

Appendix to Focus Ireland Opening Statement to Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth concerning 'Child Poverty' on Tuesday, 09th November 2021.

Child homelessness

At its peak, there were 3,873 children officially homeless in September 2019. Over the last two years, working together with local authorities and the Department of Housing, we have made huge progress, bringing the number down to 2,129 children by July this year. The COVID-related ban on evictions and other COVID-related measures by local authorities were largely responsible for this welcome improvement, but since July we have begun to see the hard-won gains eroded so that in September, we were back up to seeing 2,344 children living in emergency homeless accommodation with their families.

While we all understand that the causes of homelessness are complex, the most extensive recent analysis of the links between homelessness and poverty, carried out by the Rowntree Trust in the UK concluded that, while structural factors such as availability of work and housing cost had an impact, as did individual factors, the 'experience of (childhood) poverty very often predates, and is a powerful predictor of, (adulthood) homelessness'.¹ Every day, Focus Ireland services observe the same thing and there is no doubt that if we had the data to repeat the Rowntree study in Ireland, we would confirm it.

We welcome the commitment to boost housing supply in Housing For All, and through our Approved Housing Body Focus Housing Association, are totally committed to making our own contribution to meeting those targets. But even as we do everything in our power to ramp up housing supply, and overcome the COVID-related delays, we must recognise there will continue to be a serious shortage of places to live for the foreseeable future – and we must plan in that knowledge and do whatever we can to protect children from experiencing the trauma of losing their home.

Protecting Children while they are homeless and increased funding for Child Support Workers

For however much longer we continue to have families that are homeless and in emergency accommodation it very much matters what happens to them there and how they are supported.

Along with the fall in the number of families who are homeless there has been considerable improvement in the physical conditions in which homeless families live. It is worth drawing your attention and commending to the work of the DRHE in bringing down the number of families living in commercial hotels from 871 in March 2017 to just 67 in August this year, with most of the 67 families remaining in the hotels to be near family supports. It is also worth mentioning the innovative approach of Waterford City and County Council which largely avoids placing families in 'emergency accommodation' by ring-fencing some of its existing housing stock for short-term

¹ Bramley, Glen, and Fitzpatrick, Suzanne. "Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?" Housing Studies 33.1 (2018): 96-116.

emergency use. As a result, families in Waterford experience only part of the trauma of becoming homeless that families elsewhere endure.

We have all experienced difficulties and some of us have experienced the loss of loved ones over the duration of the pandemic, but it is certain that families in emergency homeless accommodation have experienced some of the worst of it. So, the fact that there are fewer such families, and that effort has gone into improving their physical circumstances is something that is important to recognise and welcome.

While the physical condition of the homeless accommodation is important, and these improvements are welcome, the nature and level of support provided is perhaps of even greater importance.

Following a model developed over the last 20 years, each Focus Ireland team working with families includes specialised, trained child support. The value of this intervention has been validated in a number of studies. We are particularly proud the value of our Child Support Workers was recognised in the Ombudsman for Children report 'No Place Like Home'² as this was based on the voices of the children themselves, a voice that we too are committed to placing into the centre of this debate. We are also pleased that the last report from this Committee dealing with homeless families recommended an increase in the number of child support workers.³

Some children need this support to cope with the trauma of homelessness, either as a result of poverty they were facing before becoming homeless, or as a result of being homeless, or both. Not only do our Child Support Workers help to address some of the detrimental impacts of homelessness, by extension, they help to reduce the pressure and stress on parents. This enables parents to engage much more fully both with supporting their children through a traumatic experience, as well as on the process of exiting homelessness. It is crucial to remember that children experiencing poverty live in families experiencing homelessness, and solutions need to have both family and child-specific dimensions. In many cases the Child Support Worker continues to support the child/children for a period after the family have exited homelessness.

Each Child Support Worker has a case load of about 15 children. Not all children in homeless families need such support and an assessment tool has been developed to identify those who do. As a result, there is a long wait between a child being assessed as having a support need and a Child Support Worker being allocated. Given the scale of the mismatch of between need and available support we no longer routinely assess support needs. On previous experience, however, around 25% of children require this support but this is an estimate.

Of the 1,806 children who were homeless in Dublin, between the very welcome support we receive from HSE Social Inclusion, Tusla, and public donations, Focus Ireland employs 10.5 child support workers across our Dublin services. To our knowledge, Child Support Workers are not funded in any other provider, so only 158 children have the support of a dedicated child support worker at any one time, while over 400 are likely to need that support.

For most families and experience of homelessness is a nightmare lasting a few months or a year. But failing to provide support for children going through this we are contributing to the risk that that experience will do life-long damage.

² Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019) No Place Like Home Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs

³ Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children November 2019, Recommendation 12.

We have proposed that funding a sufficient number of Child Support Workers should be a key component of Ireland's plan to deliver the EU Child Guarantee, which specifically requires that the interests of children in poverty and homeless children in particular are addressed.

Ensure that all local authorities put 'the best interests of child' at the heart of their response to families that are homeless

Local authorities are the first point of contact for people who are homeless but the laws from the 1980s which shape the Local Authority services are designed around the idea that 'the homeless' are primarily single homeless men, and so make no special provision for the needs of children where a family has lost its home.

In 2019, Private Members legislation was brought forward by Deputy Jan O'Sullivan that sought to update the law to reflect the current reality and also reflect the fact that Ireland put the rights of children into our Constitution in 2012. The legislation proposed to enshrine children's rights by ensuring that local authorities would have to put the 'best interest' of children at the centre of their decision making when responding to a homeless family. The legislation was accepted by the then Government and all opposition parties. It passed the first and second readings before the 2020 election. Since every party in the Dáil, including the Governing parties, supported this legislation it should be easy to reintroduce it and pass it into law.

The Focus Ireland Family Centre

Focus Ireland opened a specialised day service for homeless families in Dublin over the last year. We are delighted that the DRHE has agreed to fund the parent-centred homeless services for this service, but the purpose build child support services are currently underutilised due to Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth declining (to date) to provide funding for them.

The purpose of the child-care services in the Centre would be to (i) provide support for homeless parents when they are engaging with their support workers, viewing accommodation, or engaging with other supports where having childcare will make a real difference to the effectiveness of what they need to do (ii) provide a point of contact where child support needs can be assessed and marginalised families can find a route into mainstream child-support social services. The physical premises for this service are already in place in the Family Centre and have been approved. We would like to take this opportunity to invite members of the Committee to visit the Centre to see for yourselves the services we provide there – and the potential to do more directly for the children.

Supports in schools

One of the primary ways in which wealth is passed from one generation to another is through education. And the same is true for poverty. The experience of homelessness can deeply disrupt education and therefore be a mechanism through which a relatively short-term experience of poverty reverberates throughout a lifetime.

As members of the Committee may know, Focus Ireland developed a resource with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation for teachers in national schools. We were working on a similar resource with the Second-level teachers' union before Covid intervened. A greater engagement by the Department of Education in ensuring that an experience of homelessness does not damage life chances would be very welcome

Maximum duration of homelessness

In terms of 'guarantees' a commitment to ensuring that children should never remain homeless for longer than a particular period of time would be a good way of extending a meaningful guarantee to these children. Measures such as this can be a two-edged sword, and there is a risk that families may start to be penalised if they could not leave homelessness within the limit, so this would need to be realised progressively, starting at 2 years, and working to bring this down to 1 month over time.

Focus Ireland strongly welcomes the Government's commitment in Housing For All to work towards ending homelessness by 2030, and we are committed to working with government and local authorities to achieve this goal together.

Children in the care of the state

Finally, we want to mention the situation of children in the care of the State who are living in residential care. In recent years Ireland has become a world leader in getting children out of residential care and into foster families, where they fare far better. But there are still children in residential care and, in our experience, children from these backgrounds are less prepared for adulthood and have a higher risk of homelessness.

We have a long-standing proposal for dedicated staff to support the 'preparation for leaving care' process from around 16 years of age and this still remains a compelling idea.