

What can political parties say about homelessness that will really make a difference?

Focus Ireland policy proposals for General Election Manifestos.

Opinion polls consistently show that housing and homelessness are among the most important electoral issues for the electorate, but credible solutions are hard to find. Based on our extensive front-line experience across the country, our engagement with people experiencing homelessness and our national and international research, the following document sets out a series of policy proposals which Focus Ireland believes are credible and effective.

The document sets out:

- Six high level policy stances which we are asking each political party to incorporate into the manifesto
- A more detailed discussion of these policies, for background and explanation.
- A set of additional policy ideas which may be of interest
- A summary of what Focus Ireland sees as the most relevant proposals in relation to homelessness from the Report of the Housing Commission

High level proposals

1. Re-commit to delivering the Lisbon Declaration goal of “working towards ending homelessness by 2030” while setting clear milestones along the way.
2. Commit to work in collaboration with the homeless sector to set out a holistic strategy to deliver the 2030 objective, with shared goals and an appropriate budget.
3. Set a target of ending long-term homelessness by the start of 2030.
4. Adopt the Report of the Commission on Housing as the broad framework to deliver sufficient housing to meet projected structural demand and the existing housing deficit.
5. Set an ambitious, achievable target for delivering sufficient new housing to ease the housing and homeless crisis, with 30% of new homes being social and affordable. The target should take account of ESRI and Housing Commission projections that 337,000 new homes will be required over five years to tackle both the housing deficit and emerging need.
6. Commit to a programme to improve the conditions experienced by individuals and families while they are homeless, including legislation to ensure that local authorities consider the ‘best interests of the child’ when responding to families who are homeless.

More detailed information on the headline proposals

1. Lisbon Declaration and the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH).

In 2021 all European Union member states committed to the [Lisbon Declaration to 'work towards ending homelessness by 2030'](#). This commitment led to the establishment of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) which drives a programme of learning, policy development and funding to support the work of each member state. Like all EU members, Ireland signed up to this voluntary commitment and included in the Government strategy 'Housing For All' – however no framework of policies or milestones for measuring progress have been set out.

Despite the lack of progress in delivering the goals, the 2030 goal and the EPOCH process remain important policy frameworks which provide both aspiration and support.

- **We are asking all political parties to reference a continued commitment to the Lisbon Declaration and making significant progress to ending homelessness within the term of the next Government, whose term will coincide with the 2030 goal.**

2. A Collaborative Strategy involving Government and the NGO Sector

While some key elements of the strategy to make progress on the 2030 goal can be set out in party manifestos and the Programme for Government (see section 3 below), most of the crucial issues are too specific or complex to set out in a manifesto context. Additionally, [international and Irish experience suggest](#) that the most effective strategies to end homelessness come out of a collaborative approach involving central, local government, relevant state agencies and front-line homeless organisations.

Convening all stakeholders and experts to draw up this strategy should be an early priority for Government and the strategy, along with an appropriate budget, should be agreed within 6 months of the Government taking office.

A number of the elements which Focus Ireland believes need to be included in a new collaborative strategy are set out in Appendix 1 below but a number of challenges need to be addressed upfront by all political parties:

- We need a cross-departmental plan to meet the needs of people who have had their claim for asylum upheld and are required to move out of Direct Provision. Some 6,000 people are currently facing this situation. All have been trying to find rented homes for several years and, while some of them may succeed before they must leave DP, a significant number will require accommodation in the homeless system. Planned provision and a system to manage this transition will be an early and major challenge for the new Government
- A cross-departmental strategy on preventing homelessness. Increase housing supply will increase opportunities for people to exit homelessness but unless we also put in place measures to reduce the numbers who enter homelessness we will not make progress. A large number of vulnerable people still enter homelessness directly from

state institutions (Care, psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, and prison) and 'joined up' programmes could substantially reduce this.

- A programme to resolve the pressures on the homeless system which are resulting in deteriorating treatment of vulnerable people.
- **We are asking all political parties to prioritise a commitment to creating such a collaborative, shared strategy for ending homelessness, with meaningful milestones and a budget reflecting the scale of the challenges.**

3. Committing to end long-term homelessness by 2030

While the most effective way to draw up a strategy for tackling homelessness will be to bring together government and voluntary sector organisations, along with relevant experts, immediately after the new Government is formed, there are some high-level specific goals which we think it will be important to name, as delivering them will require prioritisation over other objectives. The most important of these is a commitment to ending long-term homelessness by 2030

The Lisbon Declaration does not commit to *ending homelessness* but to '*work towards ending homelessness*' by 2030. While it would be impossible to end homelessness within this timeframe, given the scale of our current problem and the society-wide impact of the housing crisis, we argue that a narrower, tangible but significant goal should be set to signal meaningful progress by 2030. This goal should be to end all long-term homelessness by that date.

Successive Irish Governments have defined the long-term homeless as all households who have been in emergency accommodation for 6 months or more, plus those who have been in and out of homelessness but have been in emergency accommodation for 6 months or more, in the preceding 24 months. The second group has been dropped from government statistical reports in recent years, and this omission should be reversed in order to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people do not fall through the cracks.

We will set out a specific approach to achieving this goal below (and in more detail at a conference to be held on 25th September). Key elements of this approach would be:

- Defining a target group comprising all individuals and families that are already long-term homeless. According to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Quarterly Report, [as of June 2024](#), there were 4,791 households who had been homeless for over 6 months (3,473 single person households and 1,318 families).
- A programme in which 10% of all social housing constructed is reserved to housing people who are already long-term homeless, while being fully integrated into general social housing and the wider community, would guarantee that every one of these households would be housed well within the life-time of the Government.
- A calibrated approach which prioritised those who have been homeless the longest would ensure that the 1,443 households who have already been homeless for over 2 years (1,039 singles and 404 families) could find a home within 18 months, even at current social housing delivery rates of around 10,000 a year. However, the mismatch between the social housing currently in the pipeline (too few single units

and large homes) would create challenges for this narrower shorter timeframe before a more appropriate design of social housing started to be delivered as a result of the Housing Commission recommendations, below.

- We also argue that a further 1% of social housing output is needed for young adults who are in state care (including Section 5 orders where appropriate) and are at high risk of becoming homeless on turning 18.
 - It is crucial to ensure that appropriate case management/tenancy sustainment support is available within both these housing streams.
- **We are asking all parties to name the specific objective of ending long term homeless by 2030 in their manifestos, setting out the targeted mechanism for the 4,800 households affected, to achieve it if possible.**

4. The Commission on Housing Report

In the 2020 General Election, Focus Ireland made the case for the establishment of a Commission on Housing to set out a broad, cross-party consensus on the housing system which would give certainty, consistency and direction for a decade or more.

Most political parties adopted this proposal and the Fine Gael/Fianna Fail/Green Government established such a Commission which reported in 2024, setting out a detailed and comprehensive vision for a 'radical strategic reset of housing policy'.

We do not expect the Government which will come into power to implement every single line in the Commission Report but we are asking all political parties to adopt the Report of the Housing Commission as the broad framework for a housing policy to provide a new consistency of approach which 'treats housing as a critical social and economic priority'.

There are several recommendations which are particularly important to tackling homelessness and several areas where, since consideration of homelessness was regrettably omitted from the Terms of Reference of the Commission, there are gaps that need to be addressed. These are set out in more detail in Appendix 2.

- **We are asking all political parties to adopt the Report of the Housing Commission as the broad framework for which to base housing policy on with a view to ensuring sustainability and consistency in Ireland's housing market over the next decade.**

5. Overall Housing Target of 337,000 over the lifetime of the Government

The Housing Commission calculated that past failures in housing delivery have resulted in a current 'housing deficit' of approx. 235,000 homes. They recommended that a ten-year project of delivering an average of 23,500 homes per year would be needed to deal with this legacy. This abstract figure manifests itself in the human cost of overcrowding, rising rents, young people being unable to buy their own homes and, in the most extreme cases, over 8,000 homeless households (over 14,000 homeless people).

Separately, the ESRI set out a range of estimate for housing need based on different scenarios for population growth. The middle projection required that 44,000 homes be

provided each year starting in 2025 until 2030 to meet new need, and 39,500 from 2030-2040.

The conclusion of these two expert groups is that 337,000 new homes would have to be delivered in the five year lifetime of the next Government if we are to see any overall easing of the housing and homelessness crisis. Delivering such a large supply of new housing would be profoundly challenging and would have significant impacts on other dimensions of the economy. However, if parties opt for a lower target, on the basis that they consider it more feasible, we are asking them to acknowledge that the housing shortage is likely to persist even if they meet their target – and to set out what measures they will take to ensure that the burden of this continued deficit does not fall disproportionately on vulnerable sectors of our society.

The last two Governments have committed that around 30% of all new housing should be social housing (along with varying amounts of affordable housing). The Housing Commission recommendation that the proportion of social housing stock should rise from around 11% to 20%, necessitates that this objective of ensuring that 30% of new housing is for social and cost rental. In that context, depending on the final targets adopted between 83,000 and 110,000 of the new homes over the period until 2019 should be social and affordable homes. (This higher rate of delivery of social homes would accelerate the goal of housing the already long-term homeless set out in the third proposal above).

- **We are asking all political parties to make the most ambition target for housing delivery that they believe is feasible, taking into account that 337,000 new homes would have to be delivered in the five year lifetime of the next Government if we are deal with emerging demand and also tackle our accumulated deficit. The objective that 30% of housing delivery should be social housing should continue.**

6. Introduce legislation to ensure local authorities consider the ‘best interests of the child’ when responding to families presenting as homeless.

Local authorities homeless services are governed by laws that were written over 40 years ago before significant family homelessness emerged, and do not even mention children or their needs.

There are a lot of things that need to be done to end family homelessness, but writing the needs of children into the laws which guide our local authorities would be a great start. This can be done by adding ‘best interests of the child’ into the things that local authorities must consider when homeless families come looking for help.

A private member Bill proposing these reforms (Homeless Families Bill 2017) gained support across all parties and could form the basis for a legislation, with some amendments. The practical effect of this would be the needs of every homeless child would be taken into account, including factors such as access to their school, medical and therapeutical needs and family relationships. Every child in homelessness with complex needs should have

timely access to a child support worker to help meet children's developmental needs while navigating their journey out of homelessness.

- **We are asking all political parties to commit to enacting the Homeless Families Bill (2017) which would ensure that local authorities place the best interests of the child at the centre of decision-making when supporting homeless families.**

Appendix 1: More detailed policy ideas

We understand that political parties will want to go into greater or lesser detail on areas of housing and homelessness policy, depending upon their policy making processes, priorities and approach to manifestos. In that light we set out a number of policy ideas which, based on our front-line experience and research, we believe can make a substantial difference if adopted.

Homelessness

1. An All-of- Government Approach

Every homeless person needs an affordable home if they are to end their homelessness, so homelessness is deeply bound up with housing policy and we support the current arrangement where the lead minister in tackling homelessness is a Cabinet Minister who also has responsibility for housing. However, many people who are homeless also need the integrated support of other services – mental health, addiction, disability, probation, Tusla etc – so effective cross agency systems at national and local/regional level are essential.

Experience over a number of different Governments and approaches leads us to recommend the following governance arrangement at national level, to obtain the best balance between inclusion, efficiency and accountability

- (i) A Cabinet Sub-Committee on Tackling Homelessness which is chaired by An Taoiseach and attended by Ministers with responsibility for Housing, Health (Mental Health and Social Inclusion), Traveller Accommodation, Youth and Children, Immigration/Integration.
- An interdepartmental Committee, with an independent expert chair, which includes senior officials (PO and above) from Department of Housing, Department of Health, HSE Social Inclusion, Education, Tusla, Justice, Children, Youth and Integration.

2. Youth Homelessness

A Commitment to introduce a second **Youth Homelessness Strategy**, with a dedicated budget, to continue the work initiated by the current three years Strategy which runs until the end of 2025.

3. Family Homelessness

Include in the collaboratively developed Homeless Strategy a specific section looking at the particular needs of homeless families which would take into account the specific needs of children who are homeless with their families, including:

- A commitment to reduce family homelessness and in particular long-term family homelessness
- A commitment to introduce a ‘best interests of the child’ approach for all local authorities responding to families that are homeless
- A commitment to funding sufficient ‘child support workers’ to provide support for all homeless children who need it.

4. Housing First

To undertake an evaluation of the successful Housing First programme to ensure that it is sustainable over the timeframe that it is required by its tenants, that it effectively targeting those who would benefit from it, that it is effectively integrating mental health and addition supports and to explore what form of programme could be introduced to support those whose level of need falls below those for HF eligibility but who are remaining trapped in homelessness for long-periods

5. Systemic Challenges in the Social Care System

Undertake a full review of the staffing and skills requirements in the social care and social work sector – looking at labour demand, skills levels, salary levels and career development in social care and social work across the statutory and NGO sector. Explore bursaries, paid internships and graduate programmes to increase the talent pool and combat labour shortages in the next decade.

6. Allocate 1% of homeless budget to evaluation and research;

State spending on homelessness [now exceeds €430 a year](#) yet there is no dedicated budget to undertake research on causes or evaluations to see which interventions are most effective. A dedicated budget for research and independent evaluation would allow us to concentrate resources on services and programme which work.

7. Move away from for-profit providers;

[Over two thirds of expenditure on homelessness now goes to private for-profit providers of emergency accommodation](#). While this is essential in providing shelter for people at current levels of homelessness, it makes no contribution to solving the problem. It should be a goal of Government to reduce the level of expenditure on private for-profit emergency accommodation (PEA).

8. More Robust Homelessness Data

Review the current methodology for publishing homeless data and establish an independent expert oversight group with a view to improving the transparency and accuracy of homelessness data.

9. Review Tendering Process for Homeless Services

Review the process of tendering for homeless services to give greater priority to the effectiveness and experience of homeless service providers as opposed to weighting the cost of homeless services higher in the tendering process.

10. Clear and Transparent Guidelines for Local Authorities

Produce clear, transparent guidelines for all the processes and procedures in which local authorities engage with individuals and families who are homeless. The [guidance published by the Scottish Government](#) for its local authorities is an excellent model for this.

11. Independent Appeals System for Homeless Provision

Introduce an independent appeals system for decisions made by local authorities in relation to homeless provision, as recommended by the Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Appendix 2

Commission recommendations of particular importance

In relation to Focus Ireland's core mission, the ending of homelessness, we particularly welcome the recommendations:

1. Implement the Lisbon Declaration, to 'work towards ending homelessness by 2030':

- Ensure adequate availability of accessible, safe and appropriate emergency accommodation so that no-one sleeps rough.
- Provide permanent housing solutions for homeless individuals and families so that no-one lives in emergency or transitional accommodation for longer than is required.
- Ensure adequate spare capacity is maintained to facilitate the housing of individuals who have been newly discharged from institutional settings.
- Avoid evictions where possible and provide housing solutions to meet the needs of individuals and households that become homeless due to eviction.
- Ensure fair access to housing and equitable treatment for people who have experienced homelessness.
- Increase substantially the support of social and affordable housing to address homelessness by the end of the decade.
- Develop new policy coordination initiatives on homelessness, including cross-departmental coordination and increased investment.
- Leverage EU initiatives such as EPOCH to gain insights on successful approaches to addressing homelessness in other EU countries. This should include the sharing of info on best practices and identifying efficient and innovative approaches.

2. Implement specific measures to end child homelessness

- Ensure adequate provision of housing and other supports for children and parents in need of a home
- Increase the availability of affordable housing options for families, ensuring that housing costs are manageable for parents
- Prioritise meeting the needs of children who are homeless in the allocation of social housing. This can be achieved through extending the local authority social-work service. Local authority social workers could do assessments to identify cases for priority access to social housing.
- Allocate additional resources to fund support services for children who experience homelessness, including education and counselling supports.
- Strengthen family support services, particularly health, education and childcare assistance, for families and children that experience homelessness.
- Provide advice and counselling supports to families that experience financial hardship or who may be at risk of losing their home.
- Review the legal definition of homelessness. This should ensure that families and children living in inadequate or intolerable conditions are not omitted.

3. Increase the supply of social housing that better matches the size of homeless households and households in need of social housing.

- Ensure that new social housing output closely matches the household sizes and needs of people who are homeless, especially by providing one and two bed homes and larger family sized properties. The social housing delivery programme of LA and AHBs should provide an appropriate share of one- and two-bedroom homes, in line with local needs.
- Provide an appropriate level of large dwellings to accommodate the relatively small number of large households in need of social housing with five or more bedrooms. This should be a particular focus in urban settings.
- Develop the Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) process to identify the requirements in relation to homeless households, including the types and sizes of homes required.
- Reform the planning and funding approval processes for social housing. This is crucial to ensure that the size of the dwellings aligns more closely with actual need.
- Enable the conversion of larger social homes into smaller homes where appropriate

4. Structural reform of social housing sector

- increase size of social and cost-rental sector to 20% of national stock (double current level)
- Spatial mismatch in delivery: need to increase significantly the output of social and cost-rental housing in cities and the Dublin region- necessary to address particularly high numbers of households in need of housing and those who are homeless.
- Diversification of financing- reduced reliance on Exchequer funding and current pro-cyclical model
- Link rent to cost- Social housing rents set at cost (of constructing, managing, maintaining and upgrading) dwellings- tenants could receive means-tested HAP-like payment to ensure affordability,
- The cost of providing care/tenancy support could be an additional component in the HAP-like housing payment
- Tenancy Supports- For those with complex needs, provide long-term social support services
- New regulator of all tenancies both social and private (including local authority)
- Centralise arrangements for applying for and allocating social and cost-rental housing

5. Structural recommended actions around homelessness:

- Integrate and coordinate cross-departmental service plans, budgets and strategies on homelessness- Integrate housing and homelessness plans, funding and strategies to ensure a consistent whole-of-government approach.
- Establish a dedicated budget line in HSE Service Plans for support services for homeless people.
- Gather data on the causes of homelessness and the effectiveness of interventions to address homelessness.
- Align the strategic policy aims and objectives of future national strategies and plans with a homelessness dimension.
- Support, properly resource and implement the Youth Homelessness Strategy

Given that the consideration of homelessness was regrettably omitted from the Terms of Reference for the Commission, there are a number of areas which the Report of the Housing Commission does not adequately address and need further elaboration:

1. Pathway to Lisbon 2030 Goal

- While supporting the commitments made in the Lisbon Declaration, does not address the absence of any Government plan to deliver these goals or to establish meaningful milestones along the way.
- Focus Ireland argues that milestones towards the 2030 goal should be set through a collaboration between the Department of Housing, relevant state agencies, local authorities and the homeless NGOs. These goals should be underpinned by an inclusive and flexible strategy, with an appropriate budget, which would be jointly owned and delivered by the national and local agencies.

2. Long-term homelessness and Allocations

- The Report does not include any reference to scale of long-term homelessness and the harm it does to adults and children and does not contain any proposals to address it as a priority within the overall homelessness problem.
- The Report pays welcome attention to the issue of allocations but only in the efficiency and consistency of current allocation systems (p205). The Report recommends that homeless households should be 'appropriately prioritised' and that this should be consistent across Local Authorities, without making clear what form of prioritization is required.
- Focus Ireland argues that, as a one-off measure, all those households who are currently long-term homeless should be ring-fenced for targeted support including housing, as part of the Commission measures to deal with the accumulated 'deficit'. In the immediate term, a proportion of housing allocations should be directed to these households. In the medium term, 10% of all new social housing construction should be ring-fenced for these households, ensuring it is of the required size and location, until all this cohort of long-term homeless households is housed.

3. Preventing homelessness

- The Commission Report does not include any reference to the importance of preventing homelessness or recommendations to achieve that goal.
- Focus Ireland argues that the collaborative strategy to deliver the Lisbon Declaration goals should include a comprehensive set of measures to prevent homelessness arising from the private rental sector, discharge from institutions and relationship breakdown.
- HAP reforms
- While we very much welcome the recommendations around HAP being converted into a short-term/emergency support for renter. There is little detail on how to transition the 60,000 households currently using HAP to rent their home.

A commitment to introduce a Social Housing Act, as proposed in the Housing Commission Report, which would define and protect the social purpose of the social housing sector.

A commitment to ensure that the Local Authority Housing Organisations (LAHOs) envisaged by the Housing Commission to increase the output of social housing, should also retain responsibility for responding to and tackling homelessness.

Ends