their children with significant health and mobility issues. Other families reported that their accommodation was located too far from family supports and that this was proving an issue in terms of access to affordable childcare.

'My ma was going to look after the youngest so I could go back and get my qualification. This cannot happen now as I am two buses away from her and cannot afford other childcare.'

It was also the case that a small number of families reported having to deal with some difficult neighbours and in one case an ongoing campaign of anti-social behaviour.

Many of the families who moved into local authority or private rented accommodation reported that it was sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation or, to all intents and purposes, completely unfurnished. These families were immediately faced with the challenge of obtaining beds, furniture, furnishings, white goods (cooker and/or microwave), washing machine, kettle, and, in many cases, floor covering or a replacement for the existing floor covering which was often in very poor condition.

'There was nothing here and I had no money so for two weeks we slept on the floor. Then I got a loan for some essentials – kitchen appliances, beds and a table and chairs. I am now having to pay this off. I just have to hope nothing else goes wrong or we will be in trouble.'

Many of the families report that money is a struggle. The majority of the families reported being dependent on social welfare payments, with little left over after they have paid their rent, bills and food.

> 'The pressure points always come back to money. We need money to live and we never have quite enough and I am always scared that some emergency will come up that I need money for and that is a slippery slope to losing the house.'

Some of the families reported that they had no previous history of living independently, while others found managing a household (following a period of homelessness) an ongoing challenge.

> 'I was so institutionalised. I had forgotten how to shop, how to budget. I think I was in homeless accommodation for so long that I still find it hard. At one level it is great and at another I am so very lonely. There is no one to talk to when the kids go to bed. I am truly on my own and alone.'

3.3 Services role in supporting families to exit homelessness

The principal services that families selected[1] for interview reported had contributed to their exits from homelessness were on the voluntary and not-for-profit side – Focus Ireland and the Society of St Vincent de Paul – and on the statutory side, their local authority, the Department of Social Protection, and others.

Focus Ireland

The majority of the families reported that their Focus Ireland key worker/s[2] played a central role in supporting them to exit homelessness. The families who were able to differentiate between their key worker and their Support to Live Independently (SLI) worker also believed that the SLI worker had an important role in helping them to get established in their new tenancy. The support provided was both moral and practical and both were regarded as equally important by the families. Many of the families interviewed also particularly valued the role of the key worker as an advocate, regularly contacting the local authority on their behalf and/or telephoning prospective landlords where necessary.

> 'We knew so little on how we could or should respond to our situation, we didn't know what a HAP was or how it worked. That is why our key worker was so important because she explained to us what our options were and what the real wait times were for these different options.'

> 'The [SLI] worker helped me get the bills all in my name and got me sorted with the household budget system so I don't have to worry about bills any more'.

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[1] A robust and random sampling strategy was used (overseen by the researchers to ensure there was no sampling bias in the selection of families for interview).

[2] Note that the term 'key worker' is used throughout, although different titles may be applied to the post (e.g. case worker, case manager, etc.).

Society of St Vincent de Paul

On the not-for-profit side, the other prominent organisation was the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP). The assistance provided by the society took various forms, including money, vouchers for food, help with form-filling, befriending and moral support, furniture – beds, tables, chairs, help with school books and vouchers for new school uniforms as well as Christmas presents and Christmas hampers.

> '**They (SVP) were good to us when we needed it.**'

In a few cases the families reported that the SVP did not help. The reasons given for not helping varied from family to family.

> '**There was a SVP van that came around the estate with food, but we stopped it after a while. It was embarrassing. It was like begging.**'

The local authority

The most important statutory body in relation to the accommodation of homeless families is the local authority. In the absence of a stock of affordable housing it was not surprising to find that a significant number of the families were frustrated with the inability of their local authority to provide them with (a) access to suitable emergency accommodation and (b) access to suitable long-term accommodation. It was also the case that the processes and practices employed by some local authorities to undertake their housing function attracted strong criticism from the families interviewed. The key problem areas included:

> While government policy (*Rebuilding Ireland*) emphasises the importance of prevention, local authority practice was not perceived by the families to focus on prevention. Families presenting to the local authority as imminently homeless reported being sent away and told not to come back until they were actually homeless. Few families reported being informed by the local authority of agencies that might help to prevent homelessness.

> The families reported presenting to their local authority highly stressed and traumatised, fearful of the family unit being broken up. Many of those interviewed described their treatment by officials as unsympathetic, and found this difficult to deal with. The families also reported that there were a small number of staff who were particularly challenging to deal with because of their moralizing comments, attitudes and behaviour. The families were aware of the significant stress the staff were under but considered these attitudes and behaviour 'unacceptable'.

> The advice of local authorities to some of the families interviewed to locate their own long-term move-on accommodation resulted in some families pursuing, often fruitlessly and for long periods, unavailable opportunities in the private rental sector.

> The practice of some local authorities which requires homeless families to confirm their continuing homelessness with high frequency, either in person or by phone, is, according to the families interviewed, time-consuming, stressful, physically exhausting, expensive and distressing.

> A small number of families were told by their local authority to 'self-accommodate' (i.e. the practice whereby the local authority, after accepting a household as homeless, requires the family to source its own emergency accommodation in a hotel which is paid for by the local authority). This process added considerable stress to families.

> The operation by some local authorities of a refusal policy (which requires families to take the second property they are offered), whilst lawful, is both challenging and subjective. Families interviewed as part of this study reported receiving what they considered to be 'unreasonable' first offers, including properties in locations that were either not in their preference area/s, properties in substandard condition, and/or properties that were located in environments that the parents considered unsafe for children (i.e. with high levels of anti-social behaviour). Under the current system, the determination of what is 'reasonable' is made by the local authority, with no meaningful appeals system, for example, that might be able to consider issues like levels of anti-social behaviour. The consequence of this refusals policy was that the families generally accepted second offers, however unsuitable, rather than face the risk of removal from the housing list.

> Several families reported having direct experience of being removed from the local authority housing waiting list without their knowledge or consent. Given that the removal of a household from the local authority housing waiting list has serious consequences for that household, it is important that this does not happen and that, where it does happen, a transparent appeals system should be put in place to ensure that any errors made can be addressed.

Department of Social Protection

The families who were eligible for support from the Department of Social Protection indicated that the department had provided them with exceptional needs payments to assist with the cost of furnishing and kitting out their new accommodation. While many of the families would have appreciated a larger payment, this system appeared to work speedily and efficiently, with no instances recorded of difficulties or poor staff interactions.

Other groups that supported the families to exit homelessness

Some of the families contacted their local public representatives around the time they were becoming homeless, while some continued to contact them while they were homeless. Other organisations that families received support from included Threshold, their church (various denominations), Depaul Ireland, the health services, local schools and family members.

3.4   Gaps in services

The families identified various gaps in services, including:

> the lack of services for children who are homeless (summer activities, afterschool services, etc.);
> the lack of supports for parents seeking to deal with their children's challenging behaviour when they are homeless;
> the need for parents to be able to access counselling (and relationship counselling) services when they are homeless;
> the need for peer support groups to assist individuals who are homeless to manage their stress levels.

Findings: The impact of homelessness on families

4.1 Impacts on children

Where children were young (five and under), and they were homeless for six months or less, from the perspective of these parents, the impact on many of these children appeared limited. According to the parents, the impact on older children was more significant.

> 'Our 14-year-old didn't do well in school (when we were homeless). He didn't study. There was no place quiet for him to study and he was too tired from all the travelling we had to do to get to school. He was always wanting to sleep. Things are starting to improve but he has lost the good studying habits he used to have, so I have stopped him playing football till things improve.'

> 'My eldest has been deeply affected by it all, by being homeless and now by having to live in an impossible situation (the family is the victim of anti-social behaviour). She was pulled off her bike outside the house and is now afraid to go out.'

Some older children appeared to recover quickly. One of the families reported how, when they were homeless, their daughter attended the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and saw a counsellor. After being relocated to a good apartment, the family reported that their daughter had improved: 'she was much better, more focused, studying and behaving normally – quite a change.'

According to the families interviewed, one of the biggest challenges for their children was dealing with the boredom associated with living in a single room with the rest of the family. One family described how their children (3 and 5 years) were initially excited about the idea of living in a hotel, but quickly got bored. The families described how has it was for them to deal with 'no one speaking to us', 'people keeping themselves to themselves' and 'day-to-day living in poor conditions'.

> 'Our son's behaviour went out of control. He was so bored. There was nothing for him to do.'

> 'My daughter's behaviour changed. She fought with me and with her dad (which was unheard of). She cried a lot and acted out.'

Another issue the parents interviewed were clearly worried about was the impact on their children of exposure to activities that they would not have witnessed were they not in emergency accommodation.

'The fact that we (me and my partner) split up when we were in homeless accommodation means the children heard more than they should. It was hard for them to see their mum and dad fighting and they heard and saw stuff that we both wish they didn't.'

'Living where we did, my children saw things that I did not want them to see. This has marked them. I know it has. They saw children taken off their parents. They saw people shooting up. They saw the ambulance come to treat a woman who had taken an overdose on the landing outside our room. They have had to grow up faster and harder than we would have ever wanted for them.'

One of the one-parent families reported that they had to make the difficult decision to send their youngest child to live with their parents (outside of the country) and continue to worry that this may, in time, have an impact on the child.

For many families, moving into their new home and out of homelessness marked an improvement in behaviour and mood, but this was not the case for all.

'We had to change schools when we moved here but could not find a school very close, so the children may have to move schools again. This is particularly hard on one of the children who finds change hard. She is upset about the first change and is finding it very hard to settle. I am not sure how she is going to cope if she has to change again.'

'When we were homeless we were stuck together in such a tiny space. Now we have more space the boys want to do things in their own rooms. It can be a battle to get them to sit down as a family and eat together.'

One of the families recounted the story of their four-year-old asking them whether being homeless was 'some form of punishment' and if it was what they had done wrong. Several of the families referred to a loss of discipline. One of these families described the impact in the following terms: 'They became bold. It became "I want" instead of "please". It was hard for us to say "no" when we were homeless and they became spoiled in that way.'

4.2   Impacts on parents

All of the families indicated that being homeless had many negative impacts for the parents. For some of the families interviewed, the impacts were practical and economic, with work and study having to be abandoned.

'I lost my job when we became homeless. I just could not get there and get the kids to and from school.'

'I loved college but I had to let it go. Hopefully I will get back to it at some stage when things are more settled.'

Other families and parents indicated that homelessness had a negative impact on their weight.

'When I was homeless I put on a lot of weight. We ate a lot of junk food. This did not make me feel good about myself and I am finding the weight very hard to shift. Sometimes I disgust myself.'

> 'When I was homeless I lost a lot of weight. I had no appetite and I walked everywhere to save money. I looked ill and my clothes were falling off me. I am better now but still don't have much of an appetite.'

For others, the most significant impact was their perceptions of themselves and their emotional well-being, which was in turn linked to their overall health and well-being.

> 'Being homeless was so overwhelming. I never felt safe. I never slept a full night. I never felt the kids were safe. I was a nervous wreck at the end of it all.'

> 'He was easily led and with people in the hotel selling drugs and him with access to our money, he got involved in drugs. Once he was in, it was a slippery slope. He and I spilt up quickly after that and then he was gone. It was just me and the kids.'

> 'My father died in (home country) and because we were homeless I was not able to travel for the funeral. That was so upsetting. It's not something I am ever going to be able to forget.'

Some of the parents indicated that they had to change their behaviour in order to survive when they were homeless.

> 'I had to get tough and toughen up when I became homeless because there were people screaming in your face and you had to defend yourself. I didn't want my son to think that I was weak. He needed me to be strong. I needed to be strong.'

Another parent, describing the impact of the experience of homelessness, contrasted her mental health while homeless and after homelessness in the following terms: 'When I was homeless, I was suicidal. Now my brain is my own again. I felt brand new when I moved in.'

Other parents described how they had 'mood swings', they 'never stopped crying' and in one or two cases how they considered killing themselves and would have done so were it not for their children. Several parents described how they had turned to prescription medication. Quite a number stopped taking these medications quite quickly 'fearful of becoming addicted'; as one parent described it, 'I stopped for fear of turning into a zombie.'

Some of the parents described how they had sought to access psychological help through their GP to cope with the depression, only to be told that the waiting list for an appointment or assessment was 12 months. None of those interviewed who sought this support got it.

Another parent described the impact of homelessness on her in the following terms: 'It was awful. I lost weight. I had a nervous breakdown and I miscarried. I did manage to get psychological in-patient help, followed by three to four months on anti-depressants.' This parent went on to report that she keeps reliving the experience of what she described as the worst winter of her life and never wants to set foot in a hotel again.

Some of the parents had also been clearly distressed and indeed traumatised by what was described as the absence of a 'place of safety and security'.

> 'The accommodation where we were placed was violent and unsafe. One man was killed there and our own child had a fall.'

> 'Where we were, there was a single washing machine for eight or nine families which didn't spin and which you had to stand over "to make sure you got your own clothes back.'

Surviving homelessness was something the majority of parents interviewed were proud that they had been able to do, describing it in the following terms:

> 'I realise I am strong. I am strong because of my daughter and I never want to go back there (homelessness) again.'

> 'For the first time in a long time I am starting to make plans again. I have just got a place on a Community Employment (CE) scheme and am looking forward to starting again.'

Some parents reported being particularly affected by the loss of their personal possessions associated with becoming homeless. Many of the parents made reference to the way in which they 'lost everything', especially regretting losing family photos, while the children reported missing their collectibles and new toys. One large family detailed how when they became homeless all they had was 'one case and the clothes we were wearing'.

The parents interviewed generally found that being homeless was expensive, largely due to food[3] and travel[4] costs. Many of the families reported that the money they had left after food and travel was very limited and was generally spent on purchases for birthdays and Christmas presents for the children. This meant that most of the families left emergency accommodation with little or no savings to help them equip their new homes.

According to some of the families, the quality of the emergency accommodation the family was placed in had a significant impact on parental stress levels. Where the accommodation provided was of good quality, the parents interviewed were clearly less stressed by their situation. Where the accommodation was poor, or where the accommodation was noisy and/or there were levels of anti-social behaviour, this was a significant cause of stress for those parents. For other families interviewed, it was the attitudes of the staff in the different types of emergency accommodation that had the biggest impact on the parents. In some instances, families reported that 'kind' staff in less than ideal emergency accommodation made the accommodation more bearable, while in other better quality accommodation, the negative attitudes of staff – and in some cases their decision to separate the families from regular guests – had a negative impact.

Without exception, the families interviewed were very clear that becoming homeless and being homeless had a very negative impact on their various relationships and particularly between parents and couples. At least two of the families indicated that the

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[3] See Focus Ireland publication by Share, M. and Hennessy, M. (2017) Food Access and Nutritional Health of Families living in Hotel Accommodation.

[4] Meeting the transport costs associated with living in emergency accommodation (at a distance from the schools children are attending) is a challenge for families who are homeless. Families with cars are much better able to get their children to and from school, sometimes travelling long distances to do so. Buses take longer, and the radial nature of Dublin's transport system means that two buses may be involved each way. Often, bus-dependent parents have nowhere to stay when their children are in school, but those with cars can wait in their cars during school hours. These transport issues can have an impact on time use and levels of stress, tiredness and frustration.

parents had separated while becoming homeless and two couples reported that they had split up while homeless.

> 'We stuck it together in homeless accommodation for four months which was very hard. Then there was a fight when he lost it and attacked me. I had to get help and the guards were called. It was horrible, and it was horrible that it happened in such a public place. After it happened he had to leave and that left me alone with the boys.'

> We had so many rows, the relationship went down the drain. Ultimately though he did stick with me and while we don't live together, maybe someday we will. The sad thing is that this also had knock-on effects for our son.'

The impact on adults of the experience of homelessness can be divided into a number of phases, with different levels of intensity:

> ❯ Phase 1 is the immediate impact after declaring homelessness. The first phase impacts as a period of high-intensity stress of short duration. Many reported feelings of panic on becoming homeless, for example, of not being able to sleep and more than one referred to the distress of the immediate period as being 'the roughest week of my life'.
> ❯ Phase 2 is the impact during the period in emergency (B&B or hotel) accommodation, which was a period of lower-intensity but prolonged and accumulating stress.
> ❯ Phase 3 is the settling into new accommodation after leaving emergency accommodation. The impacts of this phase appear to vary depending on the tenure of the accommodation where the family was placed. For those in HAP accommodation with only a short lease, the families clearly remained anxious about the risk of becoming homeless again and reported feeling restricted about what they could do within the property: 'It's frustrating that you can't make it a real home, paint the walls or do anything with it.' In contrast, the majority of the families who had become local authority tenants and for whom the threat of homelessness had finally been lifted appeared very relieved and had, without exception, begun work on making the property their own.

4.3　Impacts on the relationships between children and their parents

Analysis of the interviews with the families found that living in homeless accommodation had clearly impacted negatively on parents' relationship with their children.

> 'I was very angry when we were homeless and I tried to hide it, but it meant that I was always giving out. The boys hated it that I was always angry. It is better now. There is a different atmosphere. There is a bit more team work.'

Most of the parents interviewed reported waiting until they moved out of homeless accommodation before they began to address some of the more negative impacts.

> 'They picked up some very bad language when we were homeless and it was hard to get them to stop using it given they heard so many adults using it.'

The parents also spoke about the challenges associated with re-establishing regular routines in their new home.

> 'It was hard to adjust to healthy meals and having meals together at the table.'

School was a particular pressure point in the parent–child relationship. Parents reported working hard to avoid uprooting children from their school, either when they were in emergency accommodation or subsequently, fearing that a change would further upset their child's academic progress and/or socialisation. The parents interviewed were also very keen not to have to go through the process of having to get their child/children into a new school. The stress was lowest if schools did not change and if parents had their own cars and had somewhere to wait. Stress levels were higher where children had to either change school and/or make multiple bus journeys, with parents killing time with nowhere to go to, waiting for schools to be over. Where a family was unable to find a place for their child, this was clearly the greatest source of concern and stress.

4.4   Impacts on relationships with others

For some of the families interviewed, their homelessness clearly brought them closer to their immediate family (parents, grandparents and siblings) and close friends.

> 'Without my brother and my best friend, I do not think I would have coped.'

Many of the families made a decision not to tell people, which resulted in them losing contact or keeping people at a distance.

> 'The kids never told anyone we were homeless or where they were. We only told the school when the child's behaviour deteriorated and the school principal contacted us to find out what was going on.'

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1   Conclusions

Exiting from homelessness was a challenging process. Key factors that supported the exit included the personal resilience of the mother or father or both, as well as the nature of supports provided by Focus Ireland support workers, and the combination of the two.

Many of the families demonstrated remarkable resilience, given the experience they lived through. When asked what advice they would give to others in their situation, they said, 'keep going, never give up'. Some were already quite skilled in house-hunting and the fact that so many capable people found the experience so fraught was an indicator of just how little housing is available.

For the majority of families (with young children), the impact of the experience of homelessness lifted relatively quickly after leaving emergency accommodation. This was particularly the case for families placed in local authority accommodation and approved housing body accommodation, which were clearly considered by the families interviewed to be 'more secure' and 'more affordable than private rented accommodation'. In contrast, the families who were living in HAP accommodation generally reported finding it 'affordable, but not secure'.

Important enablers that helped the families to exit homelessness included their support worker/s; the location and quality of the accommodation; the direct payment of rent; the duration of the tenancy; and the responsiveness of the landlord. Conversely, threats to exits and tenancy sustainment were identified as unsuitable accommodation, lack of or poor-quality fittings and furnishings, low income, or families with particular additional needs.

The experience of homelessness was cumulatively greatly distressing: in the first instance, a short period of high-intensity stress and panic, followed by prolonged stress of less intensity. Being homeless put enormous stress on the relationship between parents, both those living together and those living apart, and on relationships with their children.

The impacts of the experience of homelessness varied. For very young children, it appeared – from the perspective of their parents – to have had limited impact. These young children appeared largely unaware of the nature or significance of the experience. For older children, the impact was greater and more visible. For the parent/s, it was a

time of considerable stress, intensive at first, then of less intensity, but prolonged and just as potentially scarring, often resulting in significant friction between parents. Personal relationships and family discipline generally deteriorated.

Among the principal problems were the lack of certainty, lack of play space, poor conditions in some locations, overcrowding, boredom and reduced socialisation. Specific impacts on parents were noted as food-related (weight gain/weight loss, deterioration in health), emotional (loss of confidence) and economic (loss of employment, cost of eating out, spending of any savings). Many families lost all of their possessions, bar what they could carry, and this was a cause of emotional distress for some families.

Although some emergency accommodation was of good quality, some was poor, characterised by overcrowding of washing and bathroom facilities and limited/no access to cooking facilities. Getting children to school and keeping them attending their existing schools were also key pressure points. Transport was a particular issue, with families with cars having an advantage in being able to transport their children across town more efficiently and having a location where they could wait until school was over. For those dependent on buses, this process took much longer and was much more physically tiring and ultimately more stressful.

Some families adjusted to their new accommodation quite quickly. Generally, the more secure the tenure within the new accommodation, the quicker families reported being able to adjust. The speed of adjustment did not appear to be linked to the duration of homelessness.

For younger children (but not all), school and social performance generally improved quite quickly, but it took older children and particularly teenagers longer to adjust, especially where they had to move schools, according to their parents. The families worked very hard to try to avoid a school move for their children as the majority believed that moving school could have a negative effect on their child's educational and related social progress. It should be noted that some of the issues related to being homeless only emerged for older children following the move out of homeless accommodation. It was also the case that some families only began the often-difficult process of dealing with the consequences and aftermath of a relationship break-up (often linked with their homelessness/or while homeless) when they moved into their new accommodation. The main services/supports that assisted families to exit homelessness were Focus Ireland workers, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Exceptional Needs Payments administered by the Department of Social Protection.

Local authorities were identified as having a crucial role to play as the provider of both emergency and longer-term accommodation, as well as the administrator of the HAP scheme. The families raised concerns both about the ability of the local authorities to meet growing needs and about the manner in which some local authorities transacted their business, from their apparent lack of engagement in any form of prevention, to the poor treatment of clients by a small number of local authority personnel.

5.2   Recommendations

There are three groups of recommendations, as follows:

1   **At a national level: There is an urgent need for more social housing to enable timely exits from homelessness.**

This study clearly affirms the preference of the families interviewed for local authority accommodation as their optimum long-term solution and, failing that, approved housing body accommodation.

The impact of the experience of homelessness on the families and children can be clearly seen to have influenced their preference for local authority accommodation, which was seen by the families to offer security of tenure, affordable rent, acceptable standards and, in most cases, locations where people can settle in communities in which they are comfortable. Approved Housing Body (the quality of which was found to vary) was the next preferred option. HAP accommodation had the advantage of affordable rent, but did not offer security, and formerly homeless families had a lingering fear that they could become homeless again. Taking a HAP tenancy results in a family being taken off the housing list as their housing need is deemed to have been met. For families who have waited many years on the list, this involves giving up any hope of social housing. HAP households can be included on the 'transfer list', but this is seen as of little value as time already spent on the housing list is not taken into account. Private rented accommodation was identified as the least desired option, because of its high rents, insecurity and often poor standards. These findings are interesting in the context of *Rebuilding Ireland* which contains a commitment to the construction of local authority accommodation, the balance of supply between local authority, voluntary housing, private rented and private sector being a matter of political contention. This research suggests that, from the perspective of homeless families, the construction programme needs to be heavily weighted in favour of local authority accommodation. The relative insecurity of HAP and loss of accumulated priority on the social housing list could be addressed by:

> increasing tenancy security across the private rented sector to the European norm (particularly by removing the right of landlords to terminate a tenancy in order to sell it or move family members into the unit);
> allowing families on the transfer list to retain their existing priority for the allocation of any social housing (i.e. retaining their place in the queue).

There are many factors that enable and inhibit exits from homelessness, with many ways in which the impacts of the experiences of homelessness on adults and their children can be reduced and in some cases minimised. This research came across both good practice (e.g. support workers, and the application and use of exceptional needs payments), which should be accentuated; and bad practice, which needs to be addressed. All of this can make a difference to preventing, diminishing the impact of, and speeding up the exit from, homelessness and sustaining tenancies thereafter. Whilst some of these changes require resourcing, many only require low-cost changes to procedures. These changes are the subject of the remainder of the recommendations.

2   At local authority level: There is a need for changes in a number of local authority practices, including:

> In line with *Rebuilding Ireland*, pillar 1 *Address homelessness*, where it states: 'We must ensure that those most at risk of losing their homes receive support services, so that we can minimize the risk of them becoming homeless in the first place' (p. 38), local authorities need to be proactive and automatically refer families who present themselves with the threat of impending homelessness (e.g. notice of termination) to advice services (e.g. Threshold) and also put in place accommodation options that could be ready once the family is displaced.[5]

> The practice of families being asked to source their own emergency accommodation, referred to as 'self-accommodation' is inconsistent with the expectations of the Housing Act, 1988, and should be discontinued, as should the use of the term. While families may be given the option to pursue their own accommodation, the responsibility for identifying their own long-term accommodation is that of the statutory authority (i.e. the local authority).

> Provide homeless families with access to emergency accommodation that offers them access to cooking and refrigeration facilities and that have play areas for children; end the practice of using substandard and overcrowded emergency accommodation.

> End the practice that exists within some local authorities of requiring daily signing-in, either in person or by phone, by individuals and/or families who are homeless. This could be replaced (with a saving of time for all involved) by electronic signing in.

> Ensure that no households are removed from local authority housing waiting lists without their knowledge or consent. The existing practice associated with the removal of people from these lists must be subject to permanent scanning and quality control, with the outcomes published and an independent appeals system introduced.

> Ensure that all move-on accommodation offered to homeless families is in a reasonable condition and in line with applicant preferences, ending the current two-strikes-and-out practice. The term 'reasonable' must be redefined within the scheme of allocations to include consideration of standards and safe environments for children. An independent appeals system should be introduced.

> Ensure that (local authority and approved housing body) properties provided to families exiting homelessness are furnished with basic facilities, to include adequate and safe floor coverings.

> Ensure that HAP accommodation is inspected quickly and that it meets minimum standards.

Local authority interactions with families who are homeless/at risk of homelessness need to continue to be improved. Some progress has been made in this area since some of the families interviewed became homeless. First, households presenting to the local authority with a valid notice to quit are now entitled to access Homeless HAP before entering emergency accommodation. Second, there is now a three-person prevention team within the local authority which seeks to provide assistance before the family becomes homeless. Third, on behavioural issues, further work could be done in this area through a programme of dialogue with those who experience or have experienced homelessness, with standards set down and training provided accordingly.

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[5] Government of Ireland (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland – action plan for housing and homelessness.* Dublin.

3   **Recommendations for changes in relation to the supports provided by Focus Ireland, including:**

> Preparation of a short document detailing the various accommodation options and possibilities available to families when they are homeless, provided to families as soon as they become homeless.

> Identify the number of key workers required for homeless people newly arrived in emergency accommodation within a minimum time, seeking resources from the DRHE to provide this level of support.

> Provide the families with written details of the role of the key worker and the role of the SLI worker as well as details of the timescale and duration and boundaries of the services provided. Ensure that arrangements for disengagement are clearly communicated to all families.

> Identify the number of specialist child support workers required for all children needing such support, seeking resources from Tusla to provide this level of support.

> Explore ways to make counselling services available to families, both during and after homelessness, including relationship counselling.

> Find appropriate solutions to the conflicting demands on the Focus Ireland coffee shop, so that services can be provided (there or elsewhere) for families with young children in a suitable environment.

> Introduce a dedicated helpline that former Focus Ireland clients can contact if they run into problems for a period of time after they take up their new tenancy. It is important to add that those assisted were conscious that other homeless people needed key workers too and that they should not try to hold on to the service indefinitely when others needed help more urgently.

> Explore ways in which the good practices reported in some schools can be extended throughout the school system (e.g. some schools, on their own initiative, helped homeless families by offering parents a waiting room while their children attended school).

> Undertake further research on the families who have been housed but who did not manage to sustain their tenancy.

> There would be value in investigating the feasibility of devising a storage system whereby families who are homeless could store their possessions at a nominal cost for the duration of their homelessness.

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Finding a Home
Families' Journeys out of Homelessness

Dr Kathy Walsh
and Brian Harvey

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'I was, we were in a state of shock. I never thought we would find ourselves homeless. That was something that happens to other people not us.'

'We were traumatised. We had just lost our home. We had to give away our stuff. We didn't know where we were going to sleep. I couldn't stop crying.'

Finding a Home
Families' Journeys
out of Homelessness

Dr Kathy Walsh and Brian Harvey

Independent Research Consultants

FOCUS Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

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Contents

Introduction

1.1   Introduction and background

Homelessness is known to be caused by both structural and individual factors and is a feature and outcome of wider housing policy. Recent studies reveal that the majority of families who have lost their homes were living in private rented accommodation but experienced problems of affordability, accessing accommodation that accepted rent supplement, securing follow-on housing or landlords selling their properties.[1] While the government's commitment to tackling the housing crisis through the construction of more houses and investing in social housing and hubs has been well-documented (*Rebuilding Ireland*, 2016), it has become ever more difficult for families to exit homelessness.

This research comes at a time of acute pressure on the Irish housing market, as indicated by the figures for the rental, purchase and local authority sectors, respectively. Recent research by the Simon Community found that there were as few as 3,700 homes to rent nationwide, a reduction of 12% since 2016, with just 17% falling within the limits for Rent Supplement and Housing Assistance Payment.[2] With rents continuing to rise at a rapid rate, particularly in Dublin, 57% of rental properties in the various Dublin local authorities have been designated as in rental pressure zones.[3]

According to DAFT, the country needs up to 50,000 new homes a year, but construction was, at most, a quarter of this figure.[4] *Rebuilding Ireland* published figures to show that non-market provision fell from 33% in 1975 to 5% by 2014, and its identification of the need for 47,000 new social homes by 2021 gives an idea of the scale of the deficit of homes for those on low incomes. Local authority construction completions were just 72 in 2015, compared with 7,787 in 1950, 8,794 in 1975 and 7,002 in 1984. What is clear is that the current housing

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[1] Focus Ireland (2016) *Insights into Family Homelessness Nos. 4, 5, 7, 8.* Available online: https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/

[2] Simon Community (2017) *Locked out of the rental market – the gap between rent supplement/ HAP limits and market rents.* Dublin.

[3] Dáil Eireann, *Debates*, 6 April 2017, 79–81, 84–6.

[4] DAFT.IE (2017) *The daft.ie house price report – an analysis of recent trends in the Irish residential sales market.* Dublin.

crisis can be linked to the decision by government in 1987 to rely on a market-led approach to housing provision, thereby radically reducing local authority construction.[5]

Housing supply

According to Census 2016, the total State housing stock grew by just 8,800 between 2011 and 2016. This is compared to growth of over 225,000 dwellings between 2006 and 2011. At the same time, the number of local authority properties completed or acquired decreased from 5,127 properties in 2005 to 1,179 in 2015.[6] *Rebuilding Ireland* commits to the delivery of 47,000 units by 2021, 26,000 of which will be new local authority builds. The others will be a mix of leased properties and properties provided by approved housing bodies.

Over the last four years, the number of families becoming homeless across the country has grown consistently, with current figures generating significant political and social debate. The problem of family homelessness continues to worsen every month. Although some families do leave homelessness, a larger number are becoming homeless. Recent figures published by Focus Ireland reported that 87 families became newly homeless in Dublin in January 2017. This means that an average of 72 families became newly homeless each month in the previous twelve months, culminating in a total of 1,365 families and 2,895 children homeless nationwide in Ireland in June 2017. The number of families who were homeless increased by 54% from January 2016 to June 2017.

1.2   Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland is a national voluntary organisation working to prevent people becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness through the provision of quality services, supported housing, research and advocacy. Founded in 1985, Focus Ireland works with single adults, families and young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. The guiding ethos of the organisation is that everyone has a right to a place they can call home which is safe, secure, affordable and appropriate to their needs. Focus Ireland operates the designated Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) on behalf of the four local authorities in Dublin (Dublin City Council; Dun Laoghaire Rathdown; Fingal County Council; and South Dublin County Council) and provides support to families who present as homeless, with the primary objective of supporting them to move out of homelessness.

Focus Ireland's current strategy commits the organisation to engage in activities that either prevent homelessness or support households to move out of homelessness. This is reflected in the organisation's research programme as well as its front-line services. This research report fulfils this objective by providing a deeper understanding of the experiences of families who have successfully exited homelessness with the support of

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[5] National Campaign for the Homeless (1990) *Housing – moving into crisis?* National Campaign for the Homeless and Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin.

[6] http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision

Focus Ireland, providing insights into what services and interventions assisted them and what could be done to improve them.

Focus Ireland's Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) administrative data shows that for every three families entering homelessness in the Dublin region during 2016, Focus Ireland supported one family to transition out of homelessness.[7] To date, there is no research in Ireland which seeks to understand how families exit homelessness and sustain those exits over time. Furthermore, little is known of the impact of the experience of homelessness on families, including the impacts on the overall well-being of parents and children.

1.3   Families exiting homelessness

There is growing recognition of the need for family-specific approaches to address homelessness among households, particularly in the U.S., Australia and an increasing number of European countries (Rog and Buckner, 2007; Shinn et al., 2008; Bassuk et al., 2010; Haskett et al., 2014; Pomeroy et al., 2015; Haskett, 2017). This shift in focus has largely been driven by research that suggests that families' experiences of homelessness may differ significantly to those of the general homeless population (Shinn et al., 2005; Rog et al., 2007). For instance, studies have found that when compared to 'single' homeless individuals, adults in homeless families are much less likely to present with complex or high-level support needs; more likely to have higher educational attainment levels; more likely to have recent employment experience; and more likely to have regular, positive contact with friends and family (Burt et al., 2001; Culhane et al., 2007; Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012). Homeless families are also typically younger than their single counterparts, have an average of two children (aged under 10 years); are more likely to become homeless due to relationship breakdown and/or structural processes related to loss of income or unemployment; and are often single-parent families who are predominantly headed by young women (Shinn, 1998; Shinn et al., 2005; Rog et al., 2007; Walsh and Harvey, 2015).

In the past decade, longitudinal research on homeless populations in Ireland and elsewhere (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Jones and Pleace, 2010; Aubry et al., 2013; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; O'Donoghue Hynes, 2015), as well as on homeless families in particular (Culhane et al., 2007), taught us that homelessness is much more likely to be episodic or transitional, with a large majority of those who experience homelessness returning to stable housing relatively quickly. As a result, research attention has become increasingly focused on the pathways that people take through and out of homelessness over time in an effort to shed light on the conditions that either impede or promote patterns of residential stability. Central to this research is the investigation of homeless 'exits' and the factors or mechanisms that shape individuals' routes out of homelessness to stable housing. While only a relatively small number of mostly U.S.-based studies have attempted to investigate the paths taken by families as they transition out of homelessness, the role of welfare receipts, subsidies and affordable housing emerged as the most salient factors in predicting independent exits and facilitating homeless families' stability in the research literature.

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[7] In 2016, Focus Ireland HAT supported 285 families out of homelessness into a home of their own (a total of 902 families became newly homeless during this time period and a further 62 with previous experience of homelessness returned to homelessness).

Shinn et al.'s (1998) longitudinal study in New York City, for instance, followed a cohort of first-time homeless families (N = 266) over a 5-year period and included a comparison group of families on public assistance (N = 298) to determine predictors of residential stability. The findings reported that 80% of those who received subsidised housing were living in their own residence five years after their initial recruitment to the study, compared with only 18% of those in the comparison group who did not receive subsidised housing. The authors concluded that subsidised housing – which increased the odds of stability more than 20 times – was the primary predictor of residential stability and, thus, is 'critical to ending homelessness among families' (p. 1651).

Similarly, in an evaluation of *The Homeless Family Program* (HFP) – a large-scale, multi-site programme providing subsidised, independent housing and case management services in the U.S. – 601 families were tracked over an 18-month period across six cities. These families were awarded rent subsidy in the form of eight certificates funded by the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and required families to pay up to 30% of their income towards rent and utilities. A large majority of families (88%) – including those with histories of long-term or recurrent homelessness and high-level support needs – were either still residing in subsidised housing or had moved to permanent housing (2%) approximately 18 months later. Rog et al. (1995: 512) thus argued that 'immediate placement in permanent housing was a workable option even for families with multiple and severe needs.'

Such findings have been echoed and further substantiated by more recent international research which has repeatedly highlighted that, for a vast number of families, access to permanent affordable housing (with or without tailored supports) is demonstrably effective in promoting housing stability (Zlotnick et al., 1999; Pleace et al., 2008; Shinn, 2009), particularly when compared with other housing and service interventions such as rapid re-housing and transitional housing (Fisher et al., 2014; Shinn et al., 2016a). Subsidised housing can also contribute to other positive social outcomes such as family preservation or reunification (Bassuk and Gellar, 2006; Shinn et al., 2016b), adult and child well-being and food security (Shinn et al., 2016a) and is associated with a substantially lower probability of shelter re-admission among families compared to those who have been allocated some other type of housing placement (Culhane, 1992; Stretch and Krueger, 1992; Wong et al.,1997).

While there is general consensus that access to appropriate, long-term accommodation is crucial to facilitate homeless families' exits to stable housing, research has also emphasised the importance of support services in ensuring that families do not fall back into homelessness (Bassuk et al., 2001) or remain isolated in permanent housing (Bassuk and Gellar, 2006). For instance, Bassuk et al. (2010) reviewed recent trends and evidence for service needs among homeless families and proposed a needs-based framework for understanding the layers of supports that are critical for households experiencing residential insecurity. The authors assert that a number of evidence-based interventions may be necessary to ensure housing stability for families over time, including, for example, trauma-informed care, particularly in relation to experiences of gender-based violence and victimisation; parent-level supports related to substance use and mental health; child-level supports related to schooling, development and mental health; healthcare; community engagement and integration; family-centred supports including those related to parenting, childcare and family preservation and reunification; and interventions related to training, education and employment (Bassuk et al., 2010). These supports, it was suggested, should

be appropriately tailored to each family's needs, which are likely to be episodic in nature, evolve with the passing of time and 'vary in intensity with life circumstances, transitions, and stressors' (Bassuk et al., 2010: 36). Indeed, more recently, bodies of literature on family homelessness have called for holistic approaches and inter-agency coordination between multiple sectors to effectively and successfully resolve homelessness among households (Haskett et al., 2014; Haskett, 2017).

Qualitative research in North America has identified additional determinants of, and impediments to, housing stability among families. For instance, Mayberry's (2016: 302) study of 50 parents who had recently exited homelessness found that families who reported positive relationships and clear, consistent communication with service providers were more likely to be 'in the know' about the homelessness service system and thus able to negotiate successful exits from shelters to more stable housing. Conversely, families who experienced negative service interactions – characterised by poor client-provider communication; a lack of clarity about eligibility criteria, 'paperwork', service options; and poor cross-programme collaboration between agencies – described how they felt that the 'service environment, more than any single service, impeded their efforts towards independence and stability' (p. 307).

Problematic 'system effects' that served to undermine families' housing stability were also evident in a U.S.-based study undertaken by Fisher et al. (2014), which conducted in-depth interviews with 80 families assigned to one of four conditions (permanent housing subsidies, project-based transitional housing, community-based rapid re-housing or usual care) to examine their housing decisions. The research found that families often experienced subsequent residential mobility due to 'intervening obstacles' – such as limited resources and time, and constraining programme policies in their respective interventions – which sometimes prompted a speedy but ill-informed and largely unsupported move from a shelter to independent accommodation. These housing placements would often break down – due to poor quality of accommodation, sub-par living conditions or undesirable locations – resulting 'in a cycle of unsatisfactory housing situations' (p. 379). Other challenges that families faced during the exiting process included discrimination on the part of landlords against those in receipt of rent subsidy and the fact that some programme policies forced families to make difficult decisions. This included, for example, family separations in cases where subsidised housing placements would not permit anyone in the home to have a criminal history (Fisher et al., 2014).

The research above indicates that families are increasingly included in homelessness research; however, understanding of the complex nature and dynamics of homeless exits, as well as the factors that facilitate housing stability over time, remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Moreover, a large majority of the available research evidence on families' transitions out of homelessness is quantitative in nature. As a consequence, the findings do not provide a complete 'picture' of the complex needs of homeless families, nor can they incorporate multiple dimensions of experience into their analyses (Bassuk, 2007). This study examines, for the first time in an Irish context, the process of exiting homelessness and sustaining housing among a sample of 25 families who recently exited homelessness in the Dublin region. A core goal is to use qualitative methods to identify and explore the conditions that either promote or inhibit residential stability among families with experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion in Ireland.

1.4   Research aims and objectives

The research aims to:

› explore the processes and factors that enable families to exit homelessness;
› understand the factors that enable families to sustain these exits;
› understand which elements of Focus Ireland practice are effective and which ones can be improved; and
› explore the impact of the experience of homelessness on families and children.

The study also has a number of specific objectives:

1 Identify and understand factors that resolve homelessness among families:

  › Understand the factors that facilitate or impede how families access and secure housing.
  › Appraise the effectiveness of service responses in facilitating exits out of homelessness among families.
  › Understand the capacities of families themselves in the process of exiting homelessness.
  › Further our knowledge on sustained exits from homelessness among families.
  › Understand ways to support families and children after they transition out of homelessness.

2 Provide Focus Ireland with evidence-based strategies, actions and recommendations to help support families out of homelessness and into secure and sustainable housing.

3 Provide key policy recommendations for government on both the practical and emotional supports that assist families in exiting homelessness and in developing positive life outcomes.

1.5   Research methodology

1.5.1   Methodology

This research was conducted with the support of members of the Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team (HAT) which works with families on behalf of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE). The DRHE has statutory responsibility for responding to the needs of families who present as homeless in all four Dublin local authority areas. The first task of the research was the development of a sampling frame to ensure that a representative cross-section of 25 families who left homelessness some time over the period from 1 March 2014 to September 2016 was selected for interview across the four local authority areas.

Focus Ireland's quarterly reports of families who had exited homelessness over the period 1 March 2014 to September 2016 were used to compile the sampling framework (see appendix 1 for details of the sampling framework developed based on an analysis of the database). The framework includes different family types and sizes from the different local authority areas. Option 1 was recruitment by Focus Ireland, an organisation known to

the potential participants. Option 2 was recruitment by an independent recruiter working with the research team. See Table 1.1 for details of the advantages and disadvantages of the two options.

Analysis	› **Option 1:** Recruitment by Focus Ireland of families designated by the researchers	› **Option 2:** Recruitment by the research team of families designated by the researchers
Advantages	› Organisation known to the potential interviewee	› Independent researchers more likely to be seen as impartial brokers
Disadvantages	› Potential interviewees who had a poor experience/s with Focus Ireland might be less likely to agree to participate in the study › Potential interviewees who had a positive experience/s with Focus Ireland might be more likely to agree to participate in the study	› Organisation not known to the potential interviewee › Potential data confidentiality issues for Focus Ireland in relation to sharing former client's data with an outside organisation without their permission

Table 1.1 · Analysis of different recruitment strategies

Option 1 was adopted because the research team believed that the families were more likely to consider participation in the research if the invitation came from a known organisation, rather than unknown researchers. In the event, the level of familiarity of the families (selected at random to participate in the study) with Focus Ireland and its case workers varied significantly. Some of the selected families had high levels of contact, whereas a small number of other families had significantly less contact, having managed to source the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness largely independently of Focus Ireland.

Families who matched the sampling profile were identified by the researchers and initial contact with them was then made by a Focus Ireland staff member. As part of its normal contact with households it supports, all families had given written permission to Focus Ireland to contact them within one year of disengagement for follow-up research and validation.

Accessing current contact details for the families proved a challenge and some of the families randomly selected could not be contacted because of out-of-date contact details. Some families refused the invitation to participate for a range of reasons, including not wanting to share their information, poor health, or, having moved out of homelessness, they did not want to revisit the experience. Where families declined the invitation to participate, another family with a similar profile was selected and was in turn approached by a Focus Ireland staff member with an invitation to participate in the study. It was also the case that in a small number (8) of the approximately 100 families randomly selected, the tenancy had failed and they had returned to emergency accommodation, or, in two cases, the family unit had been separated, with the children either in care or living with a family member, while the parent was living in adult emergency accommodation. A decision was made by Focus Ireland not to include these families in the study, but instead to look at these families in more depth at a later stage.

Once a family had consented to participate in the research, they were contacted by the researchers conducting the interviews to arrange a suitable date and location for the interview. The interviews were divided between the two researchers. The interviews took place in the accommodation where the families were living at the time of the interview. Before the interview itself got under way, interviewees were asked to sign a consent form which assured the interviewee and the family's anonymity, although several interviewees indicated that they would be very happy to be identified. In all cases, Focus Ireland had disengaged with the families upon their exit from homelessness (some of the families had also been engaging with Focus Ireland tenancy support teams after exiting).[8]

The length of interviews varied, being typically an hour; but some were shorter and others longer. The interview was conducted with the nominated head of the household: where a couple was present, both parties participated in the interview. All of the families interviewed received a €50 'One for All' voucher from Focus Ireland as an acknowledgement of their assistance. A total of 25 families were interviewed over the period 28 November 2016 to April 2017. The report was finalised following input from the Focus Ireland staff team and the Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group.

1.5.2   Limitations

This was an exploratory piece of research which, as a result, has a number of limitations. First, the study focuses exclusively on exploring the experiences of families (i.e. parents accompanied by child dependents) and by definition does not include parents who are not accompanied by their children or other subsets of the homeless population. Second, all of the families involved in the research were located in Dublin. Third, all of the families involved in the study were accessed through one service provider (Focus Ireland). Fourth, the research focused on exploring the impact of homelessness on the family through the perspective of adult family members, rather than their children. The research does not include interviews with Focus Ireland staff, DRHE or other stakeholders.

Finally, the families covered in this report entered homelessness over a period from Quarter (Q) 2 2013 (10) to Q3 2015 (20). During this period, both policy and practice changed significantly. In Q2 2013, there was an average of 15 families becoming homeless each month in Dublin. In Q3 2015 this had increased five-fold to 73 families each month. Over the period 2014–2016, the government reviewed various supporting measures and introduced new measures (e.g. travel cards for homeless families).[9] More recently homeless families will have benefitted from these changes, in a way that those homeless at the earlier part of the period would not have been able to do. As a result, families

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[8] Prior to researchers contacting potential families to participate in the research, a Focus Ireland Research Officer contacted selected families (selection based on robust sampling strategy on the part of the researcher, as already described). During this phone call, the study was briefly explained. The families were asked whether they were open to being contacted by the researchers to explain the study in greater detail. It was emphasised at this stage that they were under no obligation to participate. Upon agreement by a family member, relevant contact details were then passed on to the researchers.

[9] Government of Ireland (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland – action plan for housing and homelessness.* Dublin.

who became homeless in the earlier period may report a particular support being absent, which was available for families entering homelessness at a later stage, or has been put in place since 2016.

> **Free travel**
>
> *Rebuilding Ireland* commits to 'access to free public transport for family travel and for school journeys.' This was in response to concerns that families were finding it difficult to get their children to school due to the cost of transport. Pre-loaded LEAP cards, paid for by the Department of Social Protection, have been distributed to any family in a contracted or non-contracted hotel, B&B or private emergency accommodation by the Family Homeless Action Team since mid-2016.

1.6   Outline of the report

Chapter 1 introduces the research. Chapter 2 presents findings on the factors that have supported and sustained families to exit homelessness. Chapter 3 provides an exploration of the impact of homelessness on families. Chapter 4 identifies recommendations for Focus Ireland and for policy in relation to supporting families out of homelessness and into secure and sustainable housing.

2

Findings – supports and impediments to exiting homelessness

This chapter addresses some of the research questions, namely, what enabled these families to exit homelessness and thereafter sustain their exit. The chapter opens with a profile of families interviewed (2.1). It then explores the processes and factors that enabled these families to exit homelessness (2.2) and subsequently sustain their exit (2.3). Section 2.4 examines the role played by different services (including Focus Ireland) in supporting these families. Conclusions are drawn in the final section (2.5).

2.1   Profile of families interviewed

The sampling frame was designed to ensure a cross-section of family types and characteristics. First, by way of family type, it included two parents with children; single mothers with children; and single fathers with children. Some had experience of separation or divorce, with, in some cases, children living with, or between, different parents. Second, it included different family sizes, from families with a single child to larger families, for example, five children. Third, it took account of the different ages of children, from infants to adult children. Fourth, it included migrant families or families of ethnic minorities, including Traveller families as well as families from Nigeria, Poland and Romania.

In the event – and these characteristics were not part of the sampling frame but emerged from interview – most appeared to have completed family formation and, although their age was not asked, most appeared to be in the age range 20 to 40. Most had exited the private rented sector due to unaffordable rent increases, notice of termination due to the landlord wishing to sell or to make the home available to another tenant, or, in some cases, the landlord requiring the tenant to leave promptly.

The majority (16 of the 25) of families selected for interview became homeless as a result of being required to leave the private rental property where they were living. Other reasons families became homeless included domestic violence or being asked to leave the family of origin home (generally because of overcrowding). Two of the families selected to be interviewed had become homeless as a result of evictions/being forced out, while one parent who had been living in residential care was required to leave as a result of becoming pregnant. Just two families became homeless as a result of not being able to pay their mortgage.

The majority (n = 20) of the families interviewed were one-parent families. Three of these one-parent households had a male head of household. Seven of the families were headed by non-Irish nationals and/or Irish Travellers. The number of children per household ranged from one to five children. Appendix 1 provides additional details on previous tenancy, current tenancy and reason for homelessness. Appendix 1 and Table 2.1 also include information on the duration of homelessness, which varied from 2 to 36 months.

2.2   Processes and factors

2.2.1   Family exits from homelessness

Family exit from homelessness was dependent on the identification and securing of a suitable property, whether private rented, approved housing body or local authority housing. Sixteen of the families exited to local authority accommodation, with two obtaining tenancies with approved housing bodies and seven finding tenancies in the private rented sector with the support of HAP.

The extent to which families felt in control of this process varied according to their personalities. Some families were very proactive in keeping in regular contact with their local authority as well as independently seeking suitable private rental accommodation. Other families reported disliking having to seek help, using phrases like 'I don't want to beg', or 'I don't like asking for help', preferring if at all possible to sort out their situation on their own. Some families were less proactive, preferring instead to leave it with the local authority, while others worked through their key worker, where they had one, to ensure that they kept in regular contact with the local authority.

> 'They (the local authority) has so many families on its books that I wanted to keep my family in their mind. I am sure they were sick of me. I was there every week, but it has to be done.'

All of the families who reported trying to find suitable private rental accommodation found it a challenging process. The primary challenges associated with finding rental accommodation were identified by the families as affordable rent, the property location, the quality and cleanliness of the accommodation on offer, as well as the challenge of finding a landlord willing to accept a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).

Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)

Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) is a payment administered by local authorities to meet part of the cost of renting in the private rental sector for those on low incomes with a long-term housing need. The recipient must secure the rental property in the private market.

There are two types of HAP. The general HAP scheme administered by local authorities uses privately owned (as well as housing association-owned) accommodation to provide social housing. It is possible to be in full-time employment and receive HAP. To qualify, the landlord must undertake to make the accommodation available to qualifying tenants for a minimum period of three

years, and the undertaking must be registered with the Residential Tenancies Board. This scheme became operational in Dublin local authorities in April 2017. The amount of rent that the local authority will pay is set by statute, with 20% beyond this, available at the discretion of the local authority.

HAP for homeless households – or Homeless HAP – has been operational in the four Dublin local authorities since February 2015. It is an enhanced version of the main HAP payment in which the local authority will pay up to three months' rent in advance and has discretion up to 50% above the rent cap. It is administered by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE). This scheme is open to homeless households only (i.e. homeless households who are living in homeless accommodation and registered as homeless with one of the four Dublin local authorities) who can apply to the homeless section of their local authority to access Homeless HAP.

Homeless HAP differs from HAP in that it provides extra discretion to exceed the HAP rent limits for homeless households as well as providing applicants with access to rental deposits and rent in advance. While homeless households may source accommodation themselves, the Dublin Place-Finder service also engages with landlords to find suitable tenancies. It also works to fast-track the homeless HAP applications, by arranging payment of the deposit, paying a month's rent in advance and arranging for the Support to Live Independently (SLI) services to visit the tenant in the first six months of their tenancy.

See Table 2.1 for details of how the various families interviewed perceived the process by which they found the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness. It is important to note that in most cases a family moving out of homelessness requires the alignment of a number of different elements (housing allocation, HAP approval and delivery) of which it may not be fully aware.

How the family reported finding the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness	Interview no.	Time spent homeless (months)	Local authority	One-parent family	Two-parent family	No. of children
Local authority arranged an interview between the family and the approved housing body	6	13	DCC	1		1
Local authority offered the family a place which the family refused because of the location; local authority subsequently arranged an interview between the family and the approved housing body	9	12	DCC	1		2
Local authority placed the family in local authority accommodation (following extensive input from medical staff)	14	19	DCC	1		2
Local authority located the approved housing body accommodation for the family	15	18	DCC	1		2
Local authority located the RAS (Rental Accommodation Scheme) accommodation for the family	19	12	DCC		1	5

How the family reported finding the accommodation that enabled them to exit homelessness	Interview no.	Time spent homeless (months)	Local authority	One-parent family	Two-parent family	No. of children
Local authority located the approved housing body accommodation for the family	2	2	FCC	1		2
Local authority working with the key worker arranged an interview between the family and the approved housing body	16	14	FCC	1		2
Local authority provided the family with the accommodation (family presented themselves weekly at their offices)	23	6	FCC	1		3
Local authority located the family in temporary accommodation and one year later they were moved to their current longer-term accommodation	13	8	SDCC	1		4
Key worker told family about HAP and the family found the property using DAFT	3	9	DCC	1		2
Key worker helped the family to locate the property and get HAP	7	6	DCC	1		2
Family with support of their key worker found the accommodation (family viewed 56 properties, most of which they found on DAFT)	25	13	DCC		1	2
Housing association via local authority with help of key worker	1	7	DCC	1		1
Housing association via local authority with intervention of key worker	4	9	DCC	1		2
Local authority with help of key worker	5	21	DCC	1		2
Local authority with help of key worker	8	U*	SDCC	1		1
Local authority with help of key worker	10	30	DLR		1	5
HAP, no key worker	11	24	DLR	1		2
Local authority with help of key worker	12	36	DCC	1		5
HAP with help of key worker	17	U	FCC		1	3
Local authority with help of key worker	18	6	SDCC	1		2
HAP with help of key worker	20	12	DLR		1	2
Local authority with help of key worker	21	18	SDCC	1		1
Local authority with help of key worker	22	24	DCC	1		3
HAP with help of key worker	24	7	SDCC	1		3

*This family's recollection on duration of homeless was uncertain.

Table 2.1 · How families found accommodation

Many families interviewed found their accommodation through their local authority. Smaller numbers accessed the private rental sector (using HAP) with the support of their key worker.

Once the majority of the families interviewed exited homelessness, they reported that the extreme strain of their homeless situation generally lifted relatively quickly, especially for those who relocated to local authority or approved housing body accommodation where they had longer-term security of tenure.

2.2.2   Enablers and drivers

The factors that enabled and supported families to exit homelessness included the capacity and the tenacity of the parent or parents to engage with the local authority as well as their capacity to seek out and view rental properties. What was very apparent was that this experience greatly tested the social skills and personal resilience of each of the families interviewed and was particularly stressful for families who did not have the backup of wider family/community support.

> 'We found the whole experience very stressful and we were lucky my mum and my sister helped us out in every way they could. They were there for the kids and they were there for me. They kept me sane.'

> 'I was lucky because I had support from people in my church. They helped out with practical things and then they prayed with me and for me. I don't know how I would have managed without that support.'

> 'It was so tough to deal with it all and I had no backup. There was just me and my kid. There were nights when I just cried and cried. It was so difficult.'

All the families had negative experiences of homeless accommodation and strongly desired to move out of homelessness. Families described what particularly motivated them or kept them motivated in different ways which provide insight into their paths out of homelessness.

Some families (3, 7 and 25) were particularly driven to find a rapid exit from homelessness, irrespective of other considerations about their new home, by their particular family circumstances. In the case of one family, the hospital would not discharge a new baby with medical complications into homeless accommodation; in another family, the oldest child was due to start secondary school in September and the family wanted to be settled in their new home in anticipation of that. A third family had a child with significant behavioural difficulties who found homeless accommodation particularly challenging and the parents wanted to remove the child from that situation as soon as possible. These families moved to private rented tenancies supported by HAP, despite their reservations about the insecurity of this tenure.

For other families, they reported that it was the reality of living in very close quarters with one another that provided a key driver to get out.

> 'We had to get out. The kids were driving each another mad and they were driving me mad. The place was too small for the three of us for very long.'

In other cases, families reported that it was the information provided by, and subsequent support from, their key worker that supported their exit from homelessness. One family, for example, reported not knowing anything about HAP until their key worker told them.

> 'Once she (the key worker) told me we decided there and then that it was for us. We just had to get out of where we were, so I got onto daft.ie there and then and started looking at what was available.'

Another family made good use of the services of a duty key worker.

> 'We didn't have a key worker at the time but we had to get out of where we were so I contacted Focus and got the duty key worker. She was great. She really helped me and she even came and looked at places with me. I am not sure I could have done it without her help.'

Other key enablers for families were identified as the location, quality and fit-out of the accommodation. One family, for example, reported taking the accommodation they found because 'the place was close to family and to the schools'. Staying close to school – and not uprooting children to a new school – was a key factor in making the exit successful. Conversely, long journeys accompanying children to school, leaving them there and collecting them, had been one of the most negative aspects of the homeless experience.

Another family reported that while the accommodation was not in their preferred location (it required the children to move schools), they took the place because 'it had everything in it'.

> 'Having everything in it was important for us as we gave away or left behind all our stuff when we became homeless. All we had were our clothes and some toys for the kids and all our savings were gone, spent living in homeless accommodation.'

2.2.3   Impediments

The vast majority of the families interviewed reported being deeply negatively affected by becoming homeless. Cramped conditions, with the family often living in a single room, the sudden upheaval to a new and unfamiliar location, the issues associated with continuing children's education, the adjustment to a bed-and-breakfast schedule were the most obvious material changes, but the psychological impacts could be profound, with the loss of control over one's life, dependence on the decisions of others – from facility mangers to officials – worry for the future of the children, prolonged uncertainty as to the duration of the experience, often leading to a deep sense of despair and hopelessness. Many of the families also reported that the day-to-day reality of living in homeless accommodation over an extended period of time had caused them significant stress, affecting both their sleep and ultimately their mental health.

> 'My GP put me on anti-depressants, which helped a bit, but made me feel not like myself. I had no energy. I didn't care about much.'

> 'I felt so alone, it was just me and the kids. It was all I could do to get them to school and make sure they had enough to eat and got their rest. They are what kept me going. There was no time for anything else. We left early in the morning to get the buses and we did not get back till late.'

A small number reported finding themselves drawn into activities in which they otherwise would not have engaged, absorbing all of their energies.

> 'I started taking drugs. I was not myself. I see now that I was too easily led. I just didn't care.'

> 'My partner fell into bad company in the B&B. There was nothing to do and he starting taking drugs and once he started, he quickly became hooked. We eventually split up because of his habit.'

For some families, the impact of being homeless was clearly compounded and exacerbated by particular life events, some of which had contributed to their homelessness, leaving them with limited capacity and energy.

> 'I lost my wife that year. It was so difficult to cope but I had to try for the boys, but I was just going through the motions. I see that now. Then I was just sleepwalking.'

> 'My mum died. She had been ill for a while and I had been minding her. I was numb for a long time after she died. I just could not do anything more than eat, sleep and make sure the children were OK and got to school.'

> 'I was pregnant. The baby was born eight weeks early, probably not helped by my stress. It was a nightmare. My daughter had to go to my mother as I was in hospital for weeks and weeks. When I got out eventually I was not fit for anything.'

These and other challenges clearly contributed to some families abandoning the process of looking for private rental accommodation relatively quickly.

> 'When we became homeless we looked at so many places. We got so many refusals it was depressing, so we gave up. It was just too much on top of everything else.'

Other families continued with the process of looking for private rental accommodation for well over 12 months until they were able to locate a suitable property.

> 'We must have looked at 1,000 places. I am not joking, I looked at places every week and in all of those places I only found one agent that would accept me and he only accepted me because he knew the place was not great. I told him I did not care about that and that I would clean it and sort it out.'

The process of looking for private rental accommodation was generally considered easier where there were two parents, with one able to mind the children and the other able to dedicate themselves to finding suitable rental accommodation.

> 'We were lucky that there was two of us. One of us could mind the children and the other could make it to viewings. That was ultimately how we found this place. We did not, we could not give up for the boys' sake and we were lucky to get this place.'

> 'It was impossible for me to try and find a rental property. I had no one to mind the children and I could not bring them with me. No landlord wants a one-parent family with young children.'

Many families reporting contacting potential landlords only to find that none would take rent allowance and the majority would not take HAP either. One family who did not give up tried to get to viewings and ultimately attended 20 viewings. The strategy was to be as presentable as possible to landlords, 'like a job interview', wait behind until the other viewers had left and then make a personal pitch to the landlord. Some attempted to obtain HAP accommodation, both because they could not wait the long period that would be necessary for local authority accommodation and because it was suggested to them that it was their only option. Others, who had a greater awareness that it was still open to them to apply for local authority accommodation and because of their preference for a secure tenure, preferred to try for local authority accommodation.

2.3   Factors sustaining exits

2.3.1   Enabling factors

Affordable rent (paid directly)

Almost all of the families living in local authority housing and approved housing body identified the fact that paying affordable rent was critical in enabling them to sustain their tenancy (although rents in the HAP situation were similar, such a tenancy was insecure). Quite a number of the families interviewed were of the opinion that this level of rent would give them an opportunity to return to education or work. Indeed, a small number had already done so.

> 'My rent is affordable and it is taken at source as are many of my other bills, so I know what money is left, what I have to buy food and everything else. It is tight. It is always tight, but at least I know what I have and I know that my rent and bills are paid.'

> 'I am on a CE scheme and I am enjoying it. It is good to have a routine, because my rent is manageable I can do this.'

> 'Because we are sorted with someplace to live that we can afford, I am restarting my level 5 training. I am so excited about it. I want be a good role model for my children.'

The fact that the rent (and in some cases utilities) was deducted at source was also seen by many families as important support for sustaining the tenancies.

> 'I am on the household budget scheme, so that before I get my money, my rent and my bills are payed. This helps me budget.'

> 'The worker helped me get the budgeting sorted when I moved in. I don't have any unexpected bills. What I get is mine for food and for things we need.'

Location and length of tenancies

In the first instance, families who have found accommodation close to family and friends appear to adjust more quickly as they too were generally familiar with the area. For the families who had moved to local authority or approved housing body accommodation, there was a definite feeling of security, which in turn saw them seeking to make the place their own.

> 'Because we know we are going to be here for a while, perhaps forever, we are making the place our own. We have painted and are planning to put down some new carpets. The place really feels like ours.'

It was also very clear from the interviews that the shorter the period of time a family was homeless, the quicker family members were able to adjust to living independently.

> 'We were very lucky. We were not homeless for very long, especially compared with other people. The kids were very young and were so happy to have space to play when we moved. We were able to quickly make the place feel like home. I am not sure now whether the younger ones realised we were even homeless. All they remember is the hotel and the lift and I am very happy about that.'

Analysis of the interviews with the families indicated that younger children appeared to adapt and settle more quickly in their new accommodation (than teenagers in particularly), especially if they did not have to move schools. In contrast, families with older children reported that it took their older children and particularly their teenagers longer to adapt, particularly where the move to a new home required a change of schools. Whereas these may be features of the experience of any family moving home, in these situations they were attempting to recover from the experience of homelessness, which is why the adjustment process is particularly important.

> 'It was very hard on the eldest. She had to move schools and leave her friends behind. She has found it hardest to adapt. The younger ones are just happy to have a space to play and me in better form. She, on the other hand, really still misses her friends.'

The responsiveness of the landlord

Some families, generally those in the approved housing body accommodation, reported having very responsive landlords who made them feel very secure in terms of their accommodation being a good, long-term basis.

> 'The landlord (a housing association) is very good at fixing things and comes quickly. My heating broke down Christmas week and they had someone round straight away to fix it. That is so important to have when you have small children.'

However, most of the families had limited or no contact with the landlord as, with automatic rent deduction, the traditional point of contact with the landlord is gone.

2.3.2 Impediments

The most frequently identified impediments indicated by the families in relation to sustaining a tenancy tended to fall into three categories: issues linked with the quality and location of the accommodation, money pressures (linked to sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation) and additional challenges experienced by some of the families.

Accommodation issues

Some families were of the opinion that the accommodation they moved to was not suitable for their needs. The reasons for the lack of suitability varied. For some families, the issues with their accommodation related to the quality of the accommodation.

> 'We took the accommodation to prevent the family being spilt up. The medical team would not discharge my child to the homeless accommodation, so I had to find something else and quickly. I took this because my back was to the wall. It's not great. It has never been great. I have done what I can with it and cleaned it up a lot. I put in new carpets. It's a good location, but it's not great quality and it's never going to be great quality.'

Another family reported moving into a building in a questionable physical condition and whilst it is unlikely to threaten a return to homelessness, it has clearly made the post-homeless period a struggle for this family.

> 'Although it is a modern building, there is no insulation: the walls are cold to the touch on the inside and there is white mould on the outside. There is no communal heating system and, although electric storage heaters are provided,

they cost €50 to set up and €13 a day to operate. We cannot afford this, so we use two small mobile electric oil heaters for just a few hours a day (gas heaters are prohibited). There is a water immersion system, but it does not work so there is no hot water. Neither are there vents in rooms, so condensation is a problem. The lift was apparently converted to a ventilation shaft for the building as a whole. It is a multi-storey building with no evident fire escape.'

Other families reported that their accommodation was too small or was going to be too small either because of new children born/due to be born after the family was housed, or indeed siblings getting to the point that it is no longer appropriate for them to share a room.

'This place was fine when we moved in but then the new baby arrived and now the older two (a boy and a girl) are getting too old to share. It really is a worry. This place is just not big enough for us anymore and I am not sure what I can do about it.'

In one case, one of the families was in first-floor accommodation with stairs, posing a particular risk for one of their children with significant health and mobility issues. For other families, they reported that their accommodation is located too far from family supports and that this is proving an issue in terms of access to affordable childcare.

'My ma was going to look after the youngest so I could go back and get my qualification. This cannot happen now as I am two buses away from her and cannot afford other childcare.'

Another one of the families was housed in quite an isolated area with limited access to services and other children.

'The difficulty is that there is no garden, no parks close by and no kids to play with. I try and do a playdate once a week but it is not enough.'

It was also the case that a small number of families reported having to deal with some difficult neighbours.

'Some of our neighbours were not very happy when we moved in: they are all owner occupiers around here. The local authority got complaints from them. One even complained to the guards that there was domestic abuse going on. The guards came but could see that there was nothing going on and went away again. Hopefully that will die away as they get to know us, but it has been hard for us to deal with, knowing that some of our neighbours don't want us here. It is not a nice feeling not to be wanted.'

One family reported being the subject on an ongoing campaign of anti-social behaviour in the local community.

'The last two years have been a living hell, because of two years of anti-social behaviour. I cannot let the children out to play and I dare not move them to the local school, so they will have to stay where they are, which means a lot more travelling. We put our best face forward but we (me and the children) are all suffering and it's all my fault. I did not listen. It has got to the stage where I am giving very serious consideration to giving this place up and going homeless again.'

Sparsely or poorly furnished accommodation and money pressures

According to the interviewees, approved housing body accommodation generally tended to be better furnished and better kitted out than both local authority and private rental accommodation. Many of the families who moved into local authority or private rented accommodation reported that it was sparsely and/or poorly furnished accommodation or, to all intents and purposes, completely unfurnished. These families were immediately faced with the challenge of obtaining beds, furniture, furnishings, white goods (cooker and/or microwave), washing machine, kettle, and, in many cases, floor covering or a replacement for the existing floor covering which was often in very poor condition.

> 'There was nothing here and I had no money, so for two weeks we slept on the floor. Then I got a loan for some essentials – kitchen appliances, beds and a table and chairs. I am now having to pay this off. I just have to hope nothing else goes wrong or we will be in trouble.'

> 'We went into debt sorting out this place when we moved in. I am still paying this off weekly, but what could I do? There was certain things we needed and I had to get them. Others we are still waiting on. That is why the place is so empty.'

Many of the families report that money is a struggle. The majority of the families reported being dependent on social welfare payments, with little left over after they have paid their rent, bills and food.

> 'The pressure points always come back to money. We need money to live and we never have quite enough and I am always scared that some emergency will come up that I need money for and that is a slippery slope to losing the house.'

Families with particular or additional needs

Some of the families reported that they had no previous history of living independently, while others found managing a household (following a period of homelessness) an ongoing challenge.

> 'I'd never lived on my own (I lived with my ma before) and now here I am on my own with a kid. It's hard. It's really hard, I'd rather live with my ma, but there is no room.'

> 'I was so institutionalised. I had forgotten how to shop, how to budget. I think I was in homeless accommodation for so long that I still find it hard. At one level it is great and at another I am so very lonely. There is no one to talk to when the kids go to bed. I am truly on my own and alone.'

Other families were dealing with very significant health issues, which posed additional challenges.

> 'My child is very ill. He has so many things wrong with him and I don't always do so well myself. The medical team is great but a lot of the time it is so hard, dealing with it all, not helped by living in a place that is unsuitable for his needs.'

2.4   Role of different services

The principal services that the families reported had contributed to their exits from homelessness were on the voluntary and not-for-profit side – Focus Ireland and the Society of St Vincent de Paul – and on the statutory side, the local authorities, the Department of Social Protection, and others.

2.4.1   Focus Ireland

The majority of the families reported that their Focus Ireland key worker/s played a central role in supporting them to exit homelessness.[10] The families who were able to differentiate between their key worker and their Support to Live Independently (SLI) worker also believed that the SLI worker had an important role in helping them to get established in their new tenancy. The support provided was both moral and practical and both were regarded as equally important by the families.

Role of the key worker

Typically, the families, once they were appointed their key worker, met them every few weeks, with telephone contact in between. Families were encouraged to call whenever they needed to and those interviewed reported that they had felt free to do so.

The workers were generally described by the families as 'supportive' and 'obliging.' Several families said that they would have been 'lost without their worker.' A small number (2–3) of families were critical of their key worker, describing the key workers appointed to them as 'lacking in experience'.

In the initial stages

The families identified one of the most important functions of the key worker as their role in explaining, at the point of first contact, the various accommodation options and possibilities available to the family.

> **'We knew so little on how we could or should respond to our situation. We didn't know what a HAP was or how it worked. That is why our key worker was so important because she explained to us what our options were and what the real wait times were for these different options.'**

Some of the families commented that it would also have been useful to get a printed copy of this information as 'it was hard to take it all in'.

What was clear from the experiences of the families was that having this information as soon as possible after the family became homeless enabled them to make earlier decisions as to which option would work best for them.

> **'When our key worker told us about HAP we quickly decided to go for it. We just knew we had to get out of where we were.'**

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[10] Note that the term 'key worker' is used throughout, although different titles may be applied to the post (e.g. case worker, case manager, etc.).

'Because we (me and my husband) broke up when we were homeless it was difficult. I had to try to get the payments in my name. My key worker was great in advising me how to do this and was able to direct me to someone who could help with the separation. I was lost about what to do and she was able to help me. I will never forget her kindness and support.'

The time taken to be allocated a key worker appeared to vary from family to family, with some families allocated a worker relatively quickly, while others waited six to nine months. Several of the families who were waiting over six months to be allocated a key worker were ultimately able to access one to help them access HAP and get out of homelessness (they were able to access the Focus Ireland duty key worker as a result of a family crisis that necessitated them to leave homelessness services very rapidly in order to prevent the family being split up).

Allocation of Key Workers

The Family Homeless Action Team is notified when the Central Placement Service (CPS) has placed a family into emergency accommodation or has granted them permission to self-accommodate (the term 'self-accommodate' will be explained later in the document).

If a family has been placed in one of the 'contracted hotels', where the Family Homeless Action Team are operating, they will be contacted straight away and allocated a case manager to work with them.

If a family is self-accommodating or placed in a hotel where the team is not operational, they will be contacted by the assessment and duty worker, who will arrange an appointment to meet the family. At this meeting an initial assessment is completed, and advice and information is provided in relation to how to access HAP and what support services are available. The family is also given the assessment and duty worker's number whom they can contact for support at any time. There is currently a waiting list for key workers for families not living in a 'contracted hotel'.

The families reported that the point at which a homeless family acquires a key worker was a significant issue and the view of all of the families was the earlier the better. In some locations, a Focus Ireland key worker was allocated immediately and the local authority appeared to have a system in place to notify Focus Ireland immediately. In others situations, the key worker was not allocated until much later. Several cases were reported at the three-month point, but for some families it was five months and longer into homelessness. One family who were in a B&B for seven months reported that they got Focus Ireland support through the intervention of a family member who met a Focus Ireland worker and told them about the family's situation, reporting that their key worker came quickly thereafter.

For some of the families, their strong view was that their key worker came too late to be useful and their strong suggestion was that in the future key workers should be appointed much earlier and ideally as soon as possible after a family becomes homeless.

'I didn't know about HAP till I got my key worker. If I had known about it earlier I would have moved on it earlier.'

'Till we got a key worker I didn't know my child could have gone to a crèche when we were in the hotel. I didn't know to ask and feel my child missed out at a time where it would have been really good for him.'

One of the families reported that they had spent a year in a hotel without a key worker or any other form of help. In desperation, the family organised to move to a private rented flat but, without heat, it proved uninhabitable the following winter and the family became homeless for a second period.

Just one of the families reported being allocated a child support worker and had found this very useful.

'I was lucky my child got a child support worker, probably because he was so hyper. She was great at playing with him and she also got him into pre-school.'

Other families indicated that they and their children could have benefited from more support, particularly in knowing how to manage challenging behaviour.

'He (the son) acted out so much. He was really hard to manage. We really needed help but there was no one there to help.'

One reported looking for a key worker and never getting one, but enlisted the help of her local elected representative instead.

During homelessness

Some key workers accompanied families to view properties and this was regarded as very helpful by many of the families and particularly as they began their search for private rental accommodation.

'It was great to have the key worker with us. When we looked at the first few places, she knew what questions to ask and we didn't, but we learnt.'

Other key workers provided a sounding board when a family was trying to make a decision on a property.

'We were offered this place, which was great but too small. There were just two bedrooms and for five of us it was not big enough. We were so afraid when we were going to turn it down that we would not get another offer. Our key worker was great, for she let us make our decision and told us that was okay not to accept a place. I was still worried after we turned it down, but she was great at telling me to put it behind me and move forward.'

Several families described their key workers as 'empowering' because they advised the family about the full range of options they had and helped them think through the likely consequences of, for instance, saying no to HAP and waiting for a local authority/ approved housing body accommodation. Interestingly, several of the families now living in local authority accommodation cited this information as 'the best information they had received' while they were homeless.

Other families reported that their key worker helped by providing them with how-to-write-letters-to-landlords skills. In another instance, one family reported that the key worker had helped by getting a second bed in a B&B (the parent was sharing the bed with her son). Another family described how the children liked the key worker and how important this was in their situation.

Many of the families appeared to particularly value the role of the key worker as an advocate, regularly contacting the local authority on their behalf and/or telephoning prospective landlords where necessary. This was regarded as very important to many of the families as it was their view and fear that without this ongoing liaison the local authority would 'forget us' and 'do nothing for us'. The majority of the families thought that the key worker's word was often taken more seriously than their own.

> **'If we phoned we often could not get through, but if the key worker phoned she generally got through and got some answers.'**

> **'We were getting nowhere on our own. The key worker tormented them. She knew what she was doing and how to do it. Without her, I am not sure the council would not have bothered with us.'**

One of the families described how their key worker took on the role of what they described as 'getting the local authority off our back by explaining what we were doing to source accommodation and how our family circumstances were making it hard for us to do more'. At the time, the family reported that the local authority was telling them 'they were not trying hard enough to source accommodation'.

What is clear from the vast majority of the interviews with families is that the allocation of a key worker to a family generally brought relief, hope and an advocate.

> **'With a key worker, we were getting somewhere at last, for we had someone to fight for us.'**

> **'Our key worker, she really fought for us, she helped me get my medical card and then helped us find accommodation with a housing association.'**

The families also saw the Focus Ireland key workers playing an important enabling role in the completion of paperwork. One family reported that their key workers had helped them to locate and source their accommodation using HAP without any further direct contact with the local authority.

Other examples of practical help provided by key workers included:

> providing information across a wide range of topics early in homelessness;
> during homelessness, helping the children by organising outings, visits to Santa, providing toys;
> assisting with the move-in. For some of the families, their last contact with their key worker was in relation to their worker helping with arranging a van service to move their possessions to their new home.

It was generally at the point of move-in that the families reported that the key worker generally handed over to a different (SLI) worker who began the work of supporting the family to get established with utility bills, etc., in their new home. Few families were aware that the worker with them after they moved in was a SLI worker.

One or two families reported contacting their key worker following their move in.

> 'The key worker helped me make my application for HAP, so one month in, when the landlord phoned to let me know that the rent had not been paid, I contacted her to ask for her help. She was great. She contacted the local authority and got it sorted. She also contacted the landlord and let him know what was happening. She got it all sorted in a few days. I was so relieved.'

The role of the Focus Ireland SLI worker

For the families allocated a SLI worker (tenancy support worker who works with families after they have exited homelessness), they reported that key worker handover to the SLI worker was generally handled well. Not all families appear to have been allocated a SLI worker, and the reasons for the allocation/non-allocation of a SLI worker were not clear to the families. Where a family was allocated a SLI worker, in some cases the key worker and the SLI worker overlapped in terms of setting up systems for the payment of rent and utility bills.

> 'The [SLI] worker helped me get the bills all in my name and got me sorted with the household budget system so I don't have to worry about bills anymore.'

> 'I was all over the place when we moved in. The worker kept reassuring me that I could make it work and I eventually did.'

Other useful supports identified by the families as being provided by the SLI workers included helping families to register at a local GP practice and getting schools, crèches and playgroups for the children.

> 'We got the offer of this place at the end of June when all the schools were closed. It was so stressful. The worker kept telling me that we would get it sorted. She helped with writing to the schools and the form filling (my writing and spelling are not up to much). She left messages and eventually the schools came back. We got places for all of the children and they were just a week late starting.'

The families also described how their (SLI) workers had been able to put the families in touch with other organisations that might be able to support them, e.g. the local social welfare office (in relation to eligibility for an Exceptional Needs Payment to help with the fit-out of their new home, or the Society of St Vincent de Paul). In a number of cases, Focus Ireland staff had provided a small number of the families with some financial assistance to help with the cost of kitting out their new home (e.g. €300 for curtains), while other families reported that their worker helped them to apply for financial support from local trusts.

How long the Focus Ireland SLI worker stayed working with the family after they moved into their new accommodation varied from family to family depending on their needs.

> 'Some of the families interviewed were very clear that they only needed their worker for a short period of time.'

Other families indicated that they had needed this support for longer. For example, one family reported that their Focus Ireland (SLI) worker had stayed working with the family for six months after the move, visiting once a week. Another family reported that they had 'intense contact' with their worker for the first few weeks, but after the initial things were sorted, they were fine and they and the worker agreed that they did not need any further

support. Many of the families who were allocated a SLI worker appeared to particularly value the role of the worker in helping them 'deal with the paperwork'.

Where the family was not allocated a SLI worker, the key worker support ceased when the family moved to their new accommodation. For some of the families this was not a problem, but for others it was apparent that they would have appreciated some further support around the point of move-in.

> 'It was our key worker told me that they were signing off and said I'd be fine, but I felt I could have done with their help for a little longer.'

The departure of the key worker/SLI worker was something which a minority of the families reported finding difficult, particularly where the worker had been with them a long time, up to nine months in some cases.

> 'I knew the worker was going, but it was a safety net and when she finished up with me I was devastated.'

In some cases, this was ameliorated by the worker providing the family with contact details and advising that 'they could be contacted by them if needed'.

Issues raised by the families in relation to Focus services

A small number of the families reported that their workers (SLI and/or key) had changed on a number of occasions. Some of these families had found this difficult particularly where they had to deal with two or three changes of worker.

One of the families also reported being distressed and confused by some advice received from a Focus Ireland staff member prior to becoming homeless. The family reported being advised by the Focus Ireland staff member to stay put, after notice to leave expired, which would be illegal. The family ultimately disregarded this information, fearing that at least one family member could thus acquire a criminal record, a consequence of which would be to render all ineligible for local authority housing.

A second situation raised by another of the families related to a visit to the Focus Ireland café. This family reported going to the Focus Ireland café to 'get out of the cold', but being turned away and advised by staff there that it was 'not suitable for a small baby'. The family was upset about this rejection and subsequently made a decision to no longer engage with Focus Ireland.

Other families reported being unclear about what it was the worker was supposed to do. These families suggested that it might be helpful if the Focus Ireland worker outlined what they were supposed to do and for how long at the outset of their engagement with the family.

2.4.2   Society of St Vincent de Paul

On the not-for-profit side, the other prominent organisation was the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP), which provided important assistance to many families.

> 'They (SVP) were good to us when we needed it.'

> 'They (SVP) helped when no one else would.'

> '(Name) (from SVP) visits every fortnight. She brings things for me and for the kids. She chats and finds out all that is going on. She wants the best for me and she helps in so many ways. She helped me get Carers Allowance and she gave me something lovely for myself for Christmas. She believes in me.'

The assistance provided by the society took various forms, including money, vouchers for food, help with form filling, befriending and moral support, furniture – beds, tables, chairs, help with school books and vouchers for new school uniforms as well as Christmas presents and Christmas hampers. Other examples of supports provided by SVP included:

> 'Giving us €120 to have the cooker connected as well as cash to furnish the bedroom.'

> 'They (the SVP) were amazing. They volunteered to pay the deposit of €2,600 demanded by the 'the landlord'. In the end, this amount was split with Focus Ireland.'

> 'There was a SVP van that came around the estate with food, but we stopped it after a while. It was embarrassing. It was like begging.'

In a few cases the families reported that the SVP did not help. The reasons given for not helping varied from family to family. When one of the families approached the SVP they said that they were told 'that they were not poor enough and there were many others in a worse situation'. The following Christmas this same family reported being provided by the SVP with 'a €30 food voucher and €20 bus ticket'. Other families reported contacting the SVP to seek support only to be told that the SVP was unable to help because they had no presence in the area where the family was located. Another family who had contacted the SVP for support reported receiving a 'cardboard box containing €20 worth of pasta and a packet of crisps'. This they reported 'struck us as a strange way to help and we did not ask for help again'.

2.4.3   The local authority

The Housing Act, 1988, defines the responsibilities of the local authority towards a homeless person in the following terms: 'If the person falls within the definition of homeless (§2), then the local authority may, under §10 (a) make arrangements, including financial arrangements, with a body approved of by the minister for the provision by that body of accommodation for a homeless person, (b) provide a homeless person with such assistance, including financial assistance, as the authority consider appropriate or (c) rent accommodation, arrange lodgings or contribute to the cost of such accommodation or lodgings for a homeless person.'

Although the local authority, *ipso facto*, played a major role in the majority of the families' exit from homelessness, the manner in which this was done was, according to the families, the cause of some 'significant stress' at various points throughout their experiences of becoming, being and indeed leaving homelessness, leading in some cases to 'cumulative distress'. As noted above, the families entered homelessness during a period of more than four years from mid-2011 until late 2015. Over this period the pressure on staff increased dramatically, from around 10 families per month to 70 families per month being assessed as homeless. Furthermore, there are four local authorities in the Dublin region and there were significant variations in practice in each of these which are reflected in the experience of families.

When becoming homeless

In the beginning (of the homeless experience), as the families became aware of their imminent homelessness (for example, because of notice of termination), they generally approached their local authority quite often in a state of panic.

In these situations, the families reported the local authorities telling them 'we can't do anything for you until you become homeless'. The families reported being told by their local authority 'not to come back until they were homeless'. Few of the families reported being given information on any other services or source of advice they could access in the meantime. The reported lack of information and support from the local authorities at this point was clearly a cause of stress for many of the families.

> 'I did know they (the local authority officials) were under pressure. I could see it in the office, but I thought there would be something they could do. Instead there was nothing, not even any information or advice. We just had to become homeless.'

The local authorities' requirements for families to prove they were homeless were also identified by the families as a barrier to accessing homeless services as well as a significant cause of stress for some of the families, with different local authorities having different requirements.

> 'We had been evicted and were living in overcrowded conditions. That was when they told us we had to get four letters to prove that we were homeless. One letter was from our recent landlord, another from the overcrowded home, one from a social worker and another from the Department of Social Protection. Getting these letters took two weeks. Only after we provided these letters did the local authority accept we were homeless and consider our case and our needs. It was a horrible, horrible time.'

Another family in a different local authority area who reported that they were in a similar situation indicated that their local authority 'required one letter from the landlord confirming their eviction', a letter which they were able to 'get and give to them quickly.'

When first homeless

Once the families were homeless they all reported attending their local authority for support, many 'in a state of shock', often fearful 'that the family might be split up'.

> 'I was, we were in a state of shock. I never thought we would find ourselves homeless. That was something that happens to other people not us.'

> 'We were traumatised. We had just lost our home. We had to give away our stuff. We didn't know where we were going to sleep. I couldn't stop crying.'

> 'I was so scared that we would be separated. I told my adult children not to sign on (even though they were entitled to) lest this be discovered and they be separated from us.'

Given the reported vulnerability of the families at that time, it is probably not surprising that they often described their treatment by local authority officials as 'harsh' and 'unsympathetic'. This was clearly not helped by the fact that the local authorities were often not always in a position to provide the families with emergency accommodation.

One family who presented as homeless on a Friday reported being told to 'come back on Monday'. Because the parent presented (by mistake) without the child, the parent was treated as a single person and accommodated in a hostel over the weekend. The following week, the family (parent and child) re-presented and was sent to a hotel.

Many of the families recounted being told that 'we (the local authority) have nothing for you'. A small number of the families also reported being told by their local authority to 'self-accommodate' (i.e. find their own emergency accommodation).

Self-accommodation

Self-accommodation refers to the practice whereby the local authority, after accepting that a household is homeless, requires the household to source its own emergency accommodation in a commercial hotel – the hotel costs incurred are covered by the relevant local authority. Depending on availability and the time of year, this can necessitate dozens of phone calls to hotels. This process cost families money and considerably adds to the stress and pressure on them.

The challenge for families of having to locate their long-term move-on accommodation

Many families were surprised at the limited involvement of their local authority in assisting them exit homelessness by sourcing long-term accommodation. Families who had been appointed a Focus Ireland key worker were supported by them in this process. Notwithstanding this support families generally reported facing significant challenges when trying to source long-term accommodation which was both realistically-priced and appropriate for them. Some families went on to report the challenges they faced (including spending 'hours and hours' either online or on the telephone without progressing any closer to sourcing a property) to their local authority. The lack of housing options available and the repeated disappointments of families in relation to finding a suitable and affordable home, in a competitively priced market, left many families feeling dejected and demoralised.

Going on the local authority housing waiting list (when homeless)

The majority of the families reported that their long-term accommodation preference was local authority accommodation and, failing that, approved housing body accommodation, because of their affordable rents and tenancy security. Although a third of the families (n = 9) exited to private rented accommodation, none of the families interviewed reported that this had been their preference.

> 'The rents (in the private rental sector) are too high and there is no security. We could be homeless again in six months. I could not, we could not deal with that again. There is no way we are going back there again.'

> 'We were evicted from our last place. It was horrible. I could not do that again. I could not do that to the kids.'

It was not surprising to find, therefore, that all of the families interviewed (without exception) reported that they were either already on the local authority housing waiting list or had asked to be put on it. It was at the point of discussion of housing options that

one family, believing that it had already been on the housing waiting list for eight years and hoping that this would count in their favour in seeking re-housing, found that it had been removed from the list. The reason given was the non-return of a signed form, which the family did not remember receiving. This problem has been recorded before, even though its occurrence is denied by local authorities.[11]

Families reported being advised by their local authority that 'the wait for a local authority home would be a long one'. They reported being quoted wait times from '4 to 6 years', to 'ten years' and, in one case, '13 years', which, whilst factually accurate, may also have been to emphasise the importance of their trying other housing opportunities in the meantime.

Keeping in contact with the local authority (when homeless)

Among the vast majority of the families, on-going contacts with the local authority (where the family engaged regularly with the local authority) were frequently described as stressful. One of the families described how their 'in person exchanges with the local authority officials in the public office were so fraught one day that they had caused their young daughter, who had been trained, to wet herself three times while this was going on'.

While homeless, some of the families reported being required by their local authority to phone the authority every morning to confirm that they were still homeless. This appeared to apply particularly to families who presented as homeless, while living in overcrowded conditions with friends and relatives. Some of the families reported that this requirement to make daily contact to confirm their homeless status continued after they had moved into emergency homeless accommodation. Other local authorities required twice-weekly phone calls.

Families who had been required to engage in daily phone confirmation of continuing homelessness indicated that this requirement was both 'time-consuming and expensive'.

> 'It ran down my phone credit, as it often took a long time to get through.'

> 'It can take an hour to get through by phone and sometimes I just could not get through. When I could not get through I worried that we would lose our place in the hotel.'

Some of the families reported that they had been required to sign-in in person in their local authority office. In one instance, the family owned a car and indicated that they had the time to do this, but described the practice as 'expensive in terms of fuel and time'. Another family required to attend daily in person reported that they were eventually permitted to phone in daily instead when 'the official told the family that they could no longer bear them breaking down and crying in their office every day'. Another family reported that they had made a point of presenting themselves so frequently to their local authority office that they were told they were being too persistent and asked not to return but instead to make contact by phone.

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[11] This issue of removal from the housing waiting list because of the non-return of a form was documented previously in Walsh, K and Harvey, B. (2015) *Family experiences of pathways into homelessness*. Dublin, Housing Agency.

For another family (whose social welfare payment was stopped for three weeks because of their change of address) the daily sign-in requirement of the local authority (in the absence of any money/payment) necessitated a long walk with their children into the city centre to check in. This family reported that they had explained the situation to the officials to see whether they might be able to phone instead but their request was turned down.

Some of the families also described the in-person sign-in procedure as 'embarrassing'.

'You had to keep explaining your situation over and over again to the security man, then the person on the desk and then the person at the hatch and we were warned not to complain. It really makes no sense to do this as all this information was already on file.'

Information and contact from the local authority (when homeless)

Many of the families interviewed reported being very frustrated by the lack of information from the local authority particularly in relation to their position on the local authority housing waiting list. Several of the families interviewed indicated that they had specifically asked their local authority to 'tell them their situation, where they were on the waiting list, expected wait time and so on', but to little avail. The majority of the families indicated that they had struggled with the lack of information.

'The worst thing was not knowing.'

One family reported being told that they were 'top of the list' but were not told how long it would be before they received an offer (which turned out to be another eight months).

For most of the families, contact with local authorities was generally limited to either advising the family that they were going to be moved (within the emergency accommodation system) or being informed about a possible accommodation option. Without exception, the families reported finding the sudden requirement to move, sometimes at only a few hours' notice and without explanation, from one hotel or B&B to another or to other accommodation, 'very stressful and challenging'.

Accommodation offers

For the families interviewed, an offer of accommodation was something that most were eagerly awaiting. However, many of the families reported that the first accommodation offer they received was unsuitable for a variety of reasons, including, most frequently, not meeting their location preferences (detailed in their initial housing application), typically near where they grew up and where they knew well, where their relatives and friends lived, or, often most importantly, convenient to the schools their children were attending.

A small number of the families indicated that they had accepted properties with locations that were far from ideal, grateful to be out of homelessness, while regarding the property as an interim solution. One family described how they accepted a property in an area where they did not know anyone, which was an isolating experience, compounded by being robbed shortly after moving in. The majority of the families who accepted first offers from the local authority for properties in locations they did not know reported 'quickly asking to be placed on the transfer list'.

Transfer list operation

Households who move into HAP properties can seek to be put on the transfer list as soon as they move into their accommodation. Indeed, there is an incentive to do so as, if the household applies to be put on the transfer list within two weeks of signing their rent contribution, they move onto the list at the same position they held on the housing list. The two weeks is not a statutory timeframe. There is a two-year statutory timeframe within which households must remain in their HAP property before they can leave and claim HAP for an alternative dwelling, though there are exceptions to this requirement.

Making the decision to refuse a property offer was identified as the cause of some significant distress for many of the families interviewed. Families reported that this was compounded by the local authority practice of offering homeless families a 'first refusal' while at the same time informing them that 'they must take the second offer, or failing that, they will not get a third and run the risk of being homeless indefinitely'.

One of the families reported being offered a flat in an area where they knew nobody and for which they had never indicated a preference. The local authority argued that the family had indicated a preference for the area. The family protested to the local authority that this was not the case. Despite this, the family reported that they were advised by the local authority that this would be considered a first refusal. This family was subsequently offered a flat in another location where again the family did not know anyone. The family went on to view the flat, describing it as 'a dump, all smashed up, with mould and condensation on the windows, people on drugs shooting up in the adjoining flat and others acting in threatening ways'. The family reported that the local authority advised them 'to accept this flat or be off the list and on the streets for a year'. The family indicated that they had complained about this treatment to the local authority but to date had received no acknowledgement or response in relation to their complaint. In the absence of other options, the family ultimately reluctantly made the decision to 'move into the unfurnished flat, and put €1,500 of savings toward the cost of new flooring'.

Other families also reported receiving what they saw as threats about the consequences of refusing a second accommodation offer. One family recounted being told 'you will be ten years in a hotel if you don't accept this offer'. On the basis of the experiences related by this sample of interviewees, there was evidence of a pattern of low-standard first offers followed by higher standard second offers. What is very clear is that the families who have been subjected to the pressure associated with what was referred to by one of the families as 'the two-strike-and-out' approach resent the pressure and the stress to which they have been subjected.

The attitudes of some local authority officials

Among the families interviewed, the manner and attitudes of a small number of local authority officials was identified as a particular cause of distress. Some families reported that it 'was the prevalence of an attitude among a small number of officials that (the families) were the cause of their own misfortune and were sponging' that was the most difficult issue to deal with. Several families indicated that their awareness (from others who

had experience of homeless services locally) of the prevalence of this attitude among local officials had delayed them presenting to homeless services.

> 'We (me and my two children) spent two years couch-surfing in crowded conditions before eventually presenting to homeless services because we ran out of options. I just could not bear to deal with people like that, so I put if off as long as I could.'

> 'For the most part the (local authority) officials are fine. They have a job to do, a hard job and they are under pressure but they are professional and they get on with it. There are just one or two whose attitude towards us is horrendous.'

The fact that the local authorities which were approached for support were not in a position (through no fault of the local authority or its officials) to help the families quickly exit homelessness, or indeed find suitable stable emergency accommodation, can be seen to have clearly contributed to these families' largely negative view of the local authorities. Where the families interviewed reported coming across individual local authority staff variously described as 'judgmental' and 'harsh', these families described their local authority in profoundly negative terms.

2.4.4   Department of Social Protection

The other important statutory body was the Department of Social Protection. The problem of lack of or poor-quality fitting and furnishings in accommodation has already been identified. For families who reported that they were eligible for an Exceptional Needs Payment, the system appeared to work well, with the payment made quickly and efficiently. Examples of payments made to some of the families interviewed include:

> '€750 for electrics and €1,500 for beds and furniture.'

> 'Total of €1,700 but not to include a sofa or a television.'

> '€250, limited to beds.'

> '€2,500, but not to include flooring.'

> '€2,000, with the specification that €700 was for white goods. The balance was spent on a washing machine, cooker and "cheap wood" for flooring as there was only a cement floor.'

> '€2,000, for couch, beds, washing machine, cooker, flooring and pots and pans, but not curtains.'

The families interviewed reported that these payments made a 'difference' to them, with few reports of any issues with the payments. At the same time, it should be noted that the amounts provided were generally lower than the actual costs. Typically, the families interviewed reported providing a substantial amount of money themselves, examples being cited of up to €1,500.

2.4.5   Other groups that supported families to exit homelessness

Some of the families interviewed contacted their local public representatives around the time they were becoming homeless, while some continued to contact them while they were homeless. These yielded varying degrees of success for the families.

> 'My TD could not really help.'

> 'My local councillor told me who to contact but that was about it. They were not really interested.'

One family reported that their local deputy 'promised a lot, but delivered nothing', leaving the family 'very disappointed'. Another of the families reporting 'ringing round' their TDs, but to no avail. By contrast, another family reported that their TD had gone to significant effort. 'They tried really hard … phoning round landlords and agents to try find us a place.'

The families interviewed also reported accessing supports from a range of other organisations and groups. See Table 2.2 for details.

Organisation	Support provided	Commentary on support received
Threshold	› Legal and other advice	'Advice was sound' 'They told me exactly what to do and that was what I did.' 'When I called in they said I needed an appointment and I should make one and come back … I didn't.' 'They said they would call back but didn't.'
Church	› Donated items for the house › Made curtains	'They were a great source of practical and spiritual support.'
De Paul Ireland	› Key worker	'They took me and my children on when no one else would.'
Health services/ medical team	› Medical care for my son › Access to specialist support › Moral support › Letters to support case for being moved	'They were good to my son, they were kind to me, at a time where there was little kindness.' 'They mind my son, but they also check in to see how I am doing. They assure me that I am coping and that I can cope, they keep me going.' 'The first person I spoke to was a baby nurse, she was great. She could see I needed help. She got me to a family healthcare worker and then a psychologist who gave me a name for what I was dealing with. So, for me, the health services were great when they kicked in. It was just an accident that they did.'

Organisation	Support provided	Commentary on support received
Local schools	› Fed the children › Wrote letters of support where the children had to move school › Kept a close eye on the children › Kept in touch if there was a problem	'We told them what was going on and they said to let them know if they could help.' 'We had to move the children to another school and they helped with the transition.'
Family (parents, grandparents, siblings and close friends)	› Moved the family and their stuff to the new place › Helped tidy and clean the new place › Fed everyone › Did washing › Cash › Moral support › Childminding	'They were brilliant, they were always there for everything.' 'I used to go there (parents) and cry and cry and cry. My dad would take the little ones out and my ma would just listen to me.' 'They are the one place that has stayed the same for the children. They are their anchor in a world that has changed.' 'My brother gave me money for the kids when they needed something and gave me money to help me get set up in the new place.'

Table 2.2 · Other organisations or groups that supported exit

2.4.6   Identified gaps in services

The families interviewed identified various gaps in services, including:

› the lack of services for children who are homeless (summer activities, afterschool services, etc.);
› the lack of supports for parents seeking to deal with their children's challenging behaviour when they are homeless;
› the need for parents to be able to access counselling (and relationship counselling) services when they are homeless;
› the need for peer support groups to assist individuals who are homeless to manage their stress levels.

These will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

2.5   Conclusions

This chapter examined the circumstances whereby families exited homelessness, those factors that enabled them to do so, such as their own capacity and that of the various support workers; the impediments, which reduced their capacity, such as ill-health; and the enabling factors that helped them to sustain their exits, such as the direct payment of affordable rent, location, security and the responsiveness of the landlord. There were additional impediments such as the accommodation being unfurnished on arrival. The principal services were provided, on the voluntary side, by Focus Ireland (support workers) and the Society of St Vincent de Paul; and on the statutory side by the local authorities and the Department of Social Protection. Gaps in services were identified.

3

Findings – the impact of the experience of homelessness on families

This chapter explores the impact of the experience of homelessness on children (3.1), on parents (3.2) and on parents' relationship with their children (3.3). The final section explores the impact of homelessness on families' relationships with others (3.4). As noted earlier, this section is based on the interviews with the parents. This project did not involve interviews with the children or with third parties.

3.1   Impacts on children

Parents reported that the impact of the experience of being homeless on their younger (five and under) children as limited. This was particularly the case where families were homeless for six months or less. Where families were homeless for longer, parents reported an increased impact.

> 'My son has good memories of the hotel. The staff were great with him. I think he thinks we were on holidays and I am not going to tell him we were not.'

> 'My son is going to be kept back a year in pre-school, for they don't think he is ready for school. I don't either. I think the way we lived when we were homeless is part of the problem.'

> 'It did not affect our two-year-old daughter too much, except that she would have liked her own bed in the hotel and that the place we got for her in a crèche was a 90-minute walk each way, but it was so far that it blistered my legs.'

In one family, parents recalled that 'the children thought they were on holiday. They loved the intimacy of being close together in one room. They liked the older people there. As for us parents, we were totally stressed out, even fighting with one another.' One parent recalled how their daughter delightedly told her school friends that she lived in a hotel, 'which had me mortified'.

Several families with young children believed that their children were too young to understand that they were homeless, what it meant and, as a consequence, were likely to have limited memories of the experience.

According to the families interviewed, one of the biggest challenges for their children was dealing with the boredom associated with living in a single room with the rest of the family. One family described how their children (3 and 5) were initially excited about the

idea of living in a hotel, but got bored quickly. The families described how it was to deal with 'no one speaking to us', 'people keeping themselves to themselves' and 'day-to-day living in poor conditions'.

> 'Our son's behaviour went out of control. He was so bored. There was nothing for him to do.'

> 'My daughter's behaviour changed. She fought with me and with her dad (which was unheard of). She cried a lot and acted out.'

The families reported that in most circumstances their children had nowhere to play. As one family described it, 'our daughter hated it – no friends, nowhere to play'.

The families reported that the impact on their older children appeared to have been more significant.

> 'Our 14-year-old didn't do well in school (when we were homeless). He didn't study. There was no place quiet for him to study and he was too tired from all the travelling we had to do to get to school. He was always wanting to sleep. Things are starting to improve but he has lost the good studying habits he used to have, so I have stopped him playing football till things improve.'

> 'My eldest has been deeply affected by it all, by being homeless and now by having to live in an impossible situation (the family is the victim of anti-social behaviour). She was pulled off her bike outside the house and is now afraid to go out.'

> 'Our son's night terrors started then (when we were homeless) and he still gets them.'

> 'My son was assessed as having ADHD when we were homeless. It got much worse; he was hyper.'

Another issue the parents were clearly worried about was the impact on their children of exposure to activities that they would not have witnessed were they not in emergency accommodation.

> 'The fact that we (me and my partner) split up when we were in homeless accommodation means the children heard more than they should. It was hard for them to see their mum and dad fighting and they heard and saw stuff that we both wish they didn't.'

> 'Living where we did, my children saw things that I did not want them to see. This has marked them. I know it has. They saw children taken off their parents. They saw people shooting up. They saw the ambulance come to treat a woman who had taken an overdose on the landing outside our room. They have had to grow up faster and harder than we would have ever wanted for them.'

One of the one-parent families reported that they had to make the difficult decision to send their youngest child to live with their parents (outside of the country) and continue to worry that this may, in time, have an impact on the child.

> 'I could not cope with the two children on my own, so I sent one home to my mum. I hope this doesn't affect him later.'

The majority of younger children appeared to adjust relatively quickly after the move into the new home, a month or two being typical. The parents described it in the following terms:

'They were quickly normal again, and are happy now.'

'No more doors slamming, kids fighting, moaning and not doing homework.'

'My son improved quickly. He is happy at school now, independent, plays football, health is good and energy levels are up.'

Another commented on how, after the move, the children were 'doing brilliantly at school now'. Some parents took measures to assist: one family got their son into a homework club, which helped his educational performance to recover. Another family reported how, as a result of prolonged couch-surfing, their son (aged 4–6 during this period) became quite insecure and needed psychotherapy but now that they were in a HAP apartment, he was much better.

Some older children did recover quickly. One of the families reported how, when they were homeless, their daughter attended the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and saw a counsellor. After being relocated to a good apartment, the family reported that their daughter was recovering, 'she is much better, more focused, studying and behaving normally – quite a change.'

For many families, moving into their new home and out of homelessness marked an improvement in behaviour and mood, but this was not the case for all.

'We had to change schools when we moved here but could not find a school very close, so the children may have to move schools again. This is particularly hard on one of the children who finds change hard. She is upset about the first change and is finding it very hard to settle. I am not sure how she is going to cope if she has to change again.'

'My older son never complained when we were homeless nor when his dad left, but now he is disruptive. I think as he gets a bit older he misses his dad and the family life we had before.'

'When we were homeless we were stuck together in such a tiny space. Now we have more space the boys want to do things in their own rooms. It can be a battle to get them to sit down as a family and eat together.'

One of the families recounted the story of their four-year-old asking them whether being homeless was 'some form of punishment' and if it was what they had done wrong. Several of the families referred to a loss of discipline. One of these families described the impact in the following terms: 'They became bold. It became "I want" instead of "please". It was hard for us to say "no" when we were homeless and they became spoiled in that way.'

3.2   Impacts on parents

All of the families interviewed indicated that being homeless had many negative impacts for them both as adults and as parents of children experiencing homelessness. For some of the families interviewed, the impacts were practical and economic, with work and study having to be abandoned.

> 'I lost my job when we became homeless. I just could not get there and get the kids to and from school.'

> 'I loved college but I had to let it go. Hopefully I will get back to it at some stage when things are more settled.'

Other families and parents indicated that homelessness had a negative impact on their physical health.

> 'When I was homeless I put on a lot of weight. We ate a lot of junk food. This did not make me feel good about myself and I am finding the weight very hard to shift. Sometimes I disgust myself.'

> 'When I was homeless I lost a lot of weight. I had no appetite and I walked everywhere to save money. I looked ill and my clothes were falling off me. I am better now but still don't have much of an appetite.'

For others, the most significant impact was on their perceptions of themselves and their emotional well-being, which was in turn linked to their overall health and well-being. Many parents reported a significant loss of confidence, accompanied by increased and in many cases significant levels of anxiety in relation to their safety and the safety of their children. This in turn led to changes in behaviour for some individuals, while others turned to alcohol and drugs to help them cope.

> 'Being homeless knocked me down as a person. I lost so much confidence. I felt guilty. It affected me emotionally and I took it out on family members.'

> 'I got so anxious when we were homeless. The doctor put me on anti-depressants which helped a bit … I have taken myself off them now that things are more settled.'

> 'I wasn't able to cope. I went down a bad road with drugs and drinking when I lived in the hostel. I was just not myself. It nearly ruined me completely.'

Some of the parents also indicated that they had to change their behaviour in order to survive when they were homeless.

> 'I had to get tough and toughen up when I became homeless because there were people screaming in your face and you had to defend yourself. I didn't want my son to think that I was weak. He needed me to be strong. I needed to be strong.'

Another parent, describing the impact of the experience of homelessness, contrasted her mental health while homeless and after homelessness in the following terms: 'When I was homeless, I was suicidal. Now my brain is my own again. I felt brand new when I moved in.'

Other parents described how they had 'mood swings', they 'never stopped crying' and in one or two cases how they considered killing themselves and would have done

so were it not for their children. Several parents described how they had turned to prescription medication. Quite a number stopped taking these medications quite quickly 'fearful of becoming addicted'; as one parent described it, 'I stopped for fear of turning into a zombie.'

Some of the parents described how they had sought to access psychological help through their GP to cope with the depression, only to be told that the waiting list for an appointment or assessment was 12 months. None of those interviewed who sought this support got it.

Another parent described the impact of homelessness on her in the following terms: 'It was awful. I lost weight. I had a nervous breakdown and I miscarried. I did manage to get psychological in-patient help, followed by three to four months on anti-depressants.' This parent went on to report that she keeps reliving the experience of what she described as the worst winter of her life and never wants to set foot in a hotel again.

Some of the parents had also been clearly distressed and indeed traumatised by what was described as the absence of a 'place of safety and security'.

> 'The accommodation where we were placed was violent and unsafe. One man was killed there and our own child had a fall.'

> 'There was a fire in the accommodation we were living in. It made me very uneasy. I just wanted to get out.'

> 'Where we were, there was a single washing machine for eight or nine families which didn't spin and which you had to stand over "to make sure you got your own clothes back".'

When reflecting on the experience of homelessness, surviving homelessness was something of which the majority of parents were proud; in the sense that they had drawn upon their own resources, resilience, and personal strength during a period of exceptional challenge and upheaval. Many were optimistic about the future.

> 'I realise I am strong. I am strong because of my daughter and I never want to go back there (homelessness) again.'

> 'It was a big step for me to take on a house on my own. I am proud of myself for doing it. I was lucky to have my family and a SLI worker to help, who stayed with me for nine months and that made a big difference.'

> 'For the first time in a long time I am starting to make plans again. I have just got a place on a Community Employment (CE) scheme and am looking forward to starting again.'

Some parents reported being particularly affected by the loss of their personal possessions associated with becoming homeless.[12] Many of the parents made reference to the way in which they 'lost everything', especially regretting losing family photos, while the children

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[12] On becoming homeless, most families had packed up their belongings. Some were able to farm out at least some of their belongings to friends and relatives across the city, who were generally very obliging, assuming they had space to store the items. Others left their belongings behind or, in some cases, sold or dumped everything except what they could carry. Some gave everything they had to the Society of St Vincent de Paul or Barnardos.

reported missing their collectibles and new toys. One large family detailed how when they became homeless all they had was 'one case and the clothes we were wearing'.

The parents interviewed generally found that being homeless was expensive, largely due to food and travel costs.[13] Many of the families reported that the money they had left after food and travel was very limited and was generally spent on purchases for birthdays and Christmas presents for the children. This meant that most of the families left emergency accommodation with little or no savings to help them equip their new homes.

According to some of the families, the quality of the emergency accommodation the family was placed in had a significant impact on parental stress levels. Where the accommodation provided was of good quality, the parents interviewed were clearly less stressed by their situation. Where the accommodation was poor, or where the accommodation was noisy and/or there were levels of anti-social behaviour, this was a significant cause of stress for those parents. For other families interviewed, it was the attitudes of the staff in the different types of emergency accommodation that had the biggest impact on the parents. In some instances, families reported that 'kind' staff in less than ideal emergency accommodation made the accommodation more bearable, while in other better quality accommodation, the negative attitudes of staff and in some cases their decision to separate the families from regular guests had a negative impact.

> **'The accommodation was not great, but the staff were kind and helpful and that made all the difference to us.'**

> **'The accommodation was good, a lot better than other places I had been told about, but the staff (apart from the cleaners, who were very friendly) were not friendly. You got the feeling that they really did not want us there. They made us feel like a second-class citizens.'**

Without exception, the families interviewed were very clear that becoming homeless and being homeless had a very negative impact on their various relationships and particularly between parents and couples. At least two of the families indicated that the parents had separated while becoming homeless and two couples reported that they had split up while homeless.

> **'We stuck it together in homeless accommodation for four months which was very hard. Then there was a fight when he lost it and attacked me. I had to get help and the guards were called. It was horrible, and it was horrible that it happened in such a public place. After it happened he had to leave and that left me alone with the boys.'**

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[13] See the Focus Ireland report conducted by Share and Hennessy (2017) '*Food access and nutritional health among families living in hotel accommodation*'. Meeting the transport costs associated with living in emergency accommodation (at a distance from the schools children are attending) is a challenge for families who are homeless. Families with cars are much better able to get their children to and from school, sometimes travelling long distances to do so. Buses take longer, and the radial nature of Dublin's transport system means that two buses may be involved each way. Often, bus-dependent parents have nowhere to stay when their children are in school, but those with cars can wait in their cars during school hours. These transport issues can have an impact on time use and levels of stress, tiredness and frustration.

'We had so many rows, the relationship went down the drain. Ultimately though he did stick with me and while we don't live together, maybe someday we will. The sad thing is that this also had knock-on effects for our son.'

For the remainder, the experience was clearly a difficult one, with one couple adopting a coping strategy that sought to give both adults a little time to themselves.

'We fought a lot then (when we were homeless) but what saved us is that we both had an evening off. I played football and she visited her sister or her ma.'

'It was stressful for the two of us. We got through it and now we are on the good side of it all. We had to keep going. We are a strong unit and we had to be strong to hide as much as we could from the boys. We just tried to make everything fun and mostly that worked.'

3.3   Impacts on relationships: children and parents

Analysis of the interviews with the families found that living in homeless accommodation had clearly impacted negatively on parents' relationship with their children. They discussed family tensions and conflict in the context of stressful and overcrowded homeless living situations.

'I was very angry when we were homeless and I tried to hide it, but it meant that I was always giving out. The boys hated it that I was always angry. It is better now. There is a different atmosphere. There is a bit more team work.'

'When we were homeless my son always wanted to stay with my ma and sometimes for an easy life I let him. There was nothing for him to do in the hotel. Now I think he has a better relationship with her.'

'I thought being pregnant and homeless was the worst, knowing that I was going to have to bring a new baby into the situation, but then the baby arrived months early and I had to get my daughter's father to take her. She didn't know what was happening. She was really affected by that and I was powerless to protect her.'

Most of the parents interviewed reported waiting until they moved out of homeless accommodation before they began to address some of the more negative impacts.

'They picked up some very bad language when we were homeless and it was hard to get them to stop using it given they heard so many adults using it.'

The parents also spoke about the challenges associated with re-establishing regular routines in their new home.

'When we were homeless my child always wanted to go out and I was happy to let him. Now we have a home he wants to go home to. That makes me feel good.'

'It was hard to adjust to healthy meals and having meals together at the table.'

> 'When we were homeless we were all in the same room. When we moved in here we all had our own room. This was hard for the little ones to get used to, so, for a long time they used to come in during the night and we would all sleep in the same bed.'

School was a particular pressure point in the parent–child relationship. Parents reported working hard to avoid uprooting children from their school, either when they were in emergency accommodation or subsequently, fearing that a change would further upset their child's academic progress and/or socialisation. The parents interviewed were also very keen not to have to go through the process of having to get their child/children into a new school.

Several families reported finding themselves involved in complex journeys across the city that had to be carefully timed to avoid meter charges and long waits sitting outside school in the car for school to be over. One particular family reported that they used to get up every morning at a 5 a.m. to get the children to school across town. It was too far for the parent who brought the children to return to their accommodation, so they hung around, killing time during the morning. When this came to the attention of the school, the family reported that the school were 'very helpful, giving us and other parents who were homeless a room in the school, turning the heating on for us and even giving us a food hamper'.

> 'Our child has ADHD and was doing well in the school he was in. When we became homeless we were put in a B&B on the other side of the city. When we explained this to the local authority they told us to change schools. Our social worker was equally adamant that the child should not be moved. In the end, we decided to leave the child in the current school he was happy in, requiring us to travel on two buses each way, which was exhausting for all of us.'

> 'We did not want to move the children. We talked to the local authority and they listened. They put us about 15 minutes away from the children's school.'

Other families who made the decision to move their child/children or to get the child into a crèche/school in a new location reported running into considerable difficulties. One family with a young son had considerable difficulty finding an early years place. They were ultimately unsuccessful and so kept him at home. As the child approached six, the family approached the local school only to be told that there were no places, and again the family had to continue to keep the child at home. At one stage, the family considered sending the child to school in their country of origin in Europe while they tried to resolve his situation. The issue awaits resolution.

In summary, accessing schools caused both mental and physical stress for the families interviewed. The stress was lowest if schools did not change and if parents had their own cars and had somewhere to wait, like the helpful school reported above. Stress levels were higher where children had to either change school, make multiple bus journeys, with parents killing time with nowhere to go to, waiting for schools to be over. Where a family was unable to find a place for their child, this was clearly the greatest source of concern and stress.

3.4　Impact on relationships with others

For some of the families interviewed, their homelessness clearly brought them closer to their immediate family (parents, grandparents and siblings) and close friends.

> 'Without my brother and my best friend, I do not think I would have coped.'

Many of the families made a decision not to tell people due to the perceived stigma and shame of homelessness, which sometimes had a negative impact on their relationships and social networks.

> 'We were [so] embarrassed that we didn't tell friends, only family.'

> 'We pulled away from everyone. We were in denial about what was going on. We only told family where we were. We didn't tell friends.'

> 'I got very paranoid about people knowing where we lived. I thought people would judge us, so I didn't tell people and was very careful about what I posted on Facebook. This put a distance between me and other people that I am only now starting to break down.'

> 'The kids never told anyone we were homeless or where they were. We only told the school when the child's behaviour deteriorated and the school principal contacted us to find out what was going on.'

3.5　Conclusions

This chapter found that the experience of being homeless had significant negative economic, social and health impacts on the adults involved, both individually and as couples. Children were affected differently, the impact being much less for younger children and more significant for older children and teenagers. Discipline and child–parent relationships deteriorated. From the parents' perspective, younger children recovered quickly on resettlement, while the impact for older children and for the parents' relationship was often felt for significantly longer. While these findings do not incorporate the unknown long-term effects of homelessness on children of all ages, it does signal the varying impacts that homelessness has on all members of the family.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research interviewed a cross-section of families who had become homeless in Dublin and were resettled in local authority, private rented (HAP) and approved housing body accommodation.

4.1 Conclusions

Following the sequence of the previous chapters, conclusions are divided into the experience of homelessness and exiting homelessness (4.1.1); services (4.1.2); the impact of the experience of homelessness on families, parents and children (4.1.3); discussion (4.1.4), and recommendations (4.2).

4.1.1 Experience of homelessness and exiting homelessness

At the risk of stating the obvious, exiting from homelessness was a challenging process. Key factors that supported the exit included the personal resilience of the mother or father or both, as well as the nature of supports provided by Focus support workers; and the combination of the two.

Many of the families demonstrated remarkable resilience, given the experience they lived through. When asked what advice they would give to others in their situation, they said, 'keep going, never give up'. Some were already quite skilled in house-hunting and the fact that so many capable people found the experience so fraught was an indicator of just how little housing is available.

The majority of families reported that the impact of the experience of homelessness lifted relatively quickly after leaving emergency accommodation. This was particularly the case for families placed in local authority accommodation and approved housing body accommodation, which were clearly considered by the families interviewed to be 'more secure' and 'more affordable than private rented accommodation'. In contrast, the families who were living in HAP accommodation generally reported finding it 'affordable, but not secure'.

Important enablers that helped the families to exit homelessness included their support worker/s; the location and quality of the accommodation; the direct payment of rent; the duration of the tenancy; and the responsiveness of the landlord. Conversely, threats to exits and tenancy sustainment were identified as unsuitable accommodation,

lack of or poor-quality fittings and furnishings, low income, or families with particular additional needs.

The experience of homelessness was cumulatively greatly distressing: in the first instance, a short period of high-intensity stress and panic, followed by prolonged stress of less intensity. Being homeless put enormous stress on the relationship between parents, both those living together and those living apart. The impact on adults of the experience of homelessness can be divided into a number of phases, with different levels of intensity:

Phase 1 is the immediate impact after declaring homelessness. The first phase impacts as a period of high-intensity stress of short duration. Many reported feelings of panic on becoming homeless, for example, of not being able to sleep and more than one referred to the distress of the immediate period as being 'the roughest week of my life'.

Phase 2 is the impact during the period in emergency (B&B or hotel) accommodation, which was a period of lower-intensity but prolonged and accumulating stress.

Phase 3 is the settling into new accommodation after leaving emergency accommodation. The impacts of this phase appear to vary depending on the tenure of the accommodation where the family was placed. For those in HAP accommodation with only a short lease, the families clearly remained anxious about the risk of becoming homeless again and reported feeling restricted about what they could do within the property: 'It's frustrating that you can't make it a real home, paint the walls or do anything with it.' In contrast, the majority of the families who had become local authority tenants and for whom the threat of homelessness had finally been lifted appeared very relieved and had, without exception, begun work on making the property their own.

4.1.2   Services

Key services supporting the families to exit homelessness included the local authority, the Department of Social Protection, Focus Ireland support workers and the Society of St Vincent de Paul (4.1.2.1–4).

4.1.2.1 Local authorities

The most important statutory body in relation to the accommodation of homeless families is the local authority. Although, *ipso facto*, the local authority plays a major role in the exit from homelessness, the manner in which some services were provided attracted strong criticism from the families interviewed. The problem areas were as follows:

›   Although government policy (*Rebuilding Ireland*) emphasises the importance of prevention, local authority practice did not appear to be preventative in nature during the period experienced by the families in this study. Families presenting to the local authority as imminently homeless were reportedly generally sent away and told not to come back until they were actually homeless. Neither did any of the families interviewed report being informed by the local authority of agencies that might help. Several families spoke retrospectively of how they believed they could have benefitted from the provision of information and additional support at this point.

›   The families interviewed reported presenting to their local authority highly stressed and traumatised, fearful of the family unit being broken up. Many of those interviewed described their treatment by officials as unsympathetic and found this difficult to deal with. While the families interviewed recognised that local authority staff were themselves

working under great stress, they also reported that there were a small number of staff who were particularly challenging to deal with because of their moralizing comments and inferences, which they found unacceptable, even under stress.

› The advice of local authorities to some of the families interviewed to 'self-accommodate' resulted in some families pursuing, often fruitlessly and for long periods, emergency accommodation in hotels.[14]

› The practice of some local authorities, during the period reported, of requiring homeless families to frequently confirm their continuing homelessness, either in person or by phone, can be time-consuming, stressful, physically exhausting, expensive and distressing.

› The operation by some local authorities of a refusal policy (which requires families to take the second property they are offered), whilst lawful, is both challenging and subjective. Families interviewed as part of this study reported receiving what they considered to be 'unreasonable' first offers. For them, 'unreasonable' first offers included properties in locations that were either not in their preference area/s, properties in substandard condition, and/or properties that were located in environments that the parents considered unsafe for children (i.e. with high levels of anti-social behaviour). The consequence of the refusals policy for the families interviewed was that these families generally accepted second offers, however unsuitable, rather than face the risk of removal from the housing list. Under the current system, the determination of what is 'reasonable' is made by the local authority, with no meaningful appeals system, for example, that might be able to consider issues like levels of anti-social behaviour in the area.[15] It is well-established that exits are more successful in locations where applicants already know local communities or come from there, but more challenging in unfamiliar environments, but this was not always taken into account.

› Although local authorities may insist that the removal of individuals and families from the local authority housing waiting list (without their knowledge or consent) does not happen, several families interviewed reported having direct experience of being removed from the local authority housing waiting list without their knowledge or consent.[16] Given that the removal of a household from the local authority housing waiting list has such grave

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[14] Focus Ireland has already taken the view, prior to this research, that 'self-accommodation' is something that could be offered as an option but should not be set down as a requirement.

[15] Refusal policies are governed by §22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the Social Housing Allocation Regulations, 2011 (S.I. §198 of 2011), which require local authorities to draw up allocation schemes. Under these schemes, the policy of Dublin City Council is that, in the event of two refusals, the council will suspend a household from the waiting list for 12 months, which will result in the household not being offered social housing for the suspension period (12 months), and a similar policy is in effect in Dun Laoghaire. South Dublin County Council states that applicants who, without a satisfactory explanation, refuse two reasonable offers of accommodation within a twelve-month period, will have their application suspended for one year. This period will not be considered for 'time on list' purposes. A similar policy is stated by Fingal County Council. Only one local authority appears to have an appeals system, Fingal County Council, which makes provision for an internal appeal to the senior executive officer in the housing department.

[16] For example, Fingal County Council, Housing SPC, discussion on report *Family experiences of pathways into homelessness*, 29 November 2016.

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consequences for that household, it is important that this does not happen and where it does happen a transparent appeals system must be put in place to ensure that any errors can be addressed.[17]

Other challenging issues for a significant number of the families interviewed related to their frustrations with the inability of their local authority to provide them with (a) access to suitable emergency accommodation and (b) access to suitable longer-term accommodation (ideally local authority accommodation or, failing that, approved housing body accommodation).

4.1.2.2 Department of Social Protection

The families who were eligible for support from the Department of Social Protection indicated that the department had provided them with exceptional needs payments to assist with the costs of furnishing and kitting out their new accommodation. While many of the families would have appreciated a larger payment, this system appeared to work speedily and effectively, with no instances recorded of difficulties or poor staff interactions. One observation is that by providing such payments, the department appears to accept, at public expense, furnishing responsibilities that hitherto belonged to landlords (private or public). While for the latter this is partly cost-neutral, such spending is a form of subsidy for private landlords.

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[17] There are currently no published records of what forms or methods are used to contact those on the housing list, over what period of time, or what systems are put in place to check for errors, the methods of quality control applied, or of scans of test samples. The Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government informed the Dáil on 23 February that, as part of the Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA) 2016, all housing authorities were required to review those households who were on their housing list but were not then in receipt of housing support. This was to ensure that the details of the applicant households were up to date and accurate and that they remained eligible for, and in need of, social housing support in accordance with the criteria set down in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations. As part of this, all local authorities wrote to households during 2016, including those in transitional and shared or emergency accommodation, informing them of the assessment process and seeking updated information. Where a household responded and was found to no longer meet the qualification criteria for social housing support in light of their updated details, they were removed from the list. In the event of an initial non-response, guidance issued by the Housing Agency advised housing authorities to contact the household again and to use all reasonable means of communication in contacting the applicant. Authorities were also advised to undertake local advertising campaigns informing households about the summary. Where a number of attempts to contact a household failed to elicit a response, authorities were advised that it was not unreasonable to then close the household's application. However, housing authorities were also advised that should the household subsequently respond with the information required within a reasonable time, the application could be re-activated (Dáil Éireann, *Debates*, 23 February 2017, 232–3). On 28 March, the minister informed the Dáil that, on the basis of returns from 25 of 31 housing authorities, 28,000 households had been removed from the list, but that records were not kept that would identify people who might have been in emergency accommodation (Dáil Éireann, Debates, 28 March 2017, 243-4).

4.1.2.3 Focus Ireland worker/s

The role of the Focus Ireland support worker was as a provider of both practical and moral support. From the families' perspective, the most important role played by their key worker was in negotiating with the local authority on their behalf, making the case for the prioritisation of the family and indeed providing an ongoing reminder to the local authority that the family were still waiting to be housed.

The support workers, once allocated (to the family), met them regularly. These meetings were highly valued and provided the family with practical support in the form of information and explanations as to how the family could deal with their situation. The workers also helped with a range of other supports, including organising outings and activities for the children, help with viewings, help with the move-in (e.g. providing a van service), and, on arrival in the new home, with the paperwork associated with utilities.

In some instances, the support workers also helped the families to obtain private rented accommodation by assisting them with applications and in some cases actually arranging accommodation and services (e.g. early years for the children). Many were personally commended. A number of issues were identified in relation to the support workers, as follows:

> Many of the families were unclear as to the exact role of their key worker and indeed their SLI worker, which meant that expectations were unclear and boundaries uncertain.

> Although for some families the key worker arrived quickly after they became homeless, for others, there were lengthy delays, which left families vulnerable and without support. In one case, none arrived in the course of 12 months of homelessness. This is explained by the fact that family homelessness increased significantly faster than the number of key workers available during the period, resulting in a build-up of waiting lists for the allocation of key workers. Waiting lists varied from as short as a week to as long as several months during the period.[18]

> For some families, the handover from their key worker to their SLI worker was very smooth, for others the handover was less smooth, and some families do not appear to have been allocated a SLI worker at all. Despite the existence of a well-structured policy on disengagement from SLI, this was not evident in the experience of some of the interviewed families.

> There was discontinuity in the staff providing the service, with some families being assisted by several different support workers.

Related to the issue of key worker is that of child support worker. Only a small number of families interviewed were allocated a child support worker. We do not know the number assessed as in need of child support worker, but for whom, in practice, none was found. None of the other families interviewed appeared to be aware of the availability of such support, although it is evident that quite a number could have benefitted from it. According to Focus Ireland, child support workers are allocated following an assessment of need at the time of initial contact. Allocation of child support workers is prioritised on the basis of the assessed needs of the child. Child support workers are funded by the HSE and Tusla,

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[18] Focus Ireland expanded its Family Homeless Action Team in 2016, to the point that the percentage of homeless families in Dublin with a case manager rose from 27% in 2015 to 54% in 2016. The number with case management support rose from 212 in January 2016 to 560 at year's end.

and while Tusla increased the number of child support workers during this period, they are only able to support a small proportion of the children in emergency accommodation. From the evidence of the families interviewed, there is a strong case for expanding this service.

A final observation on Focus Ireland workers relates to their role as advocates. Many of the families interviewed considered that the prime role of their worker was as an advocate for them with the local authority. The finding that these families believed they needed an advocate to assist them in ensuring that their case would be effectively presented and progressed reflects poor delivery of the existing housing system, its excessive complexity and the pressure to which it is subjected.

4.1.2.4 Society of St Vincent de Paul

The Society of St Vincent de Paul was the other prominent not-for-profit organisation assisting families, many of whom indicated that they had benefitted from the society's support – cash, furniture and visits – which generally lasted up to a year after moving in. In a couple of cases, the society did not help, and the families generally attributed this to the variability of the operation of the society from one location to another.

4.1.3   Impacts of the experience of homelessness

The impacts of the experience of homelessness varied. For very young children, it appeared – from the perspective of their parents – to have had limited impact. These young children appeared largely unaware of the nature or significance of the experience. For older children, the impact was greater and more visible. For the parent/s, it was a time of considerable stress, intensive at first, then of less intensity, but prolonged and just as potentially scarring, often resulting in significant friction between parents. Personal relationships and family discipline generally deteriorated.

Among the principal problems were the lack of certainty, lack of play space, poor conditions in some locations, overcrowding, boredom and reduced socialisation. Specific impacts on parents were noted as food-related (weight gain/weight loss, deterioration in health), emotional (loss of confidence) and economic (loss of employment, cost of eating out, spending of any savings). Many families lost all of their possessions, bar what they could carry, and this was a cause of emotional distress for some families.

Although some emergency accommodation was of good quality, some was poor, characterised by over-crowding of washing and bathroom facilities and limited/no access to cooking facilities. Getting children to school and keeping them attending their existing schools were also key pressure points. Transport was a particular issue, with families with cars having an advantage in being able to transport their children across town more efficiently and having a location where they could wait until school was over. For those dependent on buses, this process took much longer and was much more physically tiring and ultimately more stressful.

Some families adjusted to their new accommodation quite quickly. For the majority, the move from homeless accommodation to new accommodation was experienced as a weight and burden being lifted from them and some referred to themselves as 'happy again'. Generally, the more secure the tenure within the new accommodation, the quicker families reported being able to adjust. The speed of adjustment did not appear to be linked to the duration of homelessness.

For most but not all younger children, school and social performance generally improved quite quickly, but it took older children and particularly teenagers longer to adjust, especially where they had to move schools. The families interviewed worked very hard to try to avoid a school move for their children, as the majority believed that moving school could have a negative effect on their child's educational and related social progress. It should be noted that some of the issues related to being homeless only emerged for older children following the move out of homeless accommodation. It was also the case that some families only began the often difficult process of dealing with the consequences and aftermath of a relationship break-up (often linked with their homelessness/or while homeless) when they moved into their new accommodation.

4.1.4   Discussion

This research confirms much of what is already known about family homelessness in Dublin (e.g. the variable conditions that exist in emergency accommodation). It sheds light on what does and what does not make a difference in facilitating exits. It confirms the preference of families who have been homeless for local authority accommodation and, failing that, approved housing body accommodation. The families interviewed believe that the security and affordability of these two tenure types afforded them the greatest likelihood of preventing future homelessness.

The research identifies the main services that assist families to exit homelessness. It highlights the positive roles played by Focus Ireland workers, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Exceptional Needs Payments administered by the Department of Social Protection.

It identified the crucial role played by local authorities as the provider of both emergency and longer-term accommodation as well as the administrator of HAP payments. It raises concerns, both about the ability of the local authorities to meet growing needs and about the manner in which local authorities transacted their business, from their apparent lack of engagement in any form of prevention, to the poor treatment of clients by a small number of local authority personnel.

The following are some of the key issues identified in this research:

> The concern that families are so keen to get out of homeless accommodation that they accept accommodation that is ultimately unsuitable for their needs (e.g. for a child with special needs, anti-social behaviour in the immediate environs). Support workers need to help families to consider whether the accommodation they have found or been offered is suitable for their needs, for once there they will generally need to spend a minimum of two years there before they will be able to go on the transfer list.[19] The families interviewed were very aware that being on the transfer list offered no guarantee of a quick move.

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[19] Dublin City Council specifies that RAS tenants who have been housed under its scheme are deemed to be adequately housed and will, after two years' tenancy, be eligible to apply for inclusion on the transfer list in the same way as tenants of council tenancies and Approved Voluntary Bodies (housing allocations scheme, 3.3). The Dun Laoghaire scheme, §30, specifies that RAS tenants may apply for inclusion on the overcrowding transfer list and/or medical transfer list to transfer to social housing support provided that they have completed a minimum of three years in a RAS dwelling and are overcrowded within the meaning of §63 of the Act of 1966 and or have a medical condition which necessitates a change in their accommodation. The Fingal scheme (§13) lays down a general requirement of two years, as does South Dublin (p. 5).

› The poor-quality accommodation that some families accepted or were offered across all housing tenure types raises questions about the functioning of inspection systems. This research recorded two instances in which the local authorities deemed two homes to be substandard, but there were several other cases of poor quality accommodation observed by the authors. Standards do exist in respect of private rented and AHB accommodation, and the level of inspection has been frequently raised in the Oireachtas.

A more specialised standards issue relates to the quality of furnishings provided for newly arriving tenants. Here, the regulations for the private sector – the Housing (standards for rented houses) (amendment) regulations 2009 – and for the public sector – SI § 47 of 1993 or the Housing (standards for rented houses) regulations 1993 – apply. The former specifies that a private landlord must provide facilities for cooking (e.g. cooker, microwave), freezing (e.g. fridge) and clothes washing. Lower standards are required for public accommodation, requiring only cooking equipment. Neither specifies flooring or bedding.[20] According to *daft.ie*, 'nearly all houses for rent are furnished'.[21] This was not the case in this research, where the legal minimum was not observed within a number of the properties visited, raising questions about the enforcement of standards and indeed whether the legal minimum standards should be raised.

The research also found a latent desire within many of the parents interviewed to either re-enter the workforce or return to education. In some instances, these individuals had skills that they had not practised for many years. Others needed training/re-training. The difficulty for many of these individuals related to obtaining affordable early years' services for their young children and in some cases affordable after-school services for their older children. This highlighted the wider reality for many low-income parents (particularly those without wider family support), that not until their youngest child is well into their school years would they (the parent with childcare responsibilities (generally the mother)) have an opportunity to re-enter the workforce or return to education.

Free childcare places

In December 2016, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) introduced free childcare places for children aged 0 to 5 whose families are registered as homeless. Children will be entitled to 25 free hours of childcare per week, as well as a daily meal. The scheme is being offered in Dublin initially, though the DCYA intends to roll it out nationally. A list of childcare providers taking part in the scheme has been provided to the Family Homeless Action Team. They support identified families to complete the necessary form which is authorised by the team and presented to the childcare provider.

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[20] Thanks to Stephen Large of Threshold for background information provided here.

[21] Accessed 19 March 2017.

4.2   Recommendations

These are divided into national (4.2.1) and local authority (4.2.2) and Focus Ireland (4.2.3) recommendations.

4.2.1   At a national level: There is an urgent need for more social housing to enable timely exits from homelessness.

This study affirms the preference of the families who were interviewed for local authority accommodation as their optimum long-term solution to exiting homelessness. Local authority housing was clearly the preferred long-term housing option for these families and, failing that, approved housing body accommodation.

The impact of the experience of homelessness on the families and children can be clearly seen to have influenced their preference for local authority accommodation, which was seen by the families to offer security of tenure, affordable rent, acceptable standards and, in most cases, locations where people can settle in communities in which they are comfortable. Voluntary housing (the quality of which was found to vary) was the next preferred option. HAP accommodation had the advantage of affordable rent, but did not offer security, and formerly homeless families had a lingering fear that they could become homeless again. Taking a HAP tenancy results in a family being taken off the housing list as their housing need is deemed to have been met. For families who have waited many years on the list, this involves giving up any hope of social housing. HAP households can be included on the 'transfer list', but this is seen as of little value as time already spent on the housing list is not taken into account. Private rented accommodation was identified as the least desired option, so identified because of its high rents, insecurity and often poor standards. These findings are interesting in the context of *Rebuilding Ireland* which contains a commitment to the construction of local authority accommodation, the balance of supply between local authority, voluntary housing, private rented and private sector being a matter of political contention. This research suggests that, from the perspective of homeless families, the construction programme needs to be heavily weighted in favour of local authority accommodation. The relative insecurity of HAP and loss of accumulated priority on the social housing list could be addressed by:

> increasing tenancy security across the private rented sector to the European norm (particularly by removing the right of landlords to terminate a tenancy in order to sell it or move family members into the unit);
> allowing families on the transfer list to retain their existing priority for the allocation of any social housing (i.e. retaining their place in the queue).

There are many factors that enable and inhibit exits from homelessness, with many ways in which the impacts of the experiences of homelessness on adults and their children can be reduced and in some cases minimised. This research came across both good practice (e.g. support workers, and the application and use of exceptional needs payments), which should be accentuated; and bad practice, which needs to be addressed. All of this can make a difference to preventing, diminishing the impact of, and speeding up the exit from, homelessness, and sustaining tenancies thereafter. Whilst some of these changes require resourcing, many only require low-cost changes to procedures. These changes are the subject of the detailed recommendations that follow.

4.2.2 At local authority level: There is a need for changes in a number of local authority practices, including:

Some local authority practices have been identified as the cause of significant stress for homeless families. This research suggests that the following practices need to be changed.

> In line with *Rebuilding Ireland*, pillar 1 *Address homelessness*, where it states: 'We must ensure that those most at risk of losing their homes receive support services, so that we can minimize the risk of them becoming homeless in the first place' (p. 38), local authorities need to be proactive and automatically refer families who present themselves with the threat of impending homelessness (e.g. notice of termination) to advice services (e.g. Threshold) and also put in place accommodation options that could be ready once the family is displaced.[22]

> The practice of families being asked to source their own emergency accommodation, referred to as 'self-accommodation' is inconsistent with the expectations of the Housing Act, 1988, and should be discontinued, as should the use of the term. While families may be given the option to pursue their own accommodation, the responsibility for identifying suitable emergency accommodation is that of the statutory authority (i.e. the local authority).

> Provide homeless families with access to emergency accommodation that offers them access to cooking and refrigeration facilities and that have play areas for children; end the practice of using substandard and overcrowded emergency accommodation.

> End the practice that exists within some local authorities of requiring daily signing-in, either in person or by phone, by individuals and/or families who are homeless. This could be replaced (with a saving of time for all involved) by electronic signing in.

> Ensure that no households are removed from local authority housing waiting lists without their knowledge or consent. The existing practice associated with the removal of people from these lists must be subject to permanent scanning and quality control, with the outcomes published and an independent appeals system introduced.

> Ensure that all move-on accommodation offered to homeless families is in a reasonable condition and in line with applicant preferences, ending the current two-strikes-and-out practice. The term 'reasonable' must be redefined within the scheme of allocations to include consideration of standards and safe environments for children. An independent appeals system should be introduced.

> Ensure that (local authority and approved housing body) properties provided to families exiting homelessness are furnished with basic facilities, to include adequate and safe floor coverings.

> Ensure that HAP accommodation is inspected quickly and that it meets minimum standards.

Local authority interactions with families who are homeless/at risk of homelessness need to continue to be improved. Some progress has been made in this area since some of the families interviewed became homeless. First, households presenting to the local authority with a valid notice to quit are now entitled to access Homeless HAP before entering emergency accommodation. Second, there is now a three-person prevention team within

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[22] Government of Ireland (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland – action plan for housing and homelessness.* Dublin.

the local authority which seeks to provide assistance before the family becomes homeless. Third, on behavioural issues, further work could be done in this area through a programme of dialogue with those who experience or have experienced homelessness, with standards set down and training provided accordingly.

4.2.3   Recommendations for changes in relation to the supports provided by Focus Ireland, including:

> Preparation of a short document detailing the various accommodation options and possibilities available to families when they are homeless, provided to families as soon as they become homeless.

> Identify the number of key workers required for homeless people newly arrived in emergency accommodation within a minimum time, seeking resources from the DRHE to provide this level of support.

> Provide the families with written details of the role of the key worker and the role of the SLI worker as well as details of the timescale and duration and boundaries of the services provided. Ensure that arrangements for disengagement are clearly communicated to all families.

> Identify the number of specialist child support workers required for all children needing such support, seeking resources from Tusla to provide this level of support.

> Explore ways to make counselling services available to families, both during and after homelessness, including relationship counselling.

> Find appropriate solutions to the conflicting demands on the Focus Ireland coffee shop, so that services can be provided (there or elsewhere) for families with young children in a suitable environment.

> Introduce a dedicated helpline that former Focus clients can contact if they run into problems for a period of time after they take up their new tenancy. It is important to add that those assisted were conscious that other homeless people needed key workers too and that they should not try to hold on to the service indefinitely when others needed help more urgently.

> Explore ways in which the good practices reported in some schools can be extended throughout the school system (e.g. some schools, on their own initiative, helped homeless families by offering parents a waiting room while their children attended school).

> Undertake further research on the families who have been housed but who did not manage to sustain their tenancy.

> There would be value in investigating the feasibility of devising a storage system whereby families who are homeless could store their possessions at a nominal cost for the duration of their homelessness.

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Appendix 1: Analysis of the families interviewed

No.	Time left homeless	Total time spent homeless (months)	Local authority	One-parent family		Two-parent family	No. of children < 18	No. of children > 18 (with family)	Current ages of children	Non-Irish national or Traveller families	Reason for homeless RTL = Required To Leave	Previous tenancy type PR = Private Rental	Current tenancy type HAP = Housing Assistance Payment
				Female head	Male head								
1	Q1 2015	7	DCC		✓		1		14		RTL (could not afford rent increase)	PR	Approved housing body
2	Q3 2014	2	FCC		✓		1	1	15 & 19	✓	RTL (landlord to move into property)	PR	Approved housing body
3	Q2 2015	9	DCC	✓			2		2 & 6		RTL (property too small and landlord wanted it back)	PR	Private rental with HAP
4	Q3 2014	9	DCC	✓			2	2	1 & 5		Forced out	PR	Approved housing body
5	Q2 2015	21	DCC	✓			2		6 & 7		Mortgage unaffordable	Mortgage	Local authority
6	Q3 2015	13	DCC	✓			1		6		RTL (Property to be sold)	PR	Approved housing body
7	Q2 2015	6	DCC	✓			2		almost 2 & 6		Living with family, thrown out as a result of an unplanned pregnancy	Family	Private rental with HAP
8	Q4 2014	U	SDCC	✓			1		4		RTL (landlord to move into property)	PR	Local authority
9	Q1 2016	12	DCC	✓			2		2 & 4		Living with family members and partner – had to leave because of (a) overcrowding and (b) being attacked	Family	Approved housing body

| No. | Time left homeless | Total time spent homeless (months) | Local authority | One-parent family | | Two-parent family | No. of children < 18 | No. of children > 18 (with family) | Current ages of children | Non-Irish national or Traveller families | Reason for homeless RTL = Required To Leave | Previous tenancy type PR = Private Rental | Current tenancy type HAP = Housing Assistance Payment |
				Female head	Male head								
10	Q4 2015	30	DLR			✓	1	4	10, 18, 18, 21 & 22		RTL (accommodation substandard)	PR	Local authority
11	Q3 2016	24	DLR	✓			2		6 & 16	✓	RTL (could not afford rent increase)	PR	HAP
12	Q2 2014	36	DCC	✓			2	3	17, 17, 23, 25 & 27		Evicted	PR	Local authority
13	Q4 2014	8	SDCC	✓			4		7, 5, 4 & 2	✓	Domestic violence	PR	Approved housing body
14	Q2 2015	19	DCC	✓			2		1 & 3		Pregnant in residential care, moved to aftercare, left to move in with family but overcrowded	Residential care and family	Local authority
15	Q2 2015	18	DCC		✓		2		5 & 7	✓	Returned from visit to country of origin to find husband had moved	PR	Approved housing body
16	Q3 2015	14	FCC	✓			2		9 & 14	✓	RTL (landlord to move into property)	PR	Approved housing body
17	Q1 2015	U	FCC			✓	3		2, 4 & 7		RTL (property to be sold)	PR	HAP
18		6	SDCC			✓	2		7 & 8		RTL (bank repossession)	PR	Local authority
19	Q2 2013	12	DCC			✓	5		8, 7, 5, 4 & 2		Landlord put up rent and could not afford increased rent	PR then family	Long-term lease (private landlord)
20	Q3 2016	12	DLR	✓			2		2 & 2	✓	RTL (property to be sold)	PR	HAP

No.	Time left homeless	Total time spent homeless (months)	Local authority	One-parent family		Two-parent family	No. of children > 18	No. of children > 18 (with family)	Current ages of children	Non-Irish national or Traveller families	Reason for homeless RTL = Required To Leave	Previous tenancy type PR = Private Rental	Current tenancy type HAP = Housing Assistance Payment
				Female head	Male head								
21	Q2 2016	18	SDCC	✓			1		3		Living with parents, required to leave by parents	Uncertain	HAP
22		24	DCC	✓			2	1	9, 16 & 20	✓	RTL (landlord complained about child and subsequently introduced a 'no children' rule)	PR	Local authority
23	Q3 2014	6	FCC	✓			3		3, 7 & 9		RTL (property to be sold)	PR	Local authority
24	Q1 2016	7	SDCC	✓			1		5, 8 & 9		RTL (property to be sold)	PR	HAP
25	Q1 2015	13	DCC			✓	2		11 & 12		House repossessed moved to private rental RTL (landlord wanted property back)	Mortgage to PR	Private rental with HAP
Totals			**13 DCC** **5 SDCC** **4 FCC** **3 DLR**	**17 families**	**3 families**	**5 families**	**50 children under 18**	**11 adult children**		**7 families**		

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