

FOCUS IRELAND HOPES NEW ELECTORAL REFORMS CAN SUPPORT THEIR GOAL TO END HOMELESSNESS IN IRELAND

This article discusses Focus Ireland's aims to end homelessness in Ireland by leveraging recent electoral reforms made by the Irish Government. Through the launching of a 'Voter Registration Drive', Focus Ireland hope to empower people experiencing homelessness to engage politically and turn out at the upcoming local and EU elections. The article also highlights Focus Ireland's '4 Asks' of candidates in the upcoming elections – such as recommendations for building social housing, tailoring housing to needs, prioritising long-term homeless, and prioritising children's welfare.



By **Louise Bayliss**, Campaign Coordinator, Focus Ireland


INTRODUCTION

Ireland currently has a record number of people experiencing homelessness. The latest figures show that there were 13,841 people homeless at the end of February 2024¹, which sadly includes 4,170 children. Focus Ireland believe that by working in collaboration with politicians and using evidence based research, we can reverse this trend and work towards our goal of ending homelessness.

In a move towards a more inclusive democracy, Ireland has recently enacted innovative changes to its electoral legislation, aimed at enhancing accessibility to the electoral register and fostering greater participation in the democratic process. The reforms help to streamline the voter registration process, and also establish an Electoral Commission, an independent body which will offer unbiased information and ensure fairness and impartiality on elections. Focus Ireland is particularly pleased to see that the reforms simplify the voter registration process for people experiencing homelessness.

VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVE CAMPAIGN

To capitalise on these reforms, Focus Ireland has launched the Voter Registration Drive campaign. The campaign has two main objectives: to empower individuals and give agency back to people experiencing homelessness, and to create real political change to help end homelessness. The launch of the campaign was hosted by An Post in the historic GPO building and speakers on the day included Mike Allen

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¹ Monthly Homelessness Data, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, March 2024.

– Director of Advocacy and Research at Focus Ireland, Anna McHugh
– Head of Corporate Communications at An Post, and Art O’Leary – CEO of the newly established Electoral Commission. James Flanagan (20), a Lived Experience Ambassador for Focus Ireland also spoke at the event. He had recently registered at a registration drive and spoke about the simplicity of the process. He also stressed the importance of empowering people to use their vote to affect real changes to end homelessness and to engage with all marginalised groups.

At the heart of the Voter Registration Drive campaign lies a commitment to political mobilisation and social change. By mobilising a sizeable and powerful voter bloc, comprised of people with lived experiences of homelessness and people at risk of homelessness, the campaign aims to elevate homelessness as a top priority on the political agenda. Through active engagement with the democratic process, people who have experienced any form of housing precarity, can assert their agency and demand accountability from elected officials.

Focus Ireland will support political engagement by offering policy recommendations that we believe will make a difference to ending homelessness and will also better support people currently experiencing homelessness. Focus Ireland will remain apolitical during elections, but we will empower voters to meaningfully engage with candidates and to use their vote to support policies that would align with our common goals.

Ireland uses an electoral system based on proportional representation with a single transferrable vote (PR–STV), ensuring that every vote cast matters. Expanding access to political participation, we believe, will lead to a more inclusive society that recognises and supports the needs of all citizens and a future where every voice is heard, and every vote counts.

ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the most significant changes involves the simplification of voter registration through the offering of an online process. Previously, registration procedures for inclusion on the electoral register involved deadline dates and it were further complicated in cases where individuals had no permanent address at which to receive the registration form. This meant that a person who missed the initial deadline, would need to register on the supplementary register and to do this, they would need to provide proof of identity and address a local police station. The cumbersome bureaucratic procedures were a major barrier for voter registration for people experiencing homelessness, especially given that they had no fixed address to provide. This was a severe form of disenfranchisement for marginalised people, excluding those most in need of state services from the democratic process.

The implementation of The Electoral Reform Act 2022 has massively improved the registration process. The simplified online registration process has made registering to vote more accessible and allows staff to support people to register online. The only requirements to use the online process is for someone to provide:

1. **A Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).**
2. **An email address.**
3. **An Eircode (postal code).**

Eligible residents can register to vote anytime up to 15 days (excluding Sundays and Public Holidays) before an election or referendum. This online process allows us to host voter registration drives throughout the country, with staff and volunteers available to assist potential voters.

There is still a paper registration process to support people with digital literacy issues, but for expediency, Focus Ireland's campaign will generally use the online process. We will also be facilitating paper forms for those people who may need to be included on the special voters, anonymous, or postal list.

For people without a permanent address, they can use the paper format and use an ERF2 form, which allows them to register in the constituency where they spend most of their time, even if they do not have an address there.

ADDRESS POINT SERVICE

We want to support people to help them use the online process and collaborated with our national postal service, An Post, to do so. An Post, has played a pivotal role in this by creating the AddressPoint service. AddressPoint is a free service that provides a fixed address to those without a fixed home. It enables them to receive regular post, access essential services and crucially, provides an Eircode which we can be used for online voter registration. A person can choose a post office within the area that they spend the most time in, and they will be registered to vote in this constituency.

LOCAL ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN

As we continue to register voters in the run up to the Local and European elections (June 7th 2024), Focus Ireland is also launching a Local Elections campaign with a set of '4 Asks' of candidates. These four key policy proposals have the potential to make a significant difference in

addressing the root causes of homelessness and provide meaningful solutions to those affected.

1. Building Sufficient Social Housing:

The first ask calls for each Local Authority to build enough social housing to meet the demand outlined in the social housing needs assessment. This fundamental step addresses the shortage of affordable housing, a primary driver of homelessness. By increasing the supply of social housing, authorities can provide stable, long-term accommodation for vulnerable individuals and families, reducing reliance on emergency shelters and temporary accommodations.

2. Tailoring Housing to Household Needs:

The second ask emphasises the importance of building housing that meets the specific needs of households on the waiting list. This approach recognizes that homelessness affects individuals and families of all sizes and compositions. By ensuring that the type of housing constructed reflects the diversity of households in need, authorities can optimise resources and provide suitable accommodation for everyone, regardless of family size or composition.

3. Prioritising People experiencing Homelessness:

The third ask focuses on allocating a fair proportion of new social homes to individuals who have been trapped in homelessness for extended periods. Ireland has seen an increase in the building of social housing units, but this has not yet resulted in a reduction in the overall homeless numbers. This targeted intervention would mean local authorities would include homelessness as part of their allocation policies, rather than solely focusing on the time an individual or family has spent on the social housing list. By prioritising those who have experienced long-term homelessness, authorities can ensure that resources are directed towards those most in need of assistance.

4. Putting the Best Interests of the Child First:

The fourth ask underscores the importance of prioritising the best interests of children in decisions related to homelessness assistance. Children are among the most vulnerable members of society affected by homelessness and their well-being should be paramount in all policy decisions. By prioritising the needs of children, authorities can ensure that families experiencing homelessness receive the support and resources necessary to safeguard the welfare of their children and mitigate the negative impact of homelessness on their development.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, these four asks represent a comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness in Ireland. By addressing both the immediate needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness and the underlying structural factors contributing to the crisis, these policy proposals have the potential to affect transformative change. Focus Ireland believe that by empowering people to vote and by offering policy recommendations during election campaigns, we can drive the political agenda to ensure that ending homelessness for all is an achievable goal.

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