

Preventing Family Homelessness

The Community Support Service at Galway Simon Community

Executive Summary



Acknowledgements

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Overview

This research reports on a study of the support for families provided by the Community Support Service (CSS; formerly known as the Tenancy Sustainment Service), which is part of the Galway Simon Community (GSC) suite of services for people affected by homelessness and housing need. The CSS supports individuals, couples, and families to maintain an existing tenancy or find a new one. This research had a specific remit to consider the support given to families, with three objectives:

- Set out the Community Support Service model for supporting families at risk of homelessness.
- Put these findings in context by situating the CSS model in the lived experience of families affected by housing insecurity.
- Suggest how further development of services for families at risk of homelessness could be supported in Galway City.

There are four sections to the research report:

1. A review of the nature of family homelessness in Ireland, statutory responses to support families, international research on principles of working in partnership with families, and service models from the U.S. and U.K.
2. The study methodology describing the interviews with family members and CSS case workers, what they comprised, and how they were analysed.
3. The findings of research interviews – An analysis of the CSS model of practice; a summary of interviews with the CSS team members; a summary of the interviews with family members.
4. Study conclusion and recommendations – Summarising the model the CSS uses to work with families, comparing the model with best practice internationally, and identifying how further development of family homelessness prevention can be supported locally in the Galway region.


The Impact

of Family Homelessness, Insecure Housing, and Hidden Homelessness



The critical, ongoing issue driving family homelessness at present in Ireland is restricted access to stable, affordable housing options. The incidence of family homelessness has special resonance because of its impact on children and youth. The experience of homelessness is a severe threat to the well being of family members on all levels, physically, socially, and emotionally. There is extensive evidence available on the negative impact and trauma for families who have to live in emergency accommodation such as hostels, Bed and Breakfasts, or in hotels (Grant et al., 2013; Share & Hennessy, 2017; Walsh & Harvey, 2015). This instability also threatens “children’s learning and development, health, and wellbeing” (NEF Consulting, 2015, p. 3).

Homelessness research has largely focused on families who have self-evicted and become homeless. There is much less research on families who are at risk of becoming homeless and in the midst of housing instability. Additionally, service models have traditionally focused on emergency homelessness responses, especially to address the needs of single men (Mayock & Bretherton, 2016).



Two important areas have emerged internationally in recent years that provide direction for planning family homelessness prevention services. The first is to include families centrally in planning service responses to address housing instability – the solutions have to fit with family needs, strengths, preferences, and developmental priorities (Gaetz, 2015; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016; Paradis et al., 2012). Gulliver-Garcia's (2016) three-year study of Canadian families and homelessness services identifies the pillars of support valued by families and a framework of preventative practice within which services can address these needs. This work is set in a systems-based context, characterised by inter-agency collaboration, individually tailored case management support, and community-based provision of services.

The second source of direction arises from successful family homelessness prevention programmes, notably examples in the U.S. such as Homebase (Goodman et al., 2016) and services operated by Shelter in the UK (McCoy et al., 2015). The model linking these examples is to provide a range of supports directly – for example, advocacy, finances, accommodation, budgeting, parenting support – and work in partnership with other agencies to give specialised support in these areas as required. These services are also distinguished by having a strong conceptual rationale and evidence base of evaluation.

These trends in best practice – (a) the emergence of an empowering, family-centred ethos and (b) a systematic approach to addressing all aspects of housing instability, provide guidance in studying how the Community Support Service provided by Galway Simon Community has set out to meet the needs of families in Galway during a period of increasing pressure on housing.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods qualitative research design, comprising semi-structured qualitative interviews with five Community Support Service staff (all full-time and part-time employees working in the service at the time, including the Service Manager) and participatory research interviews with five families (four women and three men, comprising two couples and three individuals), carried out in 2017.

Interviews with CSS staff were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews with families made use of the Ketso method for visually depicting key ideas. This interview format results in a visual branch and leaf display of the participants' views on strengths, opportunities, and goals. The main topic at the centre of the tree was pre-written as 'Our Home' and was used to explain the purpose of the interview – to explore the family experience of home in the recent past. Four main branches were set out, referring to 'The Present', 'The Past', 'State Support', and 'NGO Support'. The Ketso depiction is used as a basis for further audio-recorded discussion. The family interviews were concerned with exploring the lived experience of housing crisis and engagement with the CSS (Smith, 2011). Research ethics approval for the study was provided by the School of Psychology at NUI Galway. A descriptive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in light of the three research aims for the study.

The CSS staff members were invited to take part in individual interviews. Informed consent was obtained on the day of the interview. Families were recruited through the CSS. Staff acted as gatekeepers to identify which families were in a suitably settled situation to consider taking part. Information was provided to families on the study beforehand and informed consent was obtained on the day of the interview. The interviews took place in the family home or agreed location such as a hotel meeting room. Interviews with staff and families lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. A sketch of each family is provided below.

Sarah

She is a young single parent. She had been living with her children and partner in overcrowded, shared accommodation. After the relationship broke up her housing problems became even more acute. She had been in emergency accommodation after that. The CSS case worker continued to work with her and a tenancy was found. She was living there with her children for just a short period at the time of the interview.

Edward

He was living with his partner and they had several young children. He had health problems that restricted his ability to work and his partner's job was not secure. With a new child they could no longer go on living in the same house as before, but finding a new home proved very difficult. The CSS helped him to identify a property.

Daniel and Siobhan

They are a couple who have been living in the same house for a number of years. The landlord was supportive but after the children developed health problems the couple fell behind in the rent and had a lot of additional expenditure. With the help of the CSS the family got more help from the HSE and had brought debts and rent arrears under control.

James and Monica

Their children were older than the other families in the study. In coping with the economic recession they had to move into jobs with zero hour contracts. They had received a notice to quit and found it difficult to obtain an affordable alternative. The CSS case worker supported them to secure a HAP tenancy and they had recently moved in.

Rose

She moved into the private rented sector recently having lived for some time with her children in a direct provision hostel for asylum seekers. It had proved frustrating to find a secure accommodation. It was only when she reached out to the CSS that she found a place.

Findings

The CSS was originally set up to support individuals leaving homelessness services to find and maintain a secure independent tenancy. Since 2011, family work has become a more prominent part of the service, and GSC took a strategic decision to expand the remit of the CSS to respond to the needs of families. Now over 100 families receive support from the CSS each year. For most families, this support takes the form of information and referral to other services. For others, more intensive direct support is required to assist them to find or to secure accommodation and thereby avoid entering crisis homelessness services.

The CSS works with families on the basis of whatever needs may be presented, to support the existing tenancy or provide assistance in securing a new one. The approach taken to this work is highly practical, identifying immediate and underlying issues and how to partner with families in addressing them. However in many cases contact is first made when the tenancy has reached a critical phase and is starting to unravel. CSS case workers describe an outward focus, which involves extensive networking, collaboration, and partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies, in addition to landlords and letting companies.

Alongside this outward focus of working with agencies, the CSS case workers see their service as fundamentally being person-centred, built on trust and supportive relationships with families. This focuses staff on identifying immediate practical needs – which can involve anything from support with utilities and groceries to medical appointments and meetings with statutory service providers. The role extends all the way through to establishing a working relationship with the family, understanding any underlying issues, attending viewings, contacting letting agencies, negotiating with landlords, and, more broadly again – working at the family's pace toward a strategic plan that will support long term tenancy sustainability. The key words used by the CSS case workers in describing their role include: mobility, communication, variety, flexibility, relationship-building, partnership, documentation, structure, needs-led, practical, bridging, brokering, and team work.

The research identified four key interventions carried out by the CSS staff and explored the process of service delivery. These are represented below as the CSS Practice Model and Process.

The CSS Practice Model: Interventions

Advocacy

Ethos and goal

Promoting family needs by working with other agencies and services, building useful networks.

Actions and approach

- Landlords and letting agencies – Direct networking with landlords and agencies, as well as supporting families to negotiate private rental sector.
- Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection and Galway City Council – Help families to obtain statutory benefits and supports, providing information to families and directly advocating to housing and welfare agencies.
- Health Service Executive – Supporting families to access specialist services.
- Voluntary sector agencies – Collaborate with agencies such as COPE Galway, Threshold, Saint Vincent de Paul.

Family outcomes

(a) More appropriate and sustainable housing; (b) Access to the health or social supports required by family members.

Structure and Planning

Ethos and goal

Drawing on social care and family support models, to offer families a structured process and package of support.

Actions and approach

- Self-managing team – High level of case worker decision-making balanced with manager / team input, case review, and management structure.

- Transparency and recording – Formalised assessment protocol, use of the Department of Housing, Planning, & Local Government PASS system for standardised information recording.
- Process-based engagement – Procedures in place to guide case workers from client referral to closing cases.
- Short-term and long-term agreed plans with families – Working with families to break goals down into achievable plans.
- Flexibility – Complex, dynamic external environment requires adaptable, responsive approach alongside procedure.

Family outcomes

(a) Clear, transparent relationship with CSS; (b) Ability to break problems into achievable steps and goals.

Practical Support

Ethos and goal:

Giving proactive, practical support with core conditions for housing stability.

Actions and approach:

- Problem solving approach – practical, solution-focused.
- Provide support finding solutions to financial issues (rent arrears, tenancy deposit, etc.)
- Prioritise daily needs – groceries, utilities, household goods, children's needs, etc.
- Support independent budgeting and saving skills.

Family outcomes:

(a) Meeting needs of daily life; (b) Addressing financial issues; Enhanced ability to manage money.

The CSS Practice Model: Process

Contacting the Community Support Service

Families self refer or are referred by another agency, primarily through the online referral form galwaysimon.ie/referral-form/.

New referrals are reviewed and prioritised by the CSS team coordinated by the team leader.

Case worker workload is managed within a large case load comprising individual and family clients.



Assessment Phase and Planning

The CSS assessment process leads to an agreed plan with the family. The assessment protocol directs attention to housing issues/family supports and family needs.

Each family is supported according to their needs, supported by a case worker employing a key worker approach.

The support plan can have several goals, from resolving an immediate crisis to longer-term sustainability. The case worker meets frequently with the family to break the goals into actions.



Plan Implementation

The plan is implemented at a pace the family is comfortable with, and is significantly affected by access to opportunities and other stakeholders.

The CSS is responsive to opportunities, such as the potential for a new tenancy, which require periods of more intensive case worker contact.

Depending on family needs, the case worker may give support primarily around accommodation needs or broader goals relevant to housing stability. The support plan is responsive to changing circumstances and new goals agreed with the family.



Ending Contact and Continuing Support

There is a discrete end point for some families in their need for housing support.

Others will receive ongoing case worker support for an extended period.

Some families benefit from support on an episodic basis and will contact the CSS again when the need arises.

Some of the outcomes of CSS support are specific – an existing tenancy made sustainable or finding a new tenancy. Others are less specific (e.g., improved family resilience) or involve input from several agencies (accessing healthcare or social welfare entitlements).

The local context of housing in which the CSS operates reflects a situation of limited access to private rented accommodation in recent years. Both the CSS case workers and the interviews with families described how it is now extremely competitive to obtain a secure, stable, and affordable tenancy. Knowing this, families feel very stressed when their tenancy is threatened. Yet family issues that impact on housing stability commonly arise, including parental illness, a child's illness or disability, unemployment or reduced employment, in addition to supply-side issues such as the landlord deciding to sell up or raise rents.

These varied stories offered by each family demonstrate the needs-led nature of the work carried out by the CSS, to identify what the family wants to do and help them to achieve their goals. Despite the increasing challenge of sourcing accommodation in Galway City, the families had been helped by the CSS to find a solution that largely fitted with their needs and goals.

Conclusion

and Recommendations



The study explored Galway Simon Community's Community Support Service (CSS) as an emerging model of practice for family homelessness prevention, developed by staff in response to the increasing difficulty many families face in maintaining an existing tenancy or securing a new one.

The background research for this study reveals close comparisons between the CSS model and published work on best practice for preventative services for families in the UK and U.S. (Durham & Johnson, 2014; Rolston et al., 2013; NEF Consulting, 2015; McCoy et al., 2015). There was similarity with respect to the forms of support and services offered to families. Moreover, the practice model that CSS staff work to reflects the ethos of empowerment and engagement recommended internationally by client-involved research (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016). Individuals and families want their homeless support services to offer empowering participation in decision-making (Gaetz, 2015). This outlook on working in partnership is recognised as giving due recognition to family strengths and capacities, and by working toward long-term achievement of housing stability (Paradis et al., 2012).

Current restrictions in the local housing market mean that short-term and long-term solutions for families are not readily available. These restrictions precipitate and maintain housing crises. The limited number of available tenancies in the private sector is compounded by the reluctance of some landlords to become involved in the HAP scheme or to let to families.

CSS staff undertake the same remedial actions repeatedly, in response to family needs around low income, access to affordable housing, food security, healthcare, and child care. This is partly attributable to the ongoing need to develop systems-based responses to housing instability among relevant agencies and organisations. There is a continuing need to implement collaborative, inter-agency working practices and partnerships, an inter-agency system that will overcome the current patchwork of partnership. The families interviewed for this study underscore the point that agencies are continuing to work from their own sectoral niche. A new approach is needed, which will place inter-agency working at the heart of a strategy to promote family wellbeing and housing stability.

The families in Galway interviewed for this study described a period of trying to cope alone or with the assistance of informal support networks. This is reflective of the experience of families in Dublin (Walsh & Harvey, 2015), with families typically calling on the support of homeless services and housing supports late on in their unfolding housing crisis. The families interviewed for this study reflect the variation in family forms and the family life-cycle. They described how CSS case workers responded to their needs through an individualised plan and response. The families spoke highly of the CSS staff and the impact of the service's commitment, structure, and flexibility.

Future Directions and Recommendations

The third aim of this study was to suggest how further development of services for families at risk of homelessness could be supported in Galway City. The national crisis with regard to family homelessness arises from many factors and influences. Unquestionably, one of the most prominent of the factors driving this crisis is

the restricted supply of suitable, affordable tenancies; therefore, the top priority recommendation arising from this report is that this structural need should be addressed. This is an ambitious aim, and five specific suggestions for future directions in the family homelessness prevention are made below:

1 Alleviate the pressure on families by increasing access to high quality tenancies in the social housing and rental sector.

The fundamental underlying issue accounting for housing problems in this study was the lack of availability of options. This has been identified as a critical issue all around the country. In the case of families, there were particular issues to note – including a perceived reluctance of landlords to enter into HAP, a preference for single working people, and the limited number of lets available that are suitable for families. The local authority has cited a number of initiatives that are being implemented to make more options available for families and single people alike. Ultimately, the issues identified in this study will persist until fundamental change takes place to address the limited number of high quality tenancies available to families.

2 Enhance the level of inter-agency working partnerships and service integration within Galway homelessness services.

One of the key points of contrast between the CSS practice model and other, comparable services is the more limited degree of embedded, agreed inter-agency protocols in operation in Galway. This is not to criticise formal and informal partnerships that work successfully. However, there is scope to enhance the systems communications and collaboration aspects of working with families. The objective of this would be to establish better communication between agencies to promote greater potential to reach novel solutions, to reduce frustration for families and for the other stakeholders engaging in advocacy on behalf of families.

This work would require buy in to a strategic analysis of collaboration in order to put families at the heart of working practices. Existing strategy groups such as the regional homeless forum could have a role in taking on this work. Alternatively, the Homeless Action Team approach has been used elsewhere to bring stakeholders together.


3 Involve families in service planning, delivery, and evaluation.

Each organisation and agency occupies a particular niche in homeless service provision. With each group fulfilling its own remit, it can be difficult to envisage the lived experience of families experiencing housing instability or homelessness. Their experience cuts across the interactions with each agency and is also influenced by their own circumstances, developmental stage, goals, and aspirations. Increasingly, researchers and strategists are using participatory methods to incorporate the voice of people affected by housing crisis and homelessness. Thus, as best practice, families should be incorporated as a key stakeholder in understanding the local housing context, in shaping how services are planned, delivered, and evaluated, and to promote a model of engagement that maximises family empowerment.

4 Develop resources to ensure families are aware of homeless prevention services and how to engage with services as soon as possible.

The best chance of preventing family homelessness is to receive support when risk factors have not yet combined to result in a crisis, or, in the event of an emerging crisis, that support is forthcoming as soon as possible. Families in this study did not know about the CSS until they were a considerable way into their experience of crisis. CSS staff members also spoke about the advantage that arises if there is more time to work with families. Lack of awareness of prevention services is not surprising, given that Walsh and Harvey (2015) identified it as an issue in Dublin as well. Besides lack of awareness, there are likely to be barriers arising from the social norm of family self-reliance.

There are practical issues to bear in mind if an effort is made to increase the awareness of services that are already hard-pressed. Yet the workload for services such as the CSS could be balanced out if intervention occurs at an earlier stage, as solutions may be more readily identified if problems are dealt with early on rather than developing into more complex cases where problems have escalated. Several factors are likely to be at play in accounting for low levels of community awareness and reticence to seek help




even after becoming aware of it – such as stigma linked to accessing homelessness services, not having previous experience of reaching out to support services in the past, comparatively low levels of advertising and publicising preventative services, not knowing what specific supports and approaches are available, and the drive to remain self-reliant for as long as possible.

5 Acknowledge family homelessness prevention within the overall strategy of addressing homelessness.

Traditionally, homelessness services were associated with emergency accommodation options such as hostels. Over time, residential and resettlement programmes have been developed and received funding as core services. Managing the risk of homelessness, rather than the occurrence of homelessness, has yet to become a branch of homelessness services as well developed and recognised by policy makers, funders, and service providers.

It is recognised that averting homelessness episodes is more efficient economically than providing for the family's needs after losing a tenancy. Yet the call to build services 'upstream' has yet to be implemented. Further integration of prevention initiatives with mainstream services will help in bringing the preventative ethos into sharper focus for all service providers. A range of development strategies could be employed to raise awareness of best practice in homelessness prevention – including seminars and conferences, inclusion of prevention as a domain in all homelessness reduction strategies, and strategic partnerships between service providers.





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