


Executive Summary

# Domestic Violence & Family Homelessness

Paula Mayock  
and Fiona Neary

Challenging  
homelessness.  
Changing lives.

**FOCUS**  
Ireland



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In order to protect the identity and privacy of research participants, names in this document have been changed.

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# Foreword

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The idea for this research emerged from growing concerns in Focus Ireland's family services about the level of domestic violence and abuse which our staff were dealing with among our customers. One manifestation of this concern has been the introduction of specialised training and more informed policies to guide the practice of our staff. This is a positive and important response to these challenges, but Focus Ireland is committed not just to responding to homelessness but to understanding it and the ways which help us to bring it to an end.

Every authoritative account of homelessness includes 'domestic violence' as one of the potential causes. And every victim of domestic violence fears that losing their home and becoming homeless may be one of the consequences of escaping the abuse they face. Yet in policy and in practice we tend to behave as if they were separate evils and not so frequently linked.

There are a broad range of statutory and voluntary groups who are deeply knowledgeable about domestic violence and committed to eradicating it, but for Focus Ireland the questions are more specific – if domestic violence does occur what can be done to prevent it also resulting in homelessness, and where homelessness cannot be avoided what can be done to minimise the trauma and distress homelessness inflicts on the already distressed and traumatised victims, and how can we bring that homelessness to an end as quickly as possible.

The research project was commissioned and the first interviews were undertaken by Dr Paula Mayock and Fiona Neary long before we had even heard of Covid-19. Over the period of the pandemic, and the restrictions on movement that it entailed, reports of domestic violence have increased, and it has received much more of the public attention that it deserves. Because of these changes, some elements of data collection were repeated to ensure that the particular experiences during that period were captured, along with the long-running issues.

In line with Focus Ireland's research priorities and organisational strategy, the report places a high priority on listening to the voices of the people who experience homelessness as a result of domestic violence and abuse. Equally it draws on those experiences to propose solutions, or pathways to solutions. It is always challenging for researchers to capture those voices, speaking to researchers is not a high priority for people in distressful circumstances. But this challenge was made even greater by the Covid pandemic and its impact on social services and their customers. It is a great tribute to the skill and persistence of the researchers that these voices have been captured so movingly and clearly.

When Focus Ireland research looks at the way in which particular aspects of society cause or contribute to homelessness, we always aim to work in close collaboration with other organisations who understand those areas deeply, and we are grateful to Safe Ireland, Sonas Domestic Abuse Charity, and Women’s Aid for their collaboration and support in this project. We also express our gratitude to the representatives from government departments and agencies, local authorities, and NGO backgrounds who participated in a roundtable discussion that helped shape the report’s recommendations.

The report was initially commissioned by Focus Ireland from the resources available to us from public donations, and the very welcome decision of the Housing Agency to support the research allowed us to be more ambitious in our scope, and immeasurably increased the value of the report to those who decide public policy.

The Department of Justice has been represented on the advisory committee for the report through Philip McCormack, and the researchers and ourselves are very grateful for his support and guidance through the process. Of course, as the report notes, none of the bodies that helped us complete the report are responsible for its contents, Focus Ireland and the researchers take full responsibility for that.

The report comes to be published at a vital moment, as the Department of Justice and its partners are in the final stages of preparing the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. The two earlier Strategies both referred to the issue of homelessness arising from Domestic Violence, and the second strategy resulted in the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government guidance to local authorities, which was such an important step forward. But when the first strategy was published in 2010 there were around 150 homeless families, while today, despite the welcome decline since the pandemic, there are over 800. One part of the context for the third strategy must be the Government’s commitment to work towards ending homelessness entirely by 2030. In that light, the Third strategy needs to go much further in closing off pathways from domestic violence into homelessness. We believe that this research report provides them with the evidence and analysis to achieve that.

**Mike Allen**

Director of Advocacy, Focus Ireland

# Acknowledgements

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We want to extend special thanks to the participants in this research. The parents who participated did so out of a commitment to having their stories heard and to contributing to a better and fuller understanding of the intersection of domestic abuse and family homelessness. This required a significant commitment of time but, more importantly, courage. It is our hope that we have respectfully represented your experiences, views and perspectives.

This research also involved the participation of a large number of individuals and agencies working in domestic violence, homelessness and housing sectors nationally. We appreciate your time and commitment to the research. We also want to thank very many of you for your advice and help with recruitment to the study and for the time you invested in helping us to make contact with family members and service professionals.

Sincere thanks to members of the study's Research Advisory Group listed below, in accordance with the organisational affiliation and roles of members at the time when the Research Advisory Group was convened at the outset of the study. Members provided assistance with the design of the research and, in particular, with the data collection phases, which presented particular challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are grateful for your help and advice and want to also thank you for the valuable feedback you provided on earlier drafts of the report.

- › Philip McCormack, Researcher, Department of Justice
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- › Dr Helen Johnston, National Economic and Social Council and Focus Ireland's Research Sub-Committee
- › Lisa Marmion, Services Development Manager, Safe Ireland
- › Joan Mullan, National Manager for Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Services, Tusla
- › Ruth O'Dea, Training and Development Manager, Women's Aid
- › Fiona Ryan, CEO, Sonas Domestic Abuse Charity
- › Conor Murray, Focus Ireland Project Leader, Family Homeless Action Team

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Finally, we want to thank Focus Ireland and The Housing Agency for providing financial and technical input to the research. Very special thanks to Mike Allen, Director of Advocacy, Research and Communications, Focus Ireland; Daniel Hoey, Research Coordinator, Focus Ireland; and Haley Curran, Research Officer, Focus Ireland, who provided invaluable assistance and support throughout all stages of the conduct of the research, including with the policy recommendations outlined in the final chapter of this report.

# About the Authors

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## **Paula Mayock**

Dr Paula Mayock is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Her research focuses primarily on marginalised youth and adult populations, covering areas such as homelessness, drug use and drug treatment. She is the founder and Co-director of the *Women's Homelessness in Europe Network (WHEN)*, which seeks to develop, promote and disseminate multi-disciplinary academic and policy relevant research that enhances understanding of women's homelessness. Paula is co-editor of *Women's Homelessness in Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and author of numerous articles, book chapters and research reports.

## **Fiona Neary**

Fiona Neary is a freelance consultant in gender-based violence and change management. She has worked for over 25 years at senior levels in the not-for-profit sector on sexual and domestic violence, perpetrator interventions and homelessness, including leading an EU-wide project of frontline sexual violence services. She has particular expertise in working with people from marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. Recent consultancy work includes feasibility studies for Local Authorities and Government Departments, the provision of strategic support to Senior Management of third level institutions and governance support to a range of non-governmental organisations.



# List of Abbreviations

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AHB	Approved Housing Body
B&B	Bed and Breakfast Accommodation
DP	Direct Provision
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
LA	Local Authority
PASS	Pathway Accommodation and Support System
PEA	Private Emergency Accommodation
PRS	Private Rented Sector
STA	Supported Temporary Accommodation

## Background to the Research

There is a well-documented association between women's homelessness and domestic violence. Research in several European countries shows that women are more likely than men to experience domestic violence and to report related loss of accommodation (Baptista, 2010; Mayock et al., 2016). Available statistics also suggest that a significant proportion of families who access homelessness services have experienced domestic violence (Baptista et al., 2017) and that, among women who experience homelessness, violence or abuse can be recurrent across the life course (Mayock & Sheridan, 2012 a, b; Mayock et al., 2012; Reeve et al., 2006). Families face numerous economic and housing difficulties once they enter homelessness or domestic violence service systems which, in addition to the effects of domestic violence, can create strong barriers to housing stability.

While an association between family homelessness and domestic violence has become increasingly clear, policy and service responses to homelessness and domestic violence have remained largely or wholly distinct and separate in their organisation, structure and aims (Baptista, 2010; Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Mayock et al., 2016). In recent years, this disconnect between homelessness, housing and domestic violence service sectors has generated policy attention, with recent pan-European research consistently highlighting the need for better co-ordination and integration of responses to homelessness and domestic violence (Baptista et al., 2017; Baptista & Marlier, 2019).

## 2

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# Research Aims and Methods

**This research aimed to enhance knowledge and understanding of the relationship between domestic violence and family homelessness in Ireland. It also aimed to examine the potential for greater interagency and cross-sectoral collaboration in preventing homelessness among families affected by domestic violence and in the development of co-ordinated responses that ensure safety and security of housing for families and individuals impacted by domestic abuse.**

The study was designed according to the following two phases of data collection:

- 1** Phase 1: A consultation with key stakeholders working in the domestic violence, homeless and housing service sectors.
- 2** Phase 2: The conduct of interviews with parents accessing homelessness or domestic violence services who left their homes because of domestic abuse.

The research was significantly delayed following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and modifications were made to the research design (see full report for a detailed account of all adjustments made to the design and implementation of the research).

The data collection phases of the research were conducted as follows:

- Between April and August 2019, 17 focus groups were conducted with professionals working in domestic violence and homelessness services in Dublin (n=10), Galway (n=3), Limerick (n=2) and Cork (n=2). These focus groups involved the participation of 97 service professionals.
- Interviews with family members commenced in early 2020. Between January and March 2020, eight face-to-face interviews were conducted. Data collection was suspended for several months following the first COVID-19 lockdown and resumed in July 2020. Between July 2020 and early 2021, a further nine parents were interviewed via telephone.

- Between October 2020 and January 2021, six local authority personnel were interviewed by telephone and not face-to-face as originally planned. These participants were based in a number of geographical areas, including Dublin (n=3), Galway (n=1), Cork (n=1) and Limerick (n=1).
- In February 2021, two additional focus groups were conducted with professionals from the homelessness and domestic violence service sectors. These focus groups specifically aimed to gain service professionals' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on their services and service users.

**Overall, the research involved the participation of 17 family members and more than 100 stakeholders from domestic violence, homelessness, and housing service sectors.**



# 3

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## Key Findings: Families' Experiences of Domestic Violence, Homelessness and Housing

### 3.1 The Study's Families

- › 17 parents, including 16 women and one male were interviewed in-depth. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 53 years and the average age for the sample was 36.7 years. Eleven of the parents identified as White Irish and two as Irish Travellers. A further four were migrants, whose countries of origin included regions in Eastern Europe, Northern Africa, and Asia.
- › Of the 17 family members interviewed, seven had two children; five were the parent of one child; three had five children; and two participants had three children. The vast majority of parents were caring for all of their children at the time of interview.

### 3.2 Leaving Home: "Where am I going to go?"

- › More than half of the study's parents (n=9) stayed with a family member or friend after they first left home. Thus, a large number entered into situations of hidden homelessness, meaning that their situations – and the fact that they had experienced domestic abuse – remained concealed for many weeks and, in some cases, for several months.
- › Four parents contacted a domestic violence refuge at the point of leaving their abusive home.
- › Barriers of access to domestic violence services were numerous and included capacity issues and women's limited knowledge about available services, which was a learning process for very many.
- › For all participants, at the point of leaving an abusive relationship, protective systems were largely absent, leaving parents to cope independently in the absence of adequate financial means to find a solution to their homelessness.

### 3.3 Families' Accommodation Journeys

- › Post-leaving, most participants experienced numerous moves as they tried to ensure that they and their children were safe.
- › Families experienced high levels of residential instability, with parents reporting between two and 12 moves with their children post-leaving. Seven women had lived in five or more accommodation types since they first left their homes while the remaining participants had experienced between two and four moves. Collectively, participants reported 76 moves, with the average number of moves for the sample being 4.5. Three women had experienced a period of rough sleeping.

The accommodation paths of three parents are presented below for illustrative purposes:

Parent	Accommodation Path
<b>Annett, age 43</b>	Homes of Family & Friends (2 months) → Back to Partner (12 months) → Sleeping Rough and Emergency Homeless Hostels (1 week) → Family Hub (15 months) → Supported Temporary Accommodation (6 months)
<b>Kasia, age 32</b>	Guest House, self-financed until money ran out (2 weeks) → Emergency B&Bs/Homeless Hotels (3 weeks) → DV Refuge (3 months) → Private Rented Accommodation (with HAP) (3 months), had recently received notice to quit
<b>Ines, age 40</b>	Homeless Hostel (1 night) → DV Refuge (8 months) → Emergency Homeless Accommodation (B&B) (2 months)

**These cases strongly suggest that parents' housing options post-leaving the abusive relationship were extremely limited and that women's ability to access safe, affordable housing was severely compromised.**

#### Residential Instability Placed an Enormous Strain on Families

"It was like, at that time, they'd (children) wake up every morning and go, 'Mammy, are we moving today?'" [Karen, age 30].

"It's just so much worse going around in limbo with no stability. You don't have time to think really because you're just moving again. Literally not even time to sit down and think about anything ..." [Tara, age 25].

"Into the homeless place. And I walked in, and I was like, 'I need help!'. It's basically you're on your own ... It's just very, very hard" [Annett, age 43].

### 3.4 Families' Needs: Children in Crisis

- › Parents described many unmet needs for counselling and psychological services at a personal level and, particularly, for their children.
- › Women were acutely aware of the trauma suffered by their children and had observed high levels of anxiety and behavioural change in their children post-leaving. Many struggled to find needed supports and were relatively isolated in their efforts to respond to their children's emotional needs.
- › For parents in this study, the experience of isolation, children's distress and material hardship were persistent consequences of having lived in an abusive home, which lasted far beyond the ending of the relationship.

### 3.5 Families' Experiences of Seeking Housing

- › The last home of a large number of the families was in the private rented sector, which meant that very many were again seeking private rented accommodation. However, their situations had altered radically: they were now single parents, wholly reliant on rental subsidies, in most cases, and with few or no safety nets in relation to income or other supports.
- › Parents confronted strong competition as HAP tenants, with most reporting that the cost of available rental properties very often exceeded the HAP subsidy limits.
- › Discrimination on the part of landlords against HAP recipients was consistently reported as the greatest barrier of access to housing and one which effectively excluded them from the private rental market.

**“There is no flats to rent because landlords won't agree to the HAP”  
[Lena, age 28].**

**“So, they gave me €572 HAP. I viewed several places, and every single place has said I won't be able to afford it” [Helen, age 43].**

**“Anything that revolved around the HAP, I never heard from them again. That in itself was quite intimidating” [Ellen, age 36].**

### 3.6 Parents' Perspectives on Services

- › For those who were able to gain access, refuges provided crucial temporary housing and safety and were valued by women for offering sanctuary, respite, and advice.

**“It’s (refuge) a quiet place, like nobody there disturb you. And the people there are really nice and helpful, you know. Especially when I felt so lower, so down, you know, they gave me lots of help” [Chen, age 38].**

- › Larger congregate homeless service settings were heavily critiqued by those who had resided in them and were generally viewed as not equipped to respond to the needs of victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

**“I mean, the control that homeless services have over you is pretty difficult to deal with as an adult. It sort of reminded me of the control that he (former partner) had, that he always insisted on, like. Where are you going? What are you doing? Who are you with? Who are you talking to? What are you doing with your life? ... It was pretty hard just being in the services. I was going from one level of control to another, do you know what I mean?” [Helen, age 43].**

- › Responses to families who are forced to leave their homes because of domestic abuse and violence were generally viewed as not adequately resourced and not sufficiently attuned to the realities of the situations and needs of families. A large number felt strongly that there is an urgent need for training across all professions – including among the Gardaí, Tusla, homelessness service providers and the judiciary – on the nature and dynamics of domestic violence.

**“It’s (domestic violence) definitely not prioritised. More training is needed on coercive control, in Tusla, the Gardaí, all of them” [Martha, age 47].**

- › The inadequacy of service provision for victim-survivors of domestic violence was framed by many as reflecting a wider pervasive ambivalence about the situations and need of families and individuals impacted by domestic abuse.
- › One participant spoke explicitly about the need for a co-ordinated approach to individuals and families experiencing domestic abuse.

**“If the homeless and the domestic violence people got together, that would be a hell of a lot better for a lot of women because I’ve seen some horrific injuries on women and there’s no services out there ... I think everybody should start coming together and sitting down and realise that there’s a serious situation” [Annett, age 43].**



# 4

## Key Findings: Stakeholder Perspectives on the Intersection of Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness

### 4.1 The Relationship between Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness

- › All stakeholders confirmed that domestic abuse was a regular or constant feature of their work.
- › Stakeholders drew strong attention to the visibility of ethnic minorities, including Traveller and migrant women, accessing their services because of domestic abuse.
- › Migrant women were said to be severely impacted by their particular circumstances, both prior to and at the point of leaving an abusive relationship, and to experience specific challenges related to their immigration status and restricted access to welfare supports.
- › The COVID-19 pandemic was considered to have had a dramatic negative impact, with domestic violence service providers describing surges in the number of individuals and families making contact with their services.

### 4.2 From DV Refuge to Homelessness Services

- › The transfer of families from domestic violence to homelessness services was said to have become far more commonplace as the housing options available to domestic violence service users had become more limited.
- › The absence of a *clear pathway* out of domestic violence services was raised repeatedly by domestic violence service providers.

“If they have children, they would usually go (from refuge) into a hotel or B&B for a period. And then maybe into a hub and then maybe if she can get private rented accommodation ... the pathways are not clear after refuge, there are no clear pathways at all” [DV Service Provider].

“They have trauma coming from refuge and it’s another trauma going into emergency accommodation” [DV Service Provider].

- › Stakeholders consistently highlighted the deleterious consequences for families who are forced to navigate a new service system in the absence of adequate supports following a stay in refuge accommodation.

**“When women leave here (DV refuge) to go to emergency homeless services, she leaves here, she dips. She has been supported, now nothing ... they have one room, they may have access to a kettle, no cooking ... noisy neighbours. If men with loud voices are there, this can be intimidating. No one to talk to, strangers outside her door, she doesn’t feel safe” [DV Service Provider].**

### **4.3 The Lack of Housing Options: Women Deciding between Domestic Violence and Homelessness**

- › A majority of stakeholders attributed families’ far more constrained access to housing stability to the ongoing housing crisis.
- › Domestic violence and homelessness service providers considered the far more restrictive nature of housing options compared to previously to be a key driver of women returning to the unsafe home spaces.

**“I think the way the housing crisis is at the moment there’s so many people that would go back (to the abusive relationship) because they know the reality of this place (homelessness service)” [Homelessness Service Provider].**

- › Local authority personnel reported that they work in a landscape of extremely limited options in terms of sourcing and securing safe accommodation for families. The limits imposed on HAP payments, combined with landlord discrimination against recipients of HAP, were viewed as exacerbating broader challenges associated with the high cost of private rented housing and the limited supply of social housing; pushing many families into emergency homelessness accommodation.

**“There are huge barriers in terms of HAP and HAP limits. For some families that’s okay and that’s realistic, but if you’re talking about a single mum with no other form of income, no support, there’s no maintenance coming from her partner, it’s very, very difficult” [LA Interviewee].**

- › Commercial hotels, B&B accommodation and family hubs were viewed as not providing adequate protections for families and extremely limited in their ability to respond to the needs of families recovering from the trauma of domestic abuse.

## 4.4 The Complexity and Invisibility of Domestic Violence

- › Professionals working in homelessness services emphasised that they do not, in many cases, have information about any history of domestic abuse at the point when a woman is admitted to their service along with her children.
- › Homelessness service providers also routinely commented on the extent to which they now find themselves dealing with domestic abuse compared to previously, often in the absence of any clear guidelines or policies on how to respond.

**“So now a family that came in through homelessness and now are showing signs of DV. Now we are going, ‘Oh, what do we do now? This is unexpected”**  
[Homelessness Service Provider].

## 4.5 The Support Needs of Families Impacted by Domestic Violence

- › Divergence was apparent among homeless and domestic violence service sector participants on the question of service users’ *most pressing needs*, with the former sector invariably stating *housing* and, the latter, *safety*.

**“For some, the courage to present to a DV service might not be there but the housing need is there, it is the number one need. Not ready to contact DV service yet. In rural areas that is more pronounced, everyone knows your business ...”** [Homelessness Service Provider].

**“Safety, their safety, their children’s safety. Information about domestic violence; about perpetrators ... And then options around that safety”**  
[DV Service Provider]

- › Across the service sectors, however, the weight of attention focused on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of need among families impacted by domestic abuse, which they considered to range from relatively low to high-level support needs.

**A lot of clients coming from domestic violence have never been homeless. Others, there might be no addiction or mental health issues, it's purely domestic violence. Now, it's rare enough that they become homeless then ... But where you have the complicating factors of people having complex or additional support needs or the kids do, that's different. Then, you know, no landlord might take them in private rented and we're kind of waiting on Approved Housing Body and that type of stuff. And that's the client group that would come into the hub, you know" [LA Interviewee].**

- › Families affected by domestic abuse were considered to have a spectrum or continuum of need. Where poor mental health and substance use or addiction issues intersected, the level of need increased and also created stronger barriers to housing stability.
- › Children were described as having multiple and often complex social, psychological, and educational needs and there was strong consensus among stakeholders that current child welfare and mental health services are not equipped to meet this need.

**"The children, I mean, that is very difficult. As a key worker, I find that very hard. Like, I send the referrals (to children's services) and there would be nothing for six or seven months for these children where they should have been, in my eyes, straight away, especially after witnessing domestic violence and homelessness. But with children, there is nothing there. Nothing at all" [Homelessness Service Provider].**



# 5

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## Key Findings: Stakeholder Perspectives on Interagency Collaboration

### 5.1 What Can Interagency Collaboration Achieve and is it Happening?

- › There was general agreement among service professionals that collaboration between their agencies was important in addressing the needs of families at risk of homelessness or who become homeless due to domestic abuse.

**“Across the board, collaboration is always beneficial. It opens up the pathways between services” [Homelessness Service Provider].**

**“Absolutely, interagency work is absolutely necessary. We are stronger as a group when we are together, and it’s good for each agency to really understand what each agency is doing, and how they are doing it. You don’t want to duplicate services” [DV Service Provider].**

- › With many stakeholders expressing concern about families falling through the gaps of the services and supports provided by numerous agencies, cross-sectoral partnerships were seen as having the capacity to bridge agency divides and to overcome the limitations of siloed service delivery.
- › There were many examples of services and sectors attempting to co-ordinate their efforts but, very often, success appeared to rely almost entirely on individual relationships across agencies rather than on a transparent policy or directive. The net result was inconsistency in terms of response and there was an overall perception that service sectors and agencies continue to operate largely separately.

**“Things are compartmentalised ... where there are multiple agencies involved and it’s not co-ordinated. That’s one of the big challenges” [Homelessness Service Provider].**

**“I think collaboration is probably all bits and pieces; it’s not all getting together. We are not collaborating. So, you are kind of individually working on behalf of a person, contacting maybe four places. We are all doing something but we are not actually all joined up to get the solutions and the goal for that family” [DV Service Provider].**

- › Interagency and cross-sectoral collaboration was, on the whole, depicted as inconsistent, complicated and challenging. While examples of ‘good’ and effective interagency work were reported by participants from all three sectors, these interagency connections appeared to hinge on individual workers’ relationships with professionals within relevant agencies and were not the product of a clear policy or process.
- › The overall picture to emerge was one of limited or fractured links between domestic violence, homelessness and housing services.

## **5.2 “No one agency can solve this”: Response to Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

- › Stakeholders noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to the introduction of initiatives, including *Operation Faoiseamh* and the *Still Here Campaign*, which were considered to be constructive and progressive.
- › However, the absence of clear interagency protocols have diluted the impact of these initiatives, leading to inconsistencies in their implementation.

**“Refuges used to be funded under Section 10 and that went over to Tusla with unintended consequences. Domestic violence is now Tusla’s responsibility. It’s over there. No one agency can solve this. A round table, better collaboration between housing, health and justice is needed. It has been done effectively in other countries by building capacity. There is a huge gap. We’re (referring to domestic violence sector) not an add-on. Women and children in refuge currently are not even counted, they show up nowhere”.**

### 5.3 Barriers to Cross-sectoral Collaboration

- › Blockages within housing and related social service systems – frequently framed as resource-related challenges – were repeatedly cited as hampering the efforts of the range of agencies potentially involved with any one family at a given time.

**“Resources are a barrier to collaboration; waiting lists, competition for houses. Every cohort is deserving for a really minute pot of housing; social or private rented. There’s no houses, no refuges, not enough differentiated spaces, safe spaces for families” [Homelessness Service Provider].**

- › The lack of – or significant deficits in – interagency collaboration was attributed, at least in part, by some stakeholders to a lack of understanding of what each sector is charged with doing.

**“Not understanding what each service offers, there not an understanding of what people actually do” [Homelessness Service Provider].**

- › Alongside perceived deficits in understanding of the remit and roles of respective service sector professionals were questions about who – or what agency – is *responsible* for responding to the needs of families.

**“There is nothing mutually beneficial like a collaboration at the moment. It’s like we are in a battle with each other. Is it you? Is it me? Who is responsible for this family?” [DV Service Provider].**

## 5.4 Building Capacity for Cross-sectoral Collaboration

- › The notion of building capacity for interagency and cross-sectoral collaboration was endorsed by all stakeholders.
- › There was broad agreement that training on domestic abuse was critical to ensuring that service providers have the skills to respond effectively and appropriately to families.

**P2: If we get signs of it (DV), well what do we do? Because, in the past, that wouldn't have happened ... It's not clear. We're just expected to manage it.**

**P3: We would ring the council to say we have concerns (about DV and a family in PEA) and the council don't have any guidelines on that. So, we make that decision based on a risk. It's a band aid. Councils, local authorities, they have no training in DV - they are not equipped. There are gaps in training across the board.**

**P1: Are we meant to be dealing with DV? If so, training is needed [Homelessness Service Providers].**

- › Homelessness service providers, in particular, articulated a need for more specific training on how to respond to disclosures and to perpetrators of violence, while local authority personnel felt that training needed to be made available to their staff, including to administrators, who are likely to interact with individuals who have experienced domestic abuse.

**"In some DV situations there is the perpetrator and you've got a family under absolute stress and they're displaying behaviours that you wouldn't have expected before and they haven't even experienced before. And that's what you're trying to clarify. So how do we support both of them at the same time to get through the crisis?" [Homelessness Service Provider].**

- › Capacity building for interagency and cross-sectoral collaboration was viewed as requiring strong investment in the development of agreed national policies and protocols aimed at clearly and explicitly guiding agency partnerships and service integration.

**P1: Agencies have to agree who is going to be a lead and who is going to have responsibility.**

**P2: The question is who takes the lead ... the government needs to take the lead by delegating and saying, 'Here is what we want you to do'. Agencies have to agree who is going to be the lead and who is going to have responsibility. Who is going to be left with work to be done ... So that we are working from the same framework and that there is common commitment to that [DV Service Provider].**

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## Policy Recommendations

As outlined earlier, a key aim of this research was to explore the potential for greater co-ordination and collaboration between domestic violence, homelessness, and housing service sectors in the development of policies and interventions that are enabling to families experiencing domestic abuse. This section outlines the policy recommendations arising from the study's findings, which are underpinned by the following key principles and aims:

- 1 Reducing the number of families made homeless because of domestic abuse.
- 2 Ensuring a clear pathway of support for families experiencing domestic abuse.
- 3 Increasing families' access to safe, sustainable housing.
- 4 Supporting families to recover from the trauma of domestic abuse.

The recommendations outlined below are made in the context of a housing crisis characterised by an inadequate supply of social and affordable housing and increased demand in the private rented sector, which has seen rental costs rising steeply in both urban and rural areas. Irrespective of any, yet unknown, positive developments that may result from the government's latest housing plan, *Housing For All* (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021), what is termed a 'crisis' of housing availability and affordability is likely to be an enduring feature of Ireland's housing landscape for some time.

### **Towards Service Integration: Lead Role and Responsibilities and Supports for Interagency and Cross-sectoral Collaboration**

One of the strongest messages arising from this research is that, where interagency co-operation currently exists, it is typically wholly or primarily reliant on the personal initiative of a committed individual and their capacity to build relationships with other agencies. Strong evidence emerged of an absence of structures and policies that explicitly aim to foster collaboration between state and voluntary agencies in responding to homelessness and domestic abuse. One consequence of the absence of an integrated cross-sectoral response to families experiencing domestic violence is that parents who leave an abusive home embark on a path of moving through a series of insecure settings, propelling many along a trajectory of ongoing housing instability and homelessness.

The decision of Government in July 2021<sup>1</sup> to confirm that policy leadership for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence rests with the Department of Justice helps to clarify issues at a national policy level, but does not resolve matters at the local level, particularly at the point when a parent seeks support and encounters a complex maze of fragmented services.

Establishing a *clear pathway of support* at both national and local levels is the cornerstone on which the recommendations arising from this research are proposed. The aim of establishing such a pathway, which requires multi-agency and cross-sectoral collaboration, has resource and, potentially, legislative implications that need to be addressed and resolved in the forthcoming (third) National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.

At a local level, there is need for clarity as to which agency is responsible for convening a multi-agency case management meeting when a family is at risk of homelessness and requires an interagency response. Designating one body for such a role would not diminish the roles and responsibilities of Tusla, An Garda Síochána or any specialist domestic violence or homelessness service, but would rather provide a structure within which a holistic pathway of support can be agreed and delivered to families by all relevant agencies. Given their unique local knowledge and role as the statutory housing authority, local authorities emerge as best placed to take up this local convening role. However, given the complex interagency and resourcing issues involved, it is not the function of this research report to definitively indicate which agency should take up this role.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PR21000174>



### **Recommendation 1: Designation of the Lead Role in Convening Local Multi-agency Case Management Meetings**

- 1.1 The forthcoming (third) National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence should designate an appropriate state agency, resourced to take lead responsibility for convening local multi-agency case management meetings – when a family is identified as at risk of homelessness because of domestic abuse – with the aim of planning and delivering a safe, sustainable housing solution for the family. These meetings should involve all relevant statutory and voluntary organisations.

### **Recommendation 2: Collaborative, Multi-agency Case Management**

- 2.1 Within each local authority area, a written protocol – outlining the roles and responsibilities of all relevant agencies, including domestic violence and homelessness services, Tusla and An Garda Síochána – should be developed and agreed by the state agency identified as taking the lead role in convening local multi-agency case management meetings (see Recommendation 1).
- 2.1 This protocol should address the circumstances under which a multi-agency case management meeting will be convened (e.g. a family is identified as at risk of homelessness because of domestic abuse; a family is accessing a domestic violence refuge; a family is accessing a homelessness service because of domestic abuse; a homelessness service or agency has identified a risk of domestic abuse).
- 2.3 The Department of Justice should assess whether any management, regulatory or statutory changes are needed to ensure that relevant agencies are required to attend and actively engage in such case management meetings.

### **Recommendation 3: Case Management Supports**

- 3.1 An appropriate state agency should be provided with a budget to ensure that case managers with the relevant skills are available in each local authority, either through direct employment by the local authority or by contract with a specialist domestic violence or homelessness service. The level of support required should be established by a baseline needs assessment (see Recommendation 4) and, subsequently, by the statutory homeless plans.
- 3.2 Local authorities need to ensure that staff who work directly with families experiencing domestic abuse are provided with trauma-informed training, supports and supervision.

#### **Recommendation 4: Baseline Assessment of Refuge, Housing and Homelessness Service Supports in each Local Authority Region**

- 4.1 Regional Statutory Homeless Action Plans<sup>2</sup> should include provision to undertake a baseline assessment of the housing, refuge, and support capacities within each region, along with an assessment of current and projected need, within six months of the publication of the new National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence. This should include an assessment of the cost of providing case managers and any new or additional domestic violence refuge accommodation or supported housing required.
- 4.2 Regional Statutory Homeless Action Plans should include provision to undertake an assessment of homelessness accommodation used by families in all local authority areas, with the aim of ascertaining safety and security levels in these settings for families impacted by domestic abuse. Only those accommodation settings deemed to be safe and secure should be used to provide emergency accommodation for families who leave an abusive home.
- 4.3 A plan to respond to the risk of homelessness associated with domestic violence should be included in Regional Statutory Homelessness Action Plans.

#### **Recommendation 5: Protocols to Support Interagency and Cross-sectoral Collaboration**

- 5.1 National-level protocols should be developed to support interagency and cross-sectoral collaboration. The Department of Justice should take the lead and, in consultation with relevant stakeholders within housing, domestic violence and homeless service sectors, develop protocols aimed at supporting:
  - › Policies with clearly articulated principles, aims and objectives, both within and between agencies.
  - › Data and information sharing mechanisms.
  - › Culturally appropriate responses to the specific needs of migrant and Traveller families.
  - › Gender- and trauma-informed responses to families.

#### **Recommendation 6: Review of Current Guidance for Housing Authorities to Assist Victims of Domestic Violence**

- 6.1 The *Policy and Procedural Guidance for Housing Authorities in Relation to Assisting Victims of Domestic Violence with Emergency and Long-term Accommodation Needs*, published by Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government in 2017, should be revised to create greater clarity on – and remove any ambiguity about – the responsibility of local authorities to provide a clear pathway to safe, stable housing for families impacted by domestic abuse using a collaborative case management multi-agency approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Section 38 of the 2009 Housing Act allows for local authorities to establish Joint Homelessness Consultative Forums with adjoining local authority areas to collaborate on a joint Homeless Action Plan for those areas.

## **Ensuring Trauma-informed, Gender-informed and Family-centred Responses**

With the exception of domestic violence service professionals, the women interviewed for this research felt that understanding of the nature and dynamics of domestic abuse – and coercive control, in particular – was limited among the service professionals with whom they interacted. Additionally, permeating the findings is strong evidence of ongoing trauma and stress among parents and children as a direct consequence of the experience of domestic abuse. Women found it difficult to source supports for their children and many found themselves dealing with their children’s trauma in isolation. Likewise, service providers reported significant barriers to families’ ability to access needed supports.

### **Recommendation 7: Training on Domestic and Gender-based Violence**

- 7.1 Training on domestic and gender-based violence should be expanded to ensure that such training is not limited to a one-time ‘injection’ and includes regular upskilling opportunities for professionals working in local authorities, Approved Housing Bodies, and homelessness services. Specific practical guidance on dealing with issues, including disclosures of abuse and responses to perpetrators, should be included in this training.
- 7.2 Domestic violence service providers in local areas are best placed to provide regular training and upskilling to the relevant service sectors.

### **Recommendation 8: Trauma- and Gender-informed Training**

- 8.1 Staff across all three service sectors, including homelessness, domestic violence, and housing, should – regardless of their position or prior training – be trained in basic trauma knowledge to ensure that their interactions with victim/survivors are trauma-informed. This training should specifically address the dynamics of coercive control and post-separation abuse.

### **Recommendation 9: Trauma-informed Supports for Families Impacted by Domestic Abuse**

- 9.1 Tusla should fund appropriate local agencies with relevant expertise to provide trauma-informed interventions and supports to parents who have experienced domestic abuse.
- 9.2 Trained child support workers, with advanced knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control, should be available to support all children assessed as needing support arising from the trauma associated with domestic violence, homelessness and/or any pre-existing issue(s).
- 9.3 Access to interventions such as play therapy must be *immediate* for children who are impacted by domestic abuse. Tusla should provide funding to local professionals and/or agencies to ensure that children receive appropriate therapeutic supports at the earliest possible juncture.

## **The Domestic Violence Service Sector**

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that women's ability to access domestic violence refuge accommodation and/or other specialist supports was frequently highly constrained at the point of leaving an abusive home. Many could not access a refuge because of capacity issues and there was also evidence of a lack of knowledge about available services, particularly among migrant and Traveller parents. Stakeholders raised further problems of access to appropriate services for migrant and Traveller women as well as for women with more complex needs related to mental ill-health and/or substance use problems.

### **Recommendation 10: Domestic Violence Refuge Provision**

- 10.1 Domestic violence refuge provision should be expanded, with the aim of delivering the level of provision recommended by the Council of Europe over the duration of the third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence.
- 10.2 The expansion of emergency domestic violence refuge provision should aim to include models apart from congregate settings, including greater provision of self-contained housing that would better meet the needs and preferences of larger families and families with teenage children.

### **Recommendation 11: Raising Awareness about Domestic Violence Services**

- 11.1 The Department of Justice should plan and develop measures that aim to promote community-level awareness of the services available to victim/survivors of domestic abuse. This could be achieved through mass media and social media campaigns and local-level initiatives aimed at promoting awareness of available domestic violence services.
- 11.2 Specific measures should be taken to promote knowledge and understanding of the role and availability of domestic violence services among migrant and Traveller women.

### **Recommendation 12: Responding to Clients with Complex Needs**

- 12.1 Training and related resources should be provided to all domestic violence refuge staff and managers involved in the assessment of referrals and the provision of support to service users with more complex needs, including substance use and/or mental health problems.
- 12.2 The capacity of domestic refuges to cater to the needs of service users with complex needs should be enhanced to ensure safety and access to domestic violence services for women with substance use and/or mental health problems.

## The Homeless Service Sector

Professionals working with families in homelessness services confirmed that domestic abuse is a regular feature of their work. They also reported particular challenges in terms of responding to the needs of these families. If, as seems certain, the homeless service sector will continue to provide emergency or medium-term accommodation to families who leave an abusive home, these services must be adequately resourced and equipped to respond to the needs of victim/survivors of domestic abuse. It also needs to be acknowledged that homelessness services may be the first-to-know agencies about a family's history of domestic violence; in other instances, families may transfer from domestic violence to homelessness services in the absence of the transfer of information about a history of domestic violence. Finally, homeless service professionals, as well as other stakeholders, expressed strong concern about the risk of families being exposed to aggression and/or violence in emergency homelessness accommodation. A number of the parents reported trauma arising from exposure of this kind in these settings, particularly for their children.

### **Recommendation 13: The Development of Service-level Policies to Guide Responses to the Needs of Families Experiencing Domestic Abuse**

- 13.1 Appropriate policies that aim to ensure the safety and security of families living in homelessness services, including a risk assessment in relation to the transfer of families from refuges to homeless accommodation, should be drawn up as part of the National Quality Standards Framework with the Department of Justice.
- 13.2 Service-level policies should explicitly recognise that domestic abuse may come to the attention of staff within homelessness services, including PEA, B&Bs and family hubs, and provide guidance on how to respond to disclosures of domestic abuse.

### **Recommendation 14: Training to Enhance Service Responses to Families Experiencing Domestic Abuse**

- 14.1 Homeless sector service professionals who work with families should receive *regular* training on gender- and trauma-informed responses, as well as on how to respond to specific issues that service professionals may identify (e.g. disclosures of abuse/violence and to perpetrators who either reside in their service(s) or try to contact a resident in their service).

### **Recommendation 15: Women-only Services and Women-only Spaces**

- 15.1 The provision of women-only emergency and temporary homelessness accommodation should be increased by designating some services that are currently mixed as women-only.
- 15.2 Women-only spaces should be created in all mixed gender service settings, including family hubs.

## Housing

As discussed in Chapter 1, while domestic violence refuges provide vital safety and protection for women and their children after they leave an abusive home, they cannot provide sustainable housing solutions for families. *Housing-led solutions must therefore be the primary response to families experiencing domestic abuse, underpinned by the goal of providing families with rapid access to safe, secure housing or supporting victim/survivors to remain in their current home.*

### **Recommendation 16: Supporting Families to Remain in their Home**

- 16.1 Solutions that specifically aim to support women experiencing violence to remain in their homes should be developed, piloted, and evaluated. The Department of Justice should take the lead in developing such solutions. Examples, internationally, include Sanctuary Schemes and ‘Making Safe’, which is a multi-agency UK-based initiative that works to enable women to remain in their home and rehouses perpetrators for up to two years, with tailored supports provided to both the victim and perpetrator.

### **Recommendation 17: Measures to Support Rapid Housing Solutions for Families**

- 17.1 The protocol established between the Department of Social Protection and Tusla to allow victims of domestic violence to apply for non-means tested rent supplement should be extended from the current three-month limit to a six-month period (without means testing). This would bolster parents’ ability to achieve short-term housing security and stability for their family.
- 17.2 Current HAP limits, which have remained unchanged since 2016, fall far short of market rents in most geographical areas, even when discretionary ‘top ups’ are granted by local authorities. HAP limits should be increased to reflect current rental costs nationally.
- 17.3 Each local authority should ensure that households experiencing domestic abuse are prioritised within their housing allocation scheme.
- 17.4 The allocation of social housing must reflect the assessed support needs of all households impacted by domestic abuse.
- 17.5 Addressing the housing needs of single parents: An expert group, including representatives from relevant Government Departments and agencies working with one-parent families, should be established to review all schemes that contribute to an increased risk of housing insecurity and homelessness among single parent families.

### **Recommendation 18: In-housing Supports for Families**

- 18.1 Case management should include an assessment of any in-housing supports – related to safety and the broader support needs of the parent and children – that a family may require subsequent to moving to stable housing.



## Data and Enumeration

As documented in Chapter 1, there are clear data deficits that significantly limit knowledge and understanding of the true extent and nature of domestic violence and abuse in Ireland. Currently, women who access a domestic violence refuge are not counted as homeless. Accurate national- and regional-level data on families and individuals who access domestic violence services is critical to planning for the provision of safe, sustainable housing solutions for all individuals who leave their homes because of domestic abuse.

### **Recommendation 19: Enumerating Families and Individuals Accessing Domestic Violence Services**

- 19.1 The Department of Justice should commission an agency with the relevant research and data management expertise to develop a comprehensive, standardised data collection tool to enumerate those families and individuals who access domestic violence refuges nationally. Demographic data (related to age, gender, ethnicity and so on) on all adults and children residing in domestic violence refuges should be captured, as well as families' and individuals' housing situations (e.g. PRS, social housing, privately owned/mortgaged home) prior to accessing refuge accommodation. This data collection tool should distinguish between new admissions to a domestic violence refuge and families, individuals and children who have continued to reside in the refuge since the previous data collection point. The duration of stays in refuges should also be captured.
- 19.2 When finalised, this data collection tool should be circulated to all domestic violence services and specific training provided to ensure high-quality data entry based on clear *Data Entry Guidelines* and an understanding of all relevant definitions.
- 19.3 Data should be returned by domestic violence services to the Department of Justice on an agreed date each month and the data should be published by the Department of Justice on a monthly basis.

### **Recommendation 20: Counting Domestic Violence Refuge Residents as Homeless**

- 20.1 The monthly data collated by the Department of Justice on families, individuals and children residing in domestic violence refuges should be supplied to the Department of Housing for publication in their monthly statements and quarterly reports on homelessness.

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