

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

We would like to thank the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth for the opportunity to talk to you about the issue of Child Poverty.

I am Pat Dennigan the CEO of Focus Ireland, and our delegation today includes Mike Allen, Director of Advocacy and Kelly-Ann Byrne who is one of our ambassadors with lived experience of homelessness who we have asked to join us as part of our commitment to ensure that the voices of people who have experienced homelessness are heard where it matters.

As you know, Focus Ireland is one of Ireland's leading housing and homelessness charities. Since it was founded by Sr Stanislaus Kennedy over 30 years ago, Focus Ireland has been working to prevent homelessness and to support people to make sustained exits from homelessness. Our vision has always been that homelessness can be ended not just managed. We have long advocated for a commitment to eradicate homelessness and we welcome the goal of working towards ending homelessness by 2030 in Housing For All.

As we have set out in our current organisational strategy¹, we concentrate our work on single people with complex support needs, young adults, and families.

The issue of child poverty is deeply related to people in all these groups.

While we all understand that the causes of homelessness are complex, extensive recent analysis from the U.K. on the links between homelessness and poverty found that the 'experience of (childhood) poverty very often predates, and is a powerful predictor of, (adulthood) homelessness'.² Every day, Focus Ireland services observe the same thing and there is no doubt that if we had the data to repeat the this study in Ireland, we would confirm it.

But while child poverty is a key part of the cause of homelessness for many single people and young adults, child poverty is part of the daily experience of life for children who are homeless with their families. Many children become homeless due to the poverty experienced by their families, but the experience of homelessness itself is a deeper and more traumatic form of poverty.

We need to understand that the process of your family becoming homeless is in itself traumatic for children, and the experience of being homeless is a further trauma.

We welcome the renewed sense of partnership and collaboration between local authorities, Government, state agencies and NGOs that was cemented during the pandemic and the hard-won gains that were achieved. We need this to continue long after restrictions have ended. However, in recent years, most people entering homelessness have come from the private rented sector and the primary causes of families becoming homeless continues to remain the same: landlords leaving the

¹ Focus Ireland (2021) [Restating our Vision 2021-25](#)

² Bramley, Glen, and Fitzpatrick, Suzanne. "Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?." Housing Studies 33.1 (2018): 96-116.

market and rent arrears accruing because supports such as HAP or Rent Supplement fall far short of real rent. While there are many good initiatives in place, not enough is being done to tackle these primary drivers of child poverty and homelessness.

There are several key initiatives that ask this Committee to consider that we believe would make a considerable difference to supporting children experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

Firstly, we have proposed that funding a sufficient number of Child Support Workers to support children experiencing homelessness should be a key component of Ireland's plan to deliver the EU Child Guarantee. The importance of Child Support Workers is demonstrated by our experience with the Focus Ireland Family Centre and the Dublin Family Homeless Action Team.

Secondly, we support Deputy Jan O'Sullivan's Private Members legislation that proposes that local authorities would be required to put the 'best interest' of children at the centre of their decision making when responding to a homeless family.

Finally, we ask that the Committee to recognise the achievements that have been made possible by partnership between local authorities, NGOs, and the State over the last 18 months and the importance of this approach continuing going forward.

There are a number of other areas of our work which are very relevant to the Committee's work on child poverty, and these are outlined in our written submission to the Committee, and we are happy to take any questions about them.

Thank you.