

Making a hub a home

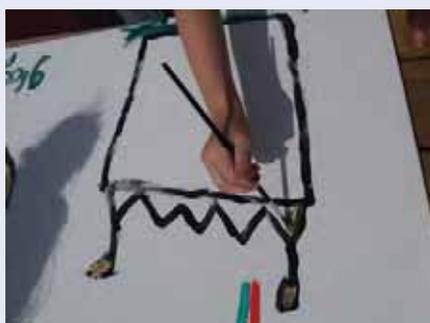
With family homelessness on the rise Shanelle Manderson finds out how Army family hubs in Ireland offer more than a place to rest

HAVING a place to call home is a fundamental human right. But imagine not having a say in where you'd like to sleep and being told that you and your family will have to live in a B&B or hotel room. Every activity, from meals and children's homework to interaction with friends and family, would take place in that single room and there would be no cooking or washing facilities. This is the reality for many families experiencing homelessness who are trying to access permanent housing in Dublin.

There is a vast family housing crisis in the Republic of Ireland's capital city. In May this year, according to Focus Ireland, 1,275 families were experiencing homelessness. In October last year 1,709 families were accessing emergency accommodation; this included 3,725 children. A lack of social and affordable housing has led to skyrocketing rents across the city. This, coupled with a scarcity of rental properties because demand far outweighs supply, has led to more families experiencing homelessness.

This rising need for accommodation has led to the opening of two Salvation Army family hubs in Dublin: at Clonard Road in December 2017 and Greencastle Parade in June 2018.

'Our family hubs provide temporary emergency accommodation for families experiencing homelessness who are deemed to be in accommodation that falls short of meeting individual needs,'



explains Robert Byrne, the service manager for both. 'The service is housing led, with a priority of working closely with families to identify their strengths and address any potential barriers preventing them from availing independent accommodation.'

Families are referred to the hubs through the Central Placement Service, operated by Dublin Region Housing Executive (DRHE).

'They are put in touch with the hubs based on family composition and, at times, previous or existing links to the area,' says Robert.

'So if a child is attending a school in a particular area, or their family lives in that area, DRHE will do its best to locate them in a hub close to those support networks,' adds Homelessness Services Unit Assistant Regional Manager (Ireland) Stephen Potter.

The hubs house 53 families across both sites. Constructed as either modular or adapted properties, they provide each family with their own room, an en suite bathroom, a TV and sofa,



table and chairs, a desk and a bunk bed. There are four training kitchens, which are available for residents to use within specific times, as well as communal dining rooms. Families also have access to laundry rooms on each floor, a toddler room and a library.

While hubs are not ideal, they offer the first step in bringing families in distress into a more cohesive and structured environment that allows for greater development options for children and a community setting for families as a whole.

Research by Royal Holloway, University of London, has shown that living in hotels for extended periods of time has many repercussions for



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families. Children’s development can be stunted – such as toddlers not learning to crawl or walk due to lack of space – daily routines tend to be disrupted, not being able to cook has health implications because of a lack of nutrition and family social time reduces.

‘Through our work within the hubs, we have identified that many of the families we engage with display poor coping mechanisms and an initial inability to regulate emotion within a community setting,’ says Robert. ‘This is seen as a direct impact of long-term inadequate housing provision.’

‘Family homelessness can also put stress on parental relationships,’ Stephen adds. ‘And, depending on the age of the child, they may question why the situation is happening to them or if it’s their fault.’

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the hubs to develop family structures, in particular the development of child support and family reunification. These include arts and crafts for children and adults, afterschool clubs, gardening, basic stretching activities for children and seasonal events and outings, such as cinema and museum trips and visits to the zoo. External services also include a one-to-one weekly meeting with a community health nurse and creative writing sessions for children delivered by award-winning authors.

The accommodation allows more time for housing needs to be assessed and provides a more structured approach to assisting families in finding their permanent home.

‘We recognise that the desire of all our families is to have the “forever home”, and so we aim to rehouse families as soon as possible to prevent any



potential institutionalisation,’ says Robert.

Service users are expected to link up with specialist support workers dedicated to resettlement. They help families navigate their way through that system, dealing with housing assistance payment – a form of social housing support provided by local authorities – viewing properties and negotiating with landlords.

The importance of families establishing strong relationships with external agencies before moving on is acknowledged and key workers are therefore assigned to assess service users’ needs and help forge those connections.

‘It is hoped that families with external support from the community will be in a better position to sustain their accommodation. This will prevent them from re-entering the homelessness cycle,’ Robert explains.

Since opening the hubs a total of 52 families between both centres have been successfully rehoused. Plans for the future include a new model of family support.

Stephen adds: ‘Family services are quite a big part of our work in Ireland. As well as the hubs in Dublin we also have four family services in Belfast. The model we are working on will draw on the insights of our existing services and those elements of best practice so they can be replicated across the board. The staff members in our hubs vary in profession, from psychologists to teachers or social workers, and are committed to getting people out of difficult situations. Having spent years working in homelessness services, they have a lot of expertise. We’re trying to put that in one place so we can continue to provide the best service possible.’