

# IRISH COALITION TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

## Submission to the Youth Homelessness Strategy Consultation

The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness brings together the leading youth organisations and all homeless NGOs with dedicated youth services and has campaigned for a national strategy on youth homelessness since 2017.<sup>1</sup> We welcome the commitment by Government to develop a Youth Homelessness Strategy, as articulated in Housing for All as part of the goal of “ending homelessness by 2030”,<sup>2</sup> and the whole of government approach taken to address the issue of youth homelessness, which we believe to be essential to an effective Youth Homelessness Strategy.

The number of young adults in emergency homeless accommodation in Ireland has almost doubled in the last six years. The Monthly Homeless Report for January 2022 shows that 1,111 people aged between 18 and 24 accessed Local Authority managed emergency accommodation.<sup>3</sup> This represents a 39% increase in twelve months, and sees the figure equal the ‘peak’ of young adults accessing emergency accommodation recorded in November 2021. Of all age groups, young people are most vulnerable. They are least likely to be aware of their rights and of the help and services that are available to them, and are most likely to experience other forms of homelessness recognised under the ETHOS typology, e.g. ‘couch surf’, staying temporarily with friends and extended family, or live in other precarious situations. In addition to the above figure, there is an unknown number of young people currently experiencing ‘hidden homelessness’, yet to present to homeless services and unable to access stable and affordable accommodation suitable for their needs.

As outlined in our 2020 Proposal for the Youth Homeless Strategy, homelessness is not random. Its predictors are empirically established and understood. The trajectory towards youth homelessness often begins during childhood, with those who have left state care or existed on the margins of state care,<sup>4</sup> as well as young people who identify as LGBTQI+ disproportionately represented. Additionally, overcrowding in the family home is a significant pathway into youth homelessness, one which disproportionately effects young people from migrant and ethnic minority groups as well as young parents, who cannot access suitable affordable accommodation.

Young people who experience homelessness are in crisis, they have not yet experienced independent living and are often without a family support network. In the absence of such support, or due to adverse childhood experiences or trauma, many have developed poor mental health or behavioural issues, sometimes turning to problematic substance use as a coping mechanism. Many have experienced a disrupted education as a result of these issues. Young people who are experiencing homelessness have support needs which are distinct from older groups and should be addressed at

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness comprises of BeLonG To, Cope Galway, Crosscare, Depaul, EPIC, Focus Ireland, Foróige, National Youth Council Ireland, Novas, Peter McVerry Trust, Simon Communities of Ireland, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Spunout, Teen Parents Support Programme, Threshold.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Ireland (2021) ‘Housing for All: A new Housing Plan for Ireland’ available at: [gov.ie - Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-resources/documents/2021-06/housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/) p54.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2022) ‘Monthly Homelessness Report January 2022’ available at: [gov.ie - Homeless Report - January 2022 \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-resources/documents/2022-01/monthly-homelessness-report-january-2022/) p2.

<sup>4</sup> Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Murphy, A., 2021. Family ‘turning point’ experiences and the process of youth becoming homeless. *Child & Family Social Work*, 26(3), pp.415-424.

the earliest opportunity. Suitable, stable and secure accommodation is central to achieving better outcomes for young people who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The right interventions can positively address young people's emotional, cognitive and social development, as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Intervening when needs and issues arise, before they become critical or entrenched, is a more efficient use of public resources and secures better outcomes for young people and their families.

## Definition of Youth

We strongly believe that the proposed aim of the strategy, addressing only young adults aged 18-24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, is flawed and will severely undermine the effectiveness of the Strategy and runs the risk of making the problem worse. Looking only at young people when they have reached adulthood ignores the lessons from the extensive evidence base and leaves it too late for effective interventions which seek to prevent instances of youth homelessness occurring at all.

As outlined above, the empirically established trajectories towards youth homelessness often begin in the years prior to the young person turning 18. Legal, governmental and funding structures create a 'cliff-edge' of adulthood where young people who have a history adverse childhood experiences, have experienced family relationship breakdown or 'hidden homelessness' move from services which support them as 'children' and into mainstream adult homeless services, where their distinct support needs are often not met. The existence of this 'cliff-edge' is one of the core challenges facing young vulnerable people as they move into adulthood, and developing the funding, legal and institutional arrangements to support young people through this transition is one of the main reasons why such a broad range of organisations sought a National Youth Homelessness Strategy. If the strategy now under preparation concentrates solely on experiences on one side of this cliff, it is likely to deepen the problem rather than contribute to solving it. We believe that an effective strategy should address the needs of young people aged 16-26, using the life-cycle approach recommended by the National Economic and Social Council.

## Preventative Measures and Early Intervention

- **Advice and Information:** Information on the rights of young people, and the services available to young people in relation to housing and homelessness and social protection should be made available by schools, youth services and community services. Many young people are unaware of these services, or do not identify with depictions of rough sleeping despite being at risk of homelessness themselves, or currently experiencing 'hidden homelessness'.
- **Aftercare:** Aftercare planning should be provided to all young people who have experienced state care at the earliest opportunity, once they become an 'eligible child' at the age of 16. The beginning of Aftercare plan preparation six months prior to the young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday does not provide sufficient planning for accommodation. Increased resources for Tusla Aftercare workers is essential to ensure young people have sufficient access to their Aftercare worker. To compliment this work, Housing Circular 46/2014 on the Protocol on Young People Leaving State Care should be reviewed and updated as national guidance.

The opportunity for young people with additional needs to voluntarily remain in care until the age of 21 should be explored.

- **Early Warning Systems:** Systems should be put in place to facilitate the identification of young people who may be at risk of homelessness by schools, health services and youth services. These young people may be on the margins of the care system, and as such will be ineligible for Aftercare. Early intervention will reduce the need for crisis intervention at a later stage, at which point the young person is more likely to have developed poor mental health, problematic behavioural issues or substance use.
- **Family Mediation Services:** Skilled family mediation services can successfully intervene where family relationship issues, or foster placement breakdown, place a young person at risk of homelessness, or where relationships have temporarily broken down and resulted in homelessness. Family circumstances is a major contributing factor for young people accessing homeless services. Tusla currently funds such services which have proven to be successful, which should be provided at a national level.
- **Young Parents:** Young women leaving care are have a higher rate of youth pregnancy than their non-care peers. Pregnancy and becoming a parent as a young adult in homelessness is an extremely difficult situation. Young families experiencing, or at risk of homelessness require additional housing and tenancy support. There needs to be a strong person-centred, healthcare approach to support women in homelessness through pregnancy from an early stage that follows through with postnatal care. Access to children can be difficult for a parent living in homeless services, having a detrimental impact on a parents ability to have access to their children and build relationships with them. Services must be resourced so that young people in this position get support with their parenting role to ensure the best outcome for them, and the best outcome for their children.
- **LGBTQI+ Youth at Risk of Homelessness:** LGBTQI+ youth are disproportionately represented amongst young people experiencing homelessness. The Youth Homelessness Strategy must reference the particular risks and pathways into homelessness which LGBTQI+ youth experience. The strategy must ensure that advice and information and support services, including family mediation services, are adequately trained and resourced to address the needs of young people who identify as LGBTQI+.
- **De-centralization of Services:** The concentration of services for vulnerable young people in city centres, often in Dublin, is inappropriate. This serves to both remove vulnerable young people who are not from these areas from their support networks, and can place the young person at greater risk.

## Address policies that disadvantage young people

- **Restore Jobseeker's Allowance for All Young People under 25:** The reduced rate denies young people the ability to live independently. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that young people were more likely to experience sharply increasing rates of unemployment due to industry 'shocks'.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the increasing cost of living and rising rents in the private rental market has significantly increased the shortfall felt by young people who experience unemployment.

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<sup>5</sup> Houses of the Oireachtas Library and Research Service (2021) 'Youth Unemployment Rates' available at: [Youth unemployment rates \(oireachtas.ie\)](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/youth-unemployment-rates/) p1.

- **Continued Aftercare Support Beyond 21:** Aftercare support should be extended to the age of 24, in line with the definition of youth proposed, for all care-leavers. This must not be contingent on the young person remaining in education. Many vulnerable young people have experienced a disrupted education due to adverse childhood experiences, the requirement to continue education to avail of continued support serves to further marginalize those most at risk.
- **After-Rent Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL):** Ensure an after-rent income based on the MESL developed by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. This will introduce equity across household types and age groups and help to improve the sustainability of renting.

## Housing Solutions

- **Housing First for Youth:** Housing First is acknowledged internationally as the way to address homelessness effectively. We recommend the introduction of a programme of Housing First for Youth in Ireland. This will involve the designation appropriate accommodation from public housing stock, approved housing bodies, and private owners and the provision of specialist supports for young people. Personalised support plans which address issues such as mental health supports, education and training, preparation for employment and independent living skills should be prepared and monitored.  
The current arrangements for young people leaving state care, through the planned provision of housing under the Capital Assistance Scheme, should be incorporated into Housing First for Youth.  
The Housing First for Youth programme must be rigorously monitored and evaluated.
- **Care-leavers Status on Local Authority Housing Lists:** Care-leavers should be given priority status on Local Authority Housing Lists. The provision of units to care-leavers should be monitored through Housing Delivery Action Plans reporting, which Local Authorities are mandated to prepare and include an assessment of the the provision of Age Friendly Housing, under Housing for All.
- **Social and Affordable Housing Stock:** A housing stock of social and affordable units, including adequate units for the number of single person households, reflecting the full range of housing needs must be produced. While the subsidization of rent through HAP and RS has provided an exit from homelessness for a significant number of people, young people are less likely to avail of this route due to competition and discrimination in the private rental market which negatively impacts their ability to source accommodation. Additionally, subsidization of rent is unsustainable due to its role in increasing the average cost of rent. Social and affordable housing is urgently needed.

## Emergency Response

- **Suitable Youth Emergency Accommodation:** At present, upon reaching 18 many young people who present to homeless services are sheltered in unsuitable emergency accommodation which do not meet their needs which have been outlined in this submission.

These adult services are centralized, often in Dublin, and place the young person at risk of entering a cycle of emergency accommodation usage, which leads to intensified engagement in negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse.

Emergency accommodation must provide holistic supports to young people, including mental health support, and staff must be trained to address the needs and safety of LGBTQI+ youth who access these services. Emergency accommodation should be utilised as a measure of last resort and for the shortest period possible.

- **Rapid Transferal from Emergency Accommodation:** Young people who enter emergency accommodation should be guaranteed a comprehensive needs assessment and transferal from emergency accommodation within two weeks.

