

Guidance for Home School Community Liaison Coordinators & School Completion Programmes

*Engaging with Children & Families
Experiencing Homelessness*



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Introduction

The Tusla Educational Welfare Services' response to children and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness is to identify supports that assist with the **educational welfare** of children (and families) who are experiencing homelessness. We seek to maximise attendance, participation and retention in school, to try to ensure that the education placement does not break down and to ensure that the protective factors of maintaining school engagement are capitalised on.

The purpose of this document is to offer good practice guidelines for School Completion Programmes (SCP) and Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators in supporting families and children who are homeless within the remit of their role, working with school management and in partnership with external agencies. The guidelines are issued in response to the significant numbers of families accessing Educational Welfare Services that are experiencing homelessness. Tusla Educational Welfare Services are committed to working in a coherent and integrated way to maximise attendance, participation and retention for all children. SCP and HSCL Coordinators are the strands best placed to provide early intervention and in-school supports to children and families experiencing homelessness. The Statutory Educational and Welfare Services (the EWO) provides support where there is significant concern about school attendance of children experiencing homelessness.

These guidelines represent an attempt to capture and disseminate the good practice which is already taking place on the ground as well as building on the lessons from other jurisdictions.

Defining Homelessness

The legal definition of homelessness:

Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1988 states that a person should be considered to be homeless if:

(a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who normally resides with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or

(b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a), and

(c) he cannot provide accommodation from his own resources.

Educational Welfare strands should employ an inclusive definition of homelessness which encompasses:

Visible Homelessness: People who are sleeping rough and/or those accommodated in emergency shelters, private emergency accommodation or shelters.

Hidden Homelessness: People who are couch surfing and involuntarily sharing with family or friends.

Those at risk of homelessness: People who currently have housing but are likely to become homeless.

Impact on Homelessness on Education - The Evidence Base

There is little research of the educational impact of homelessness on Irish children however studies in the UK and elsewhere link homelessness with lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of absence from school (Harker, 2006). Rice found homeless children twice as likely as other children to leave school without any qualifications (Rice, 2006). Disruption caused by frequent moves to different temporary and emergency accommodation may result in poor attendance and loss of equipment, books and uniform.

A survey of SCP and HSCL was conducted in 2015 on the strands' experience of providing service to homeless families. A picture emerged of significant numbers of children in DEIS schools experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The issue of family homelessness has become widespread and schools which never before experienced it are seeing children travelling to school from emergency accommodation. There was also evidence that HSCLs and SCPs are targeting supports to and engaging with families and students who are homeless and intervening as needs emerge. The commitment by both strands to support families and children experiencing homelessness was apparent in the survey.

HSCL Coordinators and SCP Coordinators reported in this survey that children who are experiencing homelessness:

- Frequently miss or are late for school.
- May not have equipment, lunch or uniform.
- Have difficulty doing and completing good quality homework as they may not have a quiet place in which to complete homework or to concentrate.
- Are frequently very tired and have poor concentration levels as homeless accommodation is frequently over crowded which does not lend itself to bedtime routines and a good night's rest.

- Present with high levels of anxiety and stress which can impact on behaviour.
- Are very anxious that no one will know about their housing status for fear of bullying or stigma or adverse consequences for the family.

Guiding Principles

It is clear that children who are experiencing homelessness are at significant risk of poor educational outcomes, achievement, attendance and retention. **All children who are experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness or exiting homelessness should be prioritised for inclusion on HSCL and SCP target lists and offered every possible support.**

Integrated Approach and Avoiding Duplication

It is important to avoid duplication and minimise the number of people that a family needs to engage with in school to repeat their story. Educational Welfare strands should use and build on existing structures and relationships to plan, coordinate and implement coherent supports for children experiencing homelessness. A lead person should be designated to liaise with the family around all school based supports. Where existing integrated structures do not already exist, HSCL and SCP should initiate an integrated approach to plan the supports to homeless children and families, designate roles and clarify responsibilities to maximise leverage, resources and contacts. It is important to secure parental permission before sharing sensitive information regarding the family's housing status and informing other services.

Working with the Community

There are significant supports available within local communities. Each HSCL cluster working with SCP colleagues should map the additional supports in their local area providing supports to homeless families. They should share this information within the cluster and with the other strands of the Educational Welfare

Services. Coordinators can then signpost these services when families require them.

Part of the role of HSCL Coordinators and the SCP is to work with other statutory and voluntary agencies and to build professional relationships with other services. It is helpful to be in a position to refer families to a named person within the services locally.

Signposting Services and Offering Advice

A HSCL Coordinator or SCP staff member is not a homeless services worker and they are not expected, or qualified, to deal with many of the issues that may arise in meetings with parents in relation to homelessness. It is important that staff do not take on a role which is not within the core work as a HSCL Coordinator or SCP staff. Families should be directed to those with the knowledge and expertise to provide support and advice specifically in relation to homelessness. It is also important that Educational Welfare services work in partnership with families and respect the parent as the agent in their own life and that they do not undermine parents' capacity to seek solutions and resolve their own issues.

Coordinators should support the parent in accessing the support from the appropriate services nationally and locally. This may include providing information, finding contact details for relevant key supports, writing letters outlining the educational impact of homelessness on the children or linking with other services such as mental health etc. It is important to be prepared and informed regarding available services.

See here for information on homeless services:

<https://www.focusireland.ie/files/information%20guidebook.pdf>

Additional information here: <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/>

Talking to Families about Homelessness

Results from the recent survey indicate that many families are not identifying their housing status and their needs to the schools or Educational Welfare supports. Reluctance to let people know that the family was experiencing homelessness due to concerns around stigma, adverse consequences or bullying of the child were identified by both HSCL and SCP as a concern for families. It is therefore important that Educational Welfare Services including HSCL and SCP supports are **visible, approachable and accessible** to homeless families and students.

Many families do not wish to share their housing status with the school and this must be respected. However HSCL Coordinators and SCP staff are very well placed to offer support to families and children experiencing homelessness in order to support continued attendance, participation and achievement in school. The cornerstone of the work of the HSCL is building bonds of trust and developing relationships with target families. These relationships lay the ground work for supporting families if they are experiencing housing difficulties and should reassure families that the coordinator is approachable, trustworthy and available to offer support.

HSCLs and SCPs should make their services visible to homeless families and highlight the supports they can offer through the school website, newsletter and school notice boards. Care and sensitivity should be taken so that any public notices do not further stigmatise families.

In some cases a child may tell a teacher or a member of SCP staff that the family is homeless or may mention to the class teacher or SCP staff member that they are moving to a hotel or are moving away. It is important that school and SCP staff are aware of the homelessness issue and that they are alert and sensitive to the indicators of this issue. The following are some indicators that a family may be experiencing homelessness:

- The child uncharacteristically arrives late to school, or has uncompleted homework;
- A teacher may notice something different in the child's demeanour, health, hygiene or presentation;
- Children wearing non-uniform clothes or sportswear as they may not have sufficient washing facilities;
- The child mentions that they are moving to a new home or going to stay in a hotel;
- Absenteeism can be an initial indicator for the class teacher/ HSCL that a family is homeless.

These concerns should be discussed with the Principal. Where it has emerged that there is an issue related to homelessness the school should focus on how it can support and help the child attend, participate and achieve in school. It may be appropriate for teacher or the HSCL to approach the parent and discuss what the child raised in class or what has been noticed, emphasising how the school can support the child during the school day and showing compassion and understanding towards the family. If a family informs the school they have become homeless the HSCL should make contact with the family to check where they are staying, how they are getting to school and to determine what support can be provided and to emphasise the importance of school attendance. It is especially important to affirm the role that the parents play in supporting their child's educational outcomes.

Sensitive information such as housing status should be shared with school personnel on a need to know basis only and with parental permission. However it may be helpful to emphasise the benefits to the child in including key people and sharing this information. It is imperative that school personnel dealing directly with children and families experiencing homelessness are sensitive, discrete and empathetic towards the individual children and families.

Messages from Research for School Completion Programmes

Evidence points to the need for multifaceted programmes that target multiple risks, assets, and protective systems as being the most likely to succeed in securing good educational outcomes for children experiencing homelessness rather than one off or programmes which only target one area. Attending to basic needs emerges clearly from the research as a prerequisite for supporting homeless children in terms of food, uniform, warmth and school supplies (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Success also depends on the school and SCP staff's ability to create a caring and stable culture in classrooms and in the school as a whole. Researchers also assert that we should make school an oasis of stability, calm and caring in what seems like a random, chaotic, and uncaring world to homeless children. Children also need to have opportunities to catch up on missed learning opportunities, support with homework and access to extra-curricular activities.

Role of the School Completion Programme

Children who are experiencing homelessness should be included on SCP target lists and should be prioritised for accessing universal supports and targeted support. Very often school is the one constant in a child's life and every effort should be made to maintain and create opportunities for positive experiences in school. In school children get a chance to develop confidence, resilience and skills. They make friends, receive praise and encouragement, achieve success and earn qualifications. SCP has an important role in supporting this.

This may include:

- The protective role of the “one good adult” in the child's life should be recognised with every effort made to link the child with a project worker or coordinator for check and connect. A key worker may be required if the needs presented are

significant.

- Children who are homeless or living in temporary or emergency accommodation may have nowhere quiet to do homework or to play. They could be supported by inclusion in homework clubs, breakfast clubs, after school clubs, school enrichment programmes and extra curricular activities.
- It is important to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in all children experiencing adverse situations so every effort should be made to include them in school activities, trips and outings.
- Cooking facilities in homeless accommodation are frequently minimal or non-existent so families rely on expensive and unhealthy takeaways. All homeless children should be included in any lunch time or meals programme and given access to nutritious meals and snacks in school where possible.
- Homelessness is a traumatic event in a child's life and homelessness can have a negative impact on student well-being, behaviour, self-confidence and inter-personal relationships in school. SCPs can offer mentoring, social and emotional support programmes, problem solving strategy based key working, behaviour support and time out opportunities.
- All homeless students should participate in universal level of supports aimed at improving students' well-being.
- Many children who are homeless need support with academic work as they may have missed school. This can be supported by inclusion in home work clubs, tutoring, one to one support and mentoring.
- Exam students who are homeless should be prioritised for inclusion in study groups, grinds classes or extra classes.
- It may be possible for SCPs to assist in funding and practical assistance with uniforms, books, equipment, transport and school trips.
- SCP Coordinators may be in a position to support transfers and may play a role where a child moves to another school by maintaining contact with the child providing some continuity and practical help around books and equipment.
- SCP staff should be alert to the possibility that children

- experiencing homelessness may be the target of bullying.
- Access to health and hygiene programmes and washing facilities should be handled with the utmost sensitivity, taking great care to protect and respect the child's dignity.

Messages from Research for Home School Community Liaison

The message from International research identifies **very significant protective factors** which should guide HSCL practice. It appears that parenting quality and **parental involvement** in the child's education is crucial to the development of competence, resilience, positive behaviour and academic success particularly among children whose lives are challenged by severe adversity. A recent study on educational achievement in homeless children found parental involvement in the child's education (as defined by parent engagement with school, talking to the child about school and helping with child's homework) had a notable positive effect on children's educational outcomes, behaviour and success in school (Miliotis , Sesma, & Masten 1999).

Two important protective processes are identified as related to school success in these children experiencing homelessness. The first was the importance of the parents providing a secure base which was reflected in the closeness of the relationship between parent and child. The second involved the parent making it clear to a child that education is important and valued which was reflected in "parental involvement", such as monitoring homework, signing homework journal, talking to the teacher, or asking a child about teachers, school work, friends and trips, etc.

The role of the HSCL is to maximise the opportunities, build capacity of parents and advise them of the benefits to their child in maintaining and building strong parental involvement in the child's education. Coordinators should be sensitive to the challenges homeless families face in meeting survival needs and

should work in partnership with parents to remove barriers to parental involvement and develop innovative strategies to boost and affirm parental role.

Role of the Home School Liaison Coordinator

Working with Families

The HSCL is an important link person for families experiencing homelessness in communication with the school and may provide a much needed ear for families.

- It is important for the HSCL Coordinators to support the family to maximise their child's engagement in school despite the difficulties the family is experiencing. They should emphasise the important protective factors for children when parents remain involved in their child's education and the benefits of attendance and retention.
- Children experiencing homelessness have difficulty attending school due to distance and transport issues. Families may be able to access transport through community welfare officers or local and voluntary groups. HSCLs can play a role in signposting supports and supporting families to explore these options.
- It is important to continue home visits to the family if they are in new or temporary accommodation, to remain engaged with them by providing information, bringing learning materials, encouraging reading, etc.
- Making sure that all opportunities for parental involvement are accessible to homeless families including sensitive scheduling of meetings, information sessions, activities and coffee mornings.
- Developing packs, shared literacy programmes, including Maths for Fun, which support families experiencing homelessness.
- Making the parent's room available in creative ways to meet the needs of parents who have may not be able to access temporary accommodation during the day.
- Providing courses and classes for parents to give them an

opportunity to build their confidence and capacity to support their child in education.

- It may be possible to use DEIS funding to subsidise the cost of school books, school uniforms and school trips for children experiencing homelessness.

Working with Schools

HSCL Coordinators should take a role in coordinating the school response to supporting homeless children.

- Talk to the teacher about ways to keep the child up to date on any class work missed out on due to late arrival to school and where possible accessing school based supports or SCP supports .
- Children who are homeless may have difficulty with attendance. In many cases the temporary accommodation sites are not close to the school and attendance can become sporadic. With the help of the HSCL, teachers can put together a pack of classwork and possibly provide extra reading material for the child to complete.
- HSCL Coordinators should discuss with school management and teachers to plan for unavoidable late arrivals to minimise the effect on the child entering the classroom.
- HSCL Coordinators should make teachers aware that children in temporary accommodation may not have a quiet area in which to do their homework. Homework should be discussed and decided upon on an individual basis between the teacher and the parent/guardian in question. Where possible places in homework clubs should be prioritised for children in this situation.
- HSCL Coordinators have a role in raising awareness that the laundry and cooking facilities in temporary accommodation are very varied and therefore children may sometimes be missing an item of uniform or their lunch may be insufficient. Schools should plan for this and be in a position to make allowances around uniform or make uniform items available.

- If a school has breakfast club, school lunches and/or afterschool club supports in place for their students. It is important that the HSCL works with the school and family to ensure that children experiencing homelessness can be included these supports.
- Children who are homeless should be referred to the school care team and/or student support team.

It may be possible to use DEIS funding to subsidise the cost of school books, school uniforms and school trips for children experiencing homelessness.

School Responses

Role of the Student Support Team

The role of the Student Support Team is to provide a coordinated response to students who may need additional support/care in school.

The provision of a coordinated response ensures better outcomes for students who may need additional support. This response is facilitated by the Student Support Team/Care Team whose typical membership includes the Principal, the SCP Coordinator or Project Worker and the HSCL with additional input from individual teachers when necessary.

The Care Team structure enables the early identification, planned interventions and monitored outcomes with the involvement of external agencies, if and when appropriate. Scheduled regular Care Team meetings take place with key personnel. The purpose of the team is to identify student's who need additional support, keep relevant staff informed, and refer for external supports as required.

The Importance of School Attendance

School attendance is very challenging for families displaced because

of homelessness. It is very important to affirm and encourage the huge efforts families make to get children in to school in the face of significant challenges and at the cost of a significant portion of the families' budget. Coordinators should reassure families of the school's commitment to the child, assure them it is best for the child and that additional supports are available to their child. They should discuss and allay any fears or concerns that parents have for their children. Equally it is important to speak with children and affirm their efforts and provide supports as required for them to improve attendance. SCP staff are well placed to engage with children and young people in this regard. It is important for HSCL and SCP to engage proactively to identify and find solutions to any barriers to attendance that are identified & where necessary to develop and implement a plan to improve attendance.

Children Moving to a New School

A move to permanent or more stable temporary accommodation may result in the need to move to a new school. Children in this situation will be experiencing additional difficulties within their personal life along with the normal challenges of settling in to a new school. HSCLs and SCP staff can play a really important role in welcoming the child's parents and easing the transition. This might include supporting the family with practical issues and liaising with the previous school around the child's strengths, needs and academic progress.

Child Welfare Responses

Out of Home Young People

Where a child or young person is homeless and not in the care of their parents or guardians they are considered an Out of Home Young Person. Where school personnel are concerned that a child or young person is in this situation a referral should be made to Tusla. Tusla has responsibility in these cases under:

Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991, which states:

‘where it appears to a health board that a child in its area is homeless, the board shall enquire into the child’s circumstances, and if the board is satisfied that there is no accommodation available to him which he can reasonably occupy, then unless the child is received into the care of the board under the provisions of the Act, the board shall take such steps as are reasonable to make available suitable accommodation to him’.

SCP staff and HSCL Coordinators have an ongoing role in terms of supporting educational outcomes for these children and young people.

Child Protection

Any concern about the child welfare and protection of children who are experiencing homelessness should be referred to Tusla according to Children First Guidelines and will be assessed in the same way as any other child protection concern.

Role of the Statutory Educational Welfare Service

When to Refer to the Educational Welfare Statutory Services

Referrals to the Statutory Strand of the EWS should be made in line with responsibilities under the Education Welfare Act, 2000.

If a school is concerned about a child who has not returned to school and they have not received notice from another school that the child is now enrolled elsewhere a referral should be made to Educational Welfare Services.

What will Educational Welfare Services Do?

The EWO will contact the school and the family to ascertain the issues impacting on school attendance. They will take a welfare based approach when contacting and working with the referred

family and will approach the family with compassion and sensitivity.

The EWO will endeavour to support the family in ensuring their children continue to receive an education.

The EWO will explore all possibilities available and will ensure the continued participation and attendance of the child. The EWO understands that the family is experiencing a difficult situation and will not add to the families' worries.

Further Reading

Good practice briefing: Engaging with homeless children. Guidance for education professionals (2008). Shelter: https://england.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/96746/Engaging_with_homeless_children_-_guidance_for_education_professionals.pdf

Decter, A. (2007). Lost in the shuffle: The impact of homelessness on children's education in Toronto. Phase 3 report of the kid builders' research project.

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Protective Process for School Success in Children from Homeless Families, Early Education and

Development, 10:2, 111-133, DOI: 10.1207/s15566935eed1002_2

Joseph F. Murphy, Joseph F & Kerri J. Tobin (2011) 'Homelessness comes to school: How homeless children and youths can succeed', The Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 93, No. 3 (November 2011), pp. 32-37

Rice, B. (2006) Against the odds. Shelter: London

The background of the entire page is a soft, out-of-focus photograph showing the backs of several children's heads and their hands raised in the air, suggesting a classroom or a group activity. The colors are muted greens and yellows.

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