

# Executive Summary

## Exploring Own-Door Models of Emergency Accommodation for Homeless Families in Ireland

A Comparative Case Study  
of Four Models



Neil Haran and Seán Ó Siochrú  
Social Research Consultants

**FOCUS**  
Ireland





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

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December 2020

**Challenging  
homelessness.  
Changing lives.**

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# Foreword

For most of the 35 years since Focus Ireland was established, family homelessness represented only a small part of Ireland's homelessness problem, but it has always been central to the organisation's work. The main pillars of our response have always been to work with families to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place and, if that proves impossible, to assist them into new stable homes as quickly as possible. But these responses are often not sufficient, and the difficult problem of how to accommodate families while they are homeless for long periods has repeatedly arisen over many years.

During the first family homelessness crisis (1998–2001), local authorities started accommodating families in 'B&Bs' with minimal facilities. Initially this was as an 'emergency response' but it soon became the standard way of dealing with homeless families. Focus Ireland responded by developing a model of support for homeless families in B&Bs, establishing childcare centres and by publishing research on the extent of family homelessness and its impact on mental health<sup>1</sup>.

Ten years later, many of these families were still living in the 'emergency response' of B&Bs and lodging houses, often with complex social problems. In 2011, Focus Ireland, in collaboration with the Department of Environment and the Homeless Agency<sup>2</sup>, launched Ireland's first 'Social Impact Bond' initiative to support families out of homelessness. The model piloted – and proved the effectiveness of – a model of case management, involving a multi-discipline team with designated child support workers, accommodation finders and settlement support. By the time the most recent crisis emerged, all but five of these 250 families with complex needs had been supported out of homelessness.

The crisis which emerged from 2014, proved to be much greater than the earlier one, with the number of families becoming homeless each month rising from 8 per month in 2013 to 80 per month four years later, with children accounting for more than one in three people in emergency accommodation.

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1 "The mental and physical health and well-being of homeless families living in Focus Point's Transitional Housing" (1999) and "Focusing on B&Bs: The unacceptable growth of emergency B&B Placement in Dublin" (2000).

2 Now the 'Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage' and the 'Dublin Region Homeless Executive'.



The number of families becoming homeless in the following years far exceeded any expectations or preparations, and local authorities and homeless organisations, particularly in Dublin, were involved in a nightly struggle to ensure that families were provided with any shelter at all. During this period families were regularly ferried by taxi late at night to hotels many miles from Dublin, and there were a number of reports of families having to sleep in Garda stations.

Under this pressure, local authorities constructed from virtually nothing a very substantial emergency homeless service for families. Rebuilding Ireland's commitment to end the use of hotels for emergency accommodation eventually led to the establishment of a new form of designed emergency accommodation for families – 'Family Hubs'.

Focus Ireland has made the case, on the basis of our own experience and on international evidence, that there should be much greater emphasis on the multi-disciplinary supports available to families rather than just the physical structure of the emergency accommodation provided. We argued that policy during this period prioritised commissioning ever greater amounts of emergency accommodation rather than investing in prevention, case management, maximising exits – or building more homes. But we also recognise the scale of the daily challenge which was faced and the innovation and commitment from local authority staff that went into delivering the crisis response that families needed.

Since 2019, even before the Coronavirus pandemic, the rise in family homelessness appears to have declined, though settling at a very high level. This should not, in the words of the Minister for Housing, Darragh O'Brien, "give rise to complacency"<sup>3</sup>. But it should give rise to an opportunity for reflection and setting of new goals.

Part of that reflection must involve a review of the measures we took in the depths of the crisis to identify which of them were more successful and which should be discontinued. The purpose of such a review is not to second guess the decisions which were made when over a 100 children needed a roof over their heads in winter, but to plot out where we go from here if we are to bring the nightmare of family homelessness to an end.

Too much of the debate has been oversimplified into an argument 'for or against' Family Hubs or a rationale for Hubs that goes no further than the justifiable claim that they are 'better than hotels'. This debate does not fairly reflect the range of different responses that have been put in place and it does not reflect the expectations the public should have for such a substantial investment of resources<sup>4</sup>. Most importantly it does not reflect the needs of the families and what we know is needed to help change their lives.

This report represents a contribution to changing the debate away from 'for or against' towards a collaborative enquiry into what has worked and what we should invest to do more of. It takes a critical eye to four services in which Focus Ireland, in partnership with local authorities and others, provides emergency accommodation and works with families to support them out of homelessness. It reveals real challenges and gives voice to the understandable frustrations of the families themselves. But it also demonstrates real commitment and innovation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fiannafail.ie/ending-child-homelessness-must-remain-a-key-priority-obrien/>

<sup>4</sup> See 'Focus on Homelessness Vol. 2 (2020)' for discussion on expenditure on homeless services <https://bit.ly/2WpMIGE>

Focus Ireland would like to thank all those who contributed to the making of the report, including our staff, the staff in the local authorities and partner agencies who shared their experiences and the families who gave their time to express their views. We express our gratitude to the representatives from local authority and NGO backgrounds who participated in a roundtable discussion that helped shape the report's conclusions. We also thank the Housing Agency who not only part funded the research but contributed their expertise and insights to the drafting.

We would also like to thank Daniel Hoey, our Research Co-ordinator who oversaw the project. Finally, we would like to thank the researchers Seán Ó Siochrú and Neil Haran who brought not only the diligence we would expect but an enthusiasm and passion which made them a pleasure to work with.

**Mike Allen**

Director of Advocacy, Focus Ireland

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- › The Housing Agency, which provided both financial and technical input to the research
- › Staff of Focus Ireland, both at national and project levels, particularly the project managers and service staff across each of the models reviewed in the study
- › Representatives of each of the local authorities and partner agencies that work alongside Focus Ireland in the implementation of the emergency accommodation models reviewed in this research
- › Those from local authority and NGO backgrounds who participated in a roundtable discussion, designed to shape the principal policy and practice implications outlined in this document
- › The Director of the Dublin Regional Housing Executive who commented on a briefing paper and whose input contributed to this research report
- › Representatives from 21 families that had experience of the emergency accommodation models reviewed in this research and whose observations act as critical informants of this document.



## About the Authors

*Seán Ó Siochrú* is a sociologist with over 30 years' experience, dividing his work between Ireland and over 50 countries worldwide, in research, programme and strategy management and design, and capacity building. He is a founder of Nexus Research Cooperative which over its 25 years, has engaged with many studies of homeless issues.

*Neil Haran* is a freelance research consultant with extensive social sector experience, having engaged deeply over the past 30 years with the public service, education, not-for-profit, and social policy sectors – both in Ireland and overseas. He has a strong track record in undertaking research, evaluation, community-based consultation and strategic planning.

Seán and Neil are regular research collaborators. Collaboration included a 2017 research project on behalf of Focus Ireland into Effective Strategies in the Prevention of Family Homelessness<sup>5</sup>.

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5 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Haran-and-OSiochru-2017-Keeping-a-Home-Full-Report.pdf>

# Abbreviations

<b>AHB</b>	Approved Housing Body
<b>B&amp;B</b>	Bed & Breakfast
<b>CAS</b>	Capital Assistance Scheme
<b>CBL</b>	Choice-based letting
<b>CRFI</b>	Childers Road Family Initiative
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>HAP</b>	Housing Assistance Payment
<b>HAT</b>	Homeless Action Team
<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>LCCC</b>	Limerick City and County Council
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>PASS</b>	Pathway Accommodation & Support System
<b>PEA</b>	Private Emergency Accommodation
<b>RAS</b>	Rental Accommodation Scheme
<b>SDCC</b>	South Dublin County Council
<b>SLA</b>	Service Level Agreement
<b>SLÍ</b>	Support to Live Independently scheme
<b>SRM</b>	Social Rental Model
<b>TH</b>	Transitional Housing
<b>WCCC</b>	Waterford City & County Council
<b>WEFS</b>	WCCC/Focus Ireland Emergency Family Service
<b>WIHS</b>	Waterford Integrated Homeless Services

# Introduction

Ireland has witnessed a substantial surge in the number of individuals and families entering homelessness in recent years. As of August 2020:

- 8,702 individuals were identified as homeless and relying on emergency homeless accommodation
- of that number, 2,620 or almost one in three homeless individuals were children
- 1,120 families were classified as homeless, of which 76% were located in the greater Dublin region
- the total number of homeless families in Ireland was 3.25 times higher than the number of families recorded as homeless in July 2014

This study considers the strengths and weaknesses of four own-door models of emergency transitional accommodation for homeless families in Ireland: two in Limerick, the Childers Road Family Initiative (CRFI) and the Social Rental Model (SRM); one in Dublin (Tallaght Cross); and one in Waterford, the Waterford Emergency Family Service (WEFS). The goals of the research were to compare these to the State's primary emergency accommodation responses, to promote informed debate on the issue and to develop ideas to improve homeless families' experiences of emergency accommodation.

The data gathering methodology deployed was mainly qualitative: an analysis of all relevant documentation and data was combined with 46 interviews with the partners active in the four models as well as with a cross section of 21 family heads previously or currently accommodated in them. A subsequent roundtable discussion with key professionals also shaped the principal policy and practice implications outlined below.

# Literature Review

A review of both Irish and international literature was undertaken as the first step in the research process. The Irish literature shows a heavy reliance on private emergency accommodation (PEA), mainly hotels and B&Bs, to tackle the rising problem of family homelessness, which was soon accompanied by evidence of the negative impact of these on families, especially children. Concerns focus on physical and mental wellbeing, and also that prolonged stays in such emergency accommodation can potentially undermine family autonomy and resilience, and can contribute to ‘institutionalisation’ and a reduced capacity to successfully exit from homelessness to independent living. This prompted a government commitment in *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* (2016)<sup>6</sup> to rapidly commission congregated ‘family hub’ type emergency accommodation<sup>7</sup>. Despite a spend of €14.8 million on the operation of these in the first 9 months of 2018 alone, August 2020 Homelessness Statistics show that 54% of homeless adults remain living in PEA accommodation. No evidence emerged in the reviewed literature on the merits or efficiency of either PEA or congregate hubs in supporting families to exit homelessness. For example, there is no published evidence to indicate that families accommodated in hubs transition to longer-term accommodation quicker than families in hotels.

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6 Government of Ireland. (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, accessible at [https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rebuilding-Ireland\\_Action-Plan.pdf](https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rebuilding-Ireland_Action-Plan.pdf)

7 Purpose-built or adapted co-living centres providing accommodation to homeless families, but where there is also some form of communal living (kitchens, bathrooms or living areas) and therefore institutional rules.



Some insights were forthcoming from the international literature review. A significant body of research focuses on causes, experiences and diverse needs of homeless families, many arguing that that these must be a key starting point for developing long-term solutions. Bassuk et al. (2010)<sup>8</sup> offer a three-tier framework of homeless family supports based on differentiated family need. Tier 1 comprises *transitional* assistance to families, to enable a transition from homelessness into secure tenure and community services. Tier 2, relating to the majority of cases, offers additional ongoing services, such as education and employment supports, to help alleviate the traumatic stress associated with homelessness. Tier 3 involves more intensive ongoing support, since family needs are deeper and more complex, and have frequently contributed to homelessness in the first place.

The literature also discusses different terminology-usage across jurisdictions and different interpretations of temporary and emergency family accommodation. Perhaps surprisingly, it is not possible to identify and compare European best-practice models that relate to the varied needs of homeless families due to the absence of common standards of quality and outcomes, as well as a lack of comparable data. The larger body of literature on US-based practice, linked to the main approach to the issue there, focuses on actions that help families to exit homelessness. Significant evidence suggests that the provision of emergency or temporary accommodation to families experiencing homelessness, coupled with case management and other key support services, acts as an essential stepping stone in enabling families to exit homelessness.

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8 Bassuk, Ellen L., Volk, Katherine T., and Olivet, Jeffrey. (2010) A framework for developing supports and services for families experiencing homelessness. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal 3.1

## The Four Models

Each of the four emergency models examined in this study offers homeless families own-door private accommodation in a self-contained apartment or house. As such, each provides:

- core facilities that enable families to carry out basic household functions such as cooking, clothes washing and refrigeration of food
- increased living space, particularly when compared to entire families having to reside in one, or in some instances, two hotel rooms
- stability through the provision of a transitional home for a prolonged period until such time as a more permanent housing solution can be secured

That said, the models are diverse in scale and nature, emerging from different circumstances. While each of the models is targeted at families experiencing homelessness, different choices are made in individual models about the type of homeless families that are directed, in practice, to the accommodation provided. In other words, in some of the models simply being homeless does not guarantee a family access to the specific accommodation provided.

The **CRFI** model in Limerick City emerged as a response to rising family homelessness. It comprises a block of 30 apartments and offers ‘own-door’ transitional accommodation to families experiencing homelessness in Limerick. The apartments are owned by Limerick City and County Council (LCCC) and have been fully managed by Focus Ireland on its behalf since late 2017. The partnership is governed by a service level agreement (SLA): LCCC provides the funding to three main Focus Ireland inputs comprising key worker staff to support families, full-time security, and service charges and property maintenance. Families are referred by the Homeless Action Team (HAT), a joint statutory-entity team co-ordinated by LCCC. Families are issued with a licence, not a tenancy agreement, with no specified time limit; a number of families have remained in CRFI for periods in excess of 18 months. Focus Ireland employs two family support workers, and a dedicated child support worker to address additional needs of children. Individual case plans are agreed to strengthen each family’s capacity to exit homelessness and secure a long-term tenancy. Of 45 families who exited CRFI during 2018 and 2019, 73% progressed to local authority or social rental approved housing bodies, while just 4% moved to private-rental accommodation supported by the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme.

Under the **SRM** model in Limerick City, Focus Ireland leases properties from landlords in the private rental market on the understanding that the organisation will, with the full consent of the property-owners, then sublet these properties to homeless families. It began in 2015 in response to the growing number of families unable to access accommodation in the city despite the availability of private rental properties and is a partnership involving Focus Ireland and LCCC. Through an SLA, LCCC commissions and funds Focus Ireland to manage SRM as part of its portfolio of emergency interventions. Focus Ireland identifies landlords willing to lease a property to it for one year, the latter continuing to be responsible for structural maintenance and repair. Focus Ireland then sublets the property to the family. As tenant, the family pays its HAP to Focus Ireland, which supplements it to pay the landlord full market rent. The goal is to encourage landlords, after the initial 12 months, to sign a long-term lease directly with the family or to sign up to the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS), thereby also enabling the family to stay. Of 63 families participating in SRM since 2017, 51 cases are closed, 45 (88%) with a successful result.

**Tallaght Cross** comprises two apartment blocks of 64 one-to-three bedroom units. In response to escalating homelessness and the number of families living in PEA, South Dublin County Council (SDCC) reached an agreement with Túath Housing to sign a 21-year lease with NAMA to manage the two blocks. SDCC nominates the families. Túath takes responsibility for offering families an 18-month Transitional Tenancy Agreement and for managing the tenancies and the apartments. Focus Ireland case workers provide social care support to each family across a range of areas, maintaining an office in one of the apartments. It also contracts an overnight-monitoring service to note incidents and issues arising. Most of the families had previously been accommodated in PEA, with over 80% for whom data are available, transitioning into local authority or other approved housing body (AHB) accommodation.

**Waterford City and County Council (WCCC)** decided to discontinue providing emergency housing to homeless families in block-booked B&Bs. Instead during 2018 and 2019, it set aside nine local authority units (seven houses and two apartments) as they became vacant. The WCCC Homeless Services Team was expanded and a new Homeless Services Centre opened as an integrated facility shared with non-state support services, including Focus Ireland. The **WEFS** model began offering families transitional accommodation in August 2019 in a partnership between WCCCC and Focus Ireland. WCCC's Homeless Services Team identifies the families and they sign a licence agreement for a maximum period of six months. The team develops individual support plans that link to other social services, and works with families to secure long-term accommodation using HAP and supports them to settle in. Focus Ireland prepares and manages physical and financial aspects of the individual transitional units, including supplementing rent through HAP. If required, it continues afterwards to support the family. The WEFS model has accommodated 13 families to date, of which 62% have, or are scheduled to, move to private rental accommodation supported by HAP, and 30% to local authority housing.

# Reducing the Impact of Homelessness

The research offers strong evidence that each of the four models, when compared to PEA and congregate family hubs, offer families experiencing homelessness substantially improved living conditions. Families hugely value having their own front door, facilities for cooking and washing, more space and greater stability through a guaranteed minimum period. Furthermore, interviews with families revealed that many could build their life-skill capacities while engaging more effectively with the care planning and supports offered to them. For some, this served to reduce the trauma of homelessness, often exacerbated in PEA. The research also pointed to evidence, particularly in Limerick and Waterford, that the constraints and shortcomings of PEA can significantly hamper a family's efforts to engage with supports and secure long-term accommodation; conversely, a key feature of these models is providing the physical and emotional space for families to fully engage with exiting homelessness.



# Reducing the Duration of Family Homelessness

The research found some evidence to suggest that the type of emergency accommodation provided influenced the speed with which a family might exit homelessness, independently of the tenancy arrangement involved. Two separate though inter-related factors primarily influence the speed with which families can exit emergency accommodation and homelessness. The first is family capacity. Families presenting with a need only to be housed are likely to experience fewer barriers in exiting homelessness than families presenting with additional and complex needs. The second concerns the inadequate supply of social and affordable housing across the local authority, AHB and private-rental sectors to which families can progress from emergency accommodation.

## Cost Effectiveness

Stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of each of the four models point to the cost-effectiveness of each of the models of accommodation. Most contend that the operation of own-front-door models of emergency accommodation results in savings to the Exchequer when compared with the costs associated with accommodating families in PEA. This tends to be supported by the high-level administrative data provided to this research, though, as is explained in the full report, these must be treated with caution.

# Conclusions for Policy and Practice

The research identifies eight implications of relevance to national policy and practice:

**1 Reducing reliance on Private Emergency Accommodation:** Evidence from this study suggests that the type of emergency accommodation provided to families, at a time of immense vulnerability, has a significant role to play in reducing the impact of homelessness experienced by families. Families interviewed during this research described very difficult experiences of PEA and emphasised the relief they felt when moved to own-door models.

The absence of social housing for emergency accommodation purposes, along with substantial numbers of individuals and families in homeless services, has led to the State's marked reliance on PEA. Increasing homeless families' access to own-door emergency accommodation models can only be realised through creative efforts to increase the volume of social housing available for emergency purposes. The four models included in this study demonstrate that creativity in action. Other possible solutions might involve a policy commitment to ensuring that an agreed percentage of all newly-built social housing would be retained for emergency accommodation purposes. Similarly, increased involvement by AHBs in leasing properties for the provision of emergency and transitional accommodation to homeless families would offer new opportunities for the generation of additional social housing stock.

**2 Invest in Child Support Workers:** Multi-agency involvement in the provision of wraparound supports to families is considered critically important in the reduction of the trauma experienced as a result of entering homelessness. In acknowledging the role and importance of these supports, local authorities and NGOs consulted during this study emphasised the need for greater investment in resources that minimise the impacts of homelessness on children. Current resources targeted at the needs of children in homelessness are inadequate, with a greater number of Child Support Workers required to address the specific needs of children in homelessness.

- 3 A Suite of Emergency Accommodation Measures:** The accommodation models examined in this study address diverse family needs and capacities, using different locally-generated approaches. All are underpinned firstly by a commitment to providing families with self-contained accommodation and in tandem, to providing case management supports in accordance with individual family need and capacity. The development of a suite of emergency accommodation options in individual local authority areas provides a relevant, appropriate and efficient approach to addressing the specific accommodation needs of homeless families whilst in tandem, taking cognisance of their respective support needs as they progress towards stable accommodation.
- 4 Revise Policy on Homelessness:** It was suggested during this research that current policy on housing and homelessness continues to draw its inspiration from the 1988 Housing Act and needs revision to reflect the current crisis affecting the country. In addition to concerns relating to the accommodation of those in homeless services and to supporting their exit from homeless services, attention was drawn to the policy and resource implications of preventing homelessness and of supporting families to sustain housing once they had exited homelessness. While local authorities and their AHB partners have been innovative in their efforts to prevent and respond to family homelessness, it would be preferable if there were a legislative framework in place that fully reflected the scale of need, as well as the range of supports provided to homeless families.
- 5 Build understanding of the Support Needs of Families with Particularly Complex Needs:** There exists a significant minority of homeless families with particularly complex needs, additional to their housing needs, some of which affect their capacity to manage and sustain permanent accommodation. These include issues such as mental health difficulties; addiction; child welfare concerns; prior difficulties sustaining a tenancy; money and home management concerns, and so on. It was suggested during interviews that limited research evidence exists concerning best practice in supporting the efficient transition of such families from emergency to sustained accommodation. Achieving success with these families would greatly reduce the demands on local authorities in respect of supports to homeless families. Undertaking a rigorously-evaluated pilot programme, applying a Housing First approach alongside a dedicated multi-disciplinary team to address the complex support needs of families at greatest risk of re-entering homelessness, would increase levels of understanding of what works in effectively supporting such families in both the immediate and longer-term.



- 6 Ensure Balance in the Allocation of Families to Emergency Accommodation in Apartment Environments:** While the overall physical quality and standard of accommodation is high in Tallaght Cross and CRFI, representing a significant improvement to being accommodated in PEA, family interviews highlighted negative experiences of bullying, intimidation and exposure to other forms of anti-social behaviour. Although the evidence from this study is limited, the concentration of families with a high level of needs, many further traumatised by the experience of PEA and homelessness generally, can lead to a range of problems and hinder the search for appropriate long-term accommodation. It is therefore suggested that attention be paid to ensuring a balanced mix of families, with varied levels of need, when allocating families to transitional accommodation settings such as apartment blocks.
- 7 Invest in Innovative Ways to Increase Social Housing Stock:** The extended length of time in emergency accommodation experienced by many homeless families is largely the result of the limited availability of appropriate and affordable social housing that matches the needs of families. Current State efforts to build more social housing remain inadequate to meeting demand and must be accompanied by innovative ways of bringing existing housing stock into use for social purposes, not just for emergency accommodation but for long-term purposes also. Of the four models explored in this study, SRM adds in practice to the housing stock available to address homelessness both in the immediate and longer-term.
- 8 Improve the Accuracy of Data on State Expenditure:** Current recording and reporting of State expenditure on emergency accommodation for homeless families are inadequate in a number of ways and do not facilitate analysis of its cost-effectiveness. While available, data illustrate the State's overall spend on emergency accommodation and most notably, its spend on PEA, they do not delineate the allocation of State resources to the accommodation of families as distinct from homeless individuals. Such data are prerequisites to comparing the cost-effectiveness of various emergency accommodation approaches to family homelessness. Consistent approaches to recording expenditure and comparing models of accommodation are necessary, particularly in the context of facilitating analysis of the cost-effectiveness of particular accommodation models.







# FOCUS

Ireland



Head Office  
9–12 High Street  
Christchurch, Dublin 8  
D08 E1W0

T 01 881 5900  
LoCall 1850 204 205  
F 01 881 5950  
E [info@focusireland.ie](mailto:info@focusireland.ie)

Registered Charity  
CHY 7220

[focusireland.ie](http://focusireland.ie)