

Planning for Children

Improving access to services for
children in private emergency
accommodation in Dublin

Joan O'Flynn and Liz Chaloner
for the Homeless Agency

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Foreword

I am very pleased to welcome the report on *Planning for Children – Improving Access to Services for Children in Private Emergency Accommodation in Dublin*. The report was completed by Joan O’Flynn and Liz Chaloner on behalf of the Homeless Agency.

The Homeless Agency is a partnership body that was established as part of the Government strategy on homelessness in May 2001. It is responsible for the planning and co-ordination of the delivery of quality services to people who are experiencing homelessness in Dublin. The Homeless Agency co-ordinates homeless services in Dublin, provides training and other supports, monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of services, carries out research and administers statutory funding to homeless services.

The Homeless Agency is comprised of voluntary and statutory agencies, who are working in partnership to implement agreed plans for the delivery of services people who are homeless, assisting them to move rapidly to appropriate long term housing and independence. A Consultative Forum advises the Board of Management.

Making it Home, the Dublin 2004–2006 action plan on homelessness prompted the commissioning of this report. It was carried out to produce guidance and standards on policies and service planning in relation to health, education and welfare for children in temporary accommodation and also to highlight the implications of this guidance and standards for service implementation.

In order to complete the research for this report, policy and academic literature was examined, over forty consultations were undertaken and an analysis was conducted of existing structures, systems and services that support the welfare of children in B&B style emergency accommodation both here and abroad. The findings highlight the gaps existing in the provision of services for a very vulnerable group of adults and children and makes recommendations in addressing these. Since the writing of this report the Homeless Agency has met with the National Care Group manager for children and families (HSE) to look at progressing the implementation of the report.

Dr Derval Howley

Director · Homeless Agency

The logo for the Homeless Agency, featuring the words "HOME", "LESS", and "agency" stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. "HOME" and "LESS" are in black, while "agency" is in white. The text is set against a light blue square background.

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Authors' Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all those who contributed their time, ideas and suggestions to the framing of this report. These contributions were made either through interviews, meetings or written material and are valued and appreciated.

A particular word of thanks is offered to the previous and current Director and staff of the Homeless Agency and to the reception staff at Parkgate Hall for their support and assistance and to Deirdre O'Flynn for editing work.

Thanks to members of the Homeless Agency's Working Group on Children and Families who offered specific support, to the Homeless Agency's Consultative Forum and to members of the various Homelessness Fora and roundtables that provided very useful feedback on the report. Your views and interest in improving the experiences of children living in private emergency accommodation in Dublin are incorporated to the best of our abilities in this report. A full list of consultations involved in this report is provided in Appendix 1 of the main report.

The Homeless Agency has commissioned and funded this report. Responsibility for it (including any errors or omissions) remains with the Consultants. The views and opinions contained in any reports arising from this contract are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Homeless Agency.

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

i Introduction

This report emanated from a commitment in the Homeless Agency's Action Plan 2004–2006 “Making it home” to tackle homelessness in Dublin and to address access to services for children in emergency accommodation. Focusing on planning for children in B&B style emergency accommodation, this research was carried out by Joan O’Flynn and Liz Chaloner on behalf of the Homeless Agency and was informed by an understanding that its *terms of reference* were to:

- produce guidance and standards on policies and service planning in relation to health, education and welfare for children in temporary accommodation
- highlight implications of this guidance and standards for service implementation

In order to fulfil these terms of reference, the following methodology was used: policy and academic literature was examined, over 40 consultations were undertaken and an analysis was conducted of existing structures, systems and services that support the welfare of children in B&B style emergency accommodation.

The report is addressed to statutory and voluntary bodies with powers, responsibilities or roles that focus on the health, well-being, education and welfare of dependent children in homeless families in private emergency style emergency accommodation. The report builds on prior studies that identified the experiences and circumstances of children in emergency B&B provision. In particular, the report seeks to be a progression of the work, *A Place for Children? Children in Families Living in Emergency Accommodation* (Halpenny et al 2003).

In drafting the report, the authors were also aware and conscious of a number of other related studies that were commissioned by the Homeless Agency and in the field of homelessness around the same time as this particular work. The relevant studies included:

- Unit Costing for Homeless Services
- Review of Funding Arrangements
- Model of Care and Case Management
- Evaluation of the Homeless Agency and three-year action plan

- Comprehensive Preventative Strategy
- Review of Partnership Structures
- Review of Temporary Accommodation.

ii Structure of Report

The report comprises an Executive Summary, seven chapters, references and appendices.

Chapter 1 introduces the terms of reference for the study, methodology, report structure and acknowledgements.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of children's rights and illustrates commitments on children's welfare, a right to housing, education and well-being under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also presents data on families presenting as homeless.

Chapter 3 looks at the key structures and systems that deliver housing and support services to homeless families with children living in private emergency accommodation. It provides a map of the services by tracing the journey and engagement that a homeless family may have with them. While the focus of this report is the welfare needs of children in private emergency accommodation, these needs arise in the context of the family's circumstances. Consequently, the focus includes structures and systems that relate directly to children in private emergency accommodation but also takes account of structures and systems that indirectly relate to children in the context of their family homelessness.

Chapter 4 describes some practices and policies employed internationally in relation to homelessness and its prevention, which may be of relevance to the situation in Ireland, particularly in Dublin. It also cites examples of practical approaches taken elsewhere in addressing the needs of homeless households.

Chapter 5 analyses points raised in preceding Chapters 2 and 3, in consultations and from a range of documentation in relation to the access to health, education and welfare services of children of homeless families. The chapter gives consideration to two issues: children and addressing the causes of their homelessness; and improving access to services for the current cohort of children in families in private emergency accommodation in Dublin.

Chapter 6 addresses issues relating to management and administration, with particular cognisance to issues that cut across the three service areas of health, education and welfare.

The last chapter, Chapter 7, draws together the key conclusions of the report and recommends guidance and standards on policies and service planning in relation to health, education and welfare. It also identifies the implications of this recommended guidance and standards for service implementation.

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

iii Key Findings and Conclusions

This report and informants to the report acknowledge much recent progress in addressing homelessness in Dublin such as:

- Improving quality standards within private emergency accommodation
- The deployment of designated resources such as the Multi-Disciplinary Healthlinks Team (MDT), a designated social work team for a period and designated public health nursing service for a period
- Better information sharing across sectors
- Greater evidence of joint working
- An increasing awareness of the well-being of dependent children in homeless families in private emergency accommodation
- A reduction in the numbers of families presenting as homeless and residing in B&Bs

Despite all these positive developments, a number of systemic and structural weaknesses in the field of homelessness in Dublin have been identified throughout this report. Recommendations seeking to address these weaknesses are set out in tabular format later in this executive summary. These recommendations also seek to build on the positive partnerships that already exist between various sectors active in addressing homelessness and manifested in the existence and performance of the Homeless Agency.

These weaknesses are identified as follows:

(i) Systemic weaknesses of private emergency accommodation

This report puts forward data on families presenting to the authorities as homeless and illustrates that it is widely accepted by the relevant statutory authorities and other organisations working with homeless families that private emergency accommodation is not an appropriate response or solution to homelessness or housing need.

Therefore, it has become a policy aim to eliminate the use of private emergency accommodation for families other than in emergencies, thus envisaging placement in private emergency accommodation as a short-term measure only. In addition, despite a current trend towards reducing numbers of homeless families living in private emergency accommodation, the reality remains that many families continue to live there for periods much longer than this, in some cases for several years. Many of these placements are in accommodation provision that lack facilities usual for family life, without sufficient or appropriate supports for people in vulnerable circumstances, and without any structured planning for their move-on into more appropriate accommodation solutions.

(ii) Welfare of Children

The evidence from this report fails to convince that the welfare of children, as an operational principle, is a primary consideration in all service planning or service delivery responses to crisis family homelessness where dependent children are in such

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

vulnerable circumstances. In conflict with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an internationally agreed framework of minimum standards necessary for the well-being of the child, the private emergency provision damages and diminishes every child's right to:

- Experience well-being
- A standard of achievement of the highest possible attainment of health
- A standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development
- Education

(iii) Area (geographical) nature of service provision does not best serve children in homeless families

Currently, families that present as homeless in any local authority area in Dublin are referred to a centralised Homeless Persons Unit in Dublin city centre. Most families are then placed in private emergency accommodation in the city centre, not adjacent to people's home environment. In many cases this accommodation is distant from and in a different administrative area for health, education and welfare services, than was the case for families in their previous address.

Being placed in accommodation in a different administrative area means that families may find themselves in a different Community Care Area within the health services and social work system, a different local authority area within the homelessness and housing systems and a different social welfare office for welfare entitlements [though these transfer readily]. They may also be distant from schools already attended by their children and distant from educational support services in which children may already participate, such as homework clubs, after-school clubs, home school community liaison services and so on.

Services, particularly health, welfare and support service are often restricted to people living within defined administrative areas. The mobility of people between areas, a common feature of homeless people's lives, and specifically the placement of homeless families in areas that are located outside their original administrative area are not catered for by the ring fencing of services to geographical boundaries. In the case of children in homeless families placed in private emergency accommodation, services may be more appropriate and provide a continuum of care if they are 'attached' to people rather than to their addresses.

(iv) The implementation challenge

Putting People First (Homeless Initiative 1999) acknowledges that one organisation on its own will rarely, if ever, be able to meet all the needs of individuals who are homeless and that integrated and comprehensive services are required to successfully deal with this issue and therefore promotes co-ordination with other organisations as a practice standard for homeless services. The Homeless Agency is a partnership structure of statutory and voluntary bodies and promotes partnership working among services, amongst other functions. *Making it Home* the Dublin 2004–2006 action plan on homelessness, makes a commitment to support partnership and to ensure the involvement of people in the homelessness sector in the planning, review and development of services (Homeless Agency 2004 p.40).

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

Although the important potential of joint working with regard to improving the access of children in emergency accommodation to health, welfare and education services is widely recognised, three main conclusions were found in terms of joint working:

- The homelessness sector and the Homeless Agency is faced with an ‘implementation challenge’ to improve access to health, education and welfare services for children in emergency accommodation.
- Agreed quality standards for services to homeless people do not carry sufficient enforcement or compliance and there is a shortfall in the extent to which these are operational for children and families in accommodation.
- The welfare of children is not evident as a universal operational first principle in the organisation, planning and administration of systems and procedures related to children’s access to health, education and welfare services

This report strongly demonstrates that, at both a strategic and operational level, and across sectors amongst those working with children in homeless families, there is a significant body of expertise on solutions to prevent family homelessness, to reduce the use of this type of accommodation and to address the support and settlement needs of families already in B&Bs. The consultations for this report proposed several suggestions and proposals to address all of these issues.

iv International Homelessness Policy Initiatives

An examination of policy initiatives in other countries that address family homelessness or support dependent children in homeless families revealed the following key points which may be of relevance to the homelessness situation in Dublin:

- An adequate supply of social and affordable housing is an essential tool in tackling homelessness
- Providing a crisis response, although important, is not sufficient in itself in tackling long-term homelessness; causal analysis is vital to addressing pathways into homelessness
- Homelessness prevention strategies are of key importance, where risk factors are identified and supports put in place to prevent people moving ‘out of home’ in the first place
- Research and information regarding trends and patterns in relation to homelessness are an important part of developing preventative and support strategies
- Identified and monitored targets can be useful in ensuring that homeless households are not inappropriately accommodated past an identified time-frame
- The support needs of each household that becomes ‘out of home’ need to be assessed, with tailored support packages put in place appropriate to these needs

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

- In the light of this assessment, consideration needs to be given to the suitability of subsequent placement, whether in temporary supported/unsupported accommodation, private rented sector etc. Each household has different needs
- Tenancy sustainment and support to people who have moved on from homelessness is essential in order to prevent repeat homelessness and ensure sustainable housing solutions
- The availability of mediation plays a valuable role both in the prevention of a household becoming homeless, and also in sustaining relationships and re-building damaged ones during a period of homelessness and thereafter
- Models of case and care management ensure that each homeless household has an appropriate plan in place with regard to its route out of homelessness
- Protocols regarding inter-agency working are essential in providing a rounded service to homeless households
- The welfare needs of children should be considered unique and should be seen as a priority in their own right.

v Key challenges

The analysis in this report and informants to the report suggest a number of reasons seeking to explain the *continuation* of this inappropriate situation of long-term B&B accommodation for families with children. These include the following key challenges:

- The wider context of a public service embargo on staff recruitment particularly with regard to the availability of sufficient numbers of professional staff to meet the needs of dependent children in private emergency accommodation
- The wider context of the public finances – to ensure sufficient monies to implement agreed quality standards such as *Putting Children First*, *Children First* and *Our Duty to Care*
- The well-being of dependent children in private emergency accommodation to date has not been the focus of strategic high-level policy or planning activity at a joint management level – by local authorities, health authorities and voluntary bodies
- The needs and well-being of dependent children in private emergency accommodation compete with issues perceived as being of higher priority – such as children’s cases that carry the possibility of judicial proceedings such as child protection cases
- The recognition of shared institutional interests for tackling homelessness is inadequate
- The dominance of area (geographical) boundaries for the administration of services to children and their families in B&B emergency accommodation

Planning for Children

Improving access to
services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

- Institutions are primarily concerned with discharging their own specific responsibilities – this results in insufficient consultation and joint management and planning with related interests
- The absence of target-setting or sufficiently strong performance monitoring
- The absence of any evident consequences or sanctions if the status quo prevails
- Changes to staff practices and issues arising, including industrial relations issues

vi Priority Recommendations

The five priority recommendations emanating from this report are set out in the following table. These recommendations are detailed further in the main report. In addition, The broader recommendations of this report will be available in the report on the recommendations from all reports commissioned by the Homeless Agency under the Action Plan Making it Home 2004–2006.

Recommendation	Issues this recommendation will address	Initiating actor	Timeline
<p>(a) Establishment of a high-level joint-management structure</p>	<p>The well-being of dependent children in B&Bs to date has not been the singular focus of strategic high-level policy or planning activity at a joint management level – by local authorities, health authorities and voluntary bodies.</p> <p>Acknowledges interrelatedness of housing, welfare and education issues. The absence of a joint management process and structures is a key barrier to the development and implementation of solutions to address the issues pertaining to B&B placement and to the welfare of children in dependent families in this accommodation. Such as joint high-level management group would:</p> <p>Have a singular remit to strategically and jointly manage issues regarding dependent children in homeless families in B&B accommodation</p> <p>Be short-term (until 2006, the end of the current Homeless Agency action plan and the timeframe for the recommendations of this report</p> <p>Be comprised of people with the relevant management authority, (e.g. Director of Homeless Agency, Director of Homelessness East Coast Area HSE, Directors of Social Inclusion within HSE, National Educational Welfare Board, Assistant County Manager with responsibility for homelessness in each local authority and high level management representation from key voluntary bodies</p> <p>Negotiate within and between sectors and with central government on planning, managing and implementing the guidance and standards of this report</p> <p>Provide a leadership role in advocating change to systems and structures, within sectors and across sectors, that have been pointed out as being weak and that, intentionally or unintentionally, act as barriers to achieving better outcomes for dependent children in homeless families or at risk of homelessness</p> <p>Mobilise, manage and coordinate the planning, resources and implementation of actions at sectoral level and at joint sectoral level to improve access to education, welfare and settlement services for dependent children in homeless families in B&Bs and to address accommodation placement issues</p> <p>Liaise with the Homeless Agency’s Working Group on Children and Families and the Homeless Agency’s Consultative Forum as appropriate</p> <p>Resource audit the full recommendations from the <i>Planning for Children</i> report.</p>	<p>HSE</p>	<p>To be initiated immediately for the duration of the current Homeless Agency Action Plan (until end of 2006)</p>

Recommendation	Issues this recommendation will address	Initiating actor	Timeline
<p>(b) Homeless services to recognise children in private emergency accommodation as individuals in their own right and be required to demonstrate how programmes and services improve the welfare of children</p>	<p>Children in families in B&B accommodation experience homelessness due to their family circumstances and the homelessness of their parents. The evidence from this report fails to convince that the welfare of children, as an operational principle is a primary consideration in all service planning or service delivery responses to crisis family homelessness where dependent children are in such vulnerable circumstances</p> <p>Commitment by the Homeless Agency to recognise children in their own right</p> <p>Programmes and services working with dependent children in B&B and emergency accommodation should be able to demonstrate how programmes and services will improve the welfare of children</p>	<p>High level joint management structure to initiate. The Ombudsman for Children, the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Children's Office could advise in this regard</p>	<p>Initial workshop involving Homeless Agency partner organisations in the first quarter 2006</p>
<p>(c) To urgently address child protection issues</p>	<p><i>(i) Transfer and allocation of child protection cases is seamless</i></p> <p>To address the lack of clarity regarding the transfer and allocation of child protection cases between HSE Community Care areas where dependent children in families are moved from a permanent address to a B&B emergency placement, between B&Bs or when they move on from a B&B</p>	<p>HSE to urgently clarify protocols and operational guidelines on this matter. Outcomes to be notified to all service providers working with children in B&Bs.</p> <p>Homeless Agency Working Group on Children and Families to be consulted on the implementation of practice on the ground and provide feedback to high-level joint management group on children in B&Bs</p>	<p>By January 2006</p> <p>Quarter 1 2006</p>
	<p><i>(ii) Routine data collection and analysis on child protection and the safeguarding of children in B&B accommodation to be made available to tailor appropriate supports to families</i></p> <p>Will address the insufficiencies in information on trends and referrals of children of homeless families in B&B accommodation at risk of abuse</p>	<p>HSE to promote the development of Social Work Information System (SWIS) and report progress to joint high-level management</p>	

Recommendation	Issues this recommendation will address	Initiating actor	Timeline
<p>(e) Establish and monitor length of stay targets for children in private emergency accommodation</p>	<p>(i) <i>Each placement of a family with dependent children in emergency B&B accommodation to be an agreed maximum period</i></p> <p>For the current cohort of families with dependent children in B&B accommodation the aim should be that all families are moved into appropriate provision with integrated support and post-settlement /tenancy sustainment services within six months of case review being initiated</p> <p>For newly homeless the aim should be that all families with dependent children would be placed in emergency provision. If this is B&B provision stays should be for no longer than three months</p> <p>(ii) <i>A performance indicator on the number of families with dependent children in B&B to be incorporated into the Homeless Agency's current Action Plan Making it Home 2004–2006</i></p> <p>(iii) <i>Target and performance indicator to be actively promoted amongst management and operational services and amongst families and children placed in B&B accommodation</i></p> <p>(iv) <i>Families in B&B style accommodation to be formally notified of complaint procedures or appeal procedures in event of stay in B&B extending beyond agreed period</i></p> <p>(v) <i>An adequate, high quality, supply of local emergency accommodation, hostel, transitional and private rented accommodation, with integrated provision of support, settlement and sustainment services, be ensured on a needs basis</i></p>	<p>Joint high-level management structure with a lead by local authorities</p> <p>The Homeless Agency Board</p> <p>Service providers working with families in B&Bs</p> <p>Service providers working with families in B&Bs</p> <p>Local authorities and relevant service providers</p>	<p>Immediate</p> <p>To commence in Quarter 1 2006</p> <p>To commence in Quarter 1 2006</p> <p>Significant progress to be achieved by end of Homeless Action Plan 2004–2006</p>

Planning for Children

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services for children
in private emergency
accommodation
in Dublin

vii Resource implications

While services that address the needs of homeless people and other public services incur costs in service planning and service delivery, doing nothing to eliminate homelessness or not doing enough also incurs costs. For example, homelessness has economic and social costs, for the individual and for society and in the short and long-term, with a particular impact on dependent children in homeless families. Homelessness amongst children may inhibit the life chances of the next generation and reduce their long-term economic and social contribution and participation. The longer a child lives in poverty, the greater the deprivation in later life.

It is beyond the scope of this report to provide conclusive figures on the implementation of the recommended guidance and standards. Furthermore, two studies for the Homeless Agency, commissioned around the same time as this report, may also be highly relevant to any consideration of costs and funding, such as:

- Unit costing for homeless services
- Review of funding arrangements.

Not all the recommendations in this report carry additional costs. Some may be cost-neutral, some may have modest costs or incur procedural or limited costs. Others, particularly those relating to additional staffing or expansion of current services will require a re-orientation of existing spending or new resources. Some recommendations may be implemented within existing delivery mechanisms.

This report makes an overall recommendation to establish a high-level joint management group (see above). It is recommended that this group has the appropriate authority, power and resources to make decisions and to oversee the implementation of this report's findings. A number of actions are also proposed whereby this group oversee the planning and management of the resource implications arising from recommendations of this report.

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