



# **Bridging the gap: from care to home**

The case for a statutory right to aftercare for young people leaving care and young people experiencing homelessness



# Bridging the gap: from care to home

Welcome to this publication which aims to advance Focus Ireland's campaign calling for a statutory right to aftercare for young people leaving care and young people experiencing homelessness in Ireland. We believe this statutory right is essential to protect the futures of young people in care and help them make a successful transition to adult life. Of the 5,000 plus children and young people in care today 80% are in foster care and the remainder live in children's residential centres. In 2006 there were nearly 500 homeless youth not being cared for by any family member. The current situation is that once a young person turns 18 years of age the State no longer has a legal obligation to provide aftercare support and housing. This is the very reason why Focus Ireland is calling for a statutory right to aftercare – to ensure young people leaving care are protected during what can be a vulnerable time. Not every young person leaving care needs support but it is vital to provide it for those who do. Many of the young people recognise that they need support to bridge the gap from care to independent living. Young people deemed homeless under section 5 of the Childcare Act 1991 may be more vulnerable than children in residential or foster care and are also entitled to the security of aftercare support on becoming 18 years of age.

A pilot study by the HSE in Dublin in 2005 showed that nearly one third of a sample of young people in care would prefer supported accommodation when they left the system at 18 years of age. It was also noted by the HSE at that time that if this level of need was replicated around the country the demand for supported accommodation would far outweigh supply. Meanwhile, the Government's Youth Homelessness Strategy also recognises the need for aftercare as it states that, "Aftercare is an integral part of the care process, it is not an optional extra." Focus Ireland is working hard with the Government, the HSE and other relevant bodies to provide support services and accommodation for young people leaving care. Much good work has been done through working in partnership in this area, including the recent opening in Dublin of Focus Ireland's Chéad Chéim aftercare project and the opening of the South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service both of which feature in this magazine. We are also working with the HSE through the Crisis Intervention Services Partnership responding to young people at risk of homelessness and facilitating their return to their family or a residential care placement.

Not everyone who needs this support is receiving it as of yet, and our experience has borne this out as there is already a waiting list for our aftercare project in Dublin. As I have said, Focus Ireland believes the right to aftercare now needs to be placed firmly as a legal obligation of the State and we are working to advance this. The first stage in any campaign is to demonstrate why change is necessary and to show

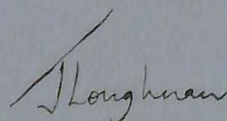
what needs to be done. I hope this magazine will bring added focus and understanding to this matter. As we all know any campaign for change has to generate support to be successful.

To this end I would like to pay special tribute to the invaluable support and input from people including Paul McGrath; Children's Ombudsman Emily Logan; Geoffrey Shannon; Sheila Marshall; Mark Yalloway; our own experienced staff; Focus Ireland's Life President Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy; and the young people themselves, as represented by the the Irish Association of Young People in Care. Paul tells movingly in this magazine of his own experiences upon leaving care and how support at this crucial time could have really helped him. One of the young people we work with also speaks candidly of her own experiences and how our services have helped her make the transition from care to independent living.

Focus Ireland has a strong track record of working to advance change since Sr. Stanislaus founded our homeless and housing charity in 1985. This work is informed through our research and experience of working directly with people who are marginalised in society. Focus Ireland will be actively continuing our campaign calling for a statutory right to aftercare through the political system by future lobbying. We will also work to raise public awareness and support for this campaign through our communications work.

We will also continue our partnership work to directly provide the services and accommodation needed to ensure that support is provided for young people leaving care. Our campaign is geared towards ensuring that one day soon these services will be a legal right for those who need them. I hope you find this magazine informative and that it will act to prompt you to support our campaign in any way you can. Working together we can each play our part to help protect the futures of vulnerable young people leaving care all around Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



**Joyce Loughnan,**  
Chief Executive, Focus Ireland



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# Paul McGrath's story

Paul McGrath is one of Ireland's greatest footballers playing for his country 83 times. He also played for Dalkey Utd., St. Pats, Man. Utd., Aston Villa, Derby and Sheffield Utd., during his illustrious career.



Paul is supporting Focus Ireland's campaign calling for a statutory right to aftercare for young people leaving care. He writes here about the challenges he faced upon leaving care just before his eighteenth birthday.

"The longest walk of my life was the one that took me out of Dublin's orphanage system in the late 70s. I was petrified. Having spent eleven years in the care of Smyly Trust Homes, I left Racefield for a little flat on Northumberland Avenue that I remember quite vividly to this day. Number 28. Yellow door. Cold. I was totally unprepared for a life of independence. In fact, it would take me months to come to terms with the fact that I was now, essentially, in charge of my own care. To me, the most important thing coming out of care is to know that there is somewhere you can go back to. That you're not entirely isolated. I wouldn't say that I felt a loner when I came out, but I did feel exposed. Looking back, I wasn't being pushed out, but that's pretty much how it felt to me at the time. I was being released into the real world, but I missed the comfort of familiarity. Of routine. Of having been institutionalised, I suppose.

It's like being caught in some kind of twilight zone. You know that you have to leave. You know that you have to move on. But part of you is pulling the other way. You want the re-assurance of having familiar people to talk to. People to ask questions of and be re-assured by. I mean I left care just before my eighteenth birthday, having spent virtually my whole life getting my tea made for me. Suddenly, you're in a flat, left to your own devices. If you don't make yourself something, you don't eat. It's that simple. For my first six months out of the system, I think I hardly ever ate anything other than beans on toast. Someone brought up within a conventional family unit might find that a little hard to understand. But simple things become incredibly intimidating. Having to pay bills, for example. I remember the apartment I moved into was absolutely freezing for a long spell because I couldn't quite come to terms with having to pay a heating bill. Then there was the responsibility of making sure there was something to eat in the cupboard. Milk in the fridge even. It felt a massive step.

To be fair to Smylys, they did have a good group of people that you could go back to. But that was another of my problems. I was never a great communicator. I didn't really like asking for help. Maybe my biggest failing was obstinacy. I wanted people to think that I was strong and confident. That I could make it on my own. I was like the duck on the pond, gliding serenely across the surface, but flapping furiously underneath. Your head is so full of questions at a time like that. And, looking back, the more questions you ask, the better. It's a tough time. Awful really. No matter how gently it's done, the fundamental thing that's happening is you are being cut off from a life you know. And that's incredibly daunting. It's a lonely time. You feel cut adrift.

You find yourself sitting in a bed-sit. You have a job to go to. I remember my gut instinct at the time was to go back to where I had been comfortable. Deep down, you know that you can't do that. That this is your life now. But it doesn't feel good. I mean the shock of going into care is one thing. But the shock of coming out is almost as significant. I certainly found that. I had been in a set routine for eleven years then, suddenly, I was back out. And now you're on your own. It's like a fear of fear itself. You couldn't actually pin-point what it is that frightens you. But it's there. You now have a responsibility. You have to set the alarm for the morning so that you're up in time for work. You've got to keep that job, make sure there's some cash in your pocket.

I made a load of mistakes. I lost a number of jobs and, being honest, was just blessed in the end that I could play football. I always felt that my life would resolve itself through football and that's pretty much what happened. Some good people at Dalkey United took me under their wing. They kept getting me new jobs. Because of the football, I think they saw something in me and wanted to help. They felt I could make something of myself. Without that help, I'm not sure how I'd have coped with life outside what felt to me like the comfort blanket of care. Bottom line, you need people to look out for you. But you need to be prepared to ask questions too."



# Young people leaving care

Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy, Life President, Focus Ireland.

Young people leaving care have always had a hard road to travel as they struggle to make the transition from care to finding themselves out on their own in the world. This is not uncommon and many of the people Focus Ireland has worked with over the years come from a background of leaving State care. Since Focus Ireland was founded in the mid 80's people leaving care formed a core part of customers who availed of our services for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. From this experience we have always been conscious that young people leaving care are at a vulnerable stage and at great risk of falling prey to problems including homelessness.

One of the critical reasons for these difficulties is that young people have to make the transition from residential care to independence very quickly unlike those growing up within family homes who usually get the time and support needed to make the transition to independence. When young people leave school they often move on to college or work and eventually leave the family home. It is part of people's experiences in life that they move on to set up a home of their own and we all have some degree of anxiety at this time as it is a big step.

However, for young people leaving care this is a much more daunting step. It is generally not a gradual process but happens suddenly when the young person becomes 18 years

of age as that is the age when the State no longer has a legal requirement to provide care. It is at this young age they have to find their independence without the kind of support, love and advice provided by parents, family and friends that their peers would have. Their peers are usually given the time and space to negotiate this complex transition at their own pace. Many a young person might leave home for a while when they are in their late teens or early 20s only to return to the family nest at some stage if things go wrong in some way. They have this safety net and along with the space and support to regroup at home before venturing off again independently into the world at some later point.

For most people, even though it is an anxious time, it is a very natural part of growing up. In contrast, young people leaving care and taking their first tentative steps into independence are very much on their own. It is not a natural right of passage but a forced transition at 18 years of age from a highly structured institutional setting to an unsupported, unstructured life style. Most young people leaving care don't get a second chance. If their job or housing doesn't work out, they cannot go back to care because they are now eighteen years of age or older and have to fend for themselves. So what happens to people in this situation?

It is our experience that young people in this situation feel totally lost, isolated and do not know where to turn for support. Negotiating the social welfare system or housing

"68% of those who took  
homelessness within two years





system is difficult to navigate for anyone at the best of times. This is especially true for young people leaving care who have not had the support while growing up to learn many things that help people to cope with difficult situations. Most of us pick up these coping mechanisms without even realising it - almost like a process of osmosis - from growing up in a family home.

Without this preparation for independent life young people find it hard to cope when things go wrong. This situation is made worse as there is a lack of suitable accommodation and support to meet the needs of young people at the different stages of leaving care. Consequently, people can very quickly fall on hard times and fall into homelessness.

But this can be avoided if young people get the support they need. Since the 1980's Focus Ireland has campaigned for better policies and services for young people leaving care. Ten years ago, Focus Ireland carried out a major study on young people leaving care. This study, "Left Out on their Own: Young People Leaving Care in Ireland," was published in the year 2000. It was a seminal piece of research and it remains the most comprehensive study carried out in this area. This study found that young people leaving care were not receiving the required levels of support they needed to prepare them to leave care and that they were without proper aftercare services. It discovered that as many as 68% of those who took part in the study had experienced homelessness within two years of leaving the care of the state.

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Since 2002 we have seen progress in the provision of services for young people leaving care. The Youth Homelessness Strategy launched in 2001 was a major step forward. It outlines Government policy and highlights the risks of homelessness and social exclusion for young people leaving care. It also places an obligation on each Health Board to produce an aftercare policy and provide resources for its implementation. Preparation for leaving care and aftercare was no longer to be an optional extra but was to be treated as an integral component of the care process.

In implementing that strategy, the HSE has worked very closely with voluntary agencies such as Focus Ireland and the development and the opening of Focus Ireland's aftercare accommodation project in Dublin city centre - described elsewhere in this magazine - is one example of this co-operation. The project provides 10 apartments for young people aged 18-21 where they live in a supported environment for a year after leaving care, after which they are given support for up to two years in settling into a house of their own.

However, while there has been significant progress made in terms of Government policy, professional practice and improved care provision, there are still considerable gaps in the service and not all policies have been fully put into practise. Young people leaving care need a lot of support and a lot of help. That support and help needs to start the day they go into care.



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Leaving care services should be part of a continuum of care - In Care, Leaving Care and Aftercare. When a person goes into care their plan for aftercare should begin. Aftercare should be an intrinsic part of care and should be seen as the right of all young people in the care of the state. That is why Focus Ireland will continue to campaign and lobby for a statutory right to aftercare.

Focus Ireland is calling for a statutory right to aftercare to ensure young people leaving care are protected during what can be a very vulnerable time. We are advocating for this measure based on our substantial experience as a service provider and also based on the empirical evidence garnered through Focus Ireland's research on young people leaving care. The transition from youth to adulthood is a complex and challenging time for all people and this can especially be the case for people in care.

This is why I believe it is critical that young people who have been in the care of the State are supported during this time and their rights are fully vindicated. To achieve this the right to high quality aftercare needs to be placed on a legislative basis. I further believe the State has a moral duty to provide such care as a right in order to protect vulnerable young people and help them to move on to have happy and independent lives. At the end of the day, this will prove to be a sound investment in the parents of our future generations.

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# HSE model for the delivery of aftercare services

Sheila Marshall and Mark Yalloway, Children and Family Services, HSE Dublin North East.

The issue of adequate preparation for children leaving care has been highlighted for some time. Evidence has shown that young people need information and support in advance of independent living. Networking and building of support systems is required to co-ordinate this transition as smoothly as possible.

The development of aftercare policy has been driven by legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks. The legislative framework for developing leaving and aftercare services is primarily driven by the Child Care Act, 1991. Relevant regulatory documents include the Childcare ( Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 and Child Care ( Placement of Children in Residential Care) Regulations 1995. Policy in this area has been directed by the National Youth Homelessness Strategy, which was launched as Government policy in October 2001, and requires each former health board area to produce an aftercare policy with the intention of strengthening the position of the young person leaving care, supporting their transition to independent living and reducing the possibility of homelessness and social exclusion on leaving care.

The Model for the Delivery of Leaving Care and Aftercare Services in HSE North West Dublin, North Central Dublin and North Dublin was launched on 22nd November 2006. The Regional Policy on Leaving Care, which was adopted as policy by the Eastern Regional Health Authority in May, 2004, is the key source of direction for the development of this model of care. At its core is the recognition that the development and co-ordination of leaving care and aftercare services is a core component in the prevention of youth homelessness and in achieving a successful transition to independent living for young people leaving care.

The model which incorporates a 14 point action plan, aims to achieve the delivery of appropriate preparation, leaving and aftercare services. It is a comprehensive multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach, involving the areas of health, welfare, education, training and accommodation, and will be implemented for young people in care between the age of 16 and 18 years and young people in aftercare. Focus Ireland is one of the service providers which have been contracted by the HSE to provide an outreach aftercare service and is a key partner in supporting the HSE to meet its statutory obligations under the Child Care Act 1991 and the Youth Homelessness Strategy 2001 in this regard.

The development of the model has involved working in co-operation with different agencies to address the issues that affect young people when they leave care as follows:

- The development of a needs assessment format and a preparation for leaving care/aftercare plan template;
- Negotiations took place between representatives of the Superintendent Community Welfare Officers and the Area Administrators to develop a template for an aftercare financial support package and access to health services;
- Negotiations were undertaken with representatives of Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council to agree protocols to access local authority housing;
- The voluntary organisations included in the provision of aftercare were requested and undertook to increase their capacity for residential aftercare programmes, with particular reference to creating capacity for girls. Focus Ireland has recently opened a newly refurbished premises in response to this need;



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Discussions were undertaken regarding services for non-Irish national young people with the Director of Child and Family Services in the Reception and Integration Agency of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

The Child Care Training and Development Unit developed and piloted a standardised training programme for key workers in residential care on the preparation of young people for leaving care. A model of preparation is also being developed for foster carers and the young people in their care and those providing supported lodgings.

The leaving care and aftercare service will be monitored both strategically and operationally through an Aftercare Forum, where the overall effectiveness of the structure for service delivery will be monitored by all the key stakeholders and changes made as required. This forum will also be used to

agree a more strategic, interagency approach in addressing issues as they arise relating to the provision of aftercare services. A 'Continued Care Register', with the assistance of the aftercare workers, will be updated and maintained by each Local Health Office to facilitate both the tracking of young people in aftercare and service planning.

There is an imperative to have a unified, standard approach throughout the HSE to the delivery of leaving and aftercare services and that this approach has the support of all partners. This model of delivery will be of assistance in the development of HSE-wide policy and guidance. In the interim the model is being implemented in the three Local Health Offices of Dublin North, Dublin North West and Dublin North Central.



# Vulnerable children: the case for reform

Geoffrey Shannon is a solicitor and author of "Child Law" (Thomson Round Hall, 2005). He is also Special Rapporteur on Child Protection.

Over the past decade Ireland has witnessed radical change. Key among these changes has been considerable economic growth leading to increased personal wealth. Ireland now boasts approximately 33,000 millionaires, a statistic that would have been unimaginable to most Irish people over a decade ago. It is within the context of this change that it is disappointing to note that youth homelessness continues to exist.

Youth homelessness is targeted in legislation. Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 is especially applicable to children who are homeless. While there is no specific definition of 'homeless' in the section, it refers to a situation where 'there is no accommodation available to [the child] which he can reasonably occupy'. Where it appears to the HSE that a child is homeless, it is obliged to verify this impression. Should it find that there is no adequate accommodation available to the child that he or she can reasonably occupy, the HSE is obliged to provide suitable accommodation for that child.

Scarcity of resources made available to the HSE has been cited as being the cause of youth homelessness. The underlying cause of youth homelessness, however, is not solely due to resources. Indeed, the underlying difficulties which propel a child or young person onto the streets in the first place are complex. A vulnerable child on the streets is at increased risk of engaging in criminal behaviour. It is therefore important to identify any gaps between the child care system and the youth justice system. The Children Act 2001 ('the 2001 Act') puts in place a modern statutory framework dealing with youth justice. It provides for family welfare conferences and other innovative provisions for children at risk or in crisis. A comprehensive strategy on restorative cautioning and conferencing is introduced. Broadly speaking,

the 2001 Act supports the philosophy that children in conflict with the law must be treated as children first. It is based on the premise that detention should only be used as a last resort and should only be considered after a range of community-based measures have been exhausted. The 2001 Act established on a statutory basis provisions for early intervention for children at risk and children before the court for their criminal behaviour by the holding of a family welfare conference.

Family welfare conferences provide a useful framework within which a child, its family and the appropriate agencies can find solutions to the problems which have led to the child being vulnerable. It empowers families to come to their own solutions with the relevant professionals. The emphasis is on consensus and partnership. One of the most significant and progressive elements of the family welfare conference is that children are present at the conference. It is also a valuable link between the child care, welfare system and the criminal law.

It does not seem like a time to complain. There are, however, a number of gaps in the current system that are worth considering. While the provisions of the 2001 Act signpost an important movement towards a more progressive youth justice system,

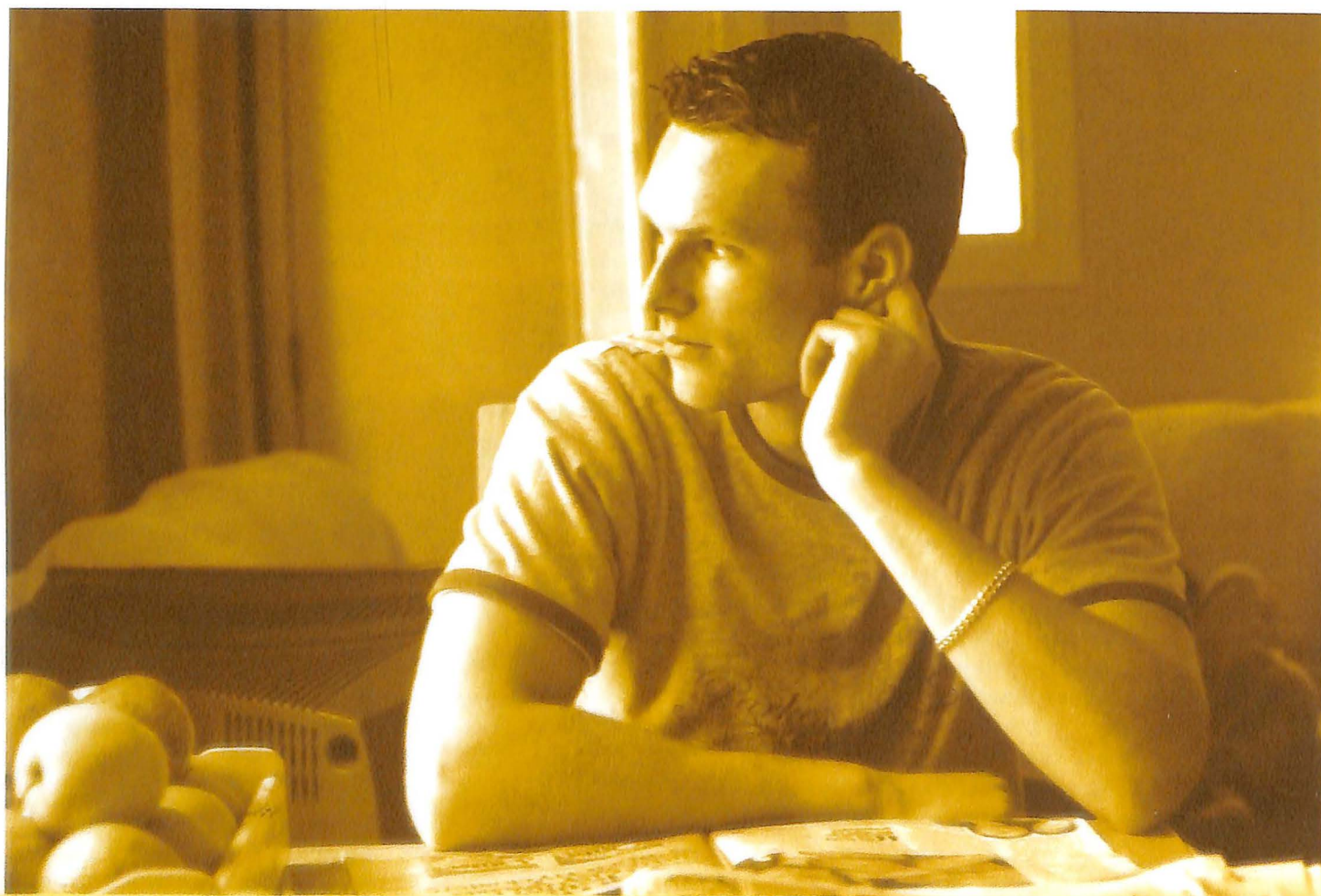




“It is much cheaper, and more productive, in terms of outcomes, to invest in family support rather than alternative care.”

greater effort needs to be made to reflect in our legislative response the socio-economic context that encourages offending behaviour in children. Of course, the family welfare conference provision in the 2001 Act as a participative model of child care, is very much to be welcomed. That said, a more pro-active approach is now needed in that family welfare conferences will only be convened when crisis intervention is necessary. Interestingly, the 2005 Report on the Youth Justice Review recommended an increased emphasis on early intervention as a means of preventing vulnerable children from engaging in criminal behaviour. Promoting and facilitating early intervention to prevent children at risk from engaging in various forms of anti-social behaviour can be achieved by providing a pro-active interagency response to support these children and their families. In this regard, there

is a need to develop increased, effective and flexible services to support children and families experiencing difficulties. Family support services play a vital role in contributing to the future well-being of children and families. These support services should be invoked whenever possible, rather than referring children at risk to various professionals. It is much cheaper, and more productive, in terms of outcomes, to invest in family support rather than alternative care. Family support may involve the establishment of formal collaborative structures (involving relevant state agencies, the voluntary sector and the local community) and the identification of a local centre to act as a focal point for the delivery of services to children. Such centres could act as a resource for both parents and children. Youth crime in Ireland is distinctive and less severe than in Britain. In this regard, the National Youth





# "Even a modest investment in aftercare offers significant returns in terms of public expenditure on the criminal justice system."

Justice Strategy 2008 – 2010 is very much to be welcomed in that it adopts a culturally specific approach to young people engaged in offending behaviour. By contrast, the introduction of ASBO's in Ireland was a 'British legislative idea taken over here and given a green outfit with silver buttons to make it look native'. The ASBO is a civil order breach of which is a criminal offence and may be the only qualification some vulnerable homeless children may obtain. Moreover, it may divert yet more of the limited funds away from the implementation of the 2001 Act.

Rather than investing money in ASBO's, the area of aftercare might have been targeted. When a child reaches 18, he or she is no longer technically deemed to be in care. Few parents, however, see fit to sever all links with their children on their reaching the age of majority. In a similar vein, the HSE is empowered, should it see fit, to make continuing provision for persons formally in its care. Section 45 of the Child Care Act 1991 allows the HSE to assist such persons until they have reached the age of 21, should it be satisfied that such assistance is needed. This provision is discretionary only and not mandatory. The reality is that the HSE, hard pressed in the allocation of resources, may choose to devote its limited resources to vulnerable children at risk rather than for providing aftercare to persons who are no longer 'children' for the purposes of the Child Care Act 1991. This is most unfortunate. What we seem to forget is that a young person's vulnerability may not end simply by him/her attaining the age of 18. I believe that the current section 45 provision should be strengthened to provide support, where necessary, for all children leaving care until the age of 21.

In summary, early intervention and family support are critical to the success of the 2001 Act and the National Youth Justice Strategy 2008 – 2010. This means galvanising resources and proper care plans for families in crisis, while children are still at an age to be rescued from permanent alienation. A mandatory aftercare provision would be particularly beneficial for young people in danger of becoming offenders. Even a modest investment in aftercare offers significant returns in terms of public expenditure on the criminal justice system. In conclusion, the challenge for Ireland is to learn from the international experience, and build on the strengths of an inclusive community approach to tackling welfare and justice issues in relation to children.





# Focus on: Chéad Chéim

Karen Doyle, Assistant Project Leader of Focus Ireland's Chéad Chéim, tells us how the project helps young people leaving care gain the skills and confidence necessary to take the first step towards independent living which they may not previously have been able to manage themselves.

Aftercare provides a vital role in the lives of young people who have come from state care, many of whom do not have any family contacts or informal support networks. The remit of Chéad Chéim is to provide a transitional accommodation service for young people aged 18 to 21 years who have been in the care of the state.

In 2007 Focus Ireland remodelled the aftercare service in North East Dublin, moving from a four apartment facility to Chéad Chéim with 10 apartments for aftercare, four apartments for step down and an outreach aftercare support and settlement service to help young people to settle in a home of their own. This new challenge has been embraced wholeheartedly by all the aftercare staff and both Chéad Chéim and the step down unit nearby are now operating waiting lists. Young people move into Chéad Chéim are

on a licence agreement which outlines their responsibilities and Focus Ireland's responsibilities towards them. All residents are allocated a key worker who is their support person during their stay. All residents are expected to engage in a day time activity (school, college, or work) and are encouraged to take part in weekly group work sessions and fortnightly key work sessions.

Group work covers educational topics such as sexual health, assertiveness, nutrition, social skills and budgeting which are carried out by project staff and are planned based on the residents' assessed needs. Residents engage in three monthly reviews of their placement in order to assess how their placement is progressing and to see if they need any further supports to meet their goals.

When young people move into Chéad Chéim they are allocated an apartment which is fully furnished and has all basic necessities provided. When the resident moves out



*Focus Ireland's Niall Keane, Neil Forsyth, Sr. Stan and Joyce Loughnan officially open Chéad Chéim*



they can bring their basic items with them in order to help them set up their new home. The majority of young people who have moved out of Chéad Chéim have moved successfully into private rented accommodation in areas of their choice. Chéad Chéim also houses an aftercare support service for young people in care and leaving care. Two visiting support workers are based in the project and are part of the aftercare team. The Aftercare Support and Settlement Service supports young people to settle into a new home – both young people moving directly into private rented accommodation from residential care or foster care and young people moving on from Chéad Chéim.

As assistant project leader of North Dublin aftercare my duties are varied, from supervising staff and interviewing prospective residents to chairing resident reviews in order to support the project leader in the running of three busy aspects of the aftercare service. We have residents from a

wide variety of backgrounds and cultures living in the project. As a staff member I find that the diversity of experience which our residents bring to the project makes our role both challenging and extremely interesting. One of the challenges of the role is advocating on behalf of our residents for funding for both education and basic living expenses. To this end we have built positive relationships with Social Workers and Community Welfare Officers in our local area and hope to continue to build on these relationships in the future. It can be very rewarding to watch young people move into the project and follow them from initial informal visit to moving out on their own and living independently a year later.

We aim to offer young people the autonomy to make life decisions but also to have the option of staff support if it is needed. Now we have all settled in to running the new project I look forward to having a role in supporting and advocating for young people in care for many years to come."







*Previous tenant Jacinta McAuliffe and Sr. Stan put the finishing touches to Chéad Chéim*

#### **Jacinta's story:**

One previous resident at Focus Ireland's Chéad Chéim who became homeless after leaving care tells how the charity helped her to turn her "life around."

Jacinta McAuliffe said: "When I left care I had no where to turn to for support and found myself staying at friends' places and sleeping on sofas. I wasn't happy, I had no support and was moving from place to place with no direction. When I moved here to Chéad Chéim it was so different. I had my own room and could get great support from the staff here and could turn to them for advice when I needed it." She added: "I was lucky as there weren't many places available.

I really struggled to keep on my feet when I left care but the staff here changed all that. They were so good to me and showed me how to have more confidence in myself. I think there should be more support for people like me leaving care and it should be everyone's right to receive this type of care should they need it."

Jacinta is a great example of how Focus Ireland's aftercare project is playing a key part in supporting young people leaving care to find a route out of homelessness or prevent them from becoming homeless in the first place and it demonstrates the need for more services of this kind.

**"The majority of young people who have moved out of Chéad Chéim have moved successfully into private rented accommodation in areas of their choice."**



# Preventing youth homelessness



Orla Barry, Director of Services, reflects on Focus Ireland's experience of responding to youth homelessness over time.

Responding to youth homelessness has been a significant part of the work of Focus Ireland since the early years of the organisation with support from both the City of Dublin Youth Services Board (CDYSB) and the HSE Children and Family Services. Over time our action has moved from responding to young people in crisis to encompassing prevention services that focus on supporting young people in making a home and preparing for independence, thus preventing homelessness from being any part of a young person's experience.

A reflection on the services Focus Ireland has provided in Dublin over the past twenty years gives an insight into the experience of young people over this time. In 1985 few services existed for young people and Street Outreach began with a team of two workers engaging with young people in Dublin city centre, witnessing the dangers young people were exposed to and advocating to social services on their behalf. The need for a safe place for young people to be resulted in the Extension day centre opening in 1987 as the 'extension' from our Coffee Shop in Eustace Street meeting the needs of young people for space, social activity, education and guidance. CDYSB continues to fund these services today through many reorganisations responding to the changing needs of young people out of home.

The need for secure accommodation accessible to this group of young people was a big problem up to the early 1990's. The opening of Off the Streets in 1992 preceded the establishment of the HSE Out of Hours service and marked the beginning of what has become a close working relationship with the HSE in responding to youth homelessness in Dublin city. The Youth Settlement Service established in 1995 with HSE funding helped young people

to sustain their tenancies in moving on from homelessness and is now part of the Chéad Chéim service.

The mid 1990's saw drug misuse grow to an epidemic stage resulting in a huge increase in the numbers of young people homeless and begging in the city centre. The late 1990's saw, for the first time, people visibly sleeping rough in doorways in the city streets and this posed a major challenge to homeless services to adapt to accommodate new needs amongst young people. With increasing challenges also impacting on residential childcare, Focus Ireland experienced an increasing younger age group presenting as street homeless who were falling through community services. In 1998 the Extension reduced the age group from 16 to 14 and set up a one-to-one response for 12 to 14 year olds. The demands of this 12 to 18 years age group resulted in the opening of The Loft day centre in 1999. A plan for a high support accommodation for young people aged 16 to 21 years who were drug using and rough sleeping resulted in the opening of The Caretakers, a Focus Ireland partnership project with the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul, in 2003. These services now operate as part of the network of crisis intervention services, aiming to respond effectively to the needs of young people and preventing youth homelessness. The Loft day centre closed in 2006 with the establishment of a day service in partnership between the HSE and Focus Ireland for 12 to 18 year olds while the Extension service is now open to 16 to 25 year olds.

A priority for Focus Ireland is to bridge the coming of age at 18 for young people out of home, a very traumatic experience for many young people faced with the withdrawal of HSE childcare support and the daunting prospect of adult homeless services. Focus Ireland through times of crisis has aimed to provide responsive services to support and protect young people while also proposing policy positions



# "Changing government policy so as to give young people leaving state care a right to aftercare will support young people to live independently."

and research evidence to promote understanding and policy change. A number of in-depth evidenced based research studies have been conducted in the last twenty years by Focus Ireland on youth homelessness. Most notably, the longitudinal study entitled "Left Out on their Own: Young People Leaving Care in Ireland" (1998 and 2000) examined the circumstances of a group of young people six months after, and again two years after, leaving care in Ireland. The study documented failings in the child care system and identified that within two years of young people leaving health board care a quarter had been in detention centres and two-thirds had experienced homelessness. Since the completion of this study, the Government has put in place an aftercare policy which supports young people in the immediate aftermath of leaving care. Focus Ireland was party to a group of service providers which advocated with the HSE to address the needs of young people out of home. This resulted in the Forum of Youth Homelessness, which inspired the 2001 Youth Homelessness Strategy and a new system within the HSE to manage youth homelessness.

What has followed is the development of a range of residential accommodation and a day service as part of the HSE Crisis Intervention Services which have increased the numbers of young people returning to their families and greatly reduced the number of young people becoming involved in street homelessness. Many gaps still exist in the accessibility of local services and in the need for young people to access crisis services out of hours through the Gardaí. Young people with very challenging needs continue to become homeless and are seriously at risk of long term homelessness, chronic addiction, and criminality. The call for

a right to aftercare includes this small and very marginalised group of young people who may require a well resourced, individually tailored, multi-agency plan to support them to health and stability and avert early death or a life of dependence on high intensity services, including hospitals and prisons.

Preventing young people becoming homeless has led Focus Ireland to identify aftercare, prison in reach and stepdown from drug rehabilitation as areas to develop in Focus Ireland's 2005 – 2010 strategy with the conviction that preventing homelessness or preventing a return to homelessness will protect many young people from the dangers of street culture and give them a chance for a positive future. In recent years Focus Ireland has also prioritised working with families who are homeless. We see the benefits of supporting parents and children in sustaining a home and participating in education and community resources as a protective measure to a new generation of young people vulnerable to homelessness.

Helping vulnerable families in local communities is the beginning of preventing youth homelessness. Helping young people to stay alive and move beyond addiction and isolation to be able to live in a home of their own is the challenge in helping the very vulnerable young people caught in street homelessness. Changing government policy so as to give young people leaving state care a right to aftercare will support young people to live independently in a home of their own without the word homelessness ever needing to be part of their thinking.



## Focus On: South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service

Michelle Carroll, Aftercare Worker, Focus Ireland South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service.

The South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service comprises of two Aftercare Workers and a Team Leader. They work with 33 young people from the HSE areas of Dublin South City, Dublin West, Dublin South West and Kildare/West Wicklow, who have been in the care of the HSE.

The role of the Aftercare Worker is one of support, advice and advocacy for young people while they make the transition from care to living independently. Young people are allocated an aftercare worker who helps them to plan for the future and set attainable goals. Aftercare workers aim to help young people access accommodation, education, training and welfare entitlements and gain the skills and knowledge they need to live independently. Each young person is fully involved in all decisions around their plan and this allows them to take ownership of their preparation for and the process of leaving care.

Focus Ireland's Michelle Carroll explains her role as part of the South Dublin aftercare team:

"I have worked with a young person over the last number of months who recently moved from foster care to independent living. The young man in question, like many teenagers in care, had not placed a lot of focus on preparing himself for his future or gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to live independently and sustain a tenancy. For most young people this is not a problem as they learn these skills with the support of family members and significant others as they mature. This young man however did not have this luxury and I worked with him weekly in addressing and identifying key areas where he needed to learn tasks and acquire skills and knowledge which would enable him to live independently.

I supported the young person to identify, apply for and secure suitable accommodation and link in with education services. I offered support to the young person as he became familiar

"For most young people this is not a problem as they learn these skills with the support of family and others as they mature."



“It is imperative that all young people in care are given the opportunity to prepare for independent living early.”



with his new neighbourhood, including public transport and community resources. The young person's aftercare plan was a useful professional tool used to break down, into manageable tasks, the daunting process of moving home incorporating areas such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, laundry, health and fitness, training and employment.

This young person is now successfully engaged in training and managing a tenancy where he is living independently. Leaving foster care or residential care can be a difficult time for a young person. Today it is not uncommon for young adults to remain in their family home right into their late 20s. However many of the young people we work with have a greater urgency to reach independence at a more

accelerated level and become competent in managing a home with little support. Young people leaving care have been found to be at increased risk of homelessness as they attempt to cope with the challenges and responsibilities of leaving their placements and moving to independent living. We begin to work with young people at the age of 16 years and I feel it is imperative that all young people in care are given the opportunity to prepare for independent living early to lessen the emotional stress and fear associated with moving once they turn 18.

Preparation and support are key for all young people who are in care as this will enable them to move more successfully into independent living and reach their goals.”



# Aftercare in the context of the rights of a child

Emily Logan, Ombudsman for Children, views aftercare in the context of the rights of a child.



Last year we asked children all over the country to vote on the areas that they want our office to prioritise. 75,000 children voted in our 'Big Ballot' project and in twenty one counties they voted the family and children in care as their number one priority. It is a harsh reality that children have to leave care at 18, the harshness of which does not happen to most young people living with their families. So why should it be acceptable for children leaving care who may be some of the most vulnerable members of our society? We know from previous research undertaken that this can be a very traumatic and frightening time for these young people. The need for appropriate aftercare services to support young people through this enormous change and transition period cannot be overstated.

Aftercare provision is an issue of concern to me as the Ombudsman for Children. The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) has the statutory mandate to promote the rights and welfare of all children under 18 years of age living in Ireland. This mandate is exercised through an independent, impartial complaints handling service, and by meeting children and young people directly and including them, appropriately, in the work of the Office; research and policy work including the monitoring and reviewing of legislation concerning matters that relate to the rights and welfare of children; advising any Minister on any matter relating to the rights and welfare of children; and ensuring that law, policy and practice meet the highest standards and obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In a report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006, as Ombudsman for Children I strongly recommended

that the Child Care Act of 1991, Section 45 (1) be amended to establish the provision of aftercare as a statutory responsibility of the HSE. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child took on board the views of the Children's Ombudsman and in its Concluding Observations: Ireland, recommended to the Government that the Irish State strengthen its efforts to ensure and provide for follow-up and aftercare to young persons leaving care centres.

The issue of aftercare provision has also arisen through the Ombudsman for Children's Office's complaints handling service. In one such case, a 17 year old living in residential care contacted the OCO because they were very worried about aftercare. The young person was studying for their Leaving Certificate and was due to turn 18 at which time they would have to leave the residential centre in which they had resided for nearly 10 years. In that time they had developed a huge attachment to the staff and other residents in the care facility. The young person expressed concerns about their ability to cope with the separation and lead a normal life without support.

The Ombudsman for Children's Office intervened and reminded the HSE that, while they are not compelled under the current legislation, the Executive does have the power to provide aftercare. Following the Ombudsman for Children's intervention the HSE met with the young person and agreed to keep them in care until after they had completed the Leaving Certificate exam. They also agreed to develop, in consultation with the young person, an appropriate aftercare plan to support them once they left care.

For more information about the Ombudsman for Children's Office including its complaints and investigation, please visit [www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)



# Aftercare for over 18s

Neil Forsyth, Manager of Young Peoples Services at Focus Ireland, outlines the reasons for Focus Ireland's call for a statutory right to aftercare for young people aged 18–21 years.



There are a number of significant milestones in the human lifecycle. Our birth, our first day at school, our first home are unique to each individual's life story. Leaving home is one such milestone. A right of passage, it is often reflected upon with a certain fondness in our later years. For some it may have been an impetuous decision, informed perhaps by youthful exuberance, a growing self-confidence and a strong desire to throw off the last vestiges of childhood. For others, it may have been a more planned affair, precipitated, perhaps, by the encroaching exigencies of adult life.

Whatever the circumstances and irrespective of the inevitable mishaps along the way, leaving home can be an exciting and a hopeful time in our lives. However, for one group of young people in our society - those who are leaving state care - this important milestone is often imbued with feelings of fear, isolation and uncertainty. For them, leaving home can be a forced transition, at a time not of their choosing, frequently with insufficient preparation and, crucially, without the support of family and friends.

For many young people who leave state care in Ireland, the concept of 'home' itself is somewhat problematic. Their real home, their family home, may have been a place they only visited at weekends, if at all, for much of their childhood. The meaning of 'leaving home', then, can signify something quite different from what most of us associate with that phrase, the leave-taking having occurred during their childhood years and usually in very traumatic circumstances. Latterly, when they reach their 18th birthday, leaving home means leaving a care placement, be that a residential home or foster care. Again, a major change in their life circumstances is inevitable and again it is outside their control. It is hardly surprising that

similar feelings of fear, rejection and powerlessness, first experienced when they entered the care system, re-emerge. That young people have very little choice as to how and when they leave care is dictated to a large extent by their legal status under the 1991 Childcare Act. Under that act, children are protected by the state throughout their time in care. However, under the same act, that protection effectively ends once they reach their 18th birthday. To date, as a consequence, many young people who have taken those first steps towards adulthood have been given only minimal support by the State.

While it is clear that Section 45 of the Childcare Act does allow for development of aftercare services, its provisions are merely facilitative and not mandatory. What this means, in essence, is that once a child reaches the age of 18 he or she is no longer deemed to be in care and while the legislation does empower the HSE to make continuing provision for young people formerly in its care it is a purely discretionary power and can only be used in very limited circumstances. Specifically, the HSE may assist a care-leaver in the following ways:

- Visiting and assisting.
- Arranging for completion of his/her education.
- Contributing towards his/her maintenance while completing his/her education.
- Placing him/her in a suitable trade or work, calling or business and paying such fees to facilitate such placement.
- Arranging a hostel or other accommodation.
- Cooperating with housing authorities in planning accommodation for children leaving care on reaching 18 years.

For those of us who work within the field of childcare or social work, the inadequacy of the legislation is a critical



issue. In practice, it is only those care-leavers who remain in full-time education who have any chance of receiving close to an acceptable level of support, and even then, there are no guarantees. But critically research has shown that statistically care-leavers tend to have much lower levels of educational attainment than their peers. Far fewer remain in education beyond second level and a great many do not even finish second level.

Arguably, we are faced with the irony that those who do not qualify for aftercare support are those who need it the most. If we take educational attainment as one indicator of childhood stability and future life chances, those who have had the most difficult childhood experiences and quite likely the most unstable care experiences are those young people for whom least support is available when they reach eighteen as they are least likely to remain in full-time education. As a direct consequence of the problems that have shaped their childhoods and precipitated their being in care in the first place, namely, poverty and social disadvantage, these young people receive the least support, when in fact they need the most. Focus Ireland's study, "Left Out on Their Own: Young People Leaving Care in Ireland," published in 2000, put the plight of care-leavers in Ireland in

the spotlight and highlighted for the first time the inadequacies of legislative provision and its consequences. It found that care-leavers were simply not receiving the required levels of support they needed in terms of preparation for leaving care and aftercare support. Consequently, 68% of those who took part in the study had experienced homelessness within two years of leaving the care of the former Health Boards.

"Left Out on Their Own" contained a number of key recommendations as to how policy and practice could be improved, thus reducing the risk of homelessness and enhancing the life-chances of care-leavers. These included the need for all Health Boards (now HSE) to:

- Have a written and accessible aftercare policy.
- Designate a budget for aftercare and resettlement.
- Recruit specialised aftercare support workers.
- Provide more appropriate accommodation options for young people who leave care.

That was over eight years ago and, while there has been some significant progress made since then in terms of government policy, professional practice and improved

"Section 45 of the Childcare Act does allow for development of aftercare services, its provisions are merely facilitative and not mandatory."



# "Preparation for leaving care and aftercare should no longer be optional extras but considered as integral components of the care process."

service provision, there are still considerable gaps and inconsistencies of approach across the country. There is a much greater willingness now to fill those gaps to warrant a large degree of optimism that further improvements could be made in the near future. Most notable is the Youth Homelessness Strategy launched in 2001. This was a very important development and is certainly one reason to be hopeful. It outlined government policy and highlighted the risk of homelessness and social exclusion for those who have left state care. It placed an obligation on each Health Board to produce an aftercare policy and provide resources for its implementation.

A further reason for optimism is that since the strategy's launch seven years ago, it would appear that the HSE has taken the strategy to heart and has worked closely with Focus Ireland and other agencies to implement it. In some areas of the country, particularly in north Dublin, policy, practice and service provision have been transformed. Focus Ireland and other voluntary agencies have worked alongside the HSE to develop a comprehensive multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach, involving the areas of health, welfare, education and accommodation. The HSE in Mid-Leinster is also developing its leaving care and aftercare services in partnership with Focus Ireland and South Dublin County Council, while developments outside of Dublin are also very encouraging.

While welcoming these improvements, Focus Ireland is calling for the legislation to be changed to make aftercare support for young people leaving State care mandatory. The call for change in legislation is to ensure that young people have the right to receive aftercare should they need it. This is not the case at the moment as huge inconsistencies exist. While the HSE has developed policies and services in recent years in some areas of the country, and is to be applauded for doing so, this has only been made possible by the fact that resources have been available in what has been a period of unprecedented economic prosperity.

But what will happen when resources are not so plentiful, as

would appear to be the case now? Will the HSE choose to devote its scant resources to children in need rather than providing aftercare to persons who are no longer "children" for the purpose of the legislation? Are we now entering a period when this might happen? If aftercare was placed on a statutory footing – if the "may" was changed to "shall" – perhaps this would not be quite so easy to do.

The principle underpinning aftercare has to be that the State should and must provide young people with the kind of support that parents provide for their children at home. Preparation for leaving care and aftercare should no longer be optional extras but should be considered as integral components of the care process.





# Supporting the right to aftercare

The Irish Association of Young People in Care (IAYPIC) supports Focus Ireland's campaign calling for the statutory right to aftercare for over 18s.

IAYPIC have been working closely with Focus Ireland over the last year developing Peer Support Groups and an Aftercare Manual for young people leaving care. We have held consultations with young people in Focus Ireland who shared with us their experiences of accessing aftercare services and identifying practical supports needed when leaving care.

IAYPIC provides information, advice and support as well as an advocacy service to young people in care and in aftercare. In the last year we have received numerous calls from young people seeking advice regarding aftercare. Many young people are anxious about leaving their current care environment and engaging with new services, while others are unclear whether they will receive support leaving care or if they can re-engage with services at a later stage.

Aftercare, as it currently exists, has been developed on an ad-hoc basis with some areas having a well developed service while in other areas aftercare is almost non-existent. Aftercare services have always been inconsistent, discretionary and inequitable but recent cutbacks within the HSE have made already poor services even worse. Concerns raised by young people who have lived much of their lives in care include:

- No right to aftercare services.
- Access to aftercare services is dependent on where you live in the country.
- Some HSE areas don't provide aftercare workers to support young people leaving care.
- Differences in aftercare provision depend on whether you are a young man or young woman.
- Insufficient supported accommodation is available to young people leaving care.

- Lack of support available to young mothers.
- Poor or little aftercare planning, preparation and support is provided.

IAYPIC believe all young people leaving care need equal opportunities to access a standardized and regulated aftercare service. Young people also require adequate preparation for life after care and continued support; we see the best way for this to be achieved is through change in legislation.





# Focus Ireland's services for young people



Catherine Maher, Head of Services - Eastern Region, Focus Ireland. A key element of Focus Ireland's work has been to address homelessness before it occurs through implementing preventative measures.

Becoming homeless has a very serious impact on young people and it can be a difficult and dangerous time for people who should be enjoying the journey towards becoming an adult. Focus Ireland provides a range of services designed to reach out and offer support to young people who are at risk of becoming homeless or are currently homeless to help them move on from homelessness.

## Services for young people in crisis

The Crisis Intervention Services Partnership, managed by the HSE, is a partnership with Focus Ireland responding to young people under 18 years of age who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The CISP works with the local social work service in developing a care plan for the young person, providing care and either offering accommodation or supporting a return to home. CISP also helps young people to access education or training. The CISP and the Outreach and Extension services, and Caretakers.

The Outreach & Extension Team works on the streets of Dublin and through a drop in day service to help young people find a route out of homelessness. The Outreach team goes out onto the streets during the day and at night to build trusting relationships with young people aged 12-25 who are seriously marginalised and to help them access services that will get them off the streets. Our Extension service is a drop in centre where young people aged 16-25 can get a shower, something to eat and do laundry as well as get advice and referral to accommodation services. Each young person is linked in with trained staff that works with them towards addressing issues so their life can develop and move on from homelessness.

The Caretakers is a partnership project with The Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The innovative project targets hard to reach young people aged between 16 and 21 who are sleeping rough and actively using drugs. Young people in this

vulnerable position are at serious risk of getting trapped in long-term drug abuse. People coming to the Caretakers typically come from a chaotic family life and frequently have a background of leaving State care before they became homeless. Our staff at the service work with people to prevent them from falling into long-term homelessness by supporting their access to treatment facilities which will help stabilise them and get their lives to develop more positively into the future. Caretakers has formal links with the HSE and Trinity Court Drug Treatment Centre and is an example of the success of our partnership approach.

## Services supporting young people on a pathway to independent living

North Dublin Aftercare (Chéad Chéim residential project and Aftercare Support and Settlement service) was developed in recognition of the need to provide young people leaving state care with support and settlement services to ensure they acquire the skills necessary to live independently and to avoid the risk of becoming homeless. Established in 2006, in partnership with the HSE, Chéad Chéim is a residential aftercare service which provides a semi-independent, residential programme for young people leaving state care. Our research and experience has shown that young people leaving care are often very vulnerable. If they lack support they risk failing to make the transition to independent living and many of them can find themselves homeless. Targeted projects such as Chéad Chéim prevent this from happening. Through regular key work sessions and personal support the project aims to help young people aged 18 to 21 years of age leaving care to take their first step to independence living.

South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service was developed in recognition of our expertise in the area of aftercare and the success of our expertise in this area and the success of our existing aftercare services in north Dublin.



# "Becoming homeless has a very serious impact on young people."

The HSE in Dublin Mid-Leinster agreed to work in partnership with Focus Ireland to provide a range of aftercare services in the greater south Dublin area. The first stage of our



collaboration was the establishment of our South Dublin Aftercare Support and Settlement Service in April 2007. The second stage of this collaboration will be setting up a residential aftercare facility in the south Dublin area in 2008. Focus Ireland provides aftercare support on behalf of the HSE in Waterford and plans to open residential aftercare in the city in 2009.

Prison-in-Reach is run in partnership with the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service and aims to provide a case management approach geared towards preventing people becoming or returning to homelessness on leaving prison. Our research has shown that there is a complex relationship between release from prison and entering a cycle of homelessness, crime and re-offending behaviour. In recognition of this, prison visits to maintain contact with young people and ensure a service link on their release has been an element of Focus Ireland's youth service for many years.

Off-the-Streets provides a short-term residential programme for young people aged between 16 and 18 years of age as part of the HSE Crisis Intervention Services. Staff endeavour to provide a welcoming, safe and supportive environment for young people who are out-of-home or at risk of becoming homeless. Our staff support young people throughout their placement and help to engage them with a range of external professionals. Each young person avails of a structured programme tailored to meet their specific needs, including assistance with education, training, employment and practical living skills. The aim of the programme is to enable young people to develop a positive self-image and to reach their full potential through helping them to move on and settle in a permanent home of their own.

The Spokes education programme's holistic approach to education plays a key role in helping people to gain valuable skills and experience to support their progression through formal and informal education programmes. In order to tackle homelessness it is vital to provide access to education, training and employment programmes for young people and adults. These programmes have helped people gain future employment, build self-esteem and develop life skills. Many of the wide range of training programmes offered are Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) accredited.



In order to protect the identity of our customers, the photographs in this publication are not those of people who have experienced homelessness  
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Focus Ireland  
9-12 High Street,  
Dublin 8.  
Tel: 01 881 5900  
[www.focusireland.ie](http://www.focusireland.ie)

Focus Ireland  
'Grange Cohan',  
Ballytruckle,  
Waterford.  
Tel: 051 879 807

Focus Ireland  
Parnell Place,  
Parnell Street,  
Limerick.  
Tel: 061 317 199

Focus Ireland  
1 Garden Row,  
Kilkenny City,  
Kilkenny.  
Tel: 056 777 7848

Focus Ireland  
114 Acorn Business  
Campus,  
Mahon Industrial  
Estate,  
Cork.  
Tel: 086 602 8143

Focus Ireland  
69 John Street,  
Sligo.  
Tel: 071 914 9974