



**Challenging  
homelessness.  
Changing lives.**

**FOCUS**  
Ireland

**Restating  
our Vision  
2021–25**

# Restating our Vision 2021–25

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‘The ache for home lives in all of us.  
The safe place where we can go  
as we are and not be questioned.’

**Maya Angelou**



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# Foreword

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**Focus Ireland has a proud track record in always taking a progressive approach towards tackling homelessness. Since I first founded this organisation in 1985, we have been driven by the need to first identify the routes into homelessness and then work to progress the policy, services and legislation that will block these pathways.**

This prevents young people, families, and individuals from becoming homeless in the first place. The rationale of this approach is to ensure that there is not only an emergency response to homelessness. There must be a clear plan in place to look beyond the need of a bed for the night and towards delivering permanent homes with supports when required.

All of us at Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association firmly believe that homelessness can be ended. We know what is working and what isn't. And we also have a very clear vision of what needs to be done by the government and all parties concerned in order to ease – and then end – this crisis. This vision is outlined in this strategy and is informed directly by the amazing work our staff does as we help to support families and individuals while they are homeless. This new strategy is consistent with what we have always set out to do and with our vision that everyone has a right to a place they can call home.

As I write this, we are still dealing with the Covid-19 public health emergency and Focus Ireland is working more closely than ever with the State and partner organisations to protect people who are homeless. We have helped to move record numbers of families and individuals out of homelessness in this period. This work must continue. When the country opens up again, we must not let homelessness be a part of our 'new normal'. We need to move on from short-term measures and hubs to provide more social and affordable rental homes.

**This really can be achieved, but only if, as a people, we make a clear, positive, and unshakable commitment to eradicating homelessness. All of us at Focus Ireland will continue to play our part and I am confident that our new strategy will help guide this work and help the drive to end homelessness in our country.**



**Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy**  
Focus Ireland Founder  
and Life President

# Overview of the main four strands of the strategy

1



## Families

who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and have complex support needs

2



## Families

who are homeless or at risk of homelessness primarily due to economic circumstances

3



## Young people

who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs

4



## Single adults

who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs

# Restating our vision

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## Everyone has a right to a place they can call home



**Pat Dennigan**  
CEO, Focus Ireland

**Focus Ireland was set up over 35 years ago with the belief that homelessness is wrong and can be put right. We have always understood that the solution to homelessness is not a shelter for the night but a secure home for good.**

But over the last 6 years, the number of people who are homeless in Ireland has grown faster than ever before – or virtually anywhere else. The OECD singled out Ireland as the country where ‘homelessness among families with children almost quadrupled ... between 2014 and 2018’ and as experiencing ‘the largest increase [in youth homelessness] with a jump of 82% over just a four-year period’.<sup>1</sup>

Over those hard years, Focus Ireland worked closely with our local authority partners across the country to deal with the night-by-night challenge of ensuring that adults and children had a safe place to stay that night. There were long days when Focus Ireland workers had to make hundreds of phone calls to find a hotel for

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<sup>1</sup> Is the housing market an obstacle to inclusive growth? For whom? (OECD 2020)  
<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b750f680-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/b750f680-en#section-d1e3143>



a distraught, homeless family. Many days ended with Focus Ireland paying a taxi to take the weary family a 60-mile journey to the only hotel that would take them.

Our front-line staff did this night after night during the darkest times. During those years, Focus Ireland's ethos and the commitment of our staff resulted in our services helping prevent homelessness for more households and supporting more families out of homelessness than ever before. We acquired a record number of new homes. Government responded with much-needed increases in funding, but without the generous response of our donors across the country, we would not have been able to help so much.

Despite these successes, with more than 3 families and 5 single people becoming newly homeless every single day during those years, it was hard to believe that there could ever be an end to it.

To a large extent, this wave of homelessness was the delayed impact of the global economic crisis that had devastated the Irish economy at the end of 00s. Hard decisions that were made at that time – cuts in housing budgets, allowing the private development sector to close down, cutting mental health and youth services, imposing 'austerity' – all trickled down. Then, just when the economists were declaring that recovery had arrived, people were pushed into homelessness.

This strategy is drafted at a very different time. At long last, our building industry is beginning to recover and money is available for investment in house building. The number of homeless families has begun to consistently fall for the first time. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought new challenges, but despite these – sometimes, because of these – we have an opportunity and an obligation to reset our vision.

**There is still a huge amount to do, but first we must get out of the habit of 'managing homelessness' and stop seeing homelessness as 'normal'. In this strategy, Focus Ireland and our housing arm, Focus Housing Association, want to re-assert our vision that, with the right mixture of policies, practices and priorities, homelessness can be brought to an end.**

Given our experiences as a country, the goal of 'ending homelessness' is sometimes dismissed as naïve. Of course, we recognise that there will always be nights where someone needs shelter, there will always be some crisis of mental health, relationships or finance where someone will have no home and will need our help. But it is not naïve to strive for a world in which that sort of crisis is rare and does not last long. If we accept the challenge, there is no good reason why a person who faces a sudden crisis should not be back in a home a few days later – and no reason why they should remain homeless for years.

Some people call this situation where homelessness is rare and short 'functional zero'. In the same way that hopefulness is the opposite of hopelessness, we would like to call our vision of such a world without homelessness as a vision of 'homefulness'.

This goal cannot, of course, be achieved easily or soon and it cannot be achieved by Focus Ireland alone. But it must be pursued with urgency and collaboration. The rest of this document sets out how Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association plan to work with others to achieve this goal and how we plan to make our own unique contribution.

# Our mission

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## Challenging homelessness. Changing lives.

Through our services across the country, Focus Ireland helps over 14,000 people every year. Sometimes that help comes in the form of a decent meal, sometimes it is advice that will prevent you losing your home, sometimes it can be an offer of a new home at an affordable rent.

Sometimes when you offer help, you know that you will need to offer the same help again tomorrow, and again the day after. We can call this 'passive support'. But there is another type of help you can offer, support which contributes to changing the whole situation: 'active support'. Offering a home, with support if needed, is 'active support' and is the most significant form of support you can offer.

Of course, with the housing shortage this is often not immediately possible but Focus Ireland's objective is to make every support we offer a truly **active** support – for instance, our Coffee Shop offers not just nutritious hot meals but Advice & Information and a gateway to case management; our Extension service for young people experiencing homelessness offers a place to take a shower but also a case manager and a link to a route out.

This is the part of our work that we call '**Changing Lives**' and over our previous strategy we worked hard to ensure that an increased proportion of the engagements we had with people were 'active supports' that either helped **prevent** homelessness or supported people to **make a sustained move** into a new home.



**Under this new strategy we are committed to moving further along that path and taking advantage of an increasingly positive environment to help change the lives of as many individuals as possible.**

But homelessness cannot be ended by working just at the individual level, important as that is. People become homeless because of wider challenges in our society – the weakness of our social safety-net, poverty, our inadequate mental health system, lack of addiction services, insecure tenancies and, perhaps most significantly, our failure to build a sufficient supply of affordable homes. Putting forward lasting solutions to these problems is the part of our work that we call ‘Challenging Homelessness’.

Sometimes our challenge to homelessness is based on the experiences of our Front-Line Services or our Housing Association – innovative approaches which we can demonstrate as effective and then seek to scale up. Sometimes we base our challenge on the successes of our international partners, sometimes on our own professional research. Always, our challenge to homelessness is based on the lived experience of the people we work with and support.

**Over the period of this strategy, we will continue to draw evidence-based inspiration from all these sources and share them with our partners to help change the practices and policies that sustain homelessness.**

Homelessness happens when people slip through the gaps in our society. Under this strategy Focus Ireland commits itself to closing those gaps by working in ever closer partnership with the whole range of organisations, departments, authorities, agencies, donor and citizens who share our commitment to tackling homelessness.

In order to build and sustain this consensus for purposeful change, the engagement of an informed public will be essential. Whether it is in the form of voters, active citizens or as donors we will continue in our commitment to provide the public with evidence-based, accessible, explanations of the causes and solutions to homelessness.

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# Our values

**Focus Ireland’s work is shaped by the needs of the people we work with and support – our customers. Therefore, the quality of services delivery is equally as important as the kind of services we provide.**

Our values underpin our behaviour and attitudes in the provision of services and our interactions with other organisations, funders, donors, local authorities and Government.

Our staff across Services, Property, Support Functions, Advocacy and Fundraising continue to work in partnership with our stakeholders to develop and support the provision of these services.

Of the nine values identified in the organisation, the four values of **Respect**, **Safety**, **Quality** and **Partnership** are closely integrated and have been identified as the primary values which are core to the other values of **Accessibility**, **Integration**, **Advocacy**, **Empowerment** and **Stewardship**.

**Respect** is about treating individuals equally and in a professional manner. Respect embraces the concepts of justice, fairness, equality and dignity. The value of ‘Respect’ links us with our commitment to Human Rights and the diversity of all stakeholders. Respect demands honesty and clarity in our interactions with each other, with customers and with all stakeholders.

**Safety** is about providing a safe environment in which all stakeholders can feel safe and secure and welcomed in Focus Ireland. All employees have a responsibility to ensure their own safety as well as the safety of others. Safety is achieved in attending to the physical environment of all stakeholders and in engaging in a professional manner with people who are feeling vulnerable or who may sometimes behave in ways that are unsafe for themselves and others.

**Quality** is about ensuring we provide service which have the customer at their heart, that are professional, appropriate and addressing the needs of customers. We aim to provide a high standard of quality services designed using knowledge of best practice, research, and policy and customer feedback. Our standards are measurable both internally and externally and they comply with all statutory standards and regulations.

**Partnership** is about partnering and cooperating with customers and with other organisations both voluntary and statutory in order to achieve our goal of preventing people becoming, remaining or returning to homelessness. Engaging in partnership processes both internally and externally enhances Focus Ireland’s capacity to deliver quality services and we recognise the contribution of different parties in working to a shared agenda with mutual benefits and responsibilities.

**Respect**

**Safety**

**Quality**

**Partnership**

**Accessibility**

**Integration**

**Advocacy**

**Empowerment**

**Stewardship**

**Accessibility** is about facilitating access to relevant services for all customers in a practical and transparent manner. We aim for clarity, simplicity and minimal bureaucracy in our systems of engagement and access. The services we provide will be flexible in accommodating the changing needs of customers and tenants. We accept the need for review and change over time and we are committed to engage in consultation so that opinions of all stakeholders are heard.

**Integration** is about the ultimate goal of our work – that our customers should be fully integrated into the fabric of society so that they can lead independent and fulfilling lives.

**Advocacy** is about how we advocate on behalf of customers to ensure that appropriate services and housing are provided by networking and partnering with voluntary, statutory and community organisations.

**Empowerment** is about enabling customers and employees to take initiative and make positive and informed choices. We are committed to assisting customers in managing their own lives so they can establish new relationships, build their self-esteem and confidence, make independent decisions and decrease their dependence on other people and organisations. We are committed to employees to provide relevant information, supervision and training to support them in making their decisions about their career and practice.

**Stewardship** is about ensuring that we as employees are accountable and transparent in all our activities. We have quality procedures, policies and governance in place for all aspects of our work to ensure that we act in ways that ensure resources are appropriately used in the service of customers. We accept we are individually and organisationally accountable to all stakeholders and we are committed to behaving honestly and transparently in all our interactions and to seeking to achieve a high standard of work at all times.



# A strategy built around the people we support

Because our work is fundamentally concerned with people – the challenges they face and how we can support them to secure their existing home or move out of homelessness – this strategy is built around the household circumstances in which people live.

Over the 2021–2025 period, Focus Ireland will concentrate our resources in four key work streams reflecting the lives of the people we support:

1		<b>Families</b> who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and have complex support needs	See page 15
2		<b>Families</b> who are homeless or at risk of homelessness primarily due to economic circumstances	See page 17
3		<b>Young people</b> who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs	See page 19
4		<b>Single adults</b> who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs	See page 21

Most people who become homeless just need an affordable, secure home and little bit of help, but experience indicates that around 10–25% of people becoming homeless have more complex needs and require additional support to find and sustain a new home. By concentrating our support on the people who need us most we can have the greatest impact.

Focus Ireland services will support our customers into different types of houses: homes rented from local authorities, from Approved Housing Bodies and, with the support of HAP, private landlords. But all four work streams will be underpinned by



Focus Housing Association, which will continue to provide homes for our existing over 1,100 tenants and aims to acquire a further 1,152 new homes over the lifetime of this strategy.

The rest of this document will set out our strategy in relation to each of those four groups, a number of projects which will underpin the four workstreams, the mechanisms we will use to monitor progress, the barriers we expect to meet along the way and how we will measure our success.

## Ending homelessness

**At the heart of this strategy is a certainty that homelessness can be effectively brought to an end. We know that it cannot be achieved in the five years covered by this strategy, or even over a single decade. We also know that it cannot be achieved by Focus Ireland alone, it needs a commitment from Government underpinned by a broad political consensus strong enough to hold firm over several Governments.**

We are looking for this Government to commit to the long-term goal of ending homelessness, to bring all stakeholders together and to agree the milestones along the way. The milestones would be commitments such as halving family homelessness within a given period, ending the need to sleep rough, end youth homelessness, end psychiatric patients being discharged into homelessness, etc.

Our vision is the creation of a purposeful, collaborative process which draws up a plan to end homelessness over a realistic timescale. We cannot, at this point, say what that timescale will be, but we know from international experience that it will take much more than a decade - so tangible and achievable targets are essential along the way.

With a long-term goal and clear milestones, we will be certain that the individual differences we make for our customers each day are also adding up to create a different, homeful world.



## Family homelessness

**Over the 35 years of its existence, Focus Ireland has been the lead organisation working with families experiencing homelessness.**

Starting in 2014, family homelessness has grown at an unprecedented level, only starting to decline in at the end of 2019. While this pattern is complicated by changes in the way family homelessness is counted<sup>2</sup> and the short-term effect of Covid-19 measures, it does represent a real opportunity to tackle family homelessness decisively.

Focus Ireland was designated as the Family Homeless Action Team (FHAT) by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive at the start of the current crisis. We have also worked with families that are homeless through our Eustace Street Coffee Shop, our services in the South East, Sligo, Cork and Limerick, and, more recently, our new Family Centre on Mountjoy Street, Dublin 1.

Families that have some form of underlying behavioural, disability, medical or social challenges are most vulnerable to becoming and remaining homeless. The scale of the housing crisis has also resulted in a large number of families with no such issues becoming homeless, primarily for economic reasons, sometimes for prolonged periods.

There is overlap between the two groups and, tragically, families who enter homelessness with no social problems can experience quite severe problems after several months. While remaining conscious of the grey areas between the two groups, we are better placed to make a difference if we reflect the needs of the two groups in two related works streams: one directed at **families who are homeless primarily for economic reasons** and the other at **families with complex support needs**, sometimes referred to as 'vulnerable families'.

The future of both groups of families would be greatly enhanced if the Government were to adopt a cross Department/Agency **Strategy to End Family Homelessness**. Working with Government to demonstrate the value of adopting such an approach, informing the content of national policy and helping in the delivery of any such holistic approach will be a key objective of our work over this period.

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<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of the changes see Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing 2018 <http://bit.ly/ConfusingTheStats>

# 1



## Families

### who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and have complex support needs

**Families with wide-ranging and complex support needs – vulnerable families – have always been a core part of Focus Ireland’s work and we will continue to channel a sizeable proportion of our resources towards their needs.**

Focus Ireland analysis of families entering homelessness suggest that between 20% to 25% of the families entering homelessness fall into this category – though as they are less likely to leave homelessness quickly, they probably comprise a much higher proportion of the total of currently homeless families.

#### **Preventing more families becoming homeless**

- › Access to timely and accurate information combined with assistance in dealing with public authorities can make the difference in many families avoiding homelessness in the first place. Unfortunately, almost half the families that become homeless do not seek advice before becoming homeless.<sup>3</sup> To provide support to all families that need it in timely way, Focus Ireland will continue to build the awareness, capacity and accessibility of our Advice and Information services.
- › The pathways into homelessness change as the housing market and the economy change, so to ensure that measure to prevent homelessness reflect current reality, Focus Ireland will undertake and publish timely research on the reasons families become homeless.
- › Most families become homeless because they have been evicted from a private rental tenancy, Focus Ireland will continue to explore evidence-based solutions to provide greater tenancy security for these families.

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<sup>3</sup> Briefing on Causes of Family Homelessness, Focus Ireland (2019)  
<http://bit.ly/2NqVMjD>

## Support out of homelessness

Many of these families with complex support needs would be more likely to move out of homelessness into sustainable tenancies if they had access to the intensity of multi-disciplinary support available under Housing First. Within the first year of this strategy Focus Ireland will:

- › pilot and evaluate the use of a multi-disciplinary team (see page 24) to support and sustain such families out of homelessness.
- › draft a grounded plan to scale it to meet the need.
- › Focus Housing Association will acquire over 500 homes for families moving out of homelessness, primarily those with complex support needs, during the lifetime of this strategy.
- › In partnership with Dublin Region Homeless Executive, Focus Ireland will restructure the Dublin Family Homeless Action Team to direct its resources toward the needs of the most vulnerable families in homeless accommodation.
- › Focus Ireland will continue to advocate for some form of priority access to social housing for the most vulnerable homeless families.

## Minimising harm during homelessness

- › Focus Ireland will develop a Trauma-informed response to families that are homeless in every aspect of its services, and advocate that a similar approach should be taken by all other agencies with which the families will come into contact.<sup>4</sup>
- › In around 20% of the families becoming homeless, the parents are under-25 and making their first move away from the family home. These are a group with significant vulnerabilities and specific needs.<sup>5</sup> Focus Ireland will work with local authorities, Tusla and other agencies to develop appropriate supports for this group.
- › Focus Ireland will continue to advocate for provision of ‘own door’ emergency accommodation for families while they are homeless, and partner with local authorities to run such services where appropriate.<sup>6</sup>
- › Focus Ireland will continue to ensure that all its family support teams include dedicated child support workers with the appropriate skills, and seek to have this model adopted throughout all services supporting vulnerable homeless families.

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4 Siersbaek and Loftus “Trauma informed Care for children in families that are homeless” Focus Ireland (2020) <https://bit.ly/2Op2mLP>

5 Lambert et al. “Young Families in the Housing Crisis” Focus Ireland (2018) <https://bit.ly/3jcrgeX>

6 Haran and Ó Siochrú “Own Door Models of Family Emergency Accommodation” Focus Ireland (2020) <https://bit.ly/34vX2LI>

**Dublin needs a dedicated Family Centre, providing supports tailored to the needs of homeless families in crisis. Securing funding from our statutory partners to develop and sustain such a service is a key objective of this strategy.**



# 2



## Families

### who are homeless or at risk of homelessness primarily due to economic circumstances

**During the housing crisis of the last few years, most families become homeless primarily because of economic reasons – the landlord evicts them because s/he is selling up, or moving a family member in, or their rent is unaffordable.**

While Focus Ireland services will do everything possible to support these families, this form of homelessness cannot be solved by any NGO and requires a coordinated government-wide response.

As a result, most of the actions under this strand of the strategy involve attempting to influence public policy so that it takes greater account of the needs of these parents and children.

As a foundation for this shift in public policy we will advocate for a **National Family Homelessness Plan** (which will also cover Vulnerable Families), to be part of the Government's 'Homes for All' approach. In the first half of 2021, we will develop a framing document and plans for how Focus Ireland can contribute to the wider effort.

#### **Preventing families becoming homeless for economic reasons**

- › All families – whether they have complex needs or are at risk of homelessness primarily due to economic reasons – require the similar support to prevent them from becoming homeless including Advice and Information, as well as greater tenancy security. See page 15 for further details.
- › Despite rent controls, private rents have increased much faster than levels of rent subsidies, forcing many families into debt and making their tenancies insecure. Focus Ireland will continue to advocate for the level of rent subsidies (HAP and Rent Supplement) to reflect real market rents.

## Rapid Rehousing

When families lose their existing homes for primarily economic reasons, the most effective response is to support them to rent alternative accommodation before they ever enter the homeless system, or as soon as possible after that. Focus Ireland will advocate measures which support this including timely access to Homeless HAT and public purchase of properties from landlords who are selling up, where appropriate.

## Building resilience in families

While our general philosophy is to devote our energies to challenging rather than managing homelessness, we plan to act to support **resilience** of those who are homeless. This is because of the long-term impact of homelessness on children and a desire to mitigate that in any way we can. This will include advocating that a skilled child support worker is available for every homeless child that needs one, in line with the proven Focus Ireland family support model.

## Housing supply

While for all the other households covered in this strategy, a supply of affordable, secure housing is needed alongside tenancy and other supports, for this group of economically homeless families, affordable secure housing in itself would be enough to end their homelessness.

Focus Ireland will continue to advocate for policies which will increase the supply of affordable secure housing, particularly social housing, to sufficient levels.

# 3



## Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs

**Focus Ireland has a long track-record of working with young people who are homeless. This includes partnerships with Tusla to provide aftercare services to care leavers, emergency residential services and a range of youth housing services in the South East, South West and elsewhere. In Dublin, we partner with the City of Dublin Youth Service Board (CDYSB) to provide essential day services such as Focus Ireland's 'Extension' service. Focus Ireland has commissioned some of the most influential research on youth homelessness and is a leading voice in advocating public policy change.**

The number of young adults in emergency accommodation rose rapidly during the housing crisis but has declined since the middle of 2019. Although international evidence indicates that there is a much higher level of 'hidden homelessness' and 'sofa-surfing' among young people than older groups, this falling use of emergency accommodation creates a real opportunity to decisively move towards bringing this form of homelessness down to 'functional zero.'

This element of the Focus Ireland strategy will be operated in the context of the drafting, publication and roll-out of the very welcome commitment to a National Youth Homelessness Strategy contained in the Programme for Government. Focus Ireland will work to influence the shape of this strategy, to encourage ambitious objectives, evidence-based policies and adequate resources, and we will be a committed partner in delivering the strategy.

The most visible group of young people who are at risk of homelessness are care leavers. On average, approximately 500 young people leave care each year and, from our experience, around 100 of these will be particularly at risk of homelessness. It is Focus Ireland's objective over the period of this strategy to make our maximum contribution to ensuring that none of these young people experiences homelessness. We will also concentrate our resources on engaging and supporting the young homeless people without a care background who have complex support needs.

## Preventing young people from becoming homeless

People who experience homelessness as a young person have a significantly higher risk of homelessness in later years. In that sense, all youth homeless services are prevention services. Inadequate youth homeless services establish the roots of chronic homelessness in decades to come.

- › Under our previous strategy, Focus Ireland piloted mediation services in Dublin to assist young people and their families to overcome challenges which were creating a risk of the young person becoming homeless. These services have demonstrated their effectiveness and Tusla has provided welcome resources to continue them. Over the course of this strategy, Focus Ireland is committed to finding resources to deliver mediation services in other urban areas.
- › Irish and international evidence shows that young LGBTQI people face an increased risk of homelessness. Over this strategy, Focus Ireland is committed to working with other partners to provide access to appropriate advice and support to young LGBTQI people at risk of homelessness.

## Supporting homeless young people into secure homes

- › Under our previous strategy, Focus Ireland secured 43 homes under Tusla CAS, the targeted programme to acquire homes for young people leaving care. Under this strategy, Focus Housing Association is committed to working with Tusla to acquiring a further 50 homes per year under this programme.
- › In the South East and South West regions, Focus Ireland has piloted a range of innovative youth housing programmes<sup>7</sup> including applying Housing First Principals to young people with complex support needs. We are committed to working with Tusla, HSE and local authorities to expand these services to meet need.
- › To address the issue of shortage of suitable 1-bed apartments, Focus Housing Association will provide additional new units through our Meascán model (see page 24).

In partnership with the National Youth Council of Ireland, Focus Ireland founded the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, which now includes all homeless organisations working in the area along with a wide range of youth organisations.

- › Over the period of this strategy, Focus Ireland is committed to supporting the growth and effectiveness of the Coalition and to continuing as a definitive voice for homeless young people in its own right – advocating for policies which will reduce youth homelessness to functional zero.
- › Focus Ireland is committed to sharing and learning from best international experience on tackling youth homelessness through its active engagement in the HF4Y cluster of the European Housing First Hub, and representing youth homeless organisations on the Administrative Council of FEANTSA – the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.

## Day and residential services

Over the period of this strategy Focus Ireland will continue to operate the Extension day service for young people experiencing homelessness and our residential services for young adults and minors, with a commitment to further developing case management support, applying Multi-Disciplinary approaches and enhancing routes out of homelessness. Focus Ireland is also committed to working with partners to create LGBTQI-youth safe spaces across our services.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Evaluation of Limerick Youth Housing, Focus Ireland (2017) <http://bit.ly/FIYouthHousing>

# 4



## Single adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with complex support needs

**While, at the outset of this strategy, there are welcome signs of family and youth homelessness declining, homelessness among single adult men and women continues at an unrelenting rate. There is no published research to indicate what is driving this increase but it is likely that private landlords leaving the market, along with Covid-19 related factors such as relationship breakdown and the precarious position of people who were previously sofa-surfing or ‘lodgers’ without tenancy rights, are significant factors.**

Focus Ireland’s Housing First partnerships with local authorities and the HSE across the country will be at the core of this element of our strategy, which will also include our work with the existing 450 single people who are our long-term tenants of Focus Housing Association after moving on from homelessness.

### **Preventing single adults with complex support needs from becoming homeless:**

- › Access to timely and accurate information combined with assistance in dealing with public authorities can make the difference in many people avoiding homelessness in the first place. Focus Ireland will continue to build the awareness, capacity and accessibility of our Advice and Information services.
- › During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Focus Ireland Coffee Shop has again proven its importance as a source of advice and nutrition to the most vulnerable. The Coffee Shop will remain at the centre of our response to the needs of single homeless people.
- › One of the significant pathways into homelessness for people with complex support needs is discharge from institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons. Over the period of this strategy Focus Ireland will:

- › Further develop Women’s Outlook Programme in partnership with the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, with Focus Housing delivering 15 new homes over 5 years along with exits to other housing options.
- › Build on the success of the North Tipperary Intensive Sustainment Service, and similar partnerships with the HSE in Limerick, South Dublin, Kildare and elsewhere we will develop a comprehensive set of services to support people with complex needs at risk of homelessness on discharge from mental health services.

### **Supporting single adult with complex support needs move on from homelessness:**

- › Focus Ireland is a pioneer of Housing First in Ireland and a leader in developing the programme across Europe. At the start of this strategy, Focus Ireland is one of the largest providers of Housing First, delivering programmes in 9 counties in Ireland. In the context of the National HF Implementation Plan, we are committed to increasing the scale of this work, including working with high needs groups such as those being discharged from mental health institutions.
- › Our Housing First programme will be reinforced by the development of the Focus Ireland multi-disciplinary team practice (see page 24 for details).
- › Focus Ireland is a founder member of the European Housing First Hub, based in Helsinki and hosted by the Y-Foundation. We will continue our commitment to sharing HF best practice internationally.
- › Focus Ireland initiated the Irish Housing First Platform to share this expertise in Ireland and we will continue our commitment to promoting HF good practice as a shared competence across the sector.

### **Sustaining exits from homelessness**

For people of working age, access to paid employment at a living wage can play an important role in ensuring a secure tenancy. Focus Ireland will continue to offer its Paths to Preparation for Education, Training & Employment (PETE) services in Dublin, Limerick and Waterford. Under this strategy, we have set a target of 10% of participants in these programmes moving to paid employment.

### **Providing homes for people with complex support needs**

Around 60% of Focus Housing Association tenancies have been allocated to single persons. Focus Ireland will continue to develop its supports for this group, with particular emphasis on:

- › Adapting our services to meet the needs of the growing proportion of our tenants who are elderly.
- › Maintaining a minimum 90% tenancy sustainment rate in our long-term housing.
- › Acquiring over 200 additional housing units for single people moving out of homelessness, primarily those with complex support needs, during the lifetime of this strategy.
- › Further developing our tenant and customer participation process (see page 23).

# Underpinning initiatives

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**While the four demographic work streams are at the heart of our strategy, a number of other objectives need to be achieved for that heart to beat. This section sets out these 9 underpinning themes.**

## **1. Tenant and customer participation**

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Focus Ireland's values of Empowerment and Partnership emphasise the importance of ensuring that the voice and agency of our customers and tenants shape the services we offer and the objectives we set. Over the period this strategy, Focus Ireland will make a step change in customers' participation, with projects including:

- › Our 'Customer and Tenant Forum', which was involved in the shaping of this strategy, will be further developed to create an independent space where customers and tenants can reflect on and shape our services and housing programme.
- › From this initiative, we will develop a system for customers/tenants to be represented at our key Services Sub-Committee.
- › Focus Ireland's Peer Research Programme will continue to make an essential contribution to our research and evaluation work, this programme will be further developed.
- › Focus Ireland will further support the capacity and opportunities for people with lived experience of homelessness to speak directly to the media and to policy makers through our 'Lived Experience Ambassadors Programme' and other activities.

## **2. Multi-disciplinary teams**

A proportion of the people who experience homelessness have complex support needs, and these people are most at risk of remaining homeless for long periods of time, or of returning to homelessness after being housed. Often a range of specialist supports are needed to assist them to achieve sustained exits from homelessness, and these supports can be effectively delivered by a support team incorporating team members with a range of care, tenancy and psychotherapeutic skills – multi-disciplinary teams. The value of this approach is recognized in Housing First schemes for adult-only households.

A small proportion of homeless families have high levels of complex support needs and require a similar level of multi-disciplinary team support if they are to successfully sustain a tenancy and integrate into their neighbourhood. There are worrying indications that a new form of ‘staircase model’ is being developed for these families, where a period in emergency accommodation is presented, without evidence, as having therapeutic value.

As part of this five-year strategy, Focus Ireland is committed, in partnership with appropriate clinical partners, to developing and evaluating the use of broad based multi-disciplinary teams across our services, starting with programmes working with families with complex support needs. This approach offers the prospect of transforming the opportunities of these families and young people.

## **3. Meascán housing model**

As Focus Housing Association continues to add to its housing stock it will continue to pursue our value of ‘integration’ through acquiring scatter site housing. To achieve the same objectives in our building programme, we will continue to develop our Meascán housing model of ‘intentional social mix’. Under this innovative model, Focus Housing Association will be tenanted by a mix of households with support needs and households without such needs. All tenants would be aware of the nature of the development, the potential that some of their neighbours had experienced homelessness and might, occasionally, have challenging behaviours. They would also be aware of supports available to them and be expected to participate in the governance and community organisation required. This exciting new approach can offer people with complex needs and an experience of homelessness the opportunity of integration into a mainstream and welcoming community.

## **4. Agile Acquisition Fund**

One of the barriers which Focus Housing Association has faced in acquiring properties from the market is that Government procurement processes are too time consuming for potential sellers, so that properties are lost to other buyers. To overcome this challenge, Focus Ireland will set up and grow a ‘agile home acquisition fund’ which will allow us to close purchases quickly with vendors after appropriate scrutiny. The fund will then be replenished for future acquisitions as the paperwork is completed.

## **5. Advice & Information and Orion**

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Access to accurate and timely advice and information is fundamental to preventing homelessness across all of our demographic work streams. We are committed to a programme of skills development and training for our front-line Advice & Information staff and a programme to increase awareness of Focus Ireland as a primary source of support for those at risk of becoming homeless. This work will itself be underpinned by the further development of our internal data collection system Orion.

## **6. Reflecting a multi-cultural Ireland**

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Migrant households and households where English is not the first language can have a higher risk of homelessness due to a number of factors (risk of poverty, discrimination in the private rental sector, lack of family networks in Ireland etc). Focus Ireland is committed to removing barriers which limit the ability of non-English speaking households to fully engage with our services and access their rights. Over the period of this strategy, Focus Ireland will, with the support of the National Integration Fund, roll out translations of key documents and interpretation services.

## **7. Research and data**

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Understanding a problem and how it changes over time is crucial to solving that problem. Equally, constant scrutiny and reflection of services and policies is crucial to identifying those that are most effective and when changed circumstance mean that previously successful practices need to be changed. Focus Ireland will continue its strong commitment to making a leading contribution to research on homelessness, to providing evidence-based scrutiny of its own services and being the most reliable and accessible source of information and data on homelessness in Ireland.

## **8. Sustainability**

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Over recent years Focus Housing Association has retrofitted a significant proportion of its housing stock and is committed to continuing this programme over the next five years. We are also committed to actively exploring other ways in which the organisation can reduce its carbon footprint.

## **9. Financial Stability**

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A key priority for Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association during the course of this Strategy will be to maintain financial resilience while continuing to invest in both enhanced customer services and the quality of our housing stock. Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association are committed to ensuring the highest standard and transparency in management and reporting of our finances. Maintaining financial support from statutory bodies, corporate donors and individual donors will be crucial to delivering this plan, and will be based on demonstration of continued impact. In the interest of financial stability we will continue to strive to maintain a financial reserve of 13 weeks operation costs, in line with recognised best practice.

# Challenges and what success looks like

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**This strategy sets out a bold and ambitious vision of what can be achieved by Focus Ireland and in respect of overall homelessness over the next five years. In setting such objectives it is useful to set out some of the already identifiable challenges that lie between us achieving our goals so we are as prepared as possible to overcome them.**

## **Covid-19**

At the time of launching this Strategy, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic creates the greatest uncertainty and immediate challenges. Lock-down of construction sites has already slowed down the delivery of new housing and there is a risk that this could worsen. Detailed planning will be needed to ensure that periods when building is allowed are used to best advantage, and greater use would have to be made of existing vacant housing supply than has been achieved to date. While services to support people while they are homeless and to support them to exit homelessness have demonstrated their resilience during the first 12 months of pandemic, further waves of Covid-19 and new variants would make it even more challenging to achieve the objectives in this strategy.

## **Housing supply**

Even without the additional risk of Covid-19, the lack of sufficient appropriate housing supply presents a very significant challenge to this strategy. While there were welcome signs of increasing momentum in total housing output, much of this was at the top-end of the market and problems of affordability are still unresolved. Furthermore, there continues to be a lack of 1-bedroom apartments in existing and planned supply. Single person households are the fastest growing household type in the overall population and such units will be increased demand. Most households which are homeless comprise just a single person and 1-bedroom units are an essential route out of homelessness for them.

The forthcoming Government strategy 'Homes for All' will be an important opportunity to address these issues.

## National strategy and vision

As has been noted, the objective of ending homelessness cannot be met by Focus Ireland alone. A number of the objectives in this strategy require Government to create a coherent and ambitious context in which our work can be most effective. This is articulated through the proposal that the Government initiate a collaborative process through which a target to end homelessness can be agreed, and also through the call for a holistic approach to tackling family homelessness. Indications in this regard are positive – in its Programme for Government the Government sets similar frameworks for itself in a commitment to a Youth Homelessness Strategy and a Commission on Housing. However, if it emerges that this Government or subsequent Governments are distracted by other challenges or have other priorities for action, the achievements under this strategy will be curtailed to the smaller, but still significant, outcomes from our own work with local partners. Focus Ireland will continue to make the case for an overarching Government-led strategy to end homelessness, and will continue to provide evidence and inform the public about the achievability of this goal.

## Mental health and addiction services

The weaknesses in the Irish mental health system – in relation to adults, young people and children – continue to create real challenges in tackling homelessness. The involvement of the HSE in the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018–2021 is welcome, but unless this becomes an adequately-funded mainstream part of the health service a significant group within the homeless population will find it difficult to make a sustained move to a home.

## Targets and impacts

**Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association support a wide range of positive changes in the lives of people that we support. The difference we make in terms of access to quality information, to training and paid employment, to health services and improved quality of life will be tracked in our Annual Service Plans, for the purpose of this overarching document we want to set out but the most fundamental measurement of the impact of our work – the number of households we plan to support to avoid becoming homeless and the number that we will support out of homelessness into a new sustainable home.**

There are three broad mechanisms through which we support households out of homelessness:

- › By providing homes in ‘our own’ housing - that Focus Housing Association owns, leases or manages.
- › By supporting families to take up and sustain tenancies in homes owned by other Approved Housing Bodies, Local Authorities or in the private rental sector (supported by HAP).
- › By influencing public policy and practices so that there is a greater supply of affordable housing or greater access and affordability for people who are homeless.

## Providing homes in Focus Housing Association properties

Focus Housing Association currently holds 1,002 homes for long-term tenancies (with a further 138 for short-term use linked to specific support services such as residential aftercare or prison step-down). **Over the five-year period of this strategy, we are committed to acquiring 1,152 new properties.**

- › 2021 – 152 properties
  - › 2022 – 250 properties
  - › 2023 – 250 properties
  - › 2024 – 250 properties
  - › 2025 – 250 properties
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- › Over 500 of these homes will be for families moving out of homelessness, prioritising those with complex support needs
  - › Over 200 of these units will be for single people moving out of homelessness, prioritising those with complex support needs
  - › Over 300 of these homes will be for careleavers and young adults with complex support needs,

It is important to note that not all these new units will become part of our own long-term housing stock and the acquisition will not necessarily double our total housing stock as, in some cases, Focus Housing Association only acquires the property for the length of time needed for the household to become settled, then passing on the property with the settled tenants to a mainstream landlord.

## Supporting households into other rented homes

Over the period of our last strategy, Focus Ireland, working with a range of other partners, supported almost 1,000 households out of homelessness each year.

Over the period of this strategy, we will continue to build our skills and capacity in this area and are committed to work with our partners to support **5,000 households out of homelessness into Local Authority, Approved Housing Body or private rented accommodation over the next five years.**

Building on our experience over the last five years, we are committed to providing Advice and Information support to 5,000 households per year and making a **significant contribution to preventing over 600 households per year from becoming homeless** – 3,000 households over the lifetime of the strategy.

## Annual targets

In addition to these 5-year strategic targets, the Boards of Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association will set annual targets and KPIs on a wider range of activities, including the number of A&I cases dealt with, progression pathways from our PETE educational service, mediations with families, and outcomes from individual services.

## 5-year impact

The impact of this strategy will be felt in two ways: the impact of the work we will do ourselves, along with our local partners and the impact of the wider national strategy for change, in which we aspire to play a central role. If we are successful in delivering on both aspects of our vision, homelessness in Ireland will be very different.

Nothing is achieved alone, but Focus Ireland and Focus Housing Association's unique contribution to partnerships will have ensured that:

- › 1,152 additional households will have a home through a Focus Housing Association tenancy, with tenancy support as needed.
- › 5,000 households which have experienced homelessness will have moved out of homelessness into social or privately rented homes with Focus Ireland support (in partnership with local authorities and national Government).
- › 3,000 households that would have otherwise become homeless will have been assisted to keep their home or find an alternative.

If, in addition to our unique Services and Housing contribution, we are successful in being part of the reshaping public policy as envisaged in this strategy:

- › Ireland will have a National Strategy to End Homelessness, with specialised strands responding to the unique needs of families and young people and a systematic approach to Housing First.
- › We will be coming up to the first set of milestones on an agreed path for bringing homelessness to an end.
- › Vulnerable young people leaving care will have a lower risk of homelessness.
- › Family homelessness caused by economic factors alone will be a thing of the past.
- › We will still have a long way to go, but we will have made a strong start in a national project to build a homeful society.

# Evaluation and governance structure

This strategy sets out a range of objectives which are inter-related both within the organisation and in their interaction with a large range of outside agencies and funders. To manage the implementation of the strategy and monitor its outcomes, a cross organisational governance system has been put in place, operating at different levels.

## Operational level

For each of the strands of the strategy a ‘cross departmental team’ has been established, convened by a member of the Executive (Senior Management) Team. These cross-departmental teams involve at least one senior staff member from each of the functions within Focus Ireland and meet at least once a month to monitor progress and propose responses to challenges that have emerged.



## **Executive (senior management) team**

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A report on the progress of each strand of the strategy is considered by the Executive Team each week, so that progress of the entire strategy is reviewed over each month.

## **Boards**

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A detailed report on the progress of one pillar of the strategy is made to the Focus Ireland Board at each meeting by the Executive Team member who convenes the cross-departmental team on that theme. All aspects of the strategy are reviewed over each year, including an overview reported by the CEO.

A report on progress on the housing aspects of the strategy is made to the Focus Housing Association Board at each meeting, along with a report on how progress and challenges impact on the implementation by Focus Ireland.

## **Annual plans**

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At the start of each year during the five-year plan, an annual plan will be developed by the CEO and Executive team, setting out the priorities, actions and KPIs which are to be met in that year if the 5-year goal is to be met.

# Our partners

## State agencies and Government departments



**Seirbhís Phríosúin na hÉireann**  
Irish Prison Service



**An Ghníomhaireacht Tithíochta**  
The Housing Agency



**An Ghníomhaireacht Airgeadais Tithíochta**  
Housing Finance Agency



**An Roinn Leanaí, Combhionannais, Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige**  
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth



**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
Department of Education and Skills



**An Roinn Gnóthaí Fostaíochta agus Coimirce Sóisialaí**  
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection



**An Roinn Tithíochta, Pleanála agus Rialtais Áitiúil**  
Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government



**An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt**  
Department of Justice

## Local authorities and agencies



## Donors and corporate partners

A few Focus Ireland services are fully funded by state agencies, most are co-funded by the state and donors. Some – often the most innovative – are fully funded by donations. Overall, half our work is funded by voluntary donations.

Our full reports and consolidated financial statements for the financial year end 31 December 2019 can be found at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Annual-Report-2019-Finance-Section.pdf>



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