

A photograph of a man and a young boy walking together in a park. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark grey jacket and a patterned scarf, looking down at the boy with a smile. The boy, on the right, is wearing a bright blue puffer jacket and a patterned scarf, looking up at the man. They are walking on a grassy path with trees and a stone wall in the background.

**FOCUS**  
Ireland

# Focus On Families

**Focus Ireland magazine**  
about family homelessness

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Ending Family  
Homelessness

Focus Ireland  
Family Centre

BGE Family  
Supports



A portrait of an elderly woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair. She is smiling and looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a dark-colored top with a light-colored, textured pattern. The background is a solid dark purple color.

“

**Now more than ever in this terrible time, every family, every individual needs the safety of their own home.**

”

**~ Sr Stan**



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## Introduction by **Pat Dennigan** Focus Ireland CEO

As I write this there are over 2811 children homeless and Focus Ireland is one of the main organisations supporting these children and their families. Homelessness is something that many of us can only imagine how it feels. However, sadly for the families and children we work with, it is a lived and very real experience. The pandemic added to the awful stress for children and highlighted once again that every child needs a safe home.

Tackling the growing problem of family homelessness more effectively will be a vital part of working towards ending homelessness. Focus Ireland has worked more closely than ever before with our State partners during the pandemic to keep families safe. As you will read in this magazine, our family services staff work to support children and their families while homeless and last year Focus Ireland - in partnership with the State – helped hundreds of families to secure a home. There was great work done during Covid 19 which saw family homelessness drop to its lowest level in years. This was possible due to the excellent partnership work along side increased access to housing and the very effective temporary prevention measures such as the ban on evictions. This success really showed what is possible to achieve with very determined efforts towards reducing homelessness. We have long called on successive Governments to commit to ending homelessness. So, we strongly welcomed the government commitment in Housing

for All to end homelessness by 2030. However, the fine details of how we can all work together to achieve this are now required. Focus Ireland is working to develop new approaches to better prevent family homelessness and to support families to move out of homelessness more quickly. “It is also vital to ensure everything possible is done to protect families, and especially children, from the trauma caused by homelessness.” We are currently developing a multidisciplinary team approach that we believe will be very effective to this end.

As I have said, we support the commitment to end homelessness by 2030 and have called on Government to prioritise ending child homelessness as one of the major steps on this journey. No child should ever be homeless and have to worry about where they are going to sleep tonight. I look forward to when our vision that “Everyone has a right to a place they can call home” becomes a reality.

I would like to conclude by thanking our staff, funders and supporters who make it possible for us to play a key role in preventing and working to end family homelessness.



# Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team

## Supporting Families & Ending Homelessness

The Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team is at the forefront of the fight against homelessness in Ireland. The team works with families who have become homeless in Dublin to support them and help them find a new home.

**“Our primary objective is always to move families out of homeless as quickly as possible, but while they’re in homelessness, we recognise that there can be a lot of complex needs that they have.”**

Niamh Lambe, Project Leader

In the past, family homelessness in Ireland was far less of a problem than homelessness among single adults. If a family became homeless, it was usually due to many complex domestic issues within the home.

However, at the beginning of the last decade, rents began to rise, available housing disappeared, and more and more families started to become homeless for purely economic reasons - there just wasn't anywhere affordable for them to live.

**“The longer these families tend to be in homelessness, the more problems arise for them. So we work with the family on all aspects to support them while they’re in homelessness.”**

Niamh Lambe, Project Leader

When a family becomes homeless, the team makes contact and works with them based on their needs. They are assigned a case manager to help them find a new home and to deal with any issues they may face.



*Niamh Lambe of Focus Ireland outside a mock hotel room the charity set up in Dublin in December 2020 to highlight the issues for families living in emergency accommodation as part of Focus Ireland's Christmas campaign.*

The Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) is funded by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive and public donations. It works with other organisations to ensure the best possible standard of care for families in need.

What makes the team unique among homelessness service providers in Ireland is its multidisciplinary approach.

A case manager works with the family as a whole, while Child Support Workers (CSW) work with the children in homelessness most in need of support. As well as this, Prevention Child Support Workers will help children who recently moved into a new home adjust to their new surroundings and work through any issues they may have.

The typical help the team can offer families will vary day to day: they might work to secure creche or school places for a family forced to move to a new area; they will help families prepare for interviews; they will spend time with children to help them talk through problems they have; and they will liaise with parents and children to support them with anything they need.

For Niamh Lambe, each family is entirely unique, with their own set of needs which the team works to address. All the while, the main goal of the team is to get the family out of homelessness and into their forever home as quickly as possible.

In 2021, the team has moved 430 families - 625 adults and 862 children - out of homeless and into a new home. But as they fight to get families out of homelessness, more families become homeless every week, due to an unstable rental market and ongoing issues with supply of affordable housing in Ireland.

## Child Support

A key part of the Family HAT's work is supporting children who find themselves in homelessness. Homelessness is very hard for any family to go through, but for children it can be a uniquely stressful and difficult time. Ensuring that the child has someone to talk to and to help them with whatever they need, is a key part of the team's mission.

In normal times, CSWs will meet children regularly to go on walks or enjoy activities, or simply be there for a child to talk to when they need it, to help them work through their fears and anxieties in a safe environment. They will also liaise with schools and other social workers to ensure the child is fully supported.

Mandie Leenheer is a child support worker with Focus Ireland. While the job can be very challenging, Mandie sees great reward in how children progress into new homes and out of homelessness.

Mandie was one of the driving forces behind the newly launched Focus Ireland Children's Charter, a framework for the organisation going forward to make sure the child's voice is heard.

**“It's to let children know that we see them. They are also part of this homeless crisis and we want them to know that we are going to listen to you as well. We are going to give you a space to share your views and share your opinions.”**

Mandie Leenheer,  
Child Support Worker

The Charter was created with the input from children in homelessness, and Mandie says it was amazing to see how resilient and hopeful the children were, despite their situation.

For her, seeing children empowered, as well as coming out of homelessness and into homes is the most rewarding part of the job.

**“I had one child who was really suffering with anxiety and I worked with him for quite a while. It was just a lovely space. He even tried to teach me Irish dancing, which I wasn't very good at, but he went on to win awards with his dancing and he's out of homelessness now, which is really great. When you see the children moving into their new homes it's just so beautiful, it makes it all worth it.”**

Mandie Leenheer,  
Child Support Worker

# “Emma’s Story

Emma and her family were homeless for almost a year. Now, Emma and her family are moving on from their experience of homelessness in a safe and secure home of their own.





I was homeless in the middle of the pandemic. I was living with my two children and my partner Paul in one room in an emergency accommodation hotel. We were there for nearly a year. My youngest son has chronic asthma and when we were put in that hotel it became worse and got out of control. He was hospitalised seven times.

And then Covid-19 came. We were terrified that our son would become infected. We had to get out. But we had nowhere else to go. My story is probably one you have heard before, and, to be honest, when our landlord told us he had to sell, I was sure we'd be able to find a new home. We were both working fulltime and had always been able to pay our way. But I had no idea what it's really like.

We spent months searching for a new home; all day, every day. But there was nothing we could afford. When we became homeless, we were put in a hotel outside the city. We were given one room for the four of us.

That's when James's asthma got much worse. My doctor said we had to move him out of the hotel because it was really affecting him. But we had nowhere to go. When the COVID-19 crisis started the hotel was still open, so rumours started to go around about people in the hotel being tested. Then we saw the ambulances arrive and the people in those PPE suits getting out. It was so scary and we were so worried about James.

That's when Adrienne, our Focus Ireland Support Worker, came to our rescue. She and the Focus Ireland family team were just phenomenal. They made sure the hotel had the proper safeguards in place. They even got hand sanitiser put on every floor because we were all using the same lifts. She was always there when I needed her. If we needed food, or advice, or anything, she was there to help. But it's not just the material things. It's the emotional support that's so important. She was such a great help to us.

When you are that alone and scared, having someone like Adrienne supporting you is life-saving.

Then one morning I got a phone call. It was the call we had been waiting for. Our application had been successful. We finally had a home of our own again. We got the keys to our new home but couldn't move in immediately because of the lockdown. But Adrienne and the Focus Ireland team set to work straight away. Because of James's serious illness they were able to help us move in and support us for as long as we needed. And then they helped us transport all our things to our new home.

We were stopped a few times at checkpoints on the way and asked where we were going. I got to say 'we're going home'. You've no idea how good it felt to be able to say that.

I can't describe how fantastic it was to be able to go to sleep in our own bed in our own house. It still feels a bit surreal, to be honest. But I know there are still so many families in the hotel that we were in and in places like it all over the country. I think about them all the time.



*Minister Darragh O'Brien TD, Sr. Stan and Pat Dennigan launch the Focus Ireland Family Centre in Phibsborough, Dublin 7*



# Family Homelessness is No Longer Soley An Issue In Dublin

Over the past five years, Ireland has been faced with an acute housing shortage: there are simply not enough houses or apartments for people to live in. This seemingly simple problem has had a devastating impact on the lives of thousands of families and children, who found themselves homeless because they were priced out of a dysfunctional rental market.

This problem hit Dublin first, but about four years ago every town and city in the country started to see a similar shortage of affordable homes – soon followed by huge increases in homelessness. Focus Ireland works in these areas to support families and help them find homes.

**“We can’t solve the homeless problem unless we build more housing.”**

Kate McGrath, Project Leader

Focus Ireland supports these families in its Childers Road Family Initiative accommodation - which provides 30 self-contained units for homeless families to live in - and also works with families housed in the community.

According to McGrath, across the Mid-West region, Focus works with about 100 families in homelessness at any one time, the majority living in Limerick city.

## Rising numbers

At the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Government introduced rules to prevent families from being evicted. At the same time, Focus Ireland and local authorities redoubled efforts to get families a safe home during the pandemic. The result was a very welcome fall in the number of homeless families right across the country. But there were still



*Kate McGrath, Project Leader, Focus Ireland Limerick*

hundreds of families caught in homeless emergency accommodation right through the pandemic. Family homelessness remains at crisis levels and, with the removal of the Covid tenancy protections, it is rising again.

It is important to remember also that the true number of families in these areas in need of a secure home is actually higher than the figures suggest. In March 2018, the then-Government reclassified a large number of homeless families living in so-called “own door” accommodation (that is, self-contained accommodation, and not, for example, a communal family hub or hotel) as no longer homeless.

These families still have a housing need that is not met, but are no longer classified as homeless in the monthly figures released by the Department of Housing. So, for example, the 30 families that Focus Ireland supports at its Childers Road Initiative are not counted as actually homeless, even though they do not have a home.

An increased supply of social housing is essential if we are to provide sustained exits out of homelessness and prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. The delivery of housing remains a core element of our strategy and is a cornerstone in our work of

challenging homelessness and changing lives. We delivered 724 homes between 2016 and 2020 and currently provide 1200 homes across Ireland. In early 2021, we launched our new organisational strategy which commits to significantly increasing the amount of social housing will provide in the coming years through building, managing and leasing.

## The work being done

Across the country, Focus Ireland works closely with local authorities to assist families who become homeless. In Waterford City, for example, an initiative between the council and Focus Ireland has eliminated the use of B&Bs and hotels for temporarily housing families who present as homeless.

**“We partnered with the local authority to provide housing and tenancy support to families who present as homeless.**

**Primarily the aim from the council’s point-of-view was to eliminate the need for B&Bs, which they did quite quickly. Within six months of their plan, they no longer relied on B&Bs to help house families who are homeless.”**

Edel Leahy, Project Leader

This is an example of a proactive relationship between local councils and a charity like Focus Ireland that can yield real results in the lives of homeless families and children. B&Bs and hotels are highly unsuitable to meet a family’s needs and are a costly form of accommodation for councils to pay for.



*David Niblock, Focus Ireland South-East Manager at the charity’s housing development in Grange Cohan in Waterford which provides housing (in partnership with Waterford City & County Council) for individuals & families who were previously Homeless or at Risk*

In Waterford, Focus Ireland also runs a Tenancy Sustainment Service (TSS), which provides advice and support to keep people in their homes, as well as services to support families who are moving on from homelessness.

## The problems remain

However, in Cork, Waterford and Limerick, as in Dublin, homelessness persists because of one key issue - a lack of suitable and affordable homes.

Both McGrath and Leahy say that moving families out homelessness and into private rental accommodation through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) - a payment made to private landlords - is not a suitable long-term solution, especially when compared with families moving into their own permanent homes.

**“I think that the trauma that people experience having lived in insecure accommodation means that they’re not really able to settle [in HAP tenancies]. In their mindset they’re not in secure accommodation.”**

Edel Leahy, Project Leader

Until an adequate supply of housing becomes available, families across the country will continue to face long-term, damaging homelessness.

**“I think what will solve homelessness is housing, simple as. As I said earlier, we had a massive move on last year with families moving into local authority accommodation... in one way it’s great and it’s great for the families, but why did it take a pandemic for this to happen?”**

Kate McGrath, Project Leader



Focus Ireland Southwest Manager Gerard Spillane echoes Kate's views and believes parts of Cork City have struggled to recover since the economic downturn of the 80s with many families feeling the pain of subsequent recessions. He says due to COVID-19 many parents are again suffering job losses which means every action needs to be taken to ensure we stop the family homeless numbers rising again.

**“While building stalled in 2020 there are still numerous cranes across Cork, but unfortunately it's offices and hotels that are being built as opposed to affordable housing. In addition, the lack of one bed bedroom apartments is also a serious contributor to the number of homeless adults, particularly single people. An offset of the crisis in the city is that many individuals and families are now being forced out of the city, to towns such as Mallow, Midleton and Cobh where rents are also increasing in the county.**

**Families are also extremely nervous about renting and some have experienced a recent 8% rent increase and despite the protections that government have put in place.”**

Gerard Spillane, Southwest Manager

While the crisis may not be as severe in the Northwest, Focus Ireland Sligo have nevertheless been providing crucial services for the past 12 years and are equally committed to ending family homelessness. The team includes tenancy support and sustainment, advice and information service, aftercare, long-term supported accommodation and short-term supported accommodation, which is all crucial in stopping family homelessness.

**“We been working harder than ever in 2020 supporting 446 households in Sligo who are homeless or at risk of losing their home. During the year we have also helped 21 households in Sligo to move out of homelessness with the support of the state and local authorities.”**

Mark Slee, Northwest Project Worker



*Mark Slee, Northwest Project Leader Focus Ireland.*

# Focus Ireland Policy

## Working to End Homelessness

Over the past nine years, thousands of families have become homeless as the result of a dysfunctional private rental market and the lack of an adequate supply of houses. When landlords sell up, or houses become too expensive to rent, families find themselves homeless through no fault of their own. Historically, homelessness services in Ireland were set up with single adults who were homeless in mind.

The huge influx of families into homelessness therefore requires significant changes in approach. Families and single adults become homeless at different times and for varied reasons. For example: the experience of a man who is homeless in his 40s living in an emergency shelter, and a 10-year-old girl homeless and living with her family in a hotel are vastly different. For several years, Focus Ireland have called for a special family homelessness strategy to be put in place to address the crisis. While we welcomed the publication of the Government's housing and homelessness strategy- "Housing For All"- it is lacking in the area of family homelessness. While it does recognise the challenges faced by some families and makes commitments to enhancing prevention and tenancy sustainment supports, there are no specific targets in place to achieve this. We now need to move on from recognising family homelessness as a problem towards developing ambitious targets for ending it.

Families are still becoming homeless and staying in homelessness for far too long. Focus Ireland believes that a dedicated approach is what is needed to help these families. There was a welcome significant drop in the numbers of families homeless year during the pandemic up until July 2021. Focus Ireland has made a key contribution to this, working with the Dublin Region Homeless Executive and local authorities to help a record number of families who were homeless to secure a home.

However, Focus Ireland is deeply concerned that the figures are now heading in the wrong direction and starting to rise again, undoing the major progress that was made last year. In December 2021, there were over 1,000 families and more than 2,500 children in emergency homeless accommodation.

Family homelessness remains at totally unacceptable levels, and we must make sure that the Government genuinely recognises the unique needs of families who are homeless and their children – and includes real measures to address them.

**“A huge part of what makes this crisis different is the fact that there are whole families who are experiencing it, which means there are thousands of children experiencing the trauma of homelessness. This is a societal failure. No child should ever be homeless, and no adult should be either.”**

Tara Gallagher,  
Policy Coordinator





At the development stage of the Housing For All Strategy Focus Ireland made a comprehensive submission outlining key actions it believes should be included in such a strategy. Focus Ireland's submission titled "Towards A Family Homelessness Strategy" outlined a wide range of actions we believe still now need to be delivered.

These include:

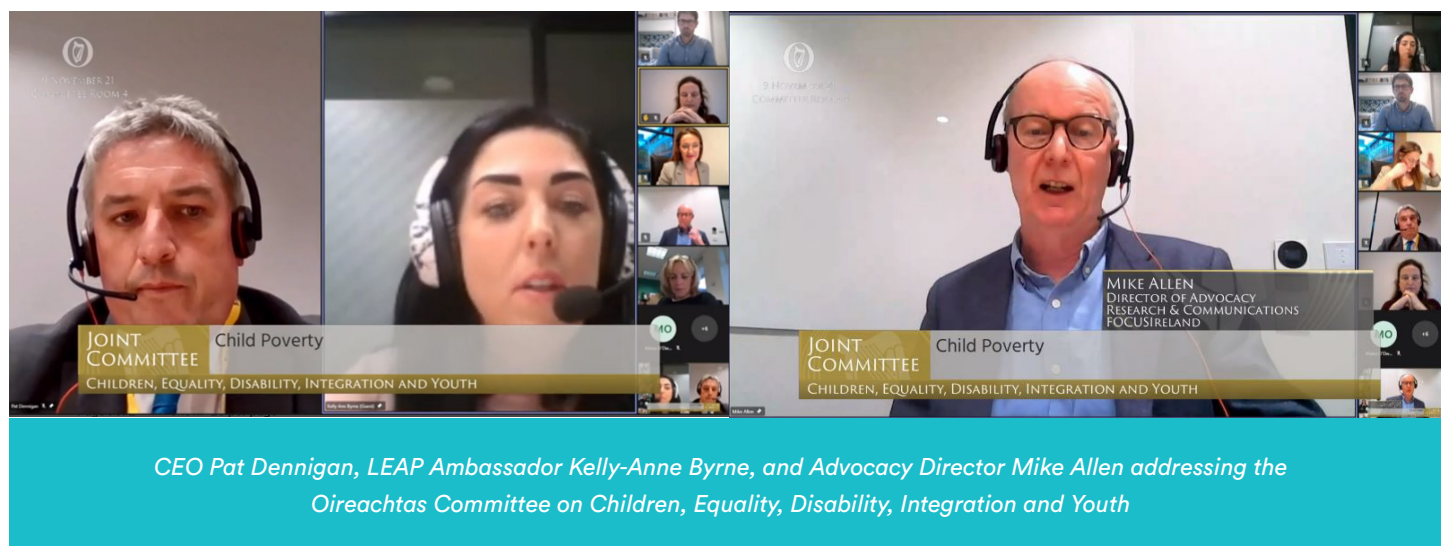
- Help prevent families from becoming homeless.
- Provide intense support for families to exit homelessness and guarantee that no family will spend more than six months in emergency accommodation.
- Ensure every child in a family that is homeless has access to a child support worker.

Meanwhile, Focus Ireland marked UN World Children's Day in November last year by launching a public campaign calling on the Government to prioritise ending child homelessness. We believe that this should be the first step in the Government's

commitment to eradicate homelessness by 2030 as outlined in the Lisbon Declaration. Our campaign to end child homelessness arose from our experience of working with – and listening to – children and their families. We support the government commitment to end homelessness by 2030 and our campaign petition, signed by over 7,000 people and submitted to Government in late April 2022, asks that that as part of this pathway, we start with prioritising child homelessness. No child should ever be homeless and have to worry about how safe and secure their family home is.

Focus Ireland strongly believes that all future policy should also be based on evidence, monitored closely and the outcomes evaluated properly so that they can be improved and built upon.

While it will not solve family homelessness overnight, Focus believes that prioritising ending child homelessness is a crucial step in the right direction and will continue to campaign strongly for a child-centred approach.



# Focus Ireland Research Programme Seeks To Help End Family Homelessness Through Fully Understanding the Crisis

In the early years of Focus Ireland, workers and volunteers at the drop-in coffee shop on Eustace Street noticed a trend among those coming in to use the service: many of them were people who had been previously living in state care and who had become homeless after they turned 18.

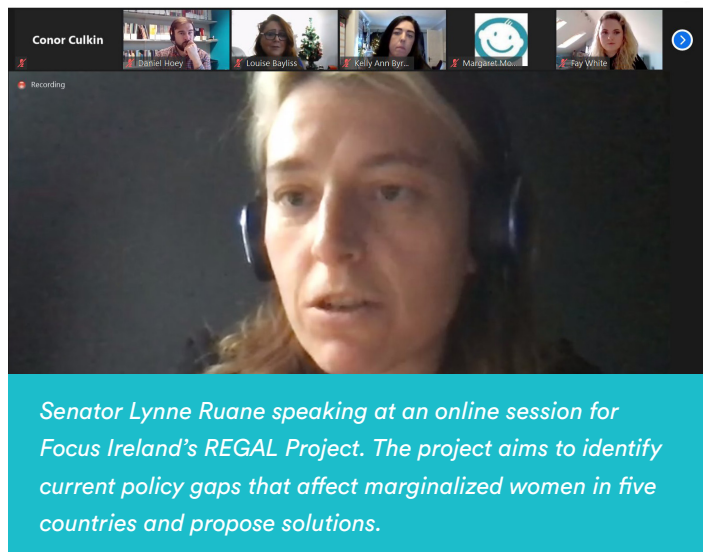
From this on-the-ground experience, Focus Ireland began to formally examine why homelessness was higher among this group of people, and started advocating on their behalf. What followed was years of dedicated research and campaigning that sought to ensure young adults leaving State care were better taken care of.

The work of Focus Ireland eventually led to significant changes in legislation which ensured that people had the right to a care plan and that specific supports would be made available when they left State care. But while the laws were strengthened, the problem still persists.

**“It’s a good example of how interaction between frontline experience, research and campaigning leads to a change which is transformative, but doesn’t solve the problem,”**

Mike Allen, Director of Advocacy

Since the organisation was founded in 1985, Focus Ireland has been committed to this approach. Data-driven research and campaigning complements frontline efforts to alleviate the suffering of people in homelessness, with the overall goal to end the problem long term.



*Senator Lynne Ruane speaking at an online session for Focus Ireland’s REGAL Project. The project aims to identify current policy gaps that affect marginalized women in five countries and propose solutions.*

## Shaping policy

Every year, Focus Ireland publishes numerous research papers into the causes and trends of homelessness in Ireland, and makes detailed submissions to different governmental and non-governmental bodies.

The goal is to help increase the understanding of homelessness and to help to shape proper policy. This research has had lasting positive impacts on the lives of homeless people in the country.

One important, ongoing research initiative is the Insights into Family Homelessness Series which began in 2016. In 2014, the number of families presenting as homeless started to rise significantly. The purpose of the Insights series was to increase understanding around what type of families were becoming homeless and why.

Through a series of interviews with 237 families in total, Focus Ireland was able to identify the main factors that led to people becoming homeless.



**“We were able to show that 68% of the families we spoke to - their last home was in the private rental sector, and 36% of those became homeless due to their landlord leaving the market. You were getting away from that idea of dysfunctional families and people with complex needs, showing that it was more so a systemic, economic issue around the private rental sector.”**

Daniel Hoey, Research Coordinator

This research was important in helping to shape the response to the rising numbers of homeless families and to increase awareness around why families were becoming homeless.

**“This research completely changed the way that we understand who was becoming homeless”**

Mike Allen, Director of Advocacy

As a result, new regulations and laws could be introduced to increase tenancy protection in the private rental sector in order to help families. But Mike Allen stresses that the impact was again “insufficient to deal with the problem”.

## REGAL

Another piece of important research Focus Ireland undertook recently in relation to women in homelessness was the EU-funded REGAL project.

Previously, Focus Ireland’s research has shown how homelessness disproportionately affects women. The most recent numbers show that just under 60% of homeless families surveyed in Dublin were lone-parent families and 95% of those were headed by a mother.

The REGAL project involved five NGOs from different European countries, and sought to identify gaps in EU legislation in relation to women on the margins of society. The research also sought to provide solutions that would reduce the number of working women in poverty.

As part of the study, Focus Ireland led a participatory project with a diverse group of women who had experienced homelessness. A number of focus groups and interviews were held to explore how improved employment opportunities and a better work-life balance could be achieved.

The research identified issues around unaffordable childcare, poor employment opportunities, inaccessible education and a number of other problems, and proposed ways that these could be addressed.

As well as this, the women worked together with professional artist Fiona Whelan to develop the Testing Faith website. Faith is a composite fictional character - a lone parent of three children - who has experienced homelessness.

She shares weekly diary entries on the website [testingfaith.ie](http://testingfaith.ie), and the project gives a powerful insight into the issues faced by women like Faith, many thousands of whom are homeless or dealing with precarious living situations and poverty in Ireland today.

For Daniel Hoey, the REGAL project and Focus Ireland’s research in general is vital in helping us to understand the homelessness crisis and work to end it:

**“It’s about knowledge. It’s understanding the problem and predicting trends. We have the evidence there and we can use it to engage with the government then through policy and through lobbying... and hopefully make a real impact.”**

Daniel Hoey, Research Coordinator



*Bord Gáis Managing Director Dave Kirwan, LEAP Ambassador Kelly-Anne Byrne and CEO Pat Dennigan at Focus Ireland-BGE 5-year partnership launch*

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## Bord Gáis Energy Partnership

Providing therapy classes for a homeless child experiencing anxiety and having nightmares. Funding art classes for a homeless teenager with serious underlying health conditions who has been forced to isolate throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Ensuring children with homelessness with nowhere to play can go to summer camps. Ensuring a child has a school uniform. Preventing thousands of families from ever becoming homeless.

These are just a sample of some of the very real differences Bord Gáis Energy (BGE) has made with its long-term partnership with Focus Ireland over the past six years. BGE has had a direct impact on the lives of thousands of homeless families in that time, supporting parents and children while in homelessness and helping to keep them in their homes.

In February 2022, BGE extended its partnership with Focus Ireland for a further five years, committing an additional €2 million, bringing its total funding to €4.4m since BGE first got involved in 2015.

The close relationship is a perfect example of how a company can give back to society and make a marked

impact on people's lives by working with a charity in a way that is mutually beneficial for both sides. BGE and its employees were able to make a real difference in the lives of homeless families through funding, fundraising, and volunteering efforts.

**“Bord Gais Energy is an inspiring example of making real and lasting change. They are the perfect example of a business making a strategic difference to one of societies biggest issues. We have aligned our values and mission to work to end homelessness in Ireland. Together, we are committed to doing that.”**

Aisling Nolan,  
Head of Partnerships & Philanthropy with  
Focus Ireland

From the start of the partnership in 2015, BGE and Focus Ireland worked together to set clear, achievable goals that work towards the common aim of helping homeless families. At all times, communication has been key, and Focus Ireland keeps our partners fully informed on how their contribution is being spent

**Focus Ireland**

and the difference it is making in the lives of children and parents.

The funding provided by BGE was focused on the key areas of prevention and ensuring sustained exits of families from homelessness. The funding allows us to run a nationwide advice and information service that supports people at risk of losing their homes. BGE also provides funding for a family's basic needs - like travel or the cost of school uniforms - or children's activities. They also fund therapeutic interventions for children and parents dealing with mental health issues.

The partnership has already directly supported over 7,000 families experiencing homelessness or at risk of losing their home. Over the next five years, Bord Gáis Energy and Focus Ireland will assist a further 10,000 families through advice, information and support programmes, and directly prevent 1,000 families from ever entering homelessness. BGE welcomes and is committed to supporting Focus Ireland to ensure that the Government meets its target of ending of homelessness by 2030:

**“We welcome the Government’s recent commitment to end homelessness by 2030 and we’re committed to supporting this important goal. Every child needs a safe place they can call home, and we will work with Focus Ireland to do everything we can to make that happen.”**

Dave Kirwan,  
Managing Director, Bord Gáis Energy

While hugely significant, the financial support from BGE is only one aspect of the support they provide. For almost six years now, employees from across the company have dedicated their time to raising vital funds for the fight against homelessness. From charity cycles to activity days for children, employees have always stepped forward to help when it was needed.

BGE also took over sponsoring the annual Shine a Light Sleep-out in 2019 bringing their support to Focus Ireland to another level and ensuring we can raise more funds and awareness.

Every year, BGE employees kindly dedicate their time to dress up as elves and help children and parents enjoy the magic of Christmas at our annual Croke Park Christmas Party.

**“Our work together, supporting families and preventing homelessness has changed thousands of lives, and as we move into this new phase, we will help thousands more. The support from Bord Gáis Energy is not just financial; they have embedded their organisation into ours, helping us with skills sharing, engagement with staff, and advocacy work. They are fantastic partners, and we look forward to working with them for the years ahead.”**

Pat Dennigan,  
CEO with Focus Ireland

As part of the renewed five-year partnership agreement, BGE will also sponsor Focus Ireland unique Lived Experience Ambassador Programme (LEAP), which will enable people who have lived experience of homelessness to share their stories and help raise awareness of the issues they have faced.

This innovative model, the first of its kind in Ireland, will bring the voices of those who have experienced homelessness to the fore, and empower, support, and uplift them in making their voice and their lived experience heard.

The partnership between Focus Ireland and BGE shows how a committed company with a strong community programme can make a huge difference in people's lives and how employees at all levels of the company can contribute towards helping those in need in a meaningful way.

**Focus Ireland**



# How A Multi-disciplinary Team Approach Helps Vulnerable Families Who Are Homeless

When the Covid-19 pandemic first struck Ireland in 2020, those working in homelessness services had to scramble to quickly adapt to a new, volatile situation.

Day centres were closed, in-person appointments were cancelled, and emergency accommodation had to be adapted to ensure the virus didn't spread out of control among families and individuals who were homeless.

As well as this, Focus Ireland and other groups worked together to ensure the most vulnerable people in services were protected. A shielding unit was set up by Focus Ireland for some of the most high-risk people who were homeless, many of whom would have found it difficult to hold down accommodation placements in the past.

Those most at risk were moved to self-contained apartments and given integrated health, accommodation and addiction management supports. This approach turned out to have more benefits than simply protecting people from Covid-19.

Focus Ireland believes that this multi-disciplinary, integrated approach to care can be an effective way to help the most vulnerable people using homeless services, including families, and should be a key part of government strategy going forward.



*Ciara Carty, Director of Services, Focus Ireland.*

**“What we found as an indirect benefit of that really intensive and flexible support for the customers was that they stayed in the placement. Customers who previously couldn't sustain a placement in accommodation, they actually stayed and I think that's down to the effects of that integrated support.”**

Ciara Carty  
Director of Services, Focus Ireland

## A multi-disciplinary team

While the majority of families become homeless as a result of a dysfunctional private rental market, Focus Ireland has identified a significant cohort of families (estimated at about 10-20%) with additional complex needs that require specific extra support.

They could be dealing with mental health difficulties, addiction issues, child welfare problems, past difficulties sustaining tenancies, and money and home management concerns, among others.

A multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach to helping these families would involve specific clinical and specialised supports that could help them exit homelessness and that would greatly improve their livelihoods.

**“A multi-disciplinary team with a number of people involved would respond to both medical and social needs. So that includes mental health, addiction and local support in terms of addressing children’s issues.”**

Dr Austin O’Carroll,  
GP based in Dublin’s north inner city

Dr O’Carroll is the clinical lead for the homeless population in Dublin during the Covid-19 crisis and a founder of Safetynet Ireland, a medical charity that provides primary care to those marginalised in society. He is also a co-founder of GMQ, a service that provides free GP care to the homeless population of Dublin, and is a strong advocate for an MDT approach to tackling homelessness.

While Safetynet and other services provide an MDT approach for assisting vulnerable homeless adults, there is “nothing being offered for families on a similar level”, says Dr O’Carroll.

The majority of families who are homeless will attend their GPs, but a small cohort will not, and the mental and physical health of children and adults will suffer as a result.

## In practice

Currently, Focus Ireland works with families on a case management basis, with specialised child support workers available where funding permits.

An MDT approach would involve a primary care team, comprising GPs, psychologists, child support workers and social workers that could be deployed. It would have a Housing First ethos, providing wrap-around support to families in need.

Different organisations would work together to ensure a continuum of care for the families who need it the most, ensuring that the therapeutic support of children is a key component.

Focus Ireland would like to see this approach adopted throughout the country where required, with bespoke MDT teams available to be deployed wherever needed. But, initially, a pilot scheme could show the benefits to such an approach.



Dr Austin O’Carroll, GP based in Dublin’s north inner city

**We want to create a strong argument for the need and we have some really good clinical practitioners guiding us on the way and making sure whatever we do is relevant and we don't stay too fixed with one notion.**

Ciara Carty  
Director of Services, Focus Ireland

Focus Ireland currently has an invitation out to tender for a wide-ranging feasibility study on what an MDT approach might look like, how it might help support families who are homeless, and how it will compare to current approaches to helping families most in need.

With the results of the research as a guide, the next step will be seeking funding and a way to implement the MDT approach in homelessness services.

For Dr. Austin O'Carroll, the right way forward is obvious:

**“It's the right thing to do because there is a need for it. But also it's a cost effective thing because there will be children that end up in care, or children that will end up sicker because the interventions aren't available.**

**So prevention is much better than cure in terms of cost, and that's where the team would really help.”**

Dr Austin O'Carroll,  
GP based in Dublin's north inner city