



A Review of the POD

A collaboration of Supports for Children and Young People who experience Homelessness in Cork

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The work of the POD is part of a complex tapestry of service provision for children and young people who are currently experiencing homelessness. While it emerged in response to a specific need identified in the Good Shepherd Cork (GSC) services, the POD has grown and evolved into an important part of both TUSLA'S and GSC's efforts to respond to the needs of children and adolescents living in homeless accommodation in Cork city and surrounds.

The POD is supported by CYPSC Cork and funded through the Healthy Ireland Fund. This support has enabled the POD to bring together a diverse network of agencies, working collaboratively to create healthy environments that promote improved physical and mental health outcomes for children and young people experiencing homelessness. The aim of reducing health inequalities is at this core of the work of the POD and the Healthy Ireland Fund has been invaluable in working towards these outcomes.

The POD is a unique collaborative structure which has provided increased opportunities for various stakeholders and service providers involved in providing for the needs of homeless children, young people and their families, to work together and to pool and target resources more effectively. It has enabled positive working relationships between a voluntary organisation such as GSC and state bodies such as TUSLA.

The POD co-ordinator has built a network of supports and allies, which he draws on to optimise and enhance inputs as much as possible. The POD has shown itself to be innovative and willing to try different things, something that is extremely valuable.

The review has found that the children and parents who have availed of the activities under the umbrella of the POD have benefitted and that activities such as the weekly Youth Club are valued and do constitute a positive experience each week for the children who attend.

A key part of the approach used by the POD is the focus on positive relationships between the children and the POD project workers. Positive relationships are key in bringing about change and in acting as a buffer to stress. Therefore, the activities of the POD are helping to reduce some of the stress associated with homeless.

The POD has grown organically and efforts to put more structures in place, to support communication, reporting and collaboration, have been evident in recent months. It is important to get a balance between the flexibility required to respond to the needs of children and adolescents with a fluid demographic and age range and the need for structure. The POD co-ordinator would benefit from access to admin support.

While the boundaries are fluid, which can make reporting and developing specific outcomes a challenge, in practice on the ground people work well together.

However, the overall impact of the POD, and how it operates on the ground, is very much interlinked with GSC, their clarity of vision and their structures which support or impede collaboration and integrated ways of working.

The POD is a novel structure, which also means that a template does not exist for how it should evolve. The development and resourcing of the POD should align with the development of GSC's strategy for supporting children and families experiencing homelessness.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The POD, a term used to describe a group of whales, is a co-ordinating structure which brings together staff from GSC, TUSLA, Foroige and others, who are working to alleviate some of the pressures on children, young people and their families, who are accessing homeless services. It emerged in response to the growing number of children and adolescents availing of GSC homeless services, as the housing crisis became more acute.

Good Shepherd Cork is one of the main voluntary organisations currently providing emergency accommodation and other supports for women, children and more recently a number of men, in Cork city and county. Their services for children and families include: Edel House, Redclyffe, B&B outreach team and the Support and Advocacy service. As of 13th December 2023, the total number of children in their services was 192, comprising of 75 females and 117 males.

The level and rate of change in GSC services has been considerable in recent years. For a long time Edel House was the flagship service for homeless women in Good Shepherd Cork. Women and their children often presented to the front door, looking for emergency refuge for a number of weeks, or at most a couple of months. The focus of the service was on getting women and children rehoused in their communities or elsewhere, if such communities were no longer safe for them. While some help was provided to the children, perhaps toys or supports in relation to school, the mothers were viewed as responsible for their children and their welfare.

As time went on, more families were presenting to the service and staying for longer periods of time. The facilities in the original Edel House were not tailored to the needs of children or large families. The accommodation was increasingly cramped, with few appropriate places to play or opportunities for teenagers to have some privacy. It was apparent that many of the children and young people were finding life in Edel House very stressful, as evidenced by symptoms (observed and reported) of anxiety, sleeplessness, withdrawal and aggression. In 2016 staff in Edel House approached Springboard/TUSLA to look for support with a cohort of teenage boys whose wellbeing and behaviour was becoming difficult to manage and a cause for concern. The initial work entailed the current co-ordinator of the POD coming into Edel House to develop activities for the young people. Quite early on, it became clear that providing opportunities for the young people to engage in structured activities outside of Edel House, would be central to the work. Since then, this work has grown and has developed its own structure known as The POD. The POD has expanded its activities to include children and young people in GSC's Redclyffe Family Hub, which opened in 2018, and those in B&Bs and other private emergency accommodation.

The POD is a co-ordinating structure which now has a full-time co-ordinator, and a number of part time roles. The co-ordinator role is directly funded by Springboard/TUSLA and it is also under their governance. Funding for the other positions and for the activities that fall under the umbrella of the POD, comes from TUSLA, Healthy Ireland and Good Shepherd Cork. GSC administers the funding for the part time roles. Supports for the POD are also provided from time to time by Cork ETB and Cork City Council.

Table 1: POD Project Workers

Fulltime	Part time	GSC Child and Youth workers
One fulltime post (39 hours) funded by Springboard/TUSLA	5 hours – Springboard/Tusla	Child and Youth workers from Edel House, Redclyffe and B and B team attend Youth Club on a Tuesday
	10 hours – Self-employed POD worker – invoice to GSC	
	5-8 hours - Foroige	
	4-8 hours – Self-employed - invoice to GSC	
	5 hours approval for equine therapist	
	10 hours from GSC Sports and fitness youth worker	

The stated aim of the POD is to adapt to the needs of families experiencing homelessness, as they present. Specifically, the aim is to reduce the anxiety, sleep and other issues that affect children living in homeless accommodation. The focus is on developing positive relationships with children and parents, providing opportunities for fun and connection, all with a view to supporting positive mental health.

The POD supports three main areas of service provision, including the weekly Youth Clubs, one to one supports for children and families and practical inputs as needs arise or resources become available.

The weekly Youth Clubs continue to provide a central focus for the work of the POD and its members. The Youth Club for 4-14year olds is held every Tuesday evening and it alternates between activities in the ETB/Foroige building in Knocknaheeny and trips to Planet or the Cookery Cottage. During the summer the children are brought on trips to other locations and activity centres. There is a service level agreement with ETB/Foroige which means that the club has access to the full building every Tuesday evening. Every effort is made to ensure that the caretakers are the same people each night. The building includes a canteen, an art room, spacious play areas, a quiet space and a large sports hall. Activities are set up in each room, under the supervision of an adult, and children are free to move between the different areas. The club usually lasts for about 1 hour and is staffed by a minimum of six people from the POD collective. A bus collects the children from Edel House and Redcliffe at 5.15pm and they are back at 7.30. A GSC staff member from each service travels on the bus with the children. When the children go to Planet, the whole area, which has a capacity of 25 children, is booked out for them. The Cookery Cottage also provides a designated space for the children, and sometimes the mothers, to cook their own food and to learn about nutrition.

Older teenagers attend youth clubs or groups on a Thursday evening, run by the Foroige youth worker and more recently one of the C & Y workers from GSC. A growing number of adolescent males have been getting involved in fitness groups, with support from the GSC C & Y worker who has a background in health and fitness.

The sessional workers involved in the POD provide a number of one-to-one sessions with individual children or families. Individual referrals can come from Redclyffe or the B and B outreach team to the POD co-ordinator, who then gives them to the project workers. Each case is reviewed after 6 sessions, to see whether more time is needed or not. They each have supervision monthly, in addition to a lot of informal contact with the co-ordinator.

Over the years the POD has supported activities such as Breakfast Clubs, Homework Clubs and access to an equine therapist. Inputs have included gym membership or family membership for a leisure centre. 120 tablets were provided to children and families during covid.

The POD, similar to Springboard, does not currently have administrative support. Meetings between POD members happen on a 5-6 weekly basis, for one hour. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss plans, logistics and staff cover for the various activities. The POD co-ordinator has recently started to provide quarterly reports on monthly activities.

The work of the POD is part of a complex tapestry of service provision for children and young people who are currently experiencing homelessness. While it emerged in response to a specific need identified in the GSC service, the POD has grown and evolved into an important part of both TUSLA'S and GSCs efforts to respond to the needs of children and adolescents living in homeless accommodation in Cork city and surrounds.

2. THE CURRENT REVIEW

The aim of the current review was to examine the POD in terms of its structures, clarity of purpose, inputs and outputs and the linkages with other organisations and providers. Because the POD is so interlinked with GSC and GSC staff, the overall impact of the POD is inextricably linked with the effectiveness and overall approach used by GSC. Therefore, a parallel review of GSC's overall approach to child and youth provision in their services was also carried out, the findings of which are detailed in a separate report.

Methodology

Reports, including a thesis on the POD and other current research regarding the impact of homelessness on children and young people in Ireland, were reviewed. Interviews were held with the Co-ordinator of the POD and the majority of project workers in the POD. Interviews were held with two representatives from TUSLA management. The reviewer attended the Tuesday evening 'Youth Club' in Knocknaheeny.

Detailed interviews were held with the CEO of GSC, the Director of Service Development and the managers of Edel House, Redclyffe, B&B Outreach team and the Support and Advocacy team. Interviews were held with all Child and Youth workers in GSC.

Focus groups were held with a sample of the young people attending the Youth Club and interviews were held with a sample of parents who have availed of the POD's and GSC child and youth activities.

In total for the purpose of both reviews, discussions were held with 17 representatives from GSC and TUSLA/Springboard and three parents and four children.

3. KEY FINDINGS

The current review has found that overall, the POD does provide an important and effective collaborating structure which brings together different stakeholders, all of whom are working to respond to the needs of children and young people living in homelessness. It has been an innovative, dynamic, and heartfelt programme and the co-ordinator has worked hard to keep people on board and to respond to the changing needs of the children and young people. Within the context of a large, complex and pressurised landscape, the POD has a clear vision and it has effectively carved out an important role. By virtue of the client group and the flux and chaos often associated with their lives, plans regularly change, attendance at activities can vary, all of which has to be managed. Despite these inherent challenges, the POD has been effective and efficient in doing what it says it can do.

As with any programme which evolve organically over time, with much enthusiasm and drive, the need for more structure becomes evident as the numbers and different interventions being provided increase. Efforts are ongoing in relation to this, and the challenge is to do so without stifling the energy and flexibility that is also at the heart of the POD. A key finding of the current review is that the wider impact of the POD, and its increased effectiveness is intrinsically linked to the clarity of the GSC vision and structures for working with children and young people.

The following paragraphs will elaborate further on some of the findings of the review and will conclude with several recommendations.

3.1. A structure for collaboration

In addition to delivering specific outputs, just as importantly the POD has created a map for joint working and communication between different providers, and it has provided an important on the ground link between a voluntary organisation and statutory organisations. This can serve to narrow the distance between funders and the funded, thereby increasing understanding and better targeting of resources. At a time when no one service has all of the answers to responding to the needs of homeless families, the need for organisations to work together is greater than ever. Yet, factors such as increased regulations, complex funding systems and at times a sense of overwhelm at the enormity and intractability of the issues, can make this difficult and provide little incentive to do so. The POD has succeeded in creating relationships, connections and a network that can provide a strong foundation for future working. Building such relationships and connections, building trust and mutual respect between different stakeholders, takes time, energy and perseverance and much of this is down to the work of the co-ordinator. The fact that everyone involved in the POD can pick up

the phone to each other as needed, is extremely positive. At a time when joining forces is also a key antidote to combating the feelings of being overwhelmed and the stress and isolation that can accompany this type of work, the POD structure has provided the potential for a genuinely collaborative approach to responding to many of the needs of children in homelessness.

Increased collaboration on the ground has resulted in increased learning on both sides. By design or otherwise, the POD includes a number of male workers. The staff in the GSC are predominantly women. When the co-ordinator of the POD first went into Edel house, it was the first time that male workers came into Edel House. One of the GSC staff members said that they have learned a lot from working with youth workers and how they work with young adolescent males in particular. The impact of positive male role models for many of the young boys in particular, should not be underestimated.

The review has found that the driving force behind the POD and this collaborative approach is the co-ordinator. The extent of the collaboration often depends upon the people available, their energy and whether or not they see it as being of value. At times, while the commitment of the GSC staff is not in doubt, their engagement with the POD has been somewhat passive.

GSC managers and Child & Youth workers very clearly see the benefit of the Youth Club and the other inputs provided by the POD but it is only part of their remit and when the role of C & Y Workers is broad and very demanding, the POD can sometimes be seen as something extra to do. While there is considerable support for the POD from the CEO of GSC and individual workers have engaged fully in the different activities, if a GSC child and youth worker is sick or unable to attend the Youth Club, it could mean that the children from that service might not then be able to go. It cannot be assumed that GSC has a clear process or sufficient staff for ensuring that another member of staff will fill this gap. As more Child & Youth workers are in post, this issue is less likely to arise, but it highlights the separate nature of the children and youth activities in GSC. Moreso in the past, it was left to the co-ordinator of the POD to find people to stand in.

As GSC develops its strategy and structures in relation to supporting children and families who are spending long periods of time in their homeless services, it will be important to do so in collaboration with the POD to ensure a more integrated approach.

3.2. The Youth Club

The Youth Club was the first initiative of what came to be known as the POD and it continues to be the activity most associated with the POD. As highlighted earlier, it grew out of a recognition of the need to bring the children and young people out of their accommodation in a planned way and it continues to provide an important focus for the work.

During a visit to the Tuesday night Youth Club, it was observed that including the POD Co-ordinator and a Social Care student, there were three staff from Springboard and four from GSC and one person from Foroige. The youngest child was aged 4yrs and the oldest was 13years. There were approximately ten children present, and they moved between the different activity stations, each of which was supervised by an adult. The large hall allowed for active and more physical games, which the boys clearly enjoyed. The Child & Youth

worker/Fitness worker with a coaching and sports background, commanded the space with authority and encouragement. Other activities included making paper airplanes, playing a game of pretend fish, pool, nail painting and hide and seek. The children were helped to make pizzas and chocolate pastries in the kitchen. The staff were very engaged and supportive. Due to the smaller numbers, there were more opportunities for one to one. The children played games and won prizes and it was clear that they were having a good time.

On alternate Tuesdays the POD goes to Planet, where they book an entire area for the children. Again, this provides a level of comfort and safety for the children, as they are free to be themselves, and not to have to worry about explaining themselves to other children. Similarly, when they go to the Cookery Cottage, the staff there are familiar with the children and the mothers, who sometimes come along.

During conversations with different POD members, people frequently referred to the fact that the Youth Club was different from a more typical youth club. Firstly, the fact that the children in homeless accommodation had their own youth club, instead of being encouraged to attend local youth clubs, was a recognition of the fact that their experience of being a child was different. The stigma and shame associated with living in homeless accommodation is difficult for children to deal with, but particularly when interacting with their peers. The Youth Club provided a respite from having to pretend or having to grapple with feelings of not belonging. Many people referred to the aim of 'giving children a positive experience each week'.

It was clear that the children did enjoy the Tuesday Youth Club. All staff reported that children love coming each Tuesday and that they are excited to join. By taking the children out of their environment, parents also get a break. For example, in Edel House, children cannot be left on their own, which means that a parent, usually the mother, has to be with them all of the time. Such rules, while necessary, can place huge pressures on children and parents.

The groups run for adolescent boys by the male Foroige youth worker were reported to be extremely beneficial, with excellent engagement. As well as being fun, these groups provided a safe space for the young people to talk about issues such as bereavement, the experience of being homeless, DV between parents, suspensions from school, coming from care system to parents, ill parents, bullying, family drug use and many other topics.

During a conversation with a parent of a young teenage boy, she talked about the challenges of trying to encourage independence in her son, on the one hand but the reality of the constraints of the environment. Children cannot be left in a room on their own. If a parent needs to go to the shop, they must bring the children. For parents of children with additional needs, daily activities such as shopping, dressing in the morning and attending various appointments brings additional stresses. Parents also have their own health needs. More typical activities such as playdates or after school activities, are not feasible for these children. The Youth Club provides an opportunity for physical activity, which supports regulation in some children, which in turn can help sleep and overall well-being.

Secondly, the people working on the ground showed a high level of commitment, engagement and sensitivity to the children and young people they are working with. The emphasis on building safe relationships with the children and young people, through positive interactions

and fun, is key to any trauma sensitive approach aiming to support children and families in such precarious circumstances. Because of the relationships that are being built up inside and outside of the Youth Club there is sufficient safety and trust to broach more difficult issues with individual children and vice versa.

The Youth Club has been running for a number of years now and people's commitment to turn up each Tuesday, week in week out, is commendable. Much work goes into making the Youth Club happen every week. Attendance at the youth club can vary but this is more so to do with what is happening in the lives of the families at particular times, than a reflection of the Youth Club. Also, as the children and their families are housed, they will no longer attend the club. The recruitment of new staff into GSC has helped to inject a new energy into the POD.

Thirdly, the dynamic nature of the POD has been sustained over what is now quite a long period of time. Because the profile and ages of the children attending the Youth Club can change, sometimes over the course of a few months, there is a need for flexibility in relation to the activities. While the club is for children between the ages of 4yrs and 13yrs, this is still quite a wide developmental range and adaptations have to be made provide for the two ends of the scale. The POD works hard to be responsive to the changing needs. An advantage of the POD is that it can try different things. The co-ordinator has built up a network of contacts and allies over the past number of years, which has served to add value to existing resources and to capitalise on a lot of good will and support. He has successfully engaged people on a sessional basis, to try different activities, depending on the needs of the children and young people. There was a genuine effort to listen to the children and to provide the activities that they liked, within reason.

A key example of such innovation was the recruitment of a Health and Fitness/Well-being coach to work with the programme for two days a week over the summer period. This particular male youth worker started on a sessional basis but is now employed as a Child & Youth Worker, on a full-time basis, by GSC. He continues to allocate ten hours of his time to the POD. While the role is still evolving, it is very interesting to note the increasing focus on young boys and adolescent males. Traditionally teenage boys can be one of the hardest groups to engage, despite the many risks associated with this stage of development. Initiatives such as 'gym and swim', mainly for the adolescent boys, where the young people are, as he put it, 'tricked into fitness', is having a positive impact. There are now 13 teenagers going to the gym and swimming.

During a conversation with the C&Y/fitness worker he outlined his approach to working with the young people. He said he teaches them how to set up a gym session so that they can do it for themselves. He explains how to build up muscle in a gradual and sensible way, one which will lead to success. He made the point that, when the young people are in the pool or the gym, no one knows that they are from Edel House. He said that he is gently introducing new options, noticing, and praising good choices. For example, he has managed to encourage the children to move from Coke to Coke 0 and water. One of the boys attending the gym asked how he might lose some weight, as he has started to feel the benefit of going to the gym. Two of the boys were reported to be very good boxers, an area that he will also be encouraging further. Increasingly some of the older boys are talking about trades and asking about pathways to them, and he provides advice and guidance in relation to this. The C&Y/fitness

worker said that he himself is clear about his expectations for behaviour, manners, and fair play. He said that he holds people accountable and if an appointment is cancelled, he rearranges it for another day. Because of the relationships that are being built up through spending time together, engaging in activities and clear and safe boundaries, many of the young people can talk about what might be happening in their lives. Also, the skills they are learning constitute life skills that are transferrable to other aspects of their lives. The plan is to provide additional opportunities for exercise-based play, games and opportunities for children and parents to interact and have fun together.

The setting up of a 'gym and coffee' group for mothers, has also been extremely positive. In time he hopes to include more girls, all of which will be easier if they see their mothers and siblings engaging in these activities. Changing how parents, and in turn the whole family, views and engages in healthy activities and habits, contributes significantly to any goal or aspiration to improve the physical and mental health of children and families in homelessness. The approach being developed is exciting and already showing many benefits. While much is down to the experience and particular skills of the worker, the fact that 10 hours are formally allocated to the POD may mean that there is less of a distinction between his POD work and his work with GSC.

One parent who is the mother of a teenager and another child on the cusp of being a teenager, said she was very conscious of the need to find places where she could let her children still feel a sense of control, and opportunities to build up their independence. She said that her children were benefiting a lot from the opportunities to go for walks during the week or to go to the gym. Her daughter goes to the Youth Club and she said that she loves it. She likes mixing with other children and it has been positive in terms of her confidence and her social skills.

The GSC staff encourage children to go to the Youth Club as much as possible. This can mean offering a lot of hand holding and support for both parent and child initially. While generally the bus works well, there has been the occasional incident, one of which did involve a GSC staff member being hit. There is a plan to make a SOP for the bus and staffing may need to be increased on occasion, depending on the age groups or tensions between children or families, within the residential settings.

Some groups of children are more difficult to include in Youth Club activities. While the bus collects the children from Edel House and Redclyffe, it is more challenging when it comes to the children in B&Bs. These children tend to be scattered, with many living in Cobh. One of the B and B workers talked about the impact of living in a B&B, sometimes a few different B&B's, on a child's mental health. Linking children into local activities is not a realistic option. Some children could be up at 5am to get the bus to school. The biggest stresses for parents in B&B's include the lack of laundry facilities and the cost of washing and drying clothes externally, the lack of cooking facilities and in turn the cost of take aways and the lack of space for children to play. A family could be in a B&B, or up to three different B&Bs, for one and a half years. This can include families who had been living in Direct Provision for many years, who then ended up homeless.

3.3. *One to one support*

The sessional workers involved in the POD provide a number of one-to-one sessions with individual children or families.

In many ways, their remit is very clear and there is a clear structure around their work. The two longest standing members, five and half years and 7 years respectively, attend the Youth Club on a Tuesday and each have 2-4 individual client cases. They each have supervision monthly, in addition to a lot of informal contact with the co-ordinator. Individual referrals can come from GSC services to the POD co-ordinator, who then gives them to the project workers. Each case is reviewed after 6 sessions, to see whether more time is needed or not. One example given was of a seven-year-old boy who was experiencing sleep difficulties, challenging behaviour and difficulties in school. The project worker, who works for 10 hours each week with the POD, met the child on a one-to-one basis once a week. They often went to the park, which got the child out of his accommodation and also gave his mother a break. The focus of the intervention was on sleep, using play and chatting, all in the context of a positive adult/child relationship. The project worker also talked to the boy's mother. She also supported the boy to attend the Youth Club. This intervention went on for 11 weeks. It was reported that there was an improvement in the child's ability to listen, to receive correction and to relate to his mother and others. The intervention ended because the family got a house. Interventions can last between 6 and 12 weeks.

The second project worker works five hours per week with the POD. An example of a one to one case he worked with involved a nine year old boy who was living in a hotel in the city. The referral was received from the GSC B&B team. The aim of the intervention was to help build a relationship between the boy and his father, who had not been around. Activities such as pool were used to build up a relationship with the boy and to offer him a space to talk. The boy was also prepped and supported to attend the youth club, as he found groups difficult. Both the boy and his father were supported to know and express some of their feelings. As they both had an interest in horses, the equine therapist also engaged with them. While this boy has now moved on, he continues to come to the Youth Club, as a wind down and as a support to his transition to a new house and community. The project met with the boy on a weekly basis for four weeks, followed by bi-monthly meetings.

Other referrals can come through Springboard. For example, a recent referral concerned a woman who was pregnant and homeless. Two of the POD project workers provided her with some support pre and post-delivery. She is registered with the Accommodation Placement Service (APS) in the City Council and as soon as she is ready, she will go into GSC, with the B&B team being the first point of contact. See appendix for a case study detailing aspects of the support provided by POD workers.

From the point of view of the GSC child and youth workers, these interventions are supportive and can lead to positive changes in a child or their family. It means that they can access additional supports.

3.4. Inputs

The co-ordinator of the POD has accessed additional resources for various children and families. During covid, 120 tablets, funded by TUSLA and CETB, were given to families, as a way of countering the digital exclusion experienced by many families during covid. The Youth

Club moved to online during covid and it did serve to offer the children connection and contact during covid. It was reported that 40 people have been registered with Leisure World and given passes for the gym. Funding for this initiative has been sourced by the co-ordinator from a private/public partnership. Despite being a good idea, the actual use of the passes can vary. However, there has been an increase since the involvement of the C & Youth/fitness worker, and it has become a much more meaningful intervention. The key ingredient appears to be relationship and encouragement from a trusted adult.

Other inputs such as the equine therapy have had mixed outcomes and success. While activities such as equine therapy are extremely beneficial, particularly for young people or families who have an interest in horses, the level of support and organisation needed for families to actually take up such initiatives, can be underestimated. For families where there are high levels of stress and at times chaos, even though they are interested, in practice it doesn't always work. Efforts to encourage families from a Traveller background to engage in this activity have been ongoing but the results have been mixed. There are five Traveller families in Edel House now. The speed at which they are rehoused can be complicated by dynamics within the wider extended family, some of which also impacts on their ability to attend such activities.

The co-ordinator of the POD said that part of his role was to advocate for additional resources, as needs became apparent. A child and Youth worker has recently been employed for the Cobh area.

3.5. Structures of the POD

The capacity to be flexible and responsive to changing needs, is an important principle of the POD. At an organisational level the balance between structure and flexibility is not always easy. As with any initiative, following the drive and energy required to get it going and to get buy in, another stage in its development is the need for more structure, for reporting systems, for data collection, for more formalised measures to capture the work, for staff support systems etc. For a programme such as the POD, the balance between structure and flexibility needs to be worked out in a way that ensures that it does not lose its essence of the POD.

The functioning of the POD depends on key stakeholders such as GSC and TUSLA. Changes and inconsistencies in their systems has a knock-on impact on the POD. There have been periods where there have been gaps from a management point of view and changes in personnel in both GSC and in Springboard, have made it difficult at times to ensure staffing for some activities. Covid also brought many challenges.

It is clear that efforts to put more structure on the POD and to address governance issues have been ongoing in recent months. Springboard now has a new manager, and she has engaged with the co-ordinator of the POD to take steps to strengthen governance and reporting systems. For example, a referral form for one-to-one work by project workers in the POD, now goes to the Springboard manager. Similarly, a number of positions have now been filled on the side of GSC.

The POD, like Springboard does not currently have administrative support. Similarly, for GSC, many of the funding grants they receive do not allow for administrative support. Currently the

POD co-ordinator provides quarterly reports. This is a relatively new process and the purpose of the reports, what should be included and who they are for, is part of an ongoing discussion. Efforts are being made to gather and collate the numbers attending the different activities each week, but greater clarity is required in relation to how such numbers are presented. It might be more useful and meaningful to detail the number of activities accessed by a particular child, or family, rather than combining the number of attendances. Meetings between POD members happen on a 5-6 weekly basis. Attendance at the meetings can vary. They are for one hour and to date there have been no minutes. The purpose of the meeting appears to be to plan the activities for the weekly Youth club, to agree on staffing, to give updates on other activities, to plan parties at Halloween and Christmas etc. The gathering of data is an area that will need support.

The boundaries between the different stakeholders in the POD are quite fluid in practice, but less so when it comes to funding streams. The outcomes are the result of a collective effort, which can make it difficult for each individual organisation to capture and show the impact of their work and inputs. Many of these issues are connected to a wider discussion regarding the role of the POD in relation to GSC.

3.6. *The POD model*

The POD model is a unique model, and it has evolved in the context of the TUSLA model of Family Support. The co-ordinator describes it as a simple model, one which is based primarily on providing positive relationships and positive experiences. While the concept of being trauma informed/aware is much used these days, in practice it continues to be an aspiration for many organisations. When people were asked about what 'trauma informed' meant in relation to the POD, the examples given were that the Youth Club was a safe place for children to be, there was a high level of consistency with the staff and children got to experience positive relationships with adults and other children. In terms of the approach of the POD and the focus on positive relationships, we do know that positive relationships provide a buffer to children experiencing high levels of stress, which in turn can reduce the risk that a child will be traumatised. Efforts to be consistent, for example when it comes to the running of the youth club each Tuesday, both in terms of caretaking staff and format, provides a predictability that may not be present in other areas of the children's lives.

3.7. *The POD and GSC*

The current review has found that the POD has a valuable role to play as part of the response to meeting the needs of children and young people living in or being supported by GSC homeless services. However, it can only be part of an overall response and its impact is reliant on the extent to which GSC is clear about what it wants to do with children and families, and in turn the structures needed to support the work.

From the point of view of TUSLA, funding the POD and providing funding to GSC, are two key strategies for providing family support to children and families who are homeless. Family Support is the framework or model that the POD is operating within and there are limits to what it can do in terms of access, resources and staffing. Also, most of the POD project workers work elsewhere and they have a limited amount of time available. This provides them with a clarity and a focus that is not necessarily the case for the more broadly defined role of C & Y workers in GSC.

While there is no doubt about GSCs commitment to children and families, and there is a lot of good work happening by very committed people, the nature of funding available to GSC, which is typically piecemeal and short term, has made it challenging to develop and resource a clear conceptual model for supporting children and families. This can mean that GSC child and youth workers are felt to be everything to everyone. For GSC, the Youth Club is only a small part of what they do.

GSC has worked tirelessly to respond to the growing crisis of homelessness, particularly for families. Often, under increasing pressure from government and state agencies, the organisation has taken on new services, such as the Family Hub, which in turn necessitated new roles and programmes. As the numbers of children increased, C&Y worker roles have been added to existing teams and structures.

The older models of service provision in homeless accommodation, which were mainly a response to single women or families who stayed for short periods of time, are no longer adequate in the face of the dramatic increase in the number of children now living in homeless accommodation for long periods of time. The experiences that led to homelessness in the first place, the experience of living in temporary accommodation that is no longer so temporary, the wider narrative of the chronic shortage and panic, all increase the risk of children living in situations of chronic stress. The parents capacity to act as a buffer to such stress, something that we know is a key protective factor for children, is worn down over time. For some families with very complicated profiles, a home, in and of itself, will not necessarily solve the myriad of issues. They will continue to need support once they are back living in the community.

There is a recognition in GSC that during this time, some of the structures and strategy in relation to children and young people have not kept up with the pace of change and growth in recent years.

When looking at how and where the POD interacts formally with GSC, much is down to the informal interaction between individuals, which typically works very well. While there is a high level of collaboration between the POD staff and the staff of GSC, there is little articulation of where the POD fits into GSC's vision and overall strategy for child and youth provision, nor case management of families.

Currently it is difficult to have a co-ordinated approach around each child and family. The focus of the POD meetings is more so in relation to the logistics. Discussions about particular children or families occur between individual workers in GSC and the POD but there is a lack of formal space for this. Feedback from the different GSC staff is very positive in relation to the interventions provided by Project Workers in the POD but such referrals are often down to individual C&Y workers as opposed to being part of an integrated plan for each family within GSC services.

A feature of today's homelessness landscape is that while parents are responsible for their children, in practice, once they are living in or accessing homeless accommodation or outreach services provided by GSC, for long periods of time, the organisation has a greater role and carries an increased responsibility or duty of care for many of these children and

families. Emergency accommodation settings such as Redclyffe and Edel House have become home for many children and their parents. Realistically the members of the POD have a certain capacity. When looked at in terms of the demand and the numbers of children now in the services it is targeting many of the children but much of the ongoing support is coming from the GSC C&Y workers.

GSC is very aware of the need to address some of the issues highlighted. The review of GSC child and youth provision has found that developing, and resourcing, a more explicit family case management system will be crucial to how GSC works with children and families into the future. In 2013, Focus Ireland launched a Social Impact Investment (SII) pilot project in collaboration with the Homeless Agency and the Department of the Environment. The aim was to support around 170 families, who had been homeless and living in B&Bs for several years, to move out of homelessness and into secure homes. The Focus Ireland SII model of support included Case Managers (to work with families), Child Support Workers (to respond to the different needs children of different ages have in coping with homelessness) and Accommodation Finders (to source suitable housing) (<https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Focus-Ireland-response-to-OCO-Report-to-Oireactas-Committee-on-the-Family.pdf>).

The role of the case manager is to ensure that the needs of the family as a unit are being met, by people from within GSC or from outside. This would include the POD. As GSC develops its strategy it will be important to draw on other supports and to insist that other state agencies or voluntary organisations have responsibilities too. The voluntary nature of the provision for children and young people also needs to be discussed, considering the complexity of many of the families presenting. Much effort and time can go into encouraging and supporting families to engage, taking a lot of time from staff, and perhaps with little to show for it in the end. Also, individual staff may end up holding a lot of the risks in relation to particular families.

Both GSC and TUSLA have their needs in relation to data collection. Until GSC is clear about what it can do, it is difficult to ensure that useful and relevant data will be collected. As highlighted earlier, at the time of the review there were 193 children and young people accessing GSC services. In terms of age ranges, there were 62 children between the ages of 0 – 3yrs, 89 children between the ages of 4 and 12yrs and 41 children between the ages of 13 and 19 years. The POD activities target a number of these children, but the gaps are also clear, when we look at the numbers of children in the different age cohorts. Targeting of resources needs to be based on an analysis of need and good information.

As has been highlighted throughout this review, collaboration on the ground between the different stakeholders is good but less strong at a systemic and structural level. While TUSLA has a framework it is operating out of, how this model integrates with the realities of the GSC approach or model to date, needs to be fully worked out. For the POD to dovetail well with GSC, the TUSLA model of family support needs to become embedded in a more integrated approach to case management and care planning within GSC services. This approach will require sufficient resources to facilitate an adequate response to the increased levels complexity and demands on services.

CONCLUSION

The POD has shown itself to be an innovative and very useful structure and model. As well as acting as a bridge between GSC and TUSLA, it has facilitated very positive working relationships between staff at different levels of the organisation.

The fact that the position of co-ordinator is fully funded by Springboard, reflects their commitment to the POD and what it does. Much of the vision and drive behind the POD comes from the co-ordinator. The POD is clear about what it can do and progress is being made in relation to putting more systems and structures in place to support the project workers directly employed under the POD.

As has been highlighted in this report, the effectiveness of the POD is linked to the effectiveness of GSC's response to children and families. As GSC develops its vision and strategy about what it can and wants to do for children and families in their services, combining the provision of long term emergency accommodation with a clearly defined approach to family support, the POD can bring valuable experience and knowledge to support this process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The effectiveness of the POD relies on buy in from the different stakeholders and some of this will depend upon the extent to which they see it as supportive and integral to their work. There is a need for clarity about how and where the work of the POD contributes to GSC's wider response to the needs of children and their families.

Communication between GSC leadership and TUSLA management is very good but there has been little discussion regarding how the two models or approaches can work together better. Opportunities to stand back and to reflect on the approaches being used, need to be created.

The POD and TUSLA need to be part of the wider conversation with GSC, as GSC develops its conceptual model of family support.

The funding and reporting systems for GSC and TUSLA can be complex, with each system having its own reporting requirements and need for specific data. Discussions about how best to collect relevant data and ideas in relation to outcomes would benefit both GSC and TUSLA. The quarterly POD reports should be developed to reflect such discussions.

APPENDIX – Case Study

This case study describes an example of support provided through the POD, as mentioned above in section 3.3 One to one support (page 12).

This case involved a young woman coming into homelessness in October, pregnant for the first time with complex addiction and mental health issues. The POD team identified two workers to build up a very meaningful trusting relationship with this vulnerable woman, putting essential supports in place that weren't available elsewhere. In essence this involved 'holding' this woman in the Winnicott sense, through her journey from emergency accommodation to supported homeless accommodation, through pregnancy in hospital where she was deemed a high risk pregnancy, back to emergency accommodation to finding accommodation with a family member to entering residential unit for parental assessment.

It included collaborating with statutory services while all the time maintaining a respected trusting relationship. Thus, giving this woman and her baby in homelessness a vital start in life. Crucial to the forming the relationship was consistency, which was trauma informed, in a non-judgemental manner supporting this woman to manage herself which saw ebbs and flows over her time. This was a three-month intensive piece where the child was on the CPNS.

While there were a few flash points in the case, there was one crisis that highlighted the essence of the POD work. Over a particular weekend, the POD worker was out for a walk with mom and baby during which mom collapsed. This was a health-related issue and not a relapse. Had the POD worker not been with her the baby could have been taken under S12 given the emergency. However, the POD worker had reignited a relationship with mom and her sister which meant Aunt was able to mind the baby while mom was taken in the ambulance to CUH. Thankfully all was ok.

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