

Creating Trust and Participation in Homeless Services for Families and Children in Ireland



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An increasing number of homeless families and children in Ireland are accommodated in forms of emergency accommodation that are often substandard. There are currently no mechanisms for users of emergency homeless accommodation to meaningfully input into how it is designed or delivered. Focus Ireland took part in an EU-funded research project that facilitated a group of lone parents with experience of homelessness to develop recommendations to improve homeless services and engage with policymakers to advance them.

The latest monthly homelessness statistics for Ireland show that 5,830 children and 2,800 families are homeless. Family homelessness has risen sharply for over a decade, particularly in Dublin, Ireland's largest city and capital, and increasingly nationwide. Between July 2014 and August 2026, the number of homeless families rose by 738 per cent—from 334 to 2,800. Most of these families are becoming homeless for the first time because of evictions from the private rented sector. Many are headed by a lone parent caring for two or more children.

Families that become homeless are accommodated in short-term housing known as emergency accommodation. This accommodation is organised by the local authority (municipality) and can include hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, or dedicated 'Family Hubs' that are purpose-built or acquired to house the growing number of homeless families. The time spent in emergency accommodation varies. Most families exit within six months, but for many the period can be longer, sometimes a year or more.

Conditions in emergency accommodation vary because of the wide range of providers (some are private operators and others are homeless NGOs) and differing levels of support. Research undertaken by Focus Ireland with 52 families in emergency accommodation 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.*'

Emergency accommodation is a vital component of Ireland's (emergency) response to homelessness. Unfortunately, demand for this service will continue to rise as the housing crisis deepens and becomes increasingly entrenched. In that context, it is crucial that the service meets the needs of parents and children placed in vulnerable and traumatic situations. While the service is managed in partnership with homeless NGOs that have the expertise to support and advocate for most families, there is no mechanism through which the voices or opinions of the families themselves can be heard by the local authorities that provide the services.

For the last four years, Focus Ireland has participated in a Horizon 2020-funded project called Involve. A core objective of the project was to investigate the inclusion of marginalised groups in consultation processes relating to policy formation and public services in the areas of health, education, employment, and housing across eight European countries. Focus Ireland's role was to conduct research with a group of lone parents who had been through the homelessness system, explore their experiences of using housing and homelessness services, and co-produce recommendations for improvement.

The research was grounded in the PAHRCA (Participatory Action Human Rights and Capabilities Approach) methodology, which brings together participatory, human rights, and capability theory in a single research approach. The goal of PAHRCA is to empower people to understand and challenge the structures that cause their marginalisation and oppression through a process of co-producing knowledge and action. The research with lone parents, which involved in-person discussion groups over the course of two years, produced many recommendations in the areas of access to housing, service delivery and administration, and support needs.

Good research will reliably provide recommendations. However, getting those recommendations into the hands of the people that can effect change is a significant challenge for researchers and advocacy groups alike. With this in mind, Involve utilised a process referred to as 'cross-talks' to bring together key stakeholders to discuss the recommendations arising from the research. Several stakeholders in policy and politics were invited to attend an event at which the lone parents shared their "stories" of homelessness and offered their solutions. The stakeholders also shared their own "stories" about their understanding of and experience with the homelessness crisis in Ireland.

The event was a hugely positive experience for all attendees. Many stakeholders said it was their first experience of such an event and that hearing directly from people with lived experience of homelessness had a powerful impact.

The lone parents in attendance felt empowered by sharing their stories and greatly encouraged by the engagement of stakeholders in the room. They felt seen and heard.

The event culminated in an agreement by senior government officials to explore the implementation of one of the research recommendations: a support resource for parents and children living in emergency accommodation.

Several months later, this recommendation is being implemented by a working group that includes government officials and representatives from health, homelessness, and child-focused agencies and NGOs. The resource will provide parents entering emergency accommodation with a comprehensive and trauma-informed range of relevant information in both physical and online formats. It will be particularly useful when a parent does not have a keyworker or is waiting to be assigned one. The aim is for parents to be able to use this resource during a particularly difficult and uncertain time, helping them understand their options and take the first steps towards moving out of homelessness.

The development of this resource is not only a great success story for the Involve project and the lone parents themselves; it is also a hugely significant development for co-production, inclusion, and active, open public consultation in homeless services in Ireland more broadly. Regrettably, this type of consultation with people who use homeless services is generally absent from service design and delivery. The Involve project shows how valuable it can be for all stakeholders, not least the parents and children who will continue to enter emergency accommodation in the months and years to come.