

Empowering lone parents with experience of homelessness to create change

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Focus Ireland is participating in a EU-funded project called Involve. A core objective of the project is to investigate the inclusion of marginalised groups in consultation processes relating to policy formation and public services in the areas of health, education, employment, and housing across eight European countries. Focus Ireland's role on the project is to conduct research with a group of lone parents that had been through the homelessness system, explore their experiences of using housing and homelessness services, and produce recommendations to improve those services.

The research emphasised the empowerment of the lone parents to understand and challenge the structures that cause their marginalisation and oppression through a process of co-producing knowledge and action. In numerous discussion groups held over two years the lone parents produced a list of recommendations in the areas of access to social housing, service delivery and administration, and support needs during homelessness.

Good research will reliably provide recommendations. However, getting those recommendations into the hands of the people that can act on them is a significant challenge for researchers and advocacy groups alike. To address this challenge, the Involve project organised a 'cross-talks' event which brought together key stakeholders—including government officials and two elected public representatives—to discuss the recommendations arising from the research.

At the event, the lone parents shared their experiences of homelessness and offered their recommendations to improve housing and homelessness services. The stakeholders shared their thoughts on the homelessness crisis in Ireland and in some cases the efforts their departments were making to alleviate it. The event was a hugely positive experience for all attendees. Many stakeholders said it was their first experience of such an event and that hearing directly from people with lived experience of homelessness had a powerful impact. The lone parents felt empowered by sharing their stories and greatly encouraged by the engagement of stakeholders in the room.

The event concluded in an agreement by senior government officials to explore the implementation of one of the research recommendations: a support resource for parents and children living in emergency accommodation. Several months later, this recommendation is being implemented by a working group that includes government officials and representatives from health, homelessness, and child-focused agencies and NGOs. The resource will provide parents entering emergency accommodation with a comprehensive and trauma-informed range of relevant information in both physical and online formats. It will be particularly useful when a parent does not have a keyworker or is waiting to be assigned one. The hope is that parents can use the

resource during a time of great upheaval and worry to find their feet and begin taking the necessary steps on a pathway out of homelessness.

The development of this recommendation is not only a great success story for the Involve project and the lone parents themselves; it is also a significant development for inclusion and active public consultation in housing and homeless services in Ireland more broadly. Regrettably, this type of consultation is generally absent. The Involve project shows how valuable it can be for all stakeholders, not least parents and children experiencing homelessness.