

Focus Ireland Submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the EU Child Guarantee

January 2022

Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to share our views with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the preparation of the National Action Plan for the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee. As one of the leading housing and homelessness organisations in the State, Focus Ireland has over 30 years' experience in working with individuals and families through our extensive supports and services nationwide.

In particular, we have expertise in working in partnership with Tusla to support children experiencing different forms of homelessness and housing insecurity, both children within families that are homeless and those in the care of state. In relation to children who are homeless with their families, we operate the Family Homeless Action Team (on behalf of the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive) and offer Advice and Information services via our Coffee Shop on Eustace Street in Dublin, the Family Centre on Mountjoy Street, and services nationwide.

We have also operated supported temporary accommodation for families with high support needs for many years. In relation to children in state care, or on the margins of state care, we operate on behalf of Tusla an aftercare service, specialised youth emergency accommodation and youth housing applying Housing First practices¹. In partnership with Tusla, we operate specialised family mediation services to avert situations where family conflicts may result in a child having to be taken into care.

In Dublin, with the CDYSB, we operate youth-specific Day Services for unattached young people. In addition, Focus Housing Association (the Approved Housing Body of Focus Ireland) acts as landlord to families who would otherwise find it difficult to maintain a tenancy with other social or private landlords, with Focus Ireland providing tenancy support. Focus Housing is, in partnership with Tusla, one of the leading providers of homes under the Tusla CAS-for-care leavers.

Today, 2,548 children are homeless with their families in Ireland², and while reliable data is not available, an unacceptable number of young people who grew up in state care now rely on homeless services. We believe that this is not only morally wrong, but it is a symptomatic failure of public policies to adequately support the most vulnerable groups in society. All homelessness is wrong, but it is children who suffer the most as it causes psychological trauma, contributes to malnutrition and can cause long-term socio-emotional harm to

¹ FEANTSA, June 2016. Housing First Guide. <https://www.feantsa.org/en/report/2016/06/01/housing-first-guide?bcParent=27>

² Focus Ireland, January 2022. Press Release. Homelessness Figures Rise for the 6th Month in a Row.

<https://www.focusireland.ie/press-release/homelessness-rises-for-6th-month-in-a-row-as-new-figures-show-total-of-9099-people-homeless/>

children³. As the EU Child Guarantee sets out to tackle and prevent child poverty and social exclusion, paying particular attention to children who are homeless and children in state care, we believe that responding to and preventing child homelessness should be a key focus of the Irish Government's National Action Plan to implement the EU Child Guarantee.

Children in Homelessness and Child Support Workers

Experiencing homelessness as a child in a family that is homeless can be a devastating and traumatic life experience which can have long-term negative impacts on children⁴. An experience of such homelessness can hinder children's development, well-being and potential to progress into adulthood.

Ending child homelessness should be a key priority of the Government's national implementation of the EU Child Guarantee, as Member States work to prevent and tackle child poverty and social exclusion by guaranteeing quality key services and resources to support children in need.

Moreover, the national actions required to implement the EU Child Guarantee are intertwined with the Government's commitment to end homelessness by 2030 as set out in the Lisbon declaration⁵. Ending child homelessness should be the first step in delivering on these crucial European commitments.

As one of the leading housing and homelessness organisations, Focus Ireland particularly welcomes the opportunity to engage collaboratively with Government stakeholders to achieve this goal. While ending family homelessness, as envisaged by the Government's Housing for All strategy is the long-term solution to these issues, we believe that the EU Child Guarantee provides a real opportunity to extend supports to this particularly vulnerable group.

Broadly speaking, homelessness can be caused by 'structural factors' (like lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, inadequate mental health services, etc.) or 'personal factors' (like addictions, mental health issues, family breakdown etc.). Today in Ireland, child homelessness is driven primarily by structural economic factors, which means structural reforms can help solve the problem.

Family breakdowns can also lead to homelessness, as is evidenced by the over representation of children in families headed by a lone parent and the continued flow of families into homelessness during the Covid-related eviction ban.

The most extensive recent analysis of the links between homelessness and poverty, carried out by the Rowntree Trust in the UK concluded that, while structural factors such as availability of work and housing cost had an impact, as did individual factors, the 'experience of (childhood) poverty very often predates, and is a powerful predictor of, (adulthood) homelessness'⁶.

Following a model developed over the last 20 years, each Focus Ireland team working with families includes specialised, trained Child Support Workers. The value of this child-centred intervention has been validated in several studies. We are particularly proud that the impact of our Child Support Workers was recognised in the Ombudsman for Children report '*No Place Like Home*'⁷ as this was based on the voices of the children

³ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, July 2017. Human Rights and Equality Commission Challenges Normalisation of Family Homelessness. <https://www.ihrec.ie/human-rights-equality-commission-challenges-normalisation-family-homelessness/>

⁴ Mayock, P. and Parker, S. 2017. Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Path to Housing. Published by Focus Ireland, in collaboration with Simon Communities of Ireland, Threshold, Peter McVerry Trust and Society of St Vincent De Paul.

⁵ European Commission, June 2021. Press Release. European Platform to Combat Homelessness is Launched. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_3044

⁶ Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. 2018. "Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?" Housing Studies 33.1 pg. 96-116.

⁷ The Ombudsman for Children Office, April 2019. *No Place Like Home; Children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs*. <https://www.oco.ie/library/no-place-like-home-childrens-views-and-experiences-of-living-in-family-hubs/>

themselves. Moreover, two joint Oireachtas Committees on 'Children and Youth Affairs' and on 'Housing, Planning and Local Government' recommended an increase in the number of Child Support Workers⁸.

Some children need this support to cope with the trauma of homelessness, either as a result of poverty they were facing before becoming homeless, or as a result of being homeless, or both. Not only do our Child Support Workers help to address some of the detrimental impacts of homelessness, by extension, they help to reduce the pressure and stress on parents.

This enables parents to engage much more fully both with supporting their children through a traumatic experience, as well as on the process of exiting homelessness. It is crucial to remember that children experiencing poverty live in families experiencing homelessness, and solutions need to have both family and child-specific dimensions.

In many cases, the Child Support Worker continues to support the child/children for a period after the family have exited homelessness. Each Child Support Worker has a case load of approx. 15 children. Not all children in homeless families need such support and an assessment tool has been developed to identify those who do.

Because of the currently long wait times between a child being assessed as having a support need and a Child Support Worker being allocated, children becoming homeless with their families are no longer being routinely assessed for support needs. On previous experience, however, around 25% of children require this support (it is important to note that this is an estimate only).

Of the 2,548 children who are currently homeless in Ireland, between the very welcome support we receive from HSE Social Inclusion, Tusla, and public donations, Focus Ireland employs 10.5 child support workers across our Dublin services.

To our knowledge, Child Support Workers are not funded in any other provider. This means that only 158 children have the support of a dedicated Child Support worker at any one time, while over 400 are likely to need that support.

We are proposing that funding a sufficient number of Child Support Workers should be a key component of Ireland's plan to deliver the EU Child Guarantee, which specifically requires that the interests of children in poverty and homeless children in particular are addressed. The National Action Plan should guarantee that, while we work towards ending family homelessness, every child who is homeless with their family and needs support should have access to a suitably qualified Child Support Worker.

The case load and appropriate skills for the Child Support Worker should take into account the specific additional needs of children in Traveller and Roma families, and of children with disabilities in families that are homeless.

Children in State Care, or at risk of being taken into Care, and preparation for secure transition into adulthood

The EU Child Guarantee requires Member States to pay particular attention to children leaving state care as they are vulnerable to poverty and face a heightened risk of entering homelessness. While Tusla's revised National Leaving Care & Aftercare policy document defines aftercare as an adult service, this can be misleading as effective aftercare must start while the person is a child and before they reach adulthood.

⁸ Houses of the Oireachtas, June 2019. Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/press-centre/press-releases/20191114-review-of-responses-to-child-and-family-homelessness-proposed-in-new-oireachtas-committee-reports-1/>

Within the literature and in practice, aftercare has always been understood as a process or transition from being in care to independence post-care⁹.

It contains three distinct stages – preparation for leaving care, leaving care and aftercare. All three stages are subsumed under the overarching concept of aftercare. It is a continuum and not a distinct event that occurs at 18 years of age. International and national standards are unequivocal about the benefits of early planning in terms of positive outcomes for care leavers¹⁰.

To that extent, aftercare is not an ‘adult service’ but reaches back into the childhood experiences of the person and so should feature strongly in the Government’s National Action Plan on the EU Child Guarantee.

If the EU Child Guarantee is to be meaningful for the most vulnerable children in state care, it needs to work towards guaranteeing that any young person who grows up in state care, or is on the margins of state care, will not face homelessness on reaching adulthood. This will mean investing in a number of different services and establishing deeper linkages between them.

Such a guarantee can be made meaningful through a number of steps:

- (i) Increase the provision for Aftercare Workers to reduce the current caseload so that young people in care can be allocated, where appropriate, an aftercare worker at the age of 16. The Aftercare Worker would then be in a position to deliver on the existing objective in the National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres¹¹ commitment that “two years prior to a young person reaching the legal age of leaving care, the care plan will outline the preparation and support in place for the young person.”

It is Focus Ireland’s experience that this early preparation work, in the context of statutory care planning, is not happening in too many cases. This has a disproportionate impact on young people in residential care. At any given time, there are between 500 and 600 young people who have reached the age at which they should be engaging in a process of preparation for leaving care and working towards the development of an Aftercare Plan.

- (ii) Increase investment in the family mediation service to ensure that all children who face the risk of becoming homeless/being taken into care due to resolvable issues of family conflict have access to the support of a qualified mediation service. Mediations services should have access to people with the specific skills needed to respond to family conflict arising from the sexual orientation or gender identity of the young person.
- (iii) Use EU structural funds to increase the funding (including funding for support services) in the Tusla CAS-for-careleavers programme to a level which ensures that suitable housing is available for all young care leavers who are at risk of becoming homeless.

The specific needs of young Traveller and other ethnic minorities, as well as the needs of young people with disabilities should be taken into account in setting the caseloads of Aftercare Workers working with people at risk of homelessness.

⁹ McNamara, D.M., 2020. Developing a Right of Aftercare for Young People Transitioning Out of State Care. *23 (2) Irish Journal of Family Law* 39.

¹⁰ Glynn, N. and Mayock, P., 2019. “I’ve changed so much within a year”: care leavers’ perspectives on the aftercare planning process. *Child Care in Practice*, 25(1), pp.79-98.

¹¹ HIQA, November 2018. National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres. <https://www.hiqa.ie/reports-and-publications/standard/national-standards-childrens-residential-centres>

Local Authorities and Child-Centred Responses to Family Homelessness

The EU Child Guarantee requires Member States to consider whether local, regional and national policies could be adapted to better safeguard children from the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Focus Ireland proposes that local authority responses to family homelessness are adapted to be more child-centred and to focus on the best interests of the child. This echoes recommendations from the joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government on Family and Child Homelessness in 2019¹².

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

In 2019, Private Members legislation was brought forward by Deputy Jan O’Sullivan that sought to update the law to reflect the current reality and reflect the fact that Ireland put the rights of children into our Constitution in 2012. The legislation proposed to enshrine children’s rights by ensuring that local authorities would have to put the ‘best interest’ of children at the centre of their decision making when responding to a homeless family.

The legislation was accepted by the then Government and all opposition parties. It passed the first and second readings before the 2020 election. Considering that every party in the Dáil, including the Governing parties, supported this legislation it should be straightforward to reintroduce it and pass it into law.

The commitment to introduce this legislation would provide a substantive underpinning to the Irish National Action Plan and demonstrate the undoubted commitment of the Irish Government both to eliminate homelessness but also, while this commitment is being implemented, to protect children from the life-long harm it can cause.

¹² Houses of the Oireachtas, November 2019. Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government. Family and Child Homelessness.
https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-family-and-child-homelessness_en.pdf