

Evaluation of Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation Service

Executive Summary

FOCUS
Ireland

**Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.**

Dr Sarah Sheridan
Independent Researcher



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Abbreviations

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CBA	Cost Benefit Analysis
CCA	Creative Community Alternatives (Tusla)
CIS	Crisis Intervention Service
COSS	Community of Schools and Services Model
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DHLGH	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
EOHS	Emergency Out of Hours Service
HSE	Health Services Executive
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NVR	Non-Violent Resistance
PPFS	Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (Tusla)
Tusla	Tusla – The Child and Family Agency

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About the Author

Dr Sarah Sheridan is an Independent Researcher and Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Foreword

Focus Ireland commissioned Dr Sarah Sheridan to carry out an evaluation of its youth family mediation service to assess whether the service has been meeting the needs of young people and their families. We set up the service in 2016 to address what our experience and research had told us was a leading cause of youth homelessness – family conflict. The overarching aim of the evaluation was to find out if the service is an effective, efficient and cost-effective approach to addressing family conflict and thus prevent young people leaving home prematurely, being taken into the care of the state and subsequently being placed at-risk of homelessness. Focus Ireland has worked with young people and their families for many decades and has seen how family conflict, coupled with a lack of tailored support services, can have devastating consequences. It is our view that if the right interventions are used to support families who are experiencing conflict then youth homelessness can be greatly reduced. And it is not just our view. As this evaluation report demonstrates, national and international research studies have shown consistently that family conflict is a key trigger of homelessness among young people. Moreover, it also has been acknowledged in numerous homeless strategies published in this country over the past 20 years. But sadly, not nearly enough has been done to implement policies and practices to address it and consequently youth homelessness has been steadily increasing in Ireland over the past decade.

What this evaluation report highlights, and what we have long suspected, is that by supporting young people and their families who are experiencing conflict to engage in mediation, crisis situations can be averted, damaged relationships can be repaired and the potential risk of homelessness greatly reduced. This is very positive news and points to the need to invest more in such services so that the worrying trend of increasing youth homelessness can be halted. It is encouraging that homeless prevention interventions, such as mediation, are emphasised in the government's current youth homelessness strategy. However, with less than one year left to implement the strategy there have been no concrete commitments made by the government to invest in prevention services.

One thing we must not forget is that youth homelessness is different from adult homelessness. To state the obvious, young people are not adults, even if they are legally so at 18 years of age. They have not acquired the personal, social and life skills that make independent living possible or even appropriate. Young adulthood is a time of great developmental change – cognitive, social and emotional – and it is imperative that this

developmental process is not jeopardised by the traumatic experience of homelessness. As such, youth homelessness is not just about a loss of stable housing, rather it is the loss of a home in which young people were embedded in dependent relationships, relationships they need to make a successful transition to adulthood. When young people are cut off from natural supports and social relations with caregivers, family, friends, and community, their experience of adolescence is interrupted. As a result, young people who are homeless face barriers to transitioning into adulthood in a secure and supported way. It adversely affects their educational outcomes, their employment prospects, their access to housing and, most importantly, their relationships and social networks. This is why prevention measures, such as mediation, are so critical. We must do all we can to support families so that young people can remain at home for as long as possible, if this is at all possible.

As mentioned, in recent years, the number of young people accessing homeless services has been increasing at an alarming rate. In the most recent homelessness data published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, young people between the age of 18–24 accounted for 17% (1,810) of all adults accessing emergency accommodation. This data does not include young people under the age of 18 years nor does it include the significant number of young people who are homeless but are not accessing adult homeless services out of fear. Unless a concerted effort is made to direct resources towards youth homeless prevention services, it seems highly likely that this worsening trend will continue and more young people will be subjected to the trauma of homelessness.

Of course, family conflict is not the only factor leading to youth homelessness and mediation is certainly not a panacea. As this evaluation makes clear, the broader legislative and policy paradigm within which the mediation service sits is inadequate and much more needs to be done to address wider systemic and structural factors, such as poverty, social exclusion and a lack of coordination between the state actors who are tasked with supporting young people and families who are struggling. This evaluation report includes wide-ranging recommendations. Perhaps the most critical recommendation is that government substantially increase investment and resources to support initiatives, such as mediation services and family support services, which are in line with the already stated priority objectives in the current Youth Homelessness Strategy. Failure to do so would represent a missed opportunity. Youth homelessness is a solvable problem. And as this evaluation report makes clear, mediation is part of the solution.

We are very thankful to the funders of the youth mediation service, including Horizon Therapeutics, Tusla and a private Irish family foundation. Special thanks to Audrey Warren and Paula Byrne in Tulsa for their support of the service since inception. Thanks also to Dr Sarah Sheridan for producing an excellent report and Focus Ireland Mediators Kristyna Alessandrini and Erin O'Brien for their support of the evaluation process and the great work they do with young people and their families. And lastly, but most importantly, we are very grateful to every young person and their family members who participated in this evaluation and who so generously gave their time and shared their experiences.

Neil Forsyth

Head of Youth Services, Focus Ireland



Executive summary

This evaluation aimed to assess whether the Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation service meets the needs of young people and their families, has a positive impact, achieves its original objectives, operates efficiently and cost-effectively, and adds value to the broader service landscape.

Background

Family conflict has been consistently identified in both national and international research studies as one of the leading causes of homelessness for young people (Mayock *et al.*, 2014; Gaetz *et al.*, 2016; Mayock and Parker, 2017; Maphosa and Mayock, 2025). This conflict is often compounded or exacerbated by structural disadvantages, such as family unemployment or underemployment, neighbourhood deprivation, trauma, experiences of care or residential instability, discrimination, early disengagement from education and unmet support needs, including mental health issues (Gaetz, 2014; Watts *et al.*, 2015; Mayock and Parker, 2017). Additionally, when a young person becomes homeless at a young age, their support needs are likely to intensify as they face compounded trauma, victimisation, worsening health and mental health challenges, and in some cases, these adverse experiences can lead to prolonged and unresolved homelessness that persists into adulthood (Mayock and Parker, 2017).

Youth family mediation services aim to prevent homelessness by addressing family conflict and discord, providing a structured environment where disputes can be resolved quickly and amicably, allowing the young person to stay in the family home (MacKenzie, 2018; Sohn and Gaetz, 2020; FEANTSA, 2021). While there is limited examples and research evidence on the impact of youth family mediation services in preventing youth homelessness, initial results are compelling. For example, the Geelong Project in Australia has seen a 40 percent reduction in young people entering homelessness and 20 percent reduction in early school leaving (MacKenzie, 2018). This has inspired other mediation services such as Upstream Cymru in Wales (Mackie *et al.*, 2021b) and Upstream Canada (Sohn and Gaetz, 2020) both of which are demonstrating positive early results. These services work closely with the school system and other service partners through

a ‘Community of Schools and Youth Services’ (COSS) model, which brings together multiple services under a shared vision to achieve collective impact (Kania and Cramer, 2011; MacKenzie, 2018).

Youth homelessness in Ireland: data and policy context

Youth homelessness has increased significantly in recent years in Ireland. According to monthly homelessness data published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the number of young people aged between 18 and 24 years residing in Section-10 funded emergency accommodation has increased by 330 percent across the last decade – from 418 young people in June 2014 to 1,798 in January 2025 (DHLGH, various years). These increases are related to the high numbers of young people entering homelessness combined with the relatively low rates of exits into housing (Maphosa and Mayock, 2025).

Ireland’s *2023–2025 Youth Homelessness Strategy* marks a renewed government commitment to addressing the housing and support needs of young people, following a prolonged policy gap (Government of Ireland, 2022). The strategy highlights the importance of homelessness prevention, and sets out “to strengthen support structures for young people and families who are experiencing domestic conflict and breakdown” (Government of Ireland, 2022: 61). The strategy also promotes inter-agency collaboration to support young people, including “enhanced connectivity” between local authorities and Tusla – The Child and Family Agency (*ibid.*, 2022: 61). Similarly, early intervention is a cornerstone of Tusla’s recent strategic and organisational objectives including in its *2024–2026 Corporate Plan* (Tusla, 2023).

Despite these policy commitments to prevention and early intervention, investment in homelessness prevention in Ireland is deemed “insufficient” by international experts (Baptista and Marlier, 2019: 117) and does not have a legislative footing as seen in the UK. For example, prevention services only accounted for 5 per cent of overall homelessness services expenditure in 2024 (O’Sullivan et al., 2025). Rather than resourcing and expanding targeted prevention efforts, a crisis-led service response to homelessness has continued.

Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation service overview

Focus Ireland launched its Youth Family Mediation service in Dublin in 2016, with initial funding from philanthropic sources. The service was established in response to a research recommendation from a study on youth homelessness commissioned by Focus Ireland (Mayock et al., 2014). Since 2018, Tusla has funded a mediator position, utilising social work referral channels with the goal of preventing young people from entering the care system. In 2023, Focus Ireland added two additional mediator positions, responding to referrals from the community and youth service systems to support young people at risk of homelessness or entering care due to family conflict.

The service's referral channels have evolved over time, influenced by funding sources and service need. Initially, it was designed to address family conflict at a crisis stage, responding to referrals from crisis intervention services working with young people already experiencing homelessness. However, as referrals began to come through community social work channels, the service adapted to incorporate early intervention alongside crisis intervention, depending on the specific needs of each case. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing number of referrals have come through the Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) in response to reports of school absenteeism.

Focus Ireland uses a facilitative mediation model, which differs from legal mediation models used in court settings (such as those for access or maintenance). This approach guides parties through structured dialogue, utilising open-ended questions, clarifying issues, summarising key points, and generating potential solutions for families. Participation in the mediation process is voluntary, and all individuals must choose to engage willingly. The family is viewed as a unit, with the underlying cause of conflict seen not as the fault of any one individual but as a dynamic within the family system. A non-judgmental approach is maintained throughout the intervention process.

Between 2016 and late 2024, the service supported **148 young people** and their families across the Dublin region, including surrounding counties such as Kildare and Wicklow. The majority of young people involved were aged between 15 and 17 years.

Methodology

The methodology for this evaluation was primarily qualitative, involving semi-structured interviews with six parents, two young people, and six key stakeholders – all of whom played a significant role in the design and delivery of the service, representing both Focus Ireland and Tusla. The evaluation also included a quantitative analysis of service-level data from 2016 to 2022 (n=114), examining age of young person, case duration, primary reasons for referral, living situations, and recorded outcomes. Throughout all stages of the research, a dedicated, multi-disciplinary research advisory committee provided guidance and feedback to the researcher. This committee included experts in social work, social policy, child-centred methodology, and an international researcher.

A strict research ethical protocol was implemented and maintained across each stage of the study, which prioritised and safeguarded the needs of the research subjects above all else. Enhanced safeguards were implemented for the participating young people. All interviews were transcribed, anonymised and systematically analysed using NVivo software. It was challenging to recruit families into the study – perhaps because they did wish to revisit the conflict or young people had entered adulthood and therefore less likely to engage. However among the families who did participate, the information they shared was extremely rich, detailed and insightful.

Key findings

Across the primary data collection with both families and stakeholders, a number of overlapping themes emerged. While the stakeholders and family data are treated separately in the full report to offer detailed insight into each cohort, the findings in this executive summary are combined for conciseness.

1 Positive impact of service on families

The evaluation finds that the service has had a uniquely positive impact on the families it supported. Through ongoing engagement with the mediator, family communication improved and conflict significantly decreased. This was achieved through structured dialogue and tailored strategies or techniques provided by the mediator. Families cited several effective examples, including fostering empathy and compassion among family members, encouraging kind gestures, ensuring all family members operated under a shared agreement on how to interact, utilising strategies for de-escalating conflict, and align parents / guardians in their messaging, among others.

While both families and key stakeholders recognise that improvements in family conflict are not always linear (with one mother describing it as “one step forward, two steps back”), the mediation process was found to contribute to greater harmony within the family home. Specific conflict points, such as drug and alcohol use, staying out late, and non-school attendance, were addressed and explored during the sessions.

“Like, I am not joking, that women [the mediator] had a profound effect on my life, she really did, and there’s very few people...there’s very few people that I have had during my life who have made an impression.” – Mother No. 4

In terms of homelessness prevention outcomes, stakeholders noted that the service had helped prevent some young people from leaving home prematurely and/or avoided the breakdown of care placements. Among the six families interviewed, one young person who was at high risk of leaving home due to escalating family conflict was, according to his interview, happily remaining in the family home beyond his final school exams. This outcome was attributed directly to the mediator’s work.

However, when it comes to preventing homelessness on a larger scale, the lack of comprehensive service-level data makes it difficult to definitively claim that the service prevents homelessness for all the families it has worked with. This challenge is compounded by the difficulty in measuring what constitutes ‘success,’ as this can vary from family to family. Additionally, the baseline service-level data did not clearly indicate how many of the young people were at heightened risk of homelessness or entering care when they first engaged in the mediation process.

What became more evident in the interview data was that the mediation process helped prevent some young people at risk of school expulsion from disengaging, with the mediator sometimes liaising directly with the school principal. For other young people, the mediator facilitated transitions to alternative forms of education or training. This focus on education is likely to have a positive impact on the young person’s future education and employment prospects as well as residential stability.

2 Non-judgemental, impartial approach yielded a unique service offering

Families described the Youth Family Mediation service as more effective than other services they had engaged with, many of which spanned social work, youth work, and mental health services. Specifically, the Youth Family Mediation service was seen as more flexible and empathetic, offering an impartial approach that included the voices of all family members (and occasionally extended relatives, when appropriate). It was also viewed as less intimidating than interventions from other services, such as social work. The delivery of mediation in the family home was particularly appreciated, as it allowed the service to meet families in their own environment, which was perceived as more comfortable and less clinical compared to office settings.

The young people valued that the intervention was not framed as an attempt to “fix” them or label them as “the black sheep.” Similarly, parents appreciated not being stigmatised as “bad parents” and valued the opportunity to be heard, with the mediator meeting families “where they were at.” The mediator tailored strategies and solutions to the unique circumstances and dynamics of each family, rather than applying a generic, “one-size-fits-all” approach. As one mother shared, the mediator “had no agenda but to listen to us and help.” The strategies proposed to families were often a process of trial and error, based on their feedback, with the mediator helping each family find their own resolution to the conflict.

3 Effective interagency collaboration

The evaluation found there to be effective and productive collaboration and cooperation between Focus Ireland and Tusla. This was not just based on the funding partnership of one mediator position which involved regular meetings to review referrals and service throughput, but it also extended to strong cooperation between all mediators and community social work channels. This allowed, for example, the mediator and the local Tusla Child and Family Network Support Coordinator to coordinate service interventions, ensuring the best possible outcomes for the family.

There were instances where mediators actively engaged with schools to negotiate potential suspensions or expulsions, or, if all other options were exhausted, to help secure alternative education or training opportunities, with some success. Further, mediators often became the “go to” professional supporting families and helped coordinate different services that were already engaging with the family. In other cases, the mediator served as a gateway to other essential support services, such as family therapy in the case of families dealing with complex trauma.

4 Early intervention or crisis intervention?

This evaluation identified two distinct pathways into the Youth Family Mediation service: early prevention and crisis intervention. These pathways reflect the evolution of the service and the changing referral channels linked to different funding streams.

Early prevention typically involves a younger age cohort and connects mediation support with families before a crisis escalates, while crisis intervention tends to address young people on the brink of entering care or homelessness, where family dynamics are already in severe crisis. Both families and stakeholders agreed that mediation is most effective when provided early, when communication is more open, and when trauma has not yet compounded. Additionally, early intervention tends to result in shorter case duration, allowing the mediator to move through more cases in a given year, which is crucial given the high demand for the service. In early intervention cases, it was found that there is less of a need to engage in pre-mediation engagement to establish trust and rapport, making the overall process more efficient.

However, the evaluation found that, likely due to the high demand for social work and other services for older teenagers in crisis, mediators often receive cases that could be characterised as *crisis intervention*. These cases tend to involve high-conflict situations with older teens, where mediation is frequently seen by stakeholders as a last resort and typically implemented after other service interventions have been unsuccessful.

International research highlights the effectiveness of ‘Upstream’ prevention to prevent homelessness at scale, particularly when services target those most at risk at an early stage. Programs like the Geelong Project and Upstream Cymru, which implement screening tools in school systems to identify at-risk youth before crises deepen, have proven successful in this regard (MacKenzie, 2018; Mackie, 2021b).

5 Limited reach and operational challenges

Interviewed stakeholders openly discussed the various challenges facing the service. One key issue highlighted was that the Youth Family Mediation service remains a niche offering within the broader context of steadily rising youth homelessness rates, which has significantly limited its scope and impact. As a result, growing waiting lists have become a concern, with the potential for conflict to escalate during the wait or for families to disengage before the process even begins. Both stakeholders and families emphasised the added difficulties of carrying out mediation after communication has broken down or trauma has been compounded, making it particularly challenging for the service to operate effectively.

Secondly, the limited availability of mediation training in Ireland and the corresponding shortage of skilled staff for recruitment have led to service gaps and potential staff burnout. To address these challenges, Focus Ireland provides training for newly recruited staff in collaboration with experienced mediators, allowing them to shadow until they acquire the necessary skills and experience to work independently. While this approach helps manage job vacancies, it does impact the efficiency of the service, particularly in the early stages. This issue may also pose a challenge to scaling up the program.

A third challenge reported by families was the branding of the mediation service under Focus Ireland, a well-known homelessness service provider. This association caused confusion and potentially contributed to a sense of stigma when accessing the service. However, once families met with the mediator, they gained a clearer understanding of the process, and this concern was quickly alleviated.

Lastly, as previously mentioned, there were issues with data collection practices within the service, which were linked to staff changes and inconsistent or missing data, particularly when tracking outcomes. Additionally, measuring success in a service like this can be inherently difficult, as what constitutes success in mediation can vary significantly from one family to another, with improvements often not being linear or clear-cut. This challenge is compounded by the fact that early intervention and crisis intervention likely require different metrics for success.

6 Mediation as a cost-saving service

There are concerted efforts at policy-making level to ensure the efficient, effective, and evidence-based use of public funds, as outlined in publications like the 2012 *Public Spending Code* (DPER, 2012). Given the exceptionally high costs of both homelessness and care provision in Ireland – especially for children’s residential care – the question of whether services such as this can save money for the exchequer becomes even more significant (not overlooking the trauma and distress homelessness or care placements can inflict on the lives of young people and their families).

Focus Ireland estimates the annual cost of employing a family mediator to be around **€81,000**. This total includes the mediator’s salary, travel expenses, organisational costs, training, supervision, administrative expenses, and premises costs. Based on service-level data, each mediator handles an average of **13.8 cases** per year, meaning the cost per case is approximately **€5,869.56**, with each case typically concluding within a 12-month period.

There is limited and up-to-date published data on the costs of care per child in Ireland, with the most recent figures on residential care costs being from a 2019 Tusla Spending Review (Branigan and Madden, 2020). According to this report, the weekly cost per child in Tusla-owned residential care is **€7,511** (Branigan and Madden, 2020: 52). The report also provides weekly averages of €6,469 for private residential care and €4,599 for voluntary-run care services. Taking an average across these three categories, the weekly cost per child in residential care comes to **€6,193**, which amounts to an annual cost of **€322,921.60 per child**. At the time of writing, no figures were available for the costs of foster care or relative foster care placements.

If a mediator were able to prevent just one young person on their caseload from entering residential care, **this could potentially save the state €317,052 annually**. However, this saving does not account for the additional costs of other services that may be required if the young person does not enter care, such as youth work, community services, or mental health supports. Of course these estimates are both simplified and limited due to lack of available costing figures and the use of hypothetical scenarios but nonetheless, it is highly likely substantial savings would be made.

Conclusion

The Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation service has proven effective in reducing family conflict, improving communication, and repairing relationships – leading to long-term, meaningful benefits for family life, as highlighted by interviews conducted for this evaluation. Both parents and young people described mediation as unique compared to other services, offering impartial, empathetic, and non-judgmental support that is tailored to the specific dynamics and circumstances of each family. Crucially, families expressed feeling heard and understood, sometimes for the first time.

In some cases, the mediation support has successfully prevented young people from experiencing homelessness, entering care, or facing other unstable housing situations. There is also evidence that mediation helped some young people stay in school, while for others, it facilitated a transition to alternative education or training. However, due to a lack of comprehensive data, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions, especially when compared to initiatives like the Geelong Project in Australia, which incorporates rigorous data collection throughout its operations.

The collaboration between Focus Ireland and Tusla has proven to be effective and productive, with the mediator playing a key role in connecting families to additional support services when needed. While the mediation service provides significant value to those it serves, its overall scope and impact remain limited, as it operates as a small, niche service offering, and is dwarfed by the wider scale of youth homelessness.

Additionally, the service's evolution and the shifting funding streams for each mediator's role have led to two distant strands of *early intervention* and *crisis intervention*. While both approaches are valuable and address important needs, if the service aims to position itself as a homelessness prevention initiative, focusing on early intervention would likely prove to be a more effective, efficient, and impactful future direction.

Recommendations

A detailed list of recommendations, along with the identification of relevant stakeholders, can be found at the end of this report. A summary of these recommendations is provided below.

In the **short term**, it is recommended that:

- › Focus Ireland (and Tusla) conduct a workshop to clarify the service's **core priorities or theory of change**, determining whether it should focus on early intervention or crisis intervention.
- › **Data collection practices** within the service be **overhauled, expanded, and standardised** to ensure accurate monitoring and outcomes tracking, demonstrating the service's effectiveness.
- › For tracking outcomes and measuring success, mediators should conduct a **dedicated post-mediation feedback session** when a case is closing to capture softer outcomes, or follow up with families who disengaged early.
- › Provide **clear and accessible information** on the nature of the service at the point of referral to demystify the process for families and encourage continued engagement.

In the **medium term**, it is recommended that:

- › Focus Ireland invest in **upskilling a cohort of staff** with relevant mediation qualifications to build a future pipeline of qualified mediators within the organisation, ensuring a skilled workforce is available when vacancies in the mediation service arise, while also integrating mediation practices into other areas of the organisation.
- › Focus Ireland provide existing mediators with additional tools and training on managing **stress and self-care** strategies.
- › Focus Ireland **strengthen international partnerships** and connections with mediation services, potentially informing the development of a future 'Upstream Ireland', potentially with mediation supports integrated into school systems targeting the most at-risk cohorts (see Mackie *et al.*, 2021b).
- › While mediation in the home is ideal (and should continue), if families choose to engage in neutral locations, the space should be modified to feel less clinical and more informal.

In the **long term**, it is recommended:

- › To prevent youth homelessness on the scale needed, the government **should significantly scale up investment and resources** directed towards initiatives like Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation, in line with the prevention priority actions in the *2023–2025 Youth Homelessness Strategy*.
- › A **greater allocation of budgetary resources within Tusla** should be directed toward targeted family mediation supports under its Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support (PPFS) services, enabling this and similar initiatives to expand and be more widespread and embedded within community social work channels.
- › If the youth family mediation service is to be scaled up, it is recommended that a version of '**Upstream Ireland**' be developed. This could expand and deepen cross-sectoral collaboration to better meet the needs of at risk young people and their families. Screening initiatives could facilitate early intervention for young people identified as being at the highest risk of homelessness, helping to directly address the ongoing rise in youth homelessness.
- › That the government and state agencies **invest in data initiatives** to enhance and integrate large data sets to inform homelessness prevention, such as official homelessness data (Department of Housing and Dublin Region Homeless Executive), small area population statistics and Pobal HP Deprivation Index (Central Statistics Office), education data (Department of Education), and other relevant data sources. This could aid in targeting specific schools or areas, as demonstrated in Upstream Cymru, for example.

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