



Focus Ireland
Budget 2019
a 'Budget for
homelessness'

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.
focusireland.ie

FOCUS
Ireland

Focus Ireland
Budget 2019
a 'Budget for
homelessness'

Introduction

Focus Ireland knows the devastating effect the homelessness crisis is having on the nearly 10,000 people who are homeless as our organisation works every day to support families and people who are homeless or at risk.

We have also seen real proof that the Irish housing system is broken as hundreds of thousands more people are caught up in the wider housing crisis of rocketing rents, overcrowding and evictions. The scale of the crisis is such that everyone knows someone who has lost their home, is struggling with rent/mortgages or is homeless or at risk of losing their home. There are also many more people trapped renting as they can't afford to buy and this means even more people are competing to secure a rented home to keep a roof over their heads.

There has been much talk that Budget 2019 has to be a 'housing and homelessness budget'. It can be easy to dismiss this as part of the annual public theatre around the budgetary process. However, there is growing sentiment that the crisis has reached a tipping point where it will either spiral further out of control OR Ireland can start to get to grips with this issue by taking some specific actions alongside a shift in policy.

We know that homelessness can be prevented and also overcome. There has been much good work carried out by Focus Ireland – and others in partnership with the State, without which the crisis would be much worse. But the harsh reality is that the Government is still further away than ever in terms of addressing the scale of the crisis. Focus Ireland manages to secure a home for at least one family at day but the very same day three more families become homeless so the crisis deepens.

This situation will continue without a shift in policy that will address some of the problems with the Rebuilding Ireland strategy. The crisis has moved on in the last two years however the government strategy has not kept pace. Not all of these wider policy changes are budgetary but there are some specific actions the Government can take on October 9th that will help kick-start the process and improve the situation.

Fine Gael has been in Government since 2011 and yet a frequent comment on the crisis is that 'it will take time'. However, the nearly 4,000 children homeless today don't have time. They are children today and need a place to call home. As do their families and many other people who are homeless or at risk. Focus Ireland has outlined **14 key actions** in this submission which we are calling for the Government to include in Budget 2019, which will:

- › **increase housing supply**
- › **prevent more families/individuals from becoming homeless**
- › **help more people to secure a home and exit homelessness.**

Housing and rental supply

The key to tackling the housing and homelessness crisis is to increase access to – and delivery of – social housing along with affordable and secure rental accommodation. Current policies are not delivering the much needed increase across these areas. We have called for the following actions in Budget 2019 to address these issues.

Social housing

The supply of this housing remains the cornerstone of Government homeless strategy, as set out in Rebuilding Ireland. While it is true that most of the targets in Rebuilding Ireland are being met, the fact that the housing and homeless crisis continues to deepen clearly shows these targets are not enough.

In making these proposals we are conscious that, in many cases, lack of finance is not the only factor holding back delivery. However, without the clear allocation of resources there is less incentive for policy makers to address the land management, planning and logistical issues that also hold back provision of adequate supply.

Rebuilding Ireland relies far too heavily on much of the social housing being built by the private sector and then acquired by the State as social housing through Part V, leasing or other schemes. However, this is not working as not enough housing is being built to meet the demand from people who want to buy their own home, investors who want to purchase a house as a rental property and the rest of the market.

As such it has become crystal clear that the Rebuilding Ireland target for only 15% of the '134,000 new social housing solutions' to be directly built by the State is no longer adequate. We are calling for two specific measures in Budget 2019 that will help to increase provision of social housing through direct build by the State and by Approved Housing Bodies such as Focus Ireland.

1 RECOMMENDATION: The existing target is to deliver 7716 builds in 2020. Focus Ireland is calling for an extra €400 million to be earmarked in Budget 2019 to deliver an additional 2,000 social homes to be delivered in 2020.

2 RECOMMENDATION: Approve a €1.3 billion borrowing capacity for the Housing Finance Agency to finance construction of an estimated 6,500 additional new build social homes by 2021.

3 RECOMMENDATION: Focus Ireland is also calling for the introduction of a vacant home tax to help bring units back into the active housing supply.

Private rental accommodation

Ireland is severely lacking in affordable rental options. Households on low incomes can't compete effectively in the private rented sector, and often end up saddled with unsustainable rent levels. Many low-income households find themselves in a double bind: not eligible for supports that would enable them to pay their rent, but not able to secure home ownership either. These are the households at significant risk of homelessness – we know that 68% of families who become homeless had previously been in the private rented sector.¹

Rebuilding Ireland had committed to introducing an affordable rental scheme. This commitment is now to be progressed using a cost rental model targeting middle income households on publicly owned land in Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs), a congested and slow mechanism. While the original commitment was to have been delivered by the third quarter 2017, the most recent status report indicates that this model of provision is currently only a pilot stage.

Focus Ireland believes that some of the larger Approved Housing Bodies (AHB's) are keen to play a role in helping to provide affordable rental homes. However, while some AHB's have the capacity to deliver, they need some initial financial support. Under a cost rental model, it may be possible to access this funding through European institutions. To facilitate such lending a policy decision to establish an affordable/cost rental tenure is required, as originally proposed in Rebuilding Ireland.

4 RECOMMENDATION: Financial support of €50 million to be provided to underpin the capacity of approved AHB's to deliver affordable rental homes.

¹ Focus Ireland (Forthcoming) 'Causes of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region: An Analysis of Quarterly Data 2016–7' Dublin: Focus Ireland.

Family homelessness

The latest figures² from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government show that there are 1698 families in homeless accommodation in Ireland. This is an 18% increase in 12 months and a 61% increase since this government took office in May 2016.

1307 of the 1698 families experiencing homelessness are in the Dublin Region. When a family presents to the Dublin local authorities and is assessed as homeless under the legislation, it has become the practice in many cases for the family to be asked to find their own emergency accommodation, which will then be paid for by the local authority. This practice is known as 'self-accommodation'.

We estimate that well over 250 families who are currently 'self-accommodating' are made responsible for finding their own emergency accommodation each night in Dublin. While families in Family Hubs and in hotels with long-term contracts are, in general, allocated to a case manager or key worker, these self-accommodating families, who are in the most vulnerable situation, are generally not allocated such support.

The support from a case manager would not only assist these families deal with the immediate challenges of finding nightly accommodation, they would support the families in planning their exit from homelessness. With the support of a case manager, families are more likely to leave homelessness to a secure tenancy. Providing a Case Manager would help reduce the likelihood of families sleeping rough. Focus Ireland is funded by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive to provide support to families who are homeless as we are currently supporting 472 families in Dublin.

5 RECOMMENDATION: Provide funding for a Case Manager for every family that is homeless.

6 RECOMMENDATION: Establish Family support teams in all major cities to ensure all families have a case manager wherever they are.

² August 2018

Preventing homelessness

Focus Ireland continues to advocate strongly for an increased commitment to policies and services that prevent homelessness. The number of individuals and households experiencing homelessness continues to rise. While the State has invested in some welcome preventative measures, Focus Ireland believes more targeted measures are required.

Voluntary organisations and local authorities are supporting more households out of homelessness than ever before. In 2017, over 3,000 households were supported out of homelessness. While a number of welcome measures have been taken to prevent homelessness, the homelessness crisis cannot be tackled effectively without a more strategic investment in prevention. One of the factors holding this back is lack of dedicated funding. For example, in 2016 over €96m was spent on providing services for people who are homeless in Dublin, but less than 5% of this went on prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement supports.

Focus Ireland strongly believes that current investment in prevention needs to be maintained and supplemented by a new targeted strategy to increase impact. With the funding support of our corporate partners Bord Gais Energy, Focus Ireland piloted such an intervention in Dublin 15. Working with the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection, over 165 families relying on Rent Supplement were contacted, and referred to clinics run by trained prevention workers. Three quarters of these families had no previous contact with state funded prevention services. Nine in ten were supported to either maintain their current tenancy, or find a suitable alternative. Similar, innovative approaches to preventing homelessness need to be encouraged and explored.

Provide resources to enforce Rent Pressure Zones and rental legislation

There have been some welcome measures designed to protect tenants in the private rented sector in recent years but they have had little chance of making an impact in the absence of an enforcement mechanism. Measures such as Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) and legislative changes to protect tenants relying on income supports can easily be ignored by landlords because they know that there is no way of ensuring they are enforced. Even if they are caught not complying the penalties rogue landlords face are so much smaller than the gains they make by hiking up rents above the 4% RPZ limit.

For example, the absence of consequences for landlords in relation to RPZ regulations means that 'bad' landlords are free to ignore these regulations when re-letting, while compliant landlords lose out. Equally there is no effective system in place to ensure people relying on various housing support payments are not discriminated against by landlords. Focus Ireland believes that for the preventative measures already introduced and those planned in the forthcoming legislative session, to be effective it is vital that the Residential Tenancies Board must be resourced to monitor and enforce these policies; failure to fund enforcement is a false economy.

Investment in domestic violence services

Focus Ireland is calling for action in Budget 2019 to reduce the risk of domestic violence resulting in homelessness for the victims. Focus Ireland undertakes regular surveys of families becoming homeless; domestic violence is frequently cited as a contributory factor in becoming homeless. Domestic violence charities report that services have seen a significant cut to their funding from Tusla over the last number of years.

Rebuilding Ireland commits to providing an unspecified number of additional domestic violence refuge spaces, to be delivered in 2016–17, and this action is recorded as complete with the provision of funding for an additional eight units of emergency accommodation for families fleeing domestic violence.

Tusla is not required to provide a regular report on the number of families seeking and accessing accommodation in domestic violence refuges, as is the case in homeless services. Focus Ireland, in providing support to families who become homeless, believes this provision is inadequate to need, and calls for funding to double this level of output in Budget 2019.

7 RECOMMENDATION: Services responding to domestic violence have suffered considerable reductions in statutory funding; this Budget should restore that funding to enable a better response to families fleeing violence.

Housing support payments

Increase HAP levels and extend Homeless HAP to all RPZs

Where a household is homeless, they are eligible for Homeless HAP, which allows discretion about the amount of rent that can be paid to be up to 50% above the formal maximum. It also allows other crucial practical arrangements like provision of a deposit and the payment of rent in advance, which are essential to secure housing the current rental market. However, Homeless HAP is only available in the Dublin area. Only a 20% discretion above the formal maximum rent is available in other areas, making it more difficult to support households out of emergency accommodation. Homeless HAP should be available in all designed RPZs.

The formal maximum rent payable in all cases should be reviewed to better reflect market rents. There is growing evidence that the difference between the actual rent and the rent payable by HAP is being covered by tenants. This practice pushed households below the minimum income levels established by Supplementary Welfare Allowance, creates deep poverty and long-term housing insecurity.

8 RECOMMENDATION: Reduce the risk of homelessness by increasing Rent Supplement and Housing Assistance Payments to reflect market rents.

9 RECOMMENDATION: Budget 2019 to establish an 'innovative homeless prevention' fund of €500,000 to support targeted prevention campaigns.

Housing for vulnerable young people

Focus Ireland has welcomed the Rebuilding Ireland initiative to enable AHB's access Capital Assistance Scheme funding to provide homes for young people leaving state care. This initiative has the potential to have long-term impact, significantly reducing the risk of homelessness among a very vulnerable group. This requires investment that is both sufficient and sustained.

Last year, the Housing Minister noted that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government approach to this initiative was to 'monitor the demand and requirement for such housing' and to make allocations accordingly. This is a reasonable approach in the initial phases, but we need to not only manage the current crisis, but ensure that measures taken now contribute to preventing such crises in the future.

While young people leaving care are particularly vulnerable, the allocation process for social housing, which prioritises the length of time on the housing list (and number of dependents), militates against young people who are eligible actually getting access to social housing.

This initiative can help to build up a stock of social housing, in mixed tenure communities, for vulnerable young people, but to do that it needs to go beyond responding to immediate demand. Around 950 of the 6,000 adults who are homeless are under 25.

10 RECOMMENDATION: Focus Ireland recommends that 10% of CAS funding be ring-fenced for this purpose. Delivering 40–50 units each year.

Youth homelessness

Youth homelessness in Ireland is damaging to so many and persistently rising yet is mostly preventable. The number of young people aged 18–24 experiencing homelessness in Ireland has increased by 85% in the past three years. Housing First for Youth gives young people a home, and then provides them with individually-tailored aftercare support. It is a central part of our work nationally.

Expand Family Mediation services to prevent youth homelessness

The major study into youth homelessness in Ireland³ found that family conflict or arguments with carers were key factors in young people leaving home and becoming homeless. In some situations, where the conflict results from neglect or abuse, a permanent exit from the family home may be in the young person's best interest. However, for many young people and their families, reconciliation can be achieved with the support of family mediation, preventing homelessness at a critical juncture in the life of a vulnerable young person.

Focus Ireland, in collaboration with Tusla, launched its pilot Family Mediation service in Dublin in June 2016. The service successfully supports young people to return to the family home and to improve their relationships with family and carers. The referral system is of crucial importance in such services, and referral in this pilot was through the Tusla Crisis Intervention Service, which refers young people in emergency accommodation, or at serious

³ Mayoock P, Parker S. (2017) Living in Limbo, Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing, Dublin, Focus Ireland.

risk of homelessness, to the service. **In 2017, the service supported 22 teenagers at high risk of homelessness to stay in the family home.**

The service initially funded one mediator from private donations, with Tusla support in terms of governance and referral. Tusla has made the welcome move of funding an additional mediator in Dublin. However, the private funding for the original mediator is no longer available.

Successful family mediation can prevent a life-time of recurrent homelessness, but delayed intervention can be too late to achieve this outcome. The success of this intervention is clear and the next stage in its development should be consolidation of the existing service in Dublin and the extension of the service to other Tusla regions.

11 RECOMMENDATION: €250,000 to be provided to fund the continuation and development of mediation services.

Increase the effectiveness of Aftercare for vulnerable young people

Focus Ireland welcomes progress over the last number of years in establishing statutory rights to aftercare for young people leaving the care of the state; such support plays a vital role in preventing homelessness.

While Tusla has made welcome progress towards ensuring that every young care leaver who needs an aftercare worker is allocated one, this has often resulted in resources being stretched through increasing the caseload of aftercare workers.

To deliver an effective service, Focus Ireland aftercare services historically operated a caseload of 15–20 young people per aftercare worker; more recently some Tusla regions have required an increase in case load to 22–25, and caseloads extending 30 young people are not uncommon in some services. This is too high for the service to meet the needs of the more vulnerable care leavers that are at greatest risk of homelessness: particularly in a period where housing is so hard to secure this is a false economy. Focus Ireland’s experience, and that of internationally recognised good practice, indicates an optimum caseload of 15–20 young people per support worker, not least to enable the continuity of support that vulnerable young people need.

12 RECOMMENDATION: An upper limit of 20 young people per aftercare caseworker.

Reduce poverty through adequate social protection for people of working age

Ireland is in the midst of a crisis of homelessness, and poverty is a prime cause of homelessness. Basic welfare rates for people of working age were cut back considerably during the recession, and have not recovered since. The basic Jobseeker rate of €204.30 per week from 2009, adjusted for inflation, should now stand at €213.50, leaving those relying on social welfare incomes around €15.50 short in real terms.

Where a young person has the capacity to end homelessness, denying them the adult rate of social protection required to sustain independent living is counter-productive. To support successful exits from homelessness, young people should be entitled to the full adult rate of payment.

13 RECOMMENDATION: As a first step towards re-establishing an adequate level of social welfare payment, Focus Ireland calls for working age payments to be restored to their pre-crisis levels.

Health related homeless services

While funding of homeless services through Department of Housing Section 10 funding was largely frozen during the period of austerity budgets, funding from the Department of Health/HSE experienced massive cuts, in some cases of over 40%.

Severe reductions in HSE funding during the course of the recession placed a significant strain on the range of social care, mental health and physical health services which are essential in supporting people who are experiencing homelessness to exit to independent living. These cuts happened in parallel with a massive increase in the numbers of people who were homeless and an increase in the support needs of many groups.

To a large extent, these cuts were absorbed through wage cuts to the staff in the voluntary sector. While the public sector is going through a process of pay restoration, staff in voluntary sector services, particularly those funded by the HSE, have seen little pay restoration and, frequently, no increments for several years. This is leading to recruitment problems in front-line services, just when need is at its greatest.

While there has been an increase in the HSE Social Inclusion funding for homeless services in recent years, this is almost entirely going into new services. While these services, such as health supports to Housing First, are very welcome, this does not address legacy issues. There is an urgent need to increase the core funding levels from HSE social inclusion to homeless services in the 2019 budget.

Recruitment of mental health professionals is a key challenge for the health service. While the recently published first report of the Public Service Pay Commission found no evidence of general difficulties in attracting staff to the public service in general, the Commission did find evidence of difficulties in recruitment and retention in a number of health areas, most particularly in mental health. While the Commission noted a number of issues that impact upon health recruitment, it is clear that these issues are exacerbated by recruitment and retention difficulties. Poor mental health can be both a cause and effect of homelessness for young people. Poor mental health is also a significant factor in inhibiting successful transitions into a secure home and independent living. Ensuring that vulnerable young people can access the support they need to address mental health needs, and develop resilience, is therefore an important component of tackling homelessness among young people.

Similarly, research into the experience of families while they were homeless showed that parents were unable to obtain mental health supports for children who were experiencing very negative impacts of homelessness. Waiting times were so long that families had not yet received any support 6 months after leaving homelessness.

Mental health supports play a critically important role in preventing and addressing homelessness: poor mental health can result in homelessness, while failure to provide for mental health needs can undermine the impact of housing supports.

14 RECOMMENDATION: Increase the core funding levels from HSE social inclusion to homeless services in the 2019 budget to pre economic crisis levels.

Focus Ireland Head Office
9–12 High Street
Christchurch
Dublin 8

Tel 01 881 5900
LoCall 1850 204 205
Fax 01 881 5950
Email info@focusireland.ie

focusireland.ie
Registered charity
CHY 7220

FOCUS
Ireland

Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.