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# Insights into Family Homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023

Challenging  
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This study builds on previous research conducted by Focus Ireland on the causes of family homelessness. This report and all previous publications are available through Focus Ireland's Insights into Family Homelessness Series which can be found at <https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/research/>

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# Preface

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Focus Ireland has been contributing to our understanding of family homelessness for over 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, we have published the ‘Insights into Family Homelessness’ series, which has tracked the growth and persistence of the current family homelessness crisis.

The research approach is a mix of quantitative and qualitative strands, administering a questionnaire with a relatively small sample of families and looking to capture demographic and housing information while also examining in some depth experiences before becoming homeless to better understand the issues which brought them to a point where they entered the homeless system. In more recent years our understanding of homelessness has been broadened by the publication of quantitative reports and research by The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Dublin Region Homeless Authority, such as new families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, years 2020–2023.<sup>2</sup>

The qualitative strand of research augments and deepens the quantitative work, helps us understand the pathways and out of homelessness and, crucially, bring the voice of the parent experiencing homelessness into the discussion.

This ‘trajectories into homelessness’ approach has revealed a number of important features of family homelessness in Ireland which are now recognised by all informed policy makers: our understanding that families frequently move through a number of insecure arrangements after losing a secure home and before entering the homeless system; the recognition that the largest single driver of family homelessness is ‘no-fault’ evictions from previously secure private tenancies; the growing number of landlords evicting tenants in order to sell their properties; the growth in domestic violence as a cause of homelessness; and the specific problems faced by lone parent families, have all emerged from this small sample, attentive research strand.

At the centre of Focus Ireland’s research is an understanding that homelessness is wrong and that the solution to homelessness is a secure, affordable home. For this reason, our research has given much less attention to the negative experiences in homelessness and the condition of homeless accommodation. We recognise that living in emergency homeless accommodation inevitably involves a loss of things which we all take for granted in our home. Some of these losses are tangible, such as reduced space, loss of privacy, limited access to cooking facilities etc. Some of the losses are less tangible: erosion of parental roles, insecurity, negative emotional states. We have taken the view that we do not need more research to tell us that being homeless is a harmful thing, and have concentrated on understanding how we can prevent and end it. Another way of saying this is that the mission of Focus Ireland is to end homelessness not to have better homelessness.

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1 Moore, J. (1994) *B&B in focus: the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless adult in Dublin*. Focus Ireland

2 Maphosa, P. (2024) *New families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, 2020–2023*. DRHE

In this research we set out to better understand the experience of families who became homeless in the aftermath of the Covid epidemic. During six of the months covered, the Government had put in place the second, post-covid no fault 'eviction ban'. We decided to include some additional questions about experiences in homeless accommodation and experiences in trying – and in some cases succeeding – in exiting homelessness.

What emerged from the interviews with families in this round of research included a much more negative experience of emergency homeless accommodation than we had expected. We recognise the danger that the negativity of these experiences could direct attention away from other aspects of the report which have more to say about solutions to the problem. But to omit or underplay these negative experiences would be to misrepresent the voices that contributed to the report. It is also important to recognise that the experiences reported here should not be seen narrowly as 'criticisms of the DRHE' but rather as feedback to all those involved in responding to family homelessness, including Focus Ireland itself, which provides support to a large number of homeless families on behalf of the DRHE. It is for this reason that the report includes a section where we invited our own family team staff to reflect on the initial findings, as the first step in exploring the implications of these findings for our own practice.

In this context, it is important to recognise that these families became homeless during a period in which homelessness increases at an almost unprecedented rate. While the first 'eviction ban' was put in place as a public health measure, the second ban (October 2022 to March 2023) arose due to a concern about rapid increases in family homelessness with the lifting Covid restrictions. A shocking 1,134 families were assessed as homeless during this period, so it is important to recognise the considerable achievement of the Dublin Local Authorities and DRHE in obtaining shelter for this sudden increase of families who had lost their homes.

This report reflects a homeless system under enormous stress, working within a social care system which is also profoundly overstretched. This is in no way to accept the negative conditions that some families reported, but rather to point out that the homeless system, including both the local authorities and the NGOs, are responding to the consequences of decisions at national policy level.

The recommendations about standards in emergency accommodation are important, but the findings of this research should not drive us towards a 'better homeless system' but to a better housing system, where effective and consistent Government policy ensures that no families are thrown into housing crisis.

Finally, it is important to recognise that in listening to the voices of families who have become homeless, we inevitably do not hear the experiences of families who were on the verge of homelessness but whose homelessness was averted by prevention measures such as the long-standing rapid-rehousing schemes operated by DRHE or by the 'Tenant in Situ' scheme introduced by the Government as a 'safety-net' measure on lifting the second eviction ban. The fact that these prevention systems did not work for the families in this report must not lead to a conclusion that 'prevention does not work' but rather to explore why increasingly effective prevention systems did not work for these particular families and how they can be improved.

**Mike Allen** · Director of Advocacy

# Summary of key findings

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This research, which is part of Focus Ireland’s Insights into Family Homelessness series, provides a snapshot of the experiences of homelessness for 52 families that became homeless and entered emergency accommodation between August 2022 and November 2023 in Dublin. During the period of October 2022 to March 2023 there was a Government moratorium on no-fault eviction. The 52 families who participated provide important insights into the experiences of families becoming homeless during this period and their efforts to move back into secure homes.

It is important to note that this report is a qualitative study of the families that participated and should not be read as representative of the 1,134 families that became homeless in Dublin during that period. It is also important to note that this report records the experiences of the families from their perspective.

Where families report poor facilities or harsh treatment by staff in services, we have not sought to identify the service or sought to get the perspective of the provider. However, in response to these findings, a consultation session was organised with fifteen members of staff from the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) to obtain their feedback on the findings and to try and develop a set of recommendations to address any shared issues of concern. Staff comprised of a mixture of senior management, team leaders, case managers and child support workers. Their experiences have been included in a separate chapter in this report.

## Participant profile and routes into homelessness

### Single mothers are most vulnerable to becoming homelessness

The majority of those who participated in the study were single mothers (56%). This is similar to previous findings in this research series.<sup>3</sup> Notably, official figures from the DRHE recorded 93% of lone parent households that became homeless during the period 2020–2023 were female-headed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Long, A. E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L., and Hoey, D. (2019). Family homelessness in Dublin: causes, housing histories, and finding a home. Focus Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Maphosa, P. (2024) New families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, 2020–2023. DRHE

## Many participants had stable housing histories, and landlord selling property was the main reason for losing their home

Nearly half (45%; n=23) of participants had histories of ‘stable’<sup>5</sup> accommodation in the private rental sector prior to becoming homeless. Participants also reported the main reason they became homeless was due to receiving a Notice of Termination (NoT) from their landlord because they were selling the property (31%, n=16). This is consistent with previous studies in this research series and official figures from the DRHE.<sup>6</sup> Almost all participants (88%, n=46) reported that it was their first-time experiencing homelessness.

## Domestic violence was a significant cause of homelessness

15% (n=8) of participants reported that domestic violence was the cause of their family’s homelessness. This was higher than in earlier reports in the series (5%)<sup>7</sup> but marginally lower than DRHE data for 2023 (18%).<sup>8</sup> This data points to the intertwined nature of women’s homelessness and domestic violence. A case study in section 4 of the report sets out the experience of domestic violence and homelessness for one participant.

## Many participants were in employment

One of the most striking findings of the report is the high number of participants (42%, n=22) who were in full time or part-time work while homeless. This finding is a significant shift from earlier studies in this research series where the number of people employed and homeless was low, but echoes data from the Housing Needs Assessment which showed that around 25% of all homeless adults were in full or part-time employment in 2023.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, some unemployed participants indicated that they had to give up employment before becoming homeless due to the challenges of getting to work and getting children to school. This sentiment was echoed by staff who explained that lone parents in particular were at risk of losing their employment while in emergency accommodation.

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5 Long-term tenancies of between 2–13 years

6 Maphosa, P. (2024) New families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, 2020–2023. DRHE

7 Long, A. E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L., and Hoey, D. (2019). Family homelessness in Dublin: causes, housing histories, and finding a home. Focus Ireland.

8 Maphosa, P. (2024) New families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, 2020–2023. DRHE

9 Summary of Social Housing Needs Assessment 2023, Housing Agency, Dublin

## **Almost all participants sought help, and some experienced significant barriers and delays**

Most participants (87%, n=45) sought advice and support when they knew their home was at risk. Non-Irish parents were less likely to be aware of the supports available. Despite this, participants found that available support did not prevent their homelessness but rather only delayed it. Some participants (21%, n=11) reported experiencing administrative barriers and delays in getting access to emergency accommodation for their families.

## **Landlord hostility and flouting of laws**

A key theme arising from the research was hostility from landlords towards tenants, mostly after a notice of termination had been issued. Nearly half of participants with experience of renting in the PRS (n=29) reported incidents of aggression and, in some instances, intimidation towards themselves and their families. Participants also reported instances of illegal evictions, invalid notices of eviction, raising rents above the legal limit, disagreements over property conditions, missing furnishings, and challenges in reclaiming deposits. Legal actions, such as filing cases with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB), were also mentioned.

## **Experiences while homeless**

### **Substandard living conditions in emergency accommodation**

Almost one-third of participants (n=17) reported serious concerns about the quality of the emergency accommodation provided to them including cramped living conditions and a lack of privacy and safety. They also reported unsanitary conditions for children, as well as discriminatory and demeaning treatment from some staff. A similar amount of participants raised issues concerning food provision and nutrition. These ranged from lack of provision for culturally appropriate food, the quality of the food provided and the difficulty of cooking food for themselves.

### **Lack of provision made for children with additional needs in emergency accommodation**

Four participants reported having children with disabilities or illnesses that left them vulnerable to infection. These participants did not feel that any assessment had been made of their children's needs and that conditions in emergency accommodation were not suitable. This was a sentiment which was also echoed by FHAT staff who shared concerns that the additional needs of families with disabilities was not considered in emergency accommodation.

## **Profound mental health impact of homelessness**

The emotional impact that homelessness is having on families and their children was a concern raised by over a quarter of participants (n=14). Depressive episodes, anxiety and increased stress levels were all mentioned by participants when discussing their experiences of entering and trying to exit emergency accommodation. Four participants spoke about behavioural changes and developmental issues with their children as a result of homelessness.

## **Routes out of homelessness**

### **Discrimination and competition in the private rented sector**

Three quarters of participants (n=39) were actively looking for homes to rent in the private rental sector, with the support of HAP (Housing Assistance Payment). A similar figure is reported in previous studies in this research series. As in those earlier studies, participants looking for a home with HAP reported huge frustration due to the severe shortage of affordable rental properties coupled with perceived prejudice from landlords and letting agents because of being a HAP recipient and in some cases a lone parent.

## **Staff consultation**

### **Staff frustrations with emergency accommodation providers, HAP, and supports for vulnerable groups**

A consultation with staff highlighted three main themes: the lack of standardised policies and procedures in emergency accommodation, problems and limitations associated with HAP as a pathway out of homelessness, as well as specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups, in particular lone parents and families with additional needs. Staff emphasised a need for improved standardised support structures to address the complex realities that these families encounter, particularly regarding issues of discrimination and services for children with additional needs. Staff also corroborated the findings regarding the trauma of homelessness on families and the importance of targeted supports to meet their unique circumstances.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed by Focus Ireland in response to the findings from the report, aiming to highlight the specific changes that would improve the quality and responsiveness of services provided to homeless families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. These recommendations are put forward with a clear understanding of the challenges facing local authorities in the face of persistently rising family homelessness. It is also recognised that some of the changes proposed may already be formal policy of the DRHE, nevertheless we have included these points as it is an important finding that these formal policy positions are not evident or experienced by the research participants.

They need to be seen in the context of the need for wider solutions at national level – a speeding up of social housing delivery, better legislative protection of tenants in the private rental sector, provision of adequate resources to local authorities, and greater collaboration with other agencies such as the HSE and Tusla.

The recommendations are set out under three key categories for families: Homeless Prevention, Homeless Emergency Accommodation, and Homeless Exits:

### Homeless Prevention for Families

- The Government should convene a cross-Departmental and cross-sectoral working group to tackle the specific issues facing lone parents that result in their overrepresentation in homelessness and persistent disadvantage in Ireland's housing system.<sup>10</sup>
- Now that the Cuan agency has been established, the Department of Justice and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should revisit the recommendations from Focus Ireland's research examining the intersection of domestic violence and family homelessness<sup>11</sup>. The implementation of these recommendations would improve service integration and responses across the domestic violence, homeless, and housing sectors to protect vulnerable families becoming homeless because of DV.
- The RTB should consider the findings in this report pertaining to the conduct of landlords and the protection of vulnerable families in the PRS with a view to tackling capacity constraints as set out in the Focus Ireland Submission to the Review of the Private Rented Sector.<sup>12</sup>
- Government should provide a specific, adequate funding line to allow the DRHE and other local authorities to expand and invest in translation services to assist families who do not speak English to navigate housing and homelessness services.

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10 Russell, H., Privalko, I., McGinnity, F., & Enright, S. (2021). Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland. Economic and Social Research Institute.

11 Mayock, P. & Neary, F. (2021) Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness. Dublin: Focus Ireland & The Housing Agency.

12 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Focus-Irelands-Submission-to-the-Review-of-the-Private-Rented-Sector.pdf>

## Homeless Emergency Accommodation for Families

- The DRHE should further expand and continue its commitment to Trauma Informed service by ensuring all forms of emergency accommodation for families adopts a trauma-informed approach. This means all staff, including staff in private providers, should be trained to better understand and respond to the traumatic experience of homelessness for families.
- The DRHE should review the operation of complaints procedures in the light of the findings of this report to ensure that they are transparent and that there are no perceptions that unfair repercussions will arise from making a complaint. Procedures in relation to warnings, transfers and the challenges facing children with additional needs should be clear and fair.
- Given the vulnerability of homeless families, a reactive complaint process is likely to have only limited impact and should be underpinned by regular, unscheduled inspections of emergency accommodations to ensure they are compliant with standards and protect families from substandard living conditions in emergency accommodation.
- In the absence of national guidelines, all local authorities should adopt a ‘best interests of the child’ assessment when families present as homeless. This would involve a needs or risk assessment to inform the selection of suitable emergency accommodation for families where the needs of the child are supported.
- Where emergency accommodation providers are unable to provide adequate and sanitary cooking facilities for families, they should ensure the provision of appropriate food for families from different cultural or religious backgrounds.
- The DRHE should commission research to investigate the prevalence of employed parents in emergency accommodation and the challenges facing them in retaining their jobs. Arising from this a set of guidelines to assist working parents who are homeless should be developed, bringing rules in emergency accommodation into line with Tusla guidelines for all other families.
- While recognising the challenges in providing sufficient emergency accommodation, Local Authorities should adopt a policy of providing accommodation for homeless families as close to their support networks as possible. Priority should be given to lone parents and families who have children with additional needs, as they are the families most vulnerable and in need to be near these networks.
- The DRHE should make it a contractual condition that all staff employed by emergency accommodation providers should have undergone training to overcome cultural and religious bias.

## Homeless Exits for Families

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, along with Local Authorities should seek to widen the range of housing options available to long term homeless families beyond Homeless HAP, particularly through ring-fencing a portion of social housing allocations, an enhanced and targeted RAS programme and adoption of best practice in the use of choice-based letting.
- The maximum rental threshold for HAP properties should be increased to larger families to make it possible for them to find affordable accommodation.

# 1 Introduction



This research documents the experiences of homelessness for 52 families that entered emergency accommodation between August 2022 and November 2023 in Dublin. It seeks to inform Focus Ireland in preventing homelessness and supporting families to exit homelessness swiftly. The evidence gathered also seeks to inform the wider debate on family homelessness and contribute to identifying effective solutions to a worsening social problem. The research builds on and confirms several findings from previous Focus Ireland studies of family homelessness, published through the Focus Ireland Insights into Family Homelessness series.

While earlier studies concentrated on the reasons that families became homeless, this report explores in more depth families experiences of losing their homes, of entering and living in homeless services and trying to find a new home.

The first section outlines the methodology used. This has developed from earlier studies, recognising that it is no longer possible to attempt to interview all families who enter homelessness each month because of the way in which services are now configured. Instead, it aimed to interview the maximum number of families entering homelessness over a 16-month period, contacting them through the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) and other service providers in the Dublin Homeless Network. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive were also supportive in contacting participating families.

The report is a description of the experiences of the 52 families who became homeless during the sixteen months of the study and who took part, it should not be read as representative of the 1,134 families that became homeless over the period. While no effort was made to selectively recruit families, inevitably families who left homelessness quickly, who are reluctant to have their view reported or are otherwise more difficult to reach will be underrepresented. It is possible to make a case that families who have complaints about their circumstances are likely to be overrepresented, equally a case could be made that they are less likely to come forward and so are underrepresented. The report simply gives voice to the marginalised families that took part, and the detailed reporting of the experiences they chose to share, rather than any claim to representativity, is the basis on which they should be valued.

It is also important to note that, while many recipients reported both effectiveness and deficiencies in services they encountered, we have made no attempt to identify the services involved or to seek their perspective on the shortcomings (or achievements) reported. However, feedback was sought from staff members of the FHAT, to clarify findings which may reflect their own experiences working with homeless families, as well as to help develop a set of recommendations for any shared areas of concern. To do this, a consultation session took place with fifteen members of FHAT, which included senior management, team leaders, case managers and child support workers. The key themes identified during this discussion from this session is included in the findings section of this report.

Following a chapter on the methodology employed in the study, the findings are grouped into five parts:

- Participant profile including last stable home and reasons for homelessness
- Experiences during the process of becoming homeless
- Experiences in first engaging with the homeless system
- Experiences in emergency homeless accommodation
- Experiences of looking for a new home
- Experiences of staff working with homeless families

The report then includes two case studies of families that participated in the research, one from a family fleeing domestic violence and one which is categorised as a 'vulnerable migrant family' in our typology (see Appendix C for further details). The report concludes with a discussion of the findings and a set of recommendations. An Appendix includes further details on participant demographics, housing histories and typologies, HAP engagement, and help-seeking.

# 2 Methodology

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## 2.1 Survey design

The study used a mixed methods approach, employing an adaptation of the telephone questionnaire used in Focus Ireland’s ‘Insights into Family Homelessness’ research series. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions and incorporated both closed and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire explored the following areas;

- Current type of accommodation
- Tenancy type and duration of stay in last four accommodations (if applicable) – including main reasons for leaving each accommodation.
- Information on help-seeking prior to homelessness.
- Length of time in emergency accommodation (EA)
- Views on supports provided in EA
- Experiences of looking for accommodation, specifically, with regards to HAP;

The questionnaire was administered by two members of the Focus Ireland research team via telephone calls or in-person in the Focus Ireland Head Office if the participant requested this. The calls and interviews lasted between 30–60 minutes depending on the amount of information shared by the participant.

## 2.2 Sample and recruitment strategy

A total of 52 questionnaires with parents of families who have experienced homelessness were completed. Among these, only six families had successfully transitioned out of homelessness and were residing in either social housing or HAP accommodation at time of contact (see table 1 below).

**Table 1: Participants accommodation at time of contact**

<b>Current accommodation</b>	<b>(n)</b>	<b>%</b>
Hotel/Hub/EA	46	88%
HAP property	4	9%
Social housing	2	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

The initial recruitment strategy encouraged families to independently initiate contact with the Focus Ireland research team via information sheets and posters circulated by Focus Ireland and several other homeless service providers who agreed to support the study. Because of the low response rate experienced with this approach (n=12), recruitment stalled for a period and reverted to a proven approach whereby consents to participate in the research were collected solely by Focus Ireland’s Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT). Importantly, the collection of consents, including contact details, allowed Focus Ireland researchers to make first contact with families, explain the research, and schedule suitable times to complete the questionnaire. This approach proved more successful, and a total of 52 questionnaires were completed.

## 2.3 Staff consultation

The Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) is the service which provides case management support for families in emergency accommodation on the basis of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Dublin Region Homeless Executive. A consultation with staff in the FHAT took place in August 2024 to allow staff to respond to the key findings from the research. Fifteen members of the FHAT team attended, including a manager, two team leaders, four child support workers and eight case managers. The consultation began with a short presentation which outlined the key findings from the research with families. Staff were then asked to reflect on these findings and discuss if they aligned with their own experiences. Staff were also asked to consider any issues that were not discussed by families in the research. Finally, staff were asked to suggest recommendations which they thought may help improve service provision for their families or address any of the problems identified.

## **2.4 Data collection and analysis**

Data was recorded manually by note taking during the telephone calls with parents. A €30 Dunnes Stores gift card was distributed to each parent. Data was recorded in a digital version of the questionnaire and saved to a database. This data was entered to Excel for categorisation and thematic analysis. The consultation with staff was recorded using a dictaphone and analysed thematically.

## **2.5 Ethical considerations**

Focus Ireland's Data Protection and Customer Confidentiality policies, as well as Focus Ireland's Ethical Guidelines for Conducting Research, were adhered to throughout the study. Verbal consent from parents/caregivers was obtained by FHAT before the research team contacted individuals. Consent was sought again at the start of each call once the researcher had outlined to participants the voluntary nature of the study, its purpose, as well as of their right to anonymity, confidentiality, and withdrawal from the study whenever they wished.

## **2.6 Limitations**

As mentioned, a total of 52 questionnaires were completed. This is a small sample size which means the findings cannot be generalised to the wider family homeless population. Nonetheless, the collected qualitative data allows for an in-depth analysis of the circumstances and trajectories of families who have experienced homelessness. Also, as noted previously, the calls and in-person interviews were not recorded, rather detailed notes were taken by hand by the researchers. This limits the research in that some notes were paraphrased.

# 3 Research findings

## 3.1 Profile of Participants

### Key demographic information

The majority of those who participated in the study were women, representing 73% (n=38) of the total sample, while men accounted for 27% (n=14). The largest age group were individuals aged 25-34 (n=23, 44%) and 35-44 (n=19, 37%).

The majority of participants were single (n=31, 60%), with only one child (n=20, 39%) aged between 1–10 years old (both n=31, 31%), suggesting that the majority of the sample are single mothers with small families and young children. In terms of country of origin, 42% (n=22) reported non-EU nations (Nigeria, Panama, Pakistan & Syria), followed by Irish (n=21, 40%) and 17% (n=9) from the EU. The majority of participants identified as white Irish (n=22, 42%), followed by those from African or any other white background (both n=8, 15%).

With regards to employment status, the largest group in the sample were those in full or part-time employment (n=22, 42%), followed by those who were unemployed (n=14, 32%). However, it should also be noted that during conversations with participants, some mentioned that they had to leave employment due to their homelessness status. Some reasons for this centred around the distance needed to travel from their homeless accommodation to either their children's school, family members houses, or the location of their job. The full demographic breakdown can be found in the Appendix.

### Last stable home and reasons for homelessness

The first section of the questionnaire asked participants about their housing history before entering emergency accommodation. Questions sought information on last four accommodations before entering emergency accommodation. Participants were asked the tenure type of the property, the duration of their stay, the main reasons for leaving the accommodation, as well as details about financial housing assistance e.g. Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or rent supplement. A full breakdown of this can be found in the Appendix.

Almost all participants (n=46, 88%) reported that it was their first-time experiencing homelessness. In terms of their last stable home, over half (n=29, 55%) had been living in accommodation in the private rental sector (PRS) before entering homelessness.

The primary reasons for family homelessness are due to the landlord selling the property (n=16, 31%), overcrowding (n=9, 17%) and domestic violence (n=8, 15%). Notably, in cases attributing homelessness to overcrowding, a significant portion of families (n=5) noted the arrival of additional family member(s) to Ireland as the cause.

As per previous research reports in the Insights into Family Homelessness series, participants were categorised into different groups which reflected their housing trajectories (E.g. ‘Stable’, ‘Precarious’, ‘Vulnerable Migrant’, etc.). Most participants were categorised as ‘Stable’ (44%, n=24), meaning they generally had a lengthy and stable housing history in the private rented sector before entering homeless services. Another significant category was ‘Vulnerable Migrant’ (19%, n=10). These families moved to Ireland for employment and became homeless due to temporary accommodation arrangements ending. Further details about all categories can be found in the Appendix.

## 3.2 Experiences during the process of becoming homeless

### Evictions from the private rental sector

Participants whose last stable home was in the private rental sector were asked a follow-up question about their experiences with their landlord once they received their notice of termination (NOT). One of the main themes which came up for participants was hostility with their landlord upon receiving their NOT. Some participants discussed situations where landlords rushed them to vacate, with one already having someone lined up to move into the property, resulting in the participant having to pay for the new tenant to stay in a hotel over the weekend before they moved out. These participants shared a similar experience in how their landlord was initially pleasant but when it became clear they could not move out by the desired date due to challenges finding alternative accommodation the landlord became aggressive and, in some instances, aggressive towards them and their family.

“Initially, he (the landlord) was nice about the eviction, but over time, he became more aggressive and threatening. He threatened me and my family, saying if we didn’t leave by a certain period, he would throw out our belongings.” **Participant 2**

“He was quite nice, but once the notice was given, everything was rushed. He regularly asked, ‘Are you going? Are you going?’” **Participant 10**

“He said (the landlord) he would send around ‘the lads’ in March to make me get out.” **Participant 29**

One participant talked about feeling ‘betrayed’ as she considered the landlord and his wife as friends, since they had lived next door to the tenant for thirteen years. They spoke about the landlord overstepping boundaries and refusing to have things replaced so they would move out quicker:

“We were friends, and I never wanted to put myself at risk, classified them as friends. However, after handing me the notice, his attitude kind of shifted. He was intimidating in the last months, the shower broke, and it took him ages to get it fixed, leaving me with no shower. He would call down whenever he wanted before I left, making me feel awkward. He just let myself in and didn’t bother to ask.”

**Participant 30**

Experiences of landlords not doing what was legally required of them was another theme. One participant was delayed in being able to access help due to their landlord not registering the property with the RTB the previous year, despite receiving rent, so they could not write them a formal letter for the dates they were in the property:

“I was back and forth with the RTB and the council regarding getting the correct letter from the landlord which he said he could not give me due to not being registered for the previous year plus the fact that I was not on the contract... The landlord seemed to get a bit frustrated and angry in the end and just wanted us out.”

**Participant 45**

Participants also reported instances of illegal evictions, invalid notices of eviction, raising rents above the legal limit, disagreements with landlords over property conditions, missing furnishings, and challenges in reclaiming deposits. Legal actions, such as filing cases with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB), were also mentioned:

“We lived there for 2 years and the landlord gave us one month. I knew we were entitled to 6 months. I told him we knew our rights and were entitled to longer. He said ‘no’ and that he was being nice giving one month.”

**Participant 20**

“The day I came home from the hospital there was an eviction notice taped to my front door. He had a ‘for sale’ sign up the whole time I lived there. I sent the NOT to Threshold to check and it was illegal. A social care worker with RTB started a legal case against the landlord for me but I decided to leave the accommodation anyway cause I no longer felt safe. The case was dropped once I left.”

**Participant 19**

“He (the landlord) told me it was a furnished property but when I got there, there was no microwave, no oven, no curtains. He argued and said it was furnished and didn’t want to help provide any of these furnishings... When we received the eviction notice and left we couldn’t take any of the possessions we bought as we had nowhere to store them. The landlord wouldn’t give back our deposit because we left our belongings there. I filed a case with the RTB and I’m waiting for a response.” **Participant 23**

For some who had taken legal action against their landlords, although it delayed their eviction, it did not stop their landlord from harassing them to vacate the property. For one participant, despite winning her case related to illegally increasing the level of rent, the landlord continued to put pressure on her to pay an increase rent:

“I won the case but the landlord was continuing to put pressure on to raise the rent. Then once eviction ban was lifted he issued NOT on the basis he was going to sell the property. He gave maximum notice but he made things difficult and was harassing.” **Participant 50**

### 3.3 Experiences in first engaging with the homeless system

#### Help seeking and supports

Of the 52 participants, almost all contacted at least one service before they lost their home, with most of them contacting multiple services. Focus Ireland and Dublin City Council were the most contacted services. A list of all the organisations mentioned by participants can be seen in table 15 in the Appendix. Seven participants stated they did not contact anyone for support before they were made homeless, this was primarily due to a lack of awareness around what help or supports were available to them, for some this was because they were new to the country and were unfamiliar with the supports available:

“...The government (in home country) doesn’t support you like they do in Ireland. So when I came here I didn’t know of or expect help.” **Participant 20**

“Where am I going? We don’t have any place, we are new here so I don’t know any place here. My children were crying so I said ‘don’t cry.’” **Participant 40**

Two of those participants stated they did not know about available supports until they had entered emergency accommodation. One participant also noted feelings of shock or vulnerability which made it difficult to ask for help.

“I never imagined I would be in this situation...You feel very vulnerable, you don’t know how to reach out to for help.” **Participant 21**

## Challenges in accessing help

Although most participants had primarily neutral interactions with services before becoming homeless, with one remarking “*at the end of the day they did their job. it was out of their hands*”, one of the main barriers that participants experienced when contacting organisations for help were the delays in processing applications. These delays included: being registered as homeless, being put on the housing list, or having their NOT checked to make sure it was valid. Some also mentioned that would have to wait until they were made homeless before the organisation could help them, adding further stress to their situation. Eleven participants mentioned that they had to ring organisations multiple times over a period of days or weeks to get the correct paperwork, or repeat paperwork, and to check if there was access to emergency accommodation, with some receiving very little or no response:

“I rang the [Dublin Region Homeless Executive Central Placement Service ] to present as homeless. I rang about four weeks before becoming homeless... I rang up to 2–3 times a day, but I got no response. I was fearful for my life at the time...”

**Participant 1**

“I rang [the council] many times leading up to becoming homeless. I was told regularly to ‘call back tomorrow’ as they had nothing for me.”

**Participant 2**

“I could only ring the council on the day I moved out the property. Very little answers to emails/phone calls. It was really stressful not knowing where I would be placed.”

**Participant 38**

Participants also spoke about the frustration at often being passed from one staff member to another, finding it difficult to get any information on what they could do:

“The council needed to assess my homelessness, and I never knew about this. They were helpful, but I had to hound them for validation. Eventually, I spoke to someone who took ownership.”

**Participant 7**

“Wasn’t easy to get information as to what I should do and what my options were.”

**Participant 46**

“I was pushed from one staff to another and they had to reassess my Housing file again... [the council] was frustrating, being passed from one person to another, I got in contact with a TD to try to push things and then my baby got sick and things were given some more priority.”

**Participant 43**

For two participants who had reached out to women refuges or to organisations that help those trying to escape domestic violence (DV), one of the main problems they experienced was the lack of available spaces in the accommodation. Additionally, one participant who was returning to Ireland to escape DV was told she was not entitled to access to their emergency shelters, as the abuse was viewed as a past threat rather than a current one and so could not be housed despite being homeless because of DV.

### 3.4 Experiences in emergency homeless accommodation

Participants were asked about their experiences of support services while living in emergency accommodation. The following section outlines identified key support needs and general experiences living in emergency accommodation.

#### Poor living conditions and unsuitable facilities

Almost one-third of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the living conditions in emergency accommodation. A lot of this referred to cramped spaces, lack of privacy, unsuitable facilities, and the impact this was having on both them and their children:

“People who are in emergency accommodation, people don’t realise the hell people are going through until I actually show pictures and videos...”

**Participant 16**

“It is just one room, one double bed and a single bed. No privacy. No cots in the room. The four of us are just in the one room...It is so complicated, I haven’t even thought of my own needs.” **Participant 9**

“What gets me the most is its almost Christmas and I don’t want to get upset around her. We are living in a bed, she is eating everything in bed. I have to go into a chair, it is not good for your health... I never want her (her daughter) to remember this.” **Participant 18**

“No space for the accommodation at all, we have a letter from GP saying she (daughter) is significantly delayed.” **Participant 29**

“My door handle falls down and didn’t work for the first three weeks. There’s no lock, so I had to put my pram up and lock it. I shouldn’t feel like I’m barricading myself in the room. I didn’t sleep for the first three weeks; even before that, I was a shell of myself. The first four weeks, I was a shell of myself, and I wouldn’t struggle with mental health. I think those in emergency accommodation are forgotten about. I think they think you have a roof over your head, so you shouldn’t complain about it.” **Participant 28**

Four participants spoke on the impact of the emergency accommodation on their children who had medical or chronic health conditions. This was sometimes met with apathy from staff:

“Very little room (in emergency accommodation), children can only do homework on the floor, my child had a big hip operation and there is no room to do the physio exercises, there is a real lack of space, her sleep is really bad now.”

**Participant 46**

“Partner and daughter are very ill due the dust coming into the room. They have an allergy to dust, my daughters been coughing for the last six weeks... my partner’s constantly into doctors for chest infection.” **Participant 30**

“I had to tell them that my daughter has a colposcopy bag and they don’t really care. They didn’t say anything and then when I seen the room, I was shocked. It is disgusting, it is beyond cleaning. My daughter has injections in her leg and she needs it to be sterile, I can’t do that. The water is brown, this room is really bad and there is nowhere else to put her...” **Participant 28**

“The other baby has chronic lung disease. The staff never asked. My baby has tubes for lung disease and the staff didn’t believe me when I said the baby needed them to breath.” **Participant 16**

One participant discussed the unsanitary conditions of the EA they stayed in, mentioning the sighting of ‘cockroaches and bedbugs’ inside the room suggesting that *“the government should do inspections on the conditions.”*

For some participants, these poor conditions were coupled with poor treatment by staff, with one Irish participant stating this behaviour was often worst toward foreign nationals:

“Sometimes they treat you like you’re a dog, their manner can be really bad. Sometimes they look down their noses at you... There’s other people who are treated badly. The lift broke and there is a lot of foreigners here and one, she was spoken to like she was dirt and she just asked simple questions...” **Participant 25**

“They don’t treat you like a normal person, no-one explained anything to me and then if you do something wrong, you’re made feel bad but it was never explained and you realise how bad it is, feeling as if something is wrong with you...”

**Participant 28**

“Most rude and unprofessional people I’ve ever met in my life.” **Participant 21**

“People in the accommodation told me ‘don’t argue with the staff because they’ll treat you badly. If you complain they will bother you.” **Participant 22**

Three participants also discussed having safety concerns about the location of the EA for them and their family, as the people in or around the building seemed to be intoxicated or using other substances:

“The surroundings and the people can be intimidating – people who are intoxicated, shouting, threatening, untrustworthy. Inside the building, I feel safe as there is a caretaker there that provides a certain level of safety for us. But outside the building I find it scary for me and my children.” **Participant 8**

“My mental health isn’t great; there are people on drugs and alcohol in this place. They look intoxicated, and it’s not safe. I don’t know what I am walking out to in this place. It is just me and my daughter, and I am only 20, so I worry for us.” **Participant 31**

“I have felt very unsafe at times, I have been threatened by other families, as my child has been hit by other children at times while he has been in his pram.” **Participant 52**

## Impact on mental health

Mental health struggles, including anxiety and depressive episodes, were mentioned by a quarter of participants.

“I struggle mentally with the situation... My anxiety is through the roof, I can’t sleep much and I can’t think of anything.” **Participant 9**

“The room is extremely noisy and too warm to close the window, I myself have trauma from the war, they will not change the room... level of anxiety has been worse in 2 months than in the last 9 years... EA is a torture centre, especially that room...” **Participant 29**

“Our concerns were where we’d be, who we would be with, how I would get my little boy to school. The whole uncertainty of everything was very difficult...” **Participant 43**

The damaging mental health impact of this environment can also be seen through the behavioural outcomes identified by participants. Four participants noted that their children were being impacted, mentally and physically, by living in these conditions:

“I am linked into the Family Resource centre – came to check in with the baby. The last little while, he’s been banging head against the wall.” **Participant 12**

“Noticed change in behaviour... She tells me ‘I hate it, I just want a house’. And all I can say is ‘it will happen, it won’t be forever, we just need to wait until it is our turn.’ I know she misses her friends and I understand why she is upset.” **Participant 6**

“There is a pillar in the room, and (her son) bangs his head to calm down and there’s no way to keep him safe.” **Participant 14**

A pattern of ‘feeling trapped’ and a ‘desire to escape’ their accommodation can be seen through the expressed mental health of two participants in particular:

“All I can think of is ‘I need to get out.” **Participant 9**

“I don’t want to be stuck in a room all day. I won’t be stuck in the room.” **Participant 28**

## Child-focused support and facilities

Several participants wanted improved facilities and supports for their children. This included play areas and child-friendly environments, as well as counselling service:

“(my child) is isolated, doesn’t laugh anymore, (there is a need for) more child-friendly centres, (there is) no play area or grass.” **Participant 23**

“(there is a need for a) play area for the kids. If it’s raining out they have to be confined to a room.” **Participant 14**

“Some counselling for (daughter) cause I have noticed a change in her... She is doing well in school but I’ve noticed that she has become very angry with me... she has had a few tantrums at times but thankfully I’ve nice neighbours next to us...” **Participant 5**

Daycare support, or help finding a creche for children, was also acknowledged by participants as beneficial. This was particularly true for single mothers, two of whom stated the lack of childcare posed a barrier to them exiting homelessness and going back to work:

“If there was some provision of childcare, it was incredibly difficult to attend viewings, fill out forms and do housing searches while looking after young children. I think a single mother’s group would have been really helpful as it can be so isolating being in emergency accommodation and I’ve seen other young single mums struggle with that as well, if there were groups like that, we could all help each other.” **Participant 31**

“Support one parents, counselling, creche is the main thing would help me get back to work.” **Participant 24**

## Food and kitchen facilities

Dietary needs and concerns about food provision was mentioned by a quarter of participants. They highlighted challenges in accessing suitable and culturally appropriate meals:

“They provide breakfast in the accommodation and sometimes lunch. However, my son was badly sick after eating a provided lunch and had to be brought to hospital.” **Participant 19**

“The food is a bit of a problem for me and my wife. We are Asian and so it is not really suitable for us (sausages, bacon etc.)” **Participant 3**

“The food is not good, the food is not halal so we don’t want to put pressure on them... The food is not nice, the rice you wouldn’t give to an animal...” **Participant 52**

“The food isn’t good, (we need) more food facilities to cook own food.” **Participant 30**

“Places providing the food should take into account the people living there, their dietary needs. The people who are running the place, they should put themselves in their other people other shoes. They don’t care and there’s people who are Muslim who don’t eat pork. They won’t come down for breakfast, it’s not fair – it seems like ‘If you don’t like it, there’s a kitchen.’” **Participant 9**

For some who had a kitchen to cook their own food, there were challenges related to the time allotment or the quality of the facilities which made it difficult to make food there. For some, this also resulted in the need for buying take-aways or other fast-food:

“I prefer you not to use the kitchen – so I go to my auntie Tuesday and Thursday and to do my washing in my aunties. Will do some cooking for my son there.”

**Participant 11**

“I can only use the kitchen for 1 hour a day, meaning I make all my meals for me and my son at that time.” **Participant 17**

“The kitchen is often full and when its free its often late as we don’t get back until later, we travel a long distance in peak traffic from school. I often end up having to get cheap food/take aways.” **Participant 46**

“If I want to cook something, of course there are a lot of people who use the kitchen... Spending money on take-aways, I’m not getting any child benefits at the moment so it’s just my spending all my wages.” **Participant 49**

### 3.5 Experiences of looking for a new home

The final section of the questionnaire asked participants about their experiences searching for properties using HAP. The following sections discusses the key themes that were identified during discussions with participants.

#### Attempts to exit homelessness with HAP

75% (n=39) of participants had experience looking for accommodation with HAP. For the remaining 25% (n=13) who had no experience, the main reason was due to their application still being processed or only approved recently e.g. less than a week. However, one participant from an EU country had been given wrong information by their support worker that they could only apply for HAP once they had been in the country and working for a year. For two participants, they were reluctant to use HAP again due to the precariousness of it and *‘because you could end up with the landlord selling up or something and have to start again from square one’*. Another participant refused to use it because they felt that it was more of a hindrance than anything else:

“The person from the council gave me a template but I didn’t mention HAP, as soon as you mention it they (agents or landlords) don’t want to know...”

**Participant 12**

However, for those who did have experience searching for accommodation with HAP, the main theme that came up participants was how they received little to no response from their applications to view properties. This is despite almost half (n=18, 46%) of the participants applying for more than 100 properties (see table 17 in the Appendix), with one explaining they ‘*can’t even count*’ how many properties they had applied for:

“I feel it’s quite off-putting as I have applied for so many properties but received very little response.” **Participant 1**

“Applied to a number of properties and only one replied.” **Participant 7**

“I put in my email that I had HAP Payments, deposit, and two months’ rent ready, and I rarely got response.” **Participant 26**

“Every time I’m going (to property rental website) and I’m applying to the same house 5 times. Sometimes more than 5 times. Sometimes the next day just in case they call you... It’s a big challenge but you just have to keep on doing it because we are not the only ones doing this. So you just have to know there are other people in the same situation as yourself, do your best.” **Participant 49**

“Often I don’t get acknowledgements so when I do I am delighted.” **Participant 50**

However, even when participants did manage to receive viewings for properties, they were often disheartened to see the properties being viewed by an excess of people:

“Going to the viewing in Dublin, I felt happy and hopeful, until I saw the queue of people waiting to view the same property, this felt like a strike of lightning to my mood and hope.” **Participant 6**

Four participants commented on the overwhelming demand for housing when viewing a property. An intense sense of competition was felt:

“You don’t know what you’re up against.” **Participant 1**

“There could be 20–25 people at a viewing for one property.” **Participant 11**

“Twenty people plus at viewings, competition is tough.” **Participant 22**

“You meet almost 100 people, all your hope, is just with god.” **Participant 48**

Some participants even discussed how they had looked outside of Dublin to try to find accommodation or were looking at properties which were outside their price range or weren't suitable for them and their families. Despite this, they still were unsuccessful:

"Not even went to one viewing. Sending it to places I know wouldn't even fit, never heard from anywhere." **Participant 17**

"Looked at 9 in the last few days – even if out the price range..." **Participant 12**

"I left my job in Dublin to go and search across the country for accommodation, as I thought I would have a better chance, but this didn't help." **Participant 6**

"I have even looked outside Dublin, in Kildare, but I can't find anything. I have had to leave my job because of the situation" **Participant 8**

"I have often offered higher than the rent amount advertised, but they have refused." **Participant 41**

One-third of participants discussed feeling discriminated against when going to viewings, which negatively impacted their ability to secure housing. For at least three of the participants, they felt this was because they were single parents in receipt of social welfare or in receipt of HAP:

"Sometimes I felt landlords were reluctant to rent to a single parent, maybe they felt I couldn't pay the rent." **Participant 22**

"I felt I was discriminated against by landlords due to being a young single parent in receipt of social welfare... I could see this amongst some friends whose circumstances were different to me i.e. single and in employment, they would get a lot more viewings than me." **Participant 30**

"He (the landlord) was interviewing people altogether... I was a little embarrassed to say I was in homeless HAP and then they (the other people viewing the property) said they could offer them (the landlord) 3,000 euro on the spot... so I emailed them and explained the situation... but it was a doctor and nurse that came in behind me. I have no job so couldn't give deposit upfront." **Participant 32**

"I do think the fact that when landlords found out I am a single mother I was looked at differently and was definitely disadvantaged in being offered a property." **Participant 50**

Two participants stated how having children damaged their chances and disqualified them for securing accommodation:

“The landlord wouldn’t allow children.” **Participant 12**

“But they didn’t want to give me the property because I had 2 children and it was one-bedroom accommodation. If I had one child they would’ve considered it more but I would need to rent a two bedroom apartment if I have two kids. This reasoning made me feel sick, like having two children was a disadvantage to finding accommodation.” **Participant 6**

Something which twelve participants mentioned as being a barrier to them getting viewings for properties was stating they were in receipt of HAP. For many, they started to remove this from their applications to properties as they believed that “*HAP sometimes puts people off*”. Often, this was felt because of perceived judgements of people in receipt in HAP.

“I feel like if I mention I am on HAP first, I won’t get a reply, and people won’t respond to my message. With the new regulations, I think sometimes people can tar everyone with the same brush.” **Participant 12**

“If we put in the description that we are on HAP or have a baby, we won’t get viewings. I think it is because of the HAP, the HAP doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.” **Participant 32**

Another participant applied for a particular property that “*had an application system that stopped as soon as I answered that I was in receipt of HAP. It just cut off saying ‘the viewings are full’ when I answered ‘yes’ to in receipt of HAP payment.*”

“I definitely think a lot of landlords/estate agents did not want to accept HAP payment. Only for my Focus Ireland keyworker nominated me for a place finder viewing. I think I would still be in EA.” **Participant 16**

“I had a phone call, but once I mentioned HAP, they said ‘other people were looking at it.’” **Participant 20**

“I’ve been looking for houses and I had a lot of viewings, most of the people when you are saying they are on the HAP. They don’t want to take the people on the HAP. I think most of the people want cash...” **Participant 48**

Three participants, two of which had secured housing, spoke on how HAP rates were insufficient to acquire new housing:

“I had been looking for over six months with homeless hap, prior to that I was granted mainstream HAP which was extremely limiting with the rate they give.”

**Participant 34**

“In the end we had to go over the HAP rate but we were lucky to get a place close to family and work, the house is in great condition and in a lovely area.”

**Participant 38**

“The payment is limiting people. I know it is to control people so they don’t struggle with their payments, there’s a lot of scarcity. I am looking for a three bedroom house for €1,900, I’m looking for a 3 bedroom. Where am I going to find a house that is lower than €2,000?” **Participant 49**

As can be seen above, it is not only living in emergency accommodation that impacts participants mental health but also searching for properties in an extremely competitive market as well. Searching for properties, as described by participants, can leave them feeling fearful, worried, hopeless, unlucky, stressed and disheartened, despite trying everything to rectify the situation:

“I’ve failed my mission as a father to look after my family, my wife and my children.”

**Participant 2**

“It is so disheartening. I wake up at half past 2 and I am applying for houses then.”

**Participant 9**

“I have full garda clearance and amazing references as well as first month’s rent and deposit. I just want a place to call home.” **Participant 10**

## Successful exits from homelessness

Only six families at time of interview had exited homelessness and were housed. The main commonalities of the group were they either reported they had applied to in excess of 100 properties, or managed to acquire the property through an acquaintance, supported by a key worker, or 'pure luck':

"I've applied to definitely more than 200 property ads, more likely between 200–500." **Participant 20**

"I sent off more than 300 applications for properties and spread my search far and wide including one beds, studios etc... Only for my Focus Ireland keyworker nominated me for a place finder viewing I think I would still be in EA." **Participant 24**

"Applied to 100 – 150 houses – out of that I only viewed only 3 houses. The house I am currently in was the first one I viewed, it went back on the market and it was just luck I got it." **Participant 12**

"I sent off more than 300 applications for properties and spread my search far and wide including one beds, studios etc." **Participant 38**

"We tried so hard, we were very persistent, we called into numerous estate agents, we were applying for hundreds of properties a month." **Participant 42**

However, even having exited homelessness through the HAP scheme, fears of being in homelessness had not dissipated for one participant:

"Although I have a roof over my head, I still don't feel safe." **Participant 12**

## 4 Case studies

The following section outlines two case studies from participants that took part in the study. Using pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality, it outlines their trajectories into homelessness, as well as the challenges they have experienced trying to exit it.

### 4.1 Gillian's Story

Gillian's story highlights the challenges faced by individuals who are dealing with homelessness as a consequence of domestic violence. It outlines the various barriers she experienced to avoid homelessness and navigating housing systems, as well as the challenges with the current HAP system.

After growing up in Ireland, Gillian moved to London and spent several years there before moving to another area in the UK, with the aspiration of owning her own home. During this time she experienced domestic violence. She spoke about how she was aware of the current housing crisis in Ireland and recounted how she had to make a 'choice'. The options were to stay in her home and continue experiencing abuse or return to Ireland and face potential homelessness with her three children. Gillian eventually returned to Ireland with her 3 children, initially staying with family members.

Gillian explained how she had sought assistance from a number of organisations before becoming homeless. She approached the council, women's refuges, other homeless charities, even contacting her local TD for help. The women's refuges that she spoke to cited a lack of availability. One deemed her situation as not meeting the criteria for immediate intervention, which Gillian attributed it to being viewed as 'past abuse' and not seen as an immediate risk and so no intervention was possible.

Due to the unavailability of alternative options Gillian ended up in emergency accommodation. The accommodation had cockroaches and bedbugs, making it uninhabitable for her and her children. It was also in an impractical location meaning she would be unable to commute from the accommodation to her children's school and then return in time to her job. After reporting the issues to the council, they explained there was no other alternative for her and so she had to go back and stay with family members and wait for her HAP application to be processed. Gillian spoke about how distressing it was to be in this situation when previously while in the UK she had lived independently, being able to afford everything she needed for herself and her children.

Gillian applied to 100–150 HAP properties before she found the property she currently resides in. She describes this as ‘a *stroke of luck*’, as it became available after initially being given to someone else. However, despite Gillian finding a home, she spoke about how she still faces problems. She described her experience with the property management company as challenging, with threats of eviction, refusal to return owed money, and unprofessional behaviour from the agent. She explained how ‘*despite having a roof over my head, I still don’t feel safe.*’

She described the property management company as a ‘*nightmare*’ to deal with and about the poor condition of the property, with one window in the kitchen in such a bad state of disrepair that she is unable to close it. When she spoke to the company about the various issues they dismissed them, stating, “*the problems you’re mentioning aren’t really problems*”. Her situation intensified as she waited for her HAP payment to be paid to the company. The property management suggested she pay the first month’s rent and deposit to secure the property, which she did by borrowing money from family members. When the HAP payment finally arrived, her attempts to reclaim the funds she had borrowed from her relatives were met with disdain. Despite the full HAP payment being made, Gillian faced unfounded claims of a shortfall and endured disrespectful interactions with the management. She described how she ‘*had never been spoken to so badly*’ and described how one phone-call interaction left her in tears. The agent then gave her a veiled threat of eviction stating “*You should be lucky you are living in such a nice place. If you’re not happy, I can fix that then*”. When she challenged him and asked if this was a threat of eviction he replied “*You can’t go anywhere because your tied into lease but I can fix it*”. When she stated that she didn’t appreciate being threatened with eviction, he laughed.

Determined to address the issues, Gillian enlisted the support of her sister, an accountant, for a meeting with the property management. However, the encounter proved distressing, characterised by a dismissive tone and unprofessional conduct. She described how “*He was the type of person who speaks over you and down to you. Even when I was there with my sister*”. At the time of interview, Gillian had still not received the correct amount of money refunded to her.

Despite securing accommodation, Gillian continues to face challenges in her living situation and encounters difficulties with property management. Gillian’s experience in HAP accommodation has left her feeling unheard, unsupported, and vulnerable. Her narrative sheds light on the pressing need for improved oversight and tenant support within the HAP system. It also emphasises how homeless families are vulnerable to being taken advantage of due to their precarious and desperate situation.

## 4.2 Paula's Story

Paula's journey underscores the systemic challenges migrants face when seeking stable housing, reflecting on societal biases and the impact on mental health during periods of homelessness.

Paula, a migrant from an EU country, moved to Ireland in 2021 to follow a potential job opportunity. She shared a two-bedroom private rental with another family, organised by acquaintances. As the months passed and she couldn't find her own accommodation, the arrangement was extended on a month-to-month basis until August 2022. The family providing the accommodation eventually needed the room back and so Paula had to leave.

When Paula was facing homelessness, and with no real support network, she contacted various organisations on Facebook for help. These efforts primarily resulted in food and supplies, with limited success in helping her secure new accommodation. However, she was recommended to contact the council, where she was then assured that emergency accommodation would be available to her. She was told that the day she becomes homeless she would need to phone them. This gave her relief because she knew she wouldn't be on the streets with her children.

Paula and her children entered emergency accommodation, what she hoped would be a short-term solution while waiting for more suitable arrangements. However, the accommodation lacked essentials for her and her children, such as cooking facilities, and had unreliable electricity. Reflecting on this period, Paula noted, *"There were no cooking facilities, and the electricity was so unreliable. It wasn't a suitable place for my children."*

She was then moved to a different emergency accommodation, one where she still resided at time of interview. This accommodation was also unsuitable. Paula stated *"The surroundings and people could be intimidating, with intoxicated individuals, shouting, and threats. Inside the building, with a caretaker, felt safer, but going outside with my children was scary."*

The mental toll of homelessness was discussed by Paula and she mentioned struggling with depressive episodes. The safety concerns for her children deepened the emotional burden. Reflecting on this period, she acknowledged *"It's been tough mentally. I worry about my kids, and it's not easy."*

Amid these challenges, Paula received approval for HAP, offering an opportunity for more stable housing. However, securing permanent accommodation proved to be a challenge, with numerous applications and limited viewings. Describing a viewing experience, she said *“I felt hopeful, but then I saw the queue of people waiting. It was disheartening.”* Paula even travelled to viewings across the country, from Kerry to Donegal, in the hope of finding somewhere but was unsuccessful.

Paula’s homelessness journey exposes the systemic challenges faced by people who are new to Ireland seeking stable housing. The narrative unveils the emotional and practical struggles of navigating emergency accommodations, societal biases, and the search for a new home.

# 5 Consultation with Family Homeless Action Team

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The Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) is the service which provides case management support for families in emergency accommodation on the basis of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE). Most of the ‘family hubs’ run by non-government organisations provide their own case management supports, so the FHAT primarily support families living in Private Emergency Accommodation. At the time of the consultation FHAT supported around one-third of the approx. 1,400 families in emergency accommodation. In line with the Focus Ireland family support model, the FHAT comprises both case managers, working to support the parents, and child support workers, providing support to children who are assessed as needing such engagement.

A consultation with Focus Ireland’s FHAT took place in August 2024 to allow staff to respond to the key findings from the research. Fifteen members of FHAT attended, including a manager, two team leaders, four child support workers and eight case managers. The consultation began with a short presentation which outlined the key findings from the research with families. Staff were then asked to reflect on these findings and discuss if they aligned with their own experiences. Staff were also asked to consider any issues that were not discussed by families in the research. Finally, staff were asked to suggest recommendations which they thought may help improve service provision for their families or address any of the problems identified. This chapter outlines the key themes arising from this consultation.

## 5.1 Emergency Accommodation

### Lack of standardised, transparent policies and procedures

A strong and recurring theme in the consultation with FHAT staff centred around a distinct lack of standardised, transparent policies and procedures in emergency accommodation, particularly in private forms of emergency accommodation (PEA). This included warnings, transfers, closing bookings, appeals and complaints, as well as accommodating families with additional needs.

While some PEAs were identified as having good and transparent processes, one FHAT staff member described the differences in policies and conditions across emergency accommodation as having ‘*no rhyme or reason*’. Other staff members described stark difference in staff attitudes:

“Of course you have to have standards and rules when you’re keeping people safe but it’s just luck of the draw.” **Child Support Worker 1**

“Some of the staff are compassionate and flexible, you’re almost surprised because then you go to another and there’s nothing...” **Child Support Worker 2**

“There needs to be a standardised set of robust policies and procedures about move-ons, warnings, and services that provide homeless accommodation.”  
**Manager**

One example of the lack of standardised policies and procedures pertained to families with additional needs. FHAT staff outlined that levels of support and accommodations for these families varied largely depending on which emergency accommodation they were placed in and the attitude of the staff, which in their opinion could sometimes be influenced by the families race or ethnicity:

“I would have an Irish family with a child with additional needs and all these accommodations are made for him but then I have a Roma family and there’s no accommodations made them and it’s like ‘your booking’s closed.’”  
**Child Support Worker 1**

“They like this family, they make accommodations. They don’t like this family, they make no accommodation.” **Case Manager 1**

An issue mentioned by one staff member was families being moved from one EA to another and how a lack of policies or procedures prevents case managers from intervening and advocating for the best interests of the family:

“Families being moved – there is no set of policies or procedures that staff can access to advocate for them. No recourse or appeals process.” **Manager**

FHAT staff acknowledged that EA staff were often limited in what they could do to help families because they had to follow certain procedures set by management. This was particularly relevant to PEA.

“There’s a difference between PEA and DCC staff... I know one particular hub, she’s very good at giving warnings and giving chances... but it’s luck of the draw.”

**Team Leader 1**

FHAT staff also stated there were EA locations where staff treated families well and there was transparent and fair procedures around warnings and transfers. In one EA, the policies and procedures around warnings meant that, even when there were problems with management, FHAT could still advocate for their families and support them if they had any issues. In this case, the warning system also had a specified timeframe which meant warnings would be removed after a certain period. FHAT staff explained that one of the reasons why the procedures in this particular EA were so good was because they had been developed by management who were qualified in social care.

“The hub I’m in... we had issues with the manager but that was to do with the manager... but they have a traffic light system and myself and my colleague can advocate to the overall managers... so the policies and procedures are very good and the reason is when the hub transitioned from hotel to a hub it was two social care workers who were managing it... so families being removed is few and far between and it is usually for something serious like domestic violence or a physical threat...” **Case Manager 4**

It was because of general poor treatment of families in PEA that staff specified that any standardised procedures for emergency accommodation needed to be trauma-informed and modelled on best practice models in social care, to minimise further traumatising families.

“Imagine a family who has gone through all the trauma of being homeless, leaving belongings, escaping domestic violence, and then finding themselves in a place where they are treated like dogs...” **Team leader 1**

Another key theme that arose in the consultation with FHAT staff was the lack of a process for complaints. Echoed by parents previously in this report, staff spoke about how the families they worked with were often afraid to speak out about issues due to fear of losing their accommodation. While there is a formal complaint process, families worried about repercussions, and not all complaints were followed up:

“There is a DRHE form but if they make a complaint, there’s a fear of repercussions.” **Case Manager 2**

“Sometimes you give them the form and they don’t want to fill it in because of the fear.” **Child Support Worker 1**

“People are terrified to complain because their booking will get closed... and often they’ve gone to their TD’s and there booking will be closed within a week and its terrifying that if they speak up.” **Child Support Worker 2**

“Some (complaints) are followed up... they have to respond in 21 days but they don’t all the time. Two (complaints) were sent and it was only when higher people were involved that they got followed up.” **Team Leader 1**

Staff spoke of how even when families have evidence of misconduct by staff, the response and investigation is often inadequate, leading to a sense of futility in raising concerns:

“Sometimes the PEA staff will lie but we would know, we would have evidence and know that that is not the case.” **Child Support Worker 2**

“Often it comes down to ‘he said, she said,’ and when it turns into that, it will get to a ‘we will just agree to disagree’ so nothing really happens.” **Manager**

## 5.2 HAP as a way out of homelessness

### Insecurity, unaffordability, and discrimination

Another theme which came up with staff was the limitations of HAP to help families exit emergency accommodation. Staff spoke about the precarity of HAP and how some of the families they worked with were re-entering EA after a few years, sometimes “*two or three times*” because their landlord was selling the property or increasing the rent, which families couldn’t afford to pay. Staff explained how this posed several problems for families because once they start a HAP tenancy they are removed from the housing list, meaning they would have to wait longer for social housing. This ultimately resulted in some families declining to use HAP again due to distrust and fears of re-entering homelessness, which staff found difficult to argue against:

“HAP sometimes feels like a punishment because they are placed on the transfer list and sometimes come back into homelessness.<sup>13</sup> When families say ‘I don’t want HAP’ it’s hard to tell them ‘No, it’s fine, you’re going to be safe,’ when they aren’t.” **Case Manager 5**

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<sup>13</sup> When families take up a HAP tenancy it is legally considered as meeting their housing need and they are taken off the main housing list, and placed on the ‘transfer list.’ Each local authority has a different system for prioritising families on the transfer list, but in many cases families have lost their ‘place in the queue’ if they are forced to return to homelessness.

Insufficient HAP rates were also raised by FHAT staff. Some spoke about their experiences trying to house larger families who needed 3–4 bedroom houses but were unable to find anything within the HAP limit:

“The only three-bed they (a family of 5) were getting was €3,000... how on earth is a family meant to afford that? It’s impossible.” **Team Leader 1**

“Renting has increased but HAP rates haven’t changed since 2019 and most families can’t pay or pay the difference. A lot of families can’t pay to do that and some landlords are wary of taking it.” **Child Support Worker 2**

Staff explained that although landlords were legally required to accept HAP, many found ways to exploit the situation or set conditions which made it difficult for families to apply. One case manager noted that:

“Landlords are now legally bound to take HAP but they are working around it now and they’re saying ‘I’ll take HAP if you give cash on the side.’” **Case Manager 4**

Additionally, staff spoke about landlords imposing conditions on family size and ‘cherry-picking’ which families they wanted to live in their accommodation, which further complicated families search for accommodation. There was also a layer of discrimination in determining whether families were ‘HAP ready’ which often meant that they had to be in employment, or Irish:

“Landlords put conditions on the size of families they want. There’s a layer of cherry-picking of whether families are ‘HAP ready... which like employment and stuff comes into it but you know that’s when unconscious bias comes into it so certain cohorts are nominated... Roma families as an example are going to be left behind in that system.” **Manager**

“in a three bed, you can easily fit five people but they can pick ‘only one kids or only two kids’, you know they can pick what they desire.” **Case Manager 2**

A staff member posed a rhetorical question that alluded to racism and the specific challenges faced by non-Irish or migrant families with HAP:

“Who is more likely to be successful at a viewing? A white Irish family or a Roma family?” **Manager**

## 5.3 Families with additional needs and challenges

### Lone parents

Staff highlighted that lone parents were particularly vulnerable to not only entering homelessness but also exiting homelessness as there a number of unique and difficult challenges for them. Unlike two-parent families, lone parents often had more difficulty balancing childcare with employment. Additionally, the lack of accessible childcare meant they were often unable to work:

“Obviously a homeless family is just tragic but the experience of a lone parent, is so, so, so vastly different...” **Child Support Worker 3**

“Under the massive housing issue, is the equally massive childcare crisis, so to see lone parents working wouldn’t be that common...” **Child Support Worker 3**

“We also have issue of parents who want to work but can’t work because they are a single parent and they are having to do everything, all by themselves and so they can’t get out of the situation, they’re trapped...” **Case Manager 6**

One staff member told of a situation in which a lone parent in employment was unable to continue working because she was unable to leave her 17-year-old son alone in emergency accommodation unsupervised:

“It’s crazy because if she were in private rented accommodation in her own home, you wouldn’t think twice of leaving your 17-year-old son at home alone, like “go do your homework” but he was sitting outside (of EA) for hours... but you working looks good for HAP but you can’t do that because you can’t leave your 17 year old sitting outside for hours.” **Child Support Worker 1**

Proximity to support networks was also raised by FHAT staff as being crucial for lone parents if they wanted to attend GP visits, attend viewings or maintain employment, and ultimately lead to a sustainable exit out of homelessness. Staff spoke about how lone parents were forced to travel long distances, sometimes requiring multiple bus rides, just to access essential support for their children:

“A lot of mams are like, ‘I need to take two buses to my mam’s just so they can be minded’ It’s just impossible.” **Child Support Worker 1**

However, when staff advocated for the families to be moved to another EA closer to their support networks, children’s school or GP, they were often met with resistance. In some instances, FHAT staff were were accused by the local authority of making families too comfortable in temporary accommodations:

“That (asking for families to be moved to somewhere close to support networks) was often met with anger. They say, ‘Why are your staff advocating to move to different accommodation? They should be advocating to move into HAP. They are getting too comfortable; this is becoming too normalised... and they are quite adamant on this.’” **Manager**

“They (local authority) are just so removed from reality... and I understand it is stressful but they get angry when we ask for the families to be close to their support network and they are just not listening to what we are trying to tell them...”  
**Case Manager 2**

## Large families

As mentioned previously, staff spoke about larger families tending to reside for longer periods in emergency accommodation due to a lack of available HAP properties. Larger families, typically with five or six members, were finding it increasingly difficult to secure housing or even attend viewings:

“If you have six kids... good luck.” **Manager**

“It’s hard to get viewings when you are 1 or 2 people, never mind 5 or 6... it seems to be getting harder for families to find a place.” **Case Manager 5**

It was also pointed out by FHAT staff that it was often difficult to find emergency accommodation in the city centre for larger families which meant they may be moved outside the city centre, which made it difficult to advocate for them:

“You know if there booking gets closed, there being moved out to Kildare, you know, much further out of the city centre so that takes them away from their support networks so you know their terrified to speak up.” **Child Support Worker 1**

## Non-Irish and non-English speaking families

Staff mentioned how non-Irish families or those who appear to be ‘non-Irish’ were often targeted and discriminated against at almost every stage of the housing process, even when they have been given a home:

“Non-Irish families or people who look ‘non-Irish’ are getting houses from local authorities, and they are being targeted.” **Case Manager 6**

There was also a need for more of the services that families interact with to include translation services, which did not seem to be available at every stage of the housing process, despite it being a legal requirement.

## Families with disabilities or additional needs

Several staff raised the issue of a lack of appropriate supports for children with disabilities or additional needs, such as autism, in emergency accommodation:

“That is something I find so common. People with autism, kids who can’t deal with living in emergency accommodation, put a tenancy at risk because they are jumping on beds, banging... Sometimes it is impossible to manage because the resources are very limited.” **Case Manager 5**

“I think it’s really important to stress how much longer those families (with additional needs) are in emergency accommodation...you’d be shocked at what is done to them and how they are treated.” **Child Support Worker 1**

One FHAT staff member described a child with autism who was chastised for being out of their room after an 8pm curfew despite needing to go on walks to manage their condition:

“I had one child, and the mam, he just wasn’t sleeping, like 2–3 hours a night, so his mam would take him for a walk, just to get him out the room cause when he was in the room he was making noise and keeping people awake...but then she was stopped like ‘what are you doing walking him around? You’ve to be in your room for 8.” **Child Support Worker 1**

Similar to lone parents, staff spoke about the significant need for more thoughtful placement of families with disabled children, particularly in terms of location and access to support networks.

“There needs to be more consideration for children with additional needs in terms of where they are placed, close to their support networks or school, a hospital. Staff need better training to support families with additional needs.” **Child Support Worker 2**

FHAT staff acknowledged that *‘it was sometimes not without trying’* that staff in private emergency accommodation responded to families with additional needs. However, it was difficult without the required resources and training. Consequently, FHAT staff felt it would be useful for PEA staff to be provided training to better support families with additional needs. FHAT staff also suggested that it would be beneficial for a needs or risk assessment to be done with families with additional needs before they entered emergency accommodation and to have this information given to staff in the EA so they understood the family and could support them as best they could.

## 6 Discussion

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This study provides insights into the profile, trajectories, and experiences of 52 families who entered emergency accommodation in Dublin during August 2022 to November 2023, as well as a contribution from fifteen staff members from the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team who support and work with families experiencing homelessness every day.

The picture that emerges is of a homeless system struggling to provide decent shelter and support for families in the face of a very rapid increase in homelessness after the end of the covid-related policies which had resulted in a rapid fall in family homelessness. Over the period of the study, the number of homeless families rose by over one-third (n= 378) – from 1,067 (August 2022) to 1,445 (November 2023). The scale of the challenge is even clearer if we note that on average 75 families presented as newly homeless each month over this period, with only 35 per month exiting.<sup>14</sup> The achievement of the DRHE in sourcing that additional emergency accommodation is considerable but strains put on both the staff and the homeless system are evident.

The demographic analysis in this study underscores a stark gendered component. While numbers becoming homeless were rising quickly, a similar demographic pattern to earlier reports in this series is evident. The demographic profile showed that **it is predominantly young, single mothers with one or two young children who are most vulnerable to becoming homeless**. This is not a new finding given homelessness data over the last several years has showed that lone parents make up the majority of families in emergency accommodation.<sup>15</sup> FHAT staff described that the need to balance childcare and employment while in emergency accommodation resulted in lone parents being at a much greater risk of becoming ‘trapped’ in homelessness. Staff also highlighted the significant challenges lone parent families face and how additional supports are necessary.

Almost all participants (n=46, 88%) reported that it was their first-time experiencing homelessness. Further analysis revealed that almost half of participants (44%; n=23) had **histories of ‘stable’<sup>16</sup> accommodation** in the private rental sector prior to becoming homeless. This study also found that **landlord selling property remains the largest single reason for families entering homelessness (31%, n=16)**, demonstrating that a significant factor driving family homelessness is structural and highlights the precarious situation for those living in the private rented sector.

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14 DRHE Monthly Homeless Report November 2023 <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Report-to-Dublin-LAs-November-2023.pdf?v=1704728595> (accessed 5th November 2024)

15 Maphosa, P. (2024) New families entering emergency accommodation in the Dublin region, 2020–2023. DRHE

16 Long-term tenancies of between 2–13 years

The second largest contributing factors towards family homelessness was **domestic violence (15%, n=8)**. This was higher than in earlier reports in this research series (5%) but marginally lower than DRHE data for 2023 (18%).<sup>17</sup> The prevalence of domestic violence as a cause of homelessness in this report is alarming and points to the intertwined nature of domestic violence and women’s experience of homelessness, which has not been adequately addressed by policy.<sup>18</sup>

42% of research participants were in **part or full-time employment**. This is a significantly higher employment rate than earlier studies in this series. This trend aligns with data made available by the Housing Agency that shows increasing numbers of adults in emergency accommodation and in employment<sup>19</sup>. These developments challenge the conventional assumption that employment provides a protective barrier against homelessness<sup>20</sup> and raises significant challenges for the homeless system about how the rules for managing homeless accommodation need to be adapted to facilitate homeless parents to continue in their jobs. For instance, while the Tusla ‘Short guide: For parents who are newly arrived in Ireland’ clearly states that “teenagers over the age of 16 can be left home alone” and “it is the decision of the parent or guardian, based on the child, their level of maturity and their living circumstances”<sup>21</sup>, however, the rules set by emergency accommodation providers for homeless families remove the decision from parents and prohibit this, creating insuperable problems for working parents.

This is especially true for lone parents, who are both the main income provider and carer for their children. Discussions with staff outlined how this dual role made it incredibly difficult for lone parents to maintain or find other employment opportunities while in emergency accommodation. Staff stressed the importance of lone parents being near their support networks, if possible, as well as a need for better childcare supports.

**Negative experiences of landlords** arose in discussions with almost half of participants with experience of renting in the PRS (n=29). There were accounts of harassment and threats of violence from landlords, mostly linked to the period after receiving a NOT. This highlights how more needs to be done to ensure tenants are better protected from these situations. Examples of tenants winning cases against their landlords but ultimately being evicted or leaving due to harassment and intimidation, demonstrate how current protections, although they may delay homelessness, frequently do not prevent it. More also needs to be done to ensure that current tenancy regulations are enforced and landlords are compelled to meet the standards expected of them.

In a welcome development from previous reports in this series, most research participants (n=45) sought help before being made homeless. However, the findings from this section demonstrate **a gap in support services** where, despite clear and

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17 Ibid

18 Mayock, P. & Neary, F. (2021) Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness. Dublin: Focus Ireland & The Housing Agency.

19 Summary of Social Housing Needs Assessment, various years, Housing Agency.

20 Bretherton, J., & Pleace, N. (2019). Is Work an Answer to Homelessness? Evaluating an Employment Programme for Homeless Adults. European Journal of Homelessness

21 A Tusla short guide: For parents who are newly arrived in Ireland, (2024) p4 and p5 <https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/english-guide-for-parents-arriving-in-ireland.pdf>

welcome instructions from the leadership in local authorities, families are still reporting that they have been told by front-line staff that they have to wait until they are made officially homeless before they can be provided with any homeless support. Just under a quarter of participants also reported being passed from one support service to another, without much assistance to their cause. This experience was described as frustrating and stressful, adding to the trauma of becoming homeless.

The trauma of homelessness for families in this study is palpable. Nearly one-third of participants in this study described **substandard living conditions in emergency accommodation**. They described cramped living quarters, inadequate facilities for children, a lack of privacy, poor quality food and offensive and discriminatory treatment from staff. This was compounded by a fear of making a complaint because of a fear of repercussions, including a risk of losing their accommodation. These living conditions had a profound and damaging impact on the mental health of parents and their children. The accounts of both parents and FHAT staff reveal a concerning disregard for trauma informed training and practice in emergency accommodation.

Four participants in this study had a child with a disability or had high medical needs. They reported that the **needs of their children were not adequately assessed or responded to in emergency accommodation**. This was supported further by staff, who highlighted that this is a common occurrence in their experiences working with families. This, along with several other elements of the report, again point to the need for a 'best interests of the child' assessment by local authorities when families present at risk of homelessness.

Despite consistent and proactive efforts of participants to find a HAP property, with several participants reporting applying for over 100 properties, **exiting homelessness into a secure home was extremely difficult** for almost two-thirds of participants. Not only did they have to contend with a severe shortage of affordable properties, they also felt that they are not attractive tenants to landlords and letting agents because of prejudice towards HAP recipients and, in some cases, lone parents. Some participants were not interested in HAP as a route out of homelessness because they felt it did not provide security of tenure. This was reflected in discussions with staff, who reported working with families who had exited to HAP tenancies only to return to homelessness due to the landlord selling up, some families two or three times.

Finally, the insights shared by FHAT staff corroborate the experiences reported by families experiencing homelessness in Dublin. Staff emphasised **the need for a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the issues related to homeless families**, as well as the need for more targeted supports for specific vulnerable groups of families (lone parents, larger families, those with additional needs etc.) who are more likely to experience barriers to exiting homelessness. Staff also spoke about the need for all emergency accommodation to have transparent and standardised policies and procedures, particularly in relation to warning systems and move-ons/transfers and that all staff operating in emergency accommodation are trained in trauma-informed care to avoid further traumatising parents and their children in what is already a deeply traumatising situation.

# 7 Recommendations

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The following recommendations were developed by Focus Ireland in response to the findings from the report, aiming to highlight the specific changes that would improve the quality and responsiveness of services provided to homeless families at risk of or experiencing homelessness. These recommendations are put forward with a clear understanding of the challenges facing local authorities in the face of persistently rising family homelessness. It is also recognised that some of the changes proposed may already be formal policy of the DRHE, nevertheless we have included these points as it is an important finding that these formal policy positions are not evident or experienced by the research participants.

They need to be seen in the context of the need for wider solutions at national level – a speeding up of social housing delivery, better legislative protection of tenants in the private rental sector, provision of adequate resources to local authorities, greater collaboration with other agencies such as the HSE and Tusla.

The recommendations are set out under three key categories for families: Homeless Prevention, Homeless Emergency Accommodations, and Homeless Exits:

## Homeless prevention for families

- The Government should convene a cross-Departmental and cross-sectoral working group to tackle the specific issues facing lone parents that result in their overrepresentation in homelessness and persistent disadvantage in Ireland's housing system.<sup>22</sup>
- Now that the Cuan agency has been established, the Department of Justice and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should revisit the recommendations from Focus Ireland's research examining the intersection of domestic violence and family homelessness.<sup>23</sup> The implementation of these recommendations would improve service integration and responses across the domestic violence, homeless, and housing sectors to protect vulnerable families becoming homeless because of DV.
- The RTB should consider the findings in this report pertaining to the conduct of landlords and the protection of vulnerable families in the PRS with a view to tackling capacity constraints as set out in the Focus Ireland Submission to the Review of the Private Rented Sector.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Russell, H., Privalko, I., McGinnity, F., & Enright, S. (2021). Monitoring adequate housing in Ireland. Economic and Social Research Institute.

23 Mayock, P. & Neary, F. (2021) Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness. Dublin: Focus Ireland and The Housing Agency.

24 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Focus-Irelands-Submission-to-the-Review-of-the-Private-Rented-Sector.pdf>

- Government should provide a specific, adequate funding line to allow the DRHE and other local authorities to expand and invest in translation services to assist families who do not speak English to navigate housing and homelessness services.

## **Homeless emergency accommodation for families**

- The DRHE should further expand and continue its commitment to Trauma Informed service by ensuring all forms of emergency accommodation for families adopts a trauma-informed approach. This means all staff, including staff in private providers, should be trained to better understand and respond to the traumatic experience of homelessness for families.
- The DRHE should review the operation of complaints procedures in the light of the findings of this report to ensure that they are transparent and that there are no perceptions that unfair repercussions will arise from making a complaint. Procedures in relation to warnings, transfers and the challenges facing children with additional needs should be clear and fair.
- Given the vulnerability of homeless families, a reactive complaint process is likely to have only limited impact and should be underpinned by regular, unscheduled inspections of emergency accommodations to ensure they are compliant with standards and protect families from substandard living conditions in emergency accommodation.
- In the absence of national guidelines, all local authorities should adopt a ‘best interests of the child’ assessment when families present as homeless. This would involve a needs or risk assessment to inform the selection of suitable emergency accommodation for families where the needs of the child are supported.
- Where emergency accommodation providers are unable to provide adequate and sanitary cooking facilities for families, they should ensure the provision of appropriate food for families from different cultural or religious backgrounds.
- The DRHE should commission research to investigate the prevalence of employed parents in emergency accommodation and the challenges facing them in retaining their jobs. Arising from this a set of guidelines to assist working parents who are homeless should be developed, bringing rules in emergency accommodation into line with Tusla guidelines for all other families.
- While recognising the challenges in providing sufficient emergency accommodation, Local Authorities should adopt a policy of providing accommodation for homeless families as close to their support networks as possible. Priority should be given to lone parents and families who have children with additional needs, as they are the families most vulnerable and in need to be near these networks.
- The DRHE should make it a contractual condition that all staff employed by emergency accommodation providers should have undergone training to overcome cultural and religious bias.

## Homeless exits for families

- The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, along with Local Authorities should seek to widen the range of housing options available to long term homeless families beyond Homeless HAP, particularly through ring-fencing a portion of social housing allocations, an enhanced and targeted RAS programme and adoption of best practice in the use of choice-based letting.
- The maximum rental threshold for HAP properties should be increased to larger families to make it possible for them to find affordable accommodation.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant profile

Table 2: Gender breakdown of participants

Gender	(n)	%
Female	38	73%
Male	14	27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3: Age group

Age group	(n)	%
25–34	23	44%
35–44	19	37%
45–54	7	13%
18–24	3	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4: Country of origin

Country of origin	(n)	%
Non-EU	22	42%
Irish	21	40%
EU	9	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 5: Ethnicity

Ethnicity	(n)	%
Irish	21	40%
African	8	15%
Another white background	8	15%
Any other Asian background	6	12%
Other/mixed	6	12%
Any other black background	3	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 6: Relationship status**

Relationship status	(n)	(%)
Single	31	60%
Couple	21	40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 7: No of children**

Number of children	(n)	%
1	20	39%
2	13	25%
3	14	27%
4	1	2%
More than 5	2	4%
Other*	2	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 8: Age range of children**

Age range (children)	(n)	%
1 to 4	31	31%
5 to 10	31	31%
11 to 15	20	20%
16+	13	13%
Below 1 year	6	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 9: Employment status**

Employment status	(n)	%
Employed (FT and PT)	22	42%
Unemployed	14	27%
FT or PT carer	10	19%
Disability allowance	3	6%
Other	3	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Appendix B: Last stable home and reasons for homelessness

Table 10: First time experiencing homelessness

Would you describe this as the first time you have experienced homelessness?	(n)	%
First time	46	88%
Have experienced homelessness before	6	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 11: Last stable home – type

Last stable home	(n)	%
Private rental sector – without housing assistance	22	42%
Living with partner (or partners family)	10	19%
Outside Ireland (family or private rental)	7	13%
Private rental sector – with housing assistance	7	13%
Family home	6	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 12: Main reasons for homelessness

Main reasons for homelessness	(n)	%
Landlord selling	16	31%
Overcrowding	9	17%
Domestic violence (DV)	8	15%
Relationship/family breakdown	5	10%
Family member/landlord moving in	4	8%
Unsuitable or temporary living conditions	3	6%
Other <sup>25</sup>	2	4%
Unsafe/unliveable conditions in property	2	4%
Employer sponsored accommodation	2	4%
Rent arrears	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

25 Illegal eviction (1), anti-social behaviour in neighbourhood and ex-partner (1)

## Appendix C: Housing histories and pathways into homelessness

### Stable housing history (n=23, 44%)

This group of families generally had a stable housing history before entering homeless services, all of which were coming from tenancies in the private rental sector, containing a mixture of people with and without housing assistance (PRS). The majority of these families stated that they had sustained their tenancies for a duration of between 3 to 13 years. Only two participants in this group had tenancies less than three years. However, the two participants still maintained a stable housing history previous to this with both living in private accommodation either in Ireland or in another country for more than three years.

Key characteristics of this group were:

- First experience of homelessness
- History of lengthy and stable tenancies primarily within the Private Rental Sector (PRS)
- Specific triggers to homelessness (outside of control);
  - Landlord selling
  - Relationship breakdown with partner
  - Growth in family size/Larger family

### Vulnerable migrant (n=11, 21%)

Families in this category were those whose last stable home was primarily outside Ireland. Primarily motivated to move to Ireland due to employment prospects, these participants often stated they had left stable housing situations in their home countries and were faced with housing instability when they arrived in Dublin. One participant highlighted how both him and his wife were promised housing by their employer when they arrived but this did not manifest. This group often resorted to temporary housing arrangements with family, friends, or church acquaintances, where conditions were unsuitable for long-term living e.g. sleeping on couches, floors, spare rooms etc. Despite the initial understanding that these arrangements were temporary, meaning no exchange of money or rental agreement, challenges in obtaining suitable housing often prolonged their stay in these situations. Eventually the unsuitability of the situation compelled families to eventually seek emergency accommodation. One participant in this group also discussed how their employer, who also provided the person with subsidised accommodation, directly impacted their capacity to seek help prior to entering homelessness. When their employment contract ended, so did their accommodation lease. They stated their employer did not inform them about the process for a PPS number, which resulted in delaying any support they could receive for housing. Some of those in this group spoke on how they were in the process of applying for housing assistance payment and this delayed their ability to apply for properties and exit homelessness.

Key characteristics of this group:

- Employment opportunities stated as primary reason for emigration to Ireland
- Often in short term, informal PRS accommodation when they move to Ireland (6–12 months)
- Specific triggers to homelessness;
  - Accommodation part of employment contract
  - Accommodation no longer suitable (family reunification)
  - Informal arrangements for temporary stay with acquaintances
  - Lack of affordable housing options

### **Domestic violence (n=8, 15%)**

This category comprised of eight participants, all women, whose experience of homelessness is a consequence of domestic violence from within their home. Almost all of the participants contacted one charity related to domestic violence or women's refuge for help with accommodation. They all had some experience of sofa surfing or accessing domestic violence refuges before being made homeless. One participant stated she had experienced homelessness before moving in with her partner, where she then had to leave again due to domestic violence.

Key characteristics of this group were:

- All women
- Domestic violence is the primary reason for entering homelessness
- Majority of the group's last stable home was in PRS
- All reliant on some form of temporary accommodation e.g. of sofa surfing or staying in domestic violence refuges before presenting as homeless

### **'Locked out' of housing market (n=7, 13%)**

Across all seven cases in this category, the participants lived in their family home for the majority of their lives. They either entered homelessness immediately upon departure from their family home or after one or two short term alternative accommodation(s). These short-term living arrangements included sofa surfing, emergency accommodation and living in a partner's home. None of the participants had experience of renting privately before entering homelessness. Their trajectory into homelessness was slightly more multifaceted. For some, departing from their family home was due to family breakdown. For other participants, the reasons were linked to space issues, such as downsizing or pregnancy, leading to a lack of accommodation.

Key characteristics of this group were:

- No experience of living independently
- Specific triggers to homelessness included conflict and/or overcrowding in family home, newborn child , and difficulties accessing PRS

### **Precarious housing history (n=3, 6%)**

For those categorised as having a precarious housing history, the primary reason for leaving their homes was due to relationship or family breakdown. However, before this point they generally had a stable, long-term housing history from between 3–5 years. Once the relationship or family breakdown happened, they were much more reliant on informal arrangements with friends or relatives on a temporary basis before entering emergency accommodation. For one participant in this group, they had previously been in Direct Provision and had a relatively stable housing arrangement before moving to Dublin in search of employment. It was here they relied on informal arrangements with their friend before having to enter emergency accommodation once their family joined them in Dublin.

The key characteristics of this group were:

- Broadly stable housing history in PRS with some degree of housing instability in the past
- Greater reliance on informal arrangements
- History of moving in and out of family home over the years

## Appendix D: Help seeking and supports

Table 13: Number of people who contacted supports

Did you contact anyone or any person/service for support before you lost your home?	(n)	%
Yes	45	87%
No	7	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 14: Organisations contacted by participants

Organisation	(n)
Focus Ireland	10
Dublin City Council (DCC)	9
Threshold	5
Peter McVerry Trust	3
St Vincent de Paul (SVP)	3
Women's refuge/DV charities	3
Local Church	2
Crosscare	2
Other <sup>26</sup>	8

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26 These organisations were mentioned by one participant: Redcross, Fingal County council, Tallaght Homeless Advice Unit, Park Gate Street, TD (politician), Dun Laoghaire Council, Citizen Advice.

## Appendix E: HAP

Table 15: Experience of HAP

Do you have any experience looking for HAP accommodation?	(n)	%
Yes	39	75%
No	13	25%
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 16: Properties applied for with HAP

How many places have you applied or?	(n)	%
More than 100	18	46%
More than 50	7	18%
More than 20	7	18%
1 to 3	3	8%
More than 10	2	5%
6 to 10	1	3%
4 to 5	1	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 17: Property viewings with HAP

How many viewings have you gone to?	(n)	%
1 to 3	19	46%
0	11	37%
More than 20	4	8%
6 to 10	3	6%
4 to 5	1	2%
More than 10	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>



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