

Submission to the Youth Homelessness Strategy Consultation

Introduction

Focus Ireland is one of the leading organisations working with homeless young people, including not only young adults but also unattached minors and children who are homeless with their families. We, along with other leading youth organisations and all homeless NGOs with dedicated youth services, have campaigned since 2017 for a new strategic response to youth homelessness to address the wide range of issues young people face.

Focus Ireland welcomes 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”.¹

Youth Homelessness

Of all age groups, young people are most vulnerable. They are most likely to experience forms of homelessness recognised under the ETHOS typology,² such as ‘couch-surfing’, staying temporarily with friends and extended family, or living in other precarious situations. Young people leaving state care or those on the margins of care,³ as well as young LGBTQI+ people,⁴ are at a disproportionate risk of homelessness. Overcrowding in the family home pushes young parents into homelessness,⁵ and is a factor which disproportionately affects young Travellers and young Roma.⁶ Young women are at a heightened risk of violence in their intimate relationships,⁷ and may be at risk of homelessness due to their need for temporary refuge in this situation, and the housing precarity which often follows.

Using the ETHOS typology, there is an unknown number of young people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity in Ireland today. These young people are in addition to the 1,111 young adults accessing local authority managed homeless accommodation,⁸ upon which Government homelessness reports are based, which is almost double that of 2016 and 39% higher than January 2021. As stated in the Lisbon Declaration, the importance of reliable data collection on homelessness, including youth homelessness, must be acknowledged.⁹

¹ 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 \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie - Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland (www.gov.ie) p54) p54.

² FEANTSA (2017) ‘ETHOS European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion’ available at: [ethos2484215748748239888.pdf \(feantsa.org\)](http://ethos2484215748748239888.pdf (feantsa.org)).

³ 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.

⁴ Quilty, A. and Norris, M. (2020) *A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

⁵ Gambi, L., Sheridan, S. and Hoey, D. (2018) *Insights into Family Homelessness No. 16: Causes of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region during 2016 and 2017*. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

⁶ CSO (2016) ‘Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion’ available at: Irish Travellers - Socio-economic Aspects and Housing - CSO - Central Statistics Office; National Economic and Social Council (2020) ‘The Implications of Covid-19 for Housing in Ireland’ available at: [c19-housing.pdf \(nesc.ie\)](http://c19-housing.pdf (nesc.ie)).

⁷ Women’s Aid (2022) ‘Media Release: Young women at high risk of men’s violence in their own intimate relationships’ available at: [Latest news & releases | Women's Aid - Domestic violence service in Ireland \(womensaid.ie\)](http://Latest news & releases | Women's Aid - Domestic violence service in Ireland (womensaid.ie)).

⁸ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2022) ‘Monthly Homelessness Report January 2022’ available at: [gov.ie - Homeless Report - January 2022 \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie - Homeless Report - January 2022 (www.gov.ie) p2) p2.

⁹ European Commission (2021) *Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness*.

Young people experiencing homelessness are in crisis and need specialised supports. They have not yet experienced independent living and lack the support networks available to most other young people. They are the age group least likely to be aware of their rights and of the help and services that are available to them. They are also the age group most likely to face discrimination in the private rental market.¹⁰ Young people are more likely than older cohorts to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion.¹¹ Social protection policy should complement housing policy in this regard. However, the reduced rate of jobseeker's allowance denies young people experiencing unemployment the ability to live independently. This barrier should be removed, and an after-rent income based on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living developed by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice should be adopted.

Young people have support needs which are distinct from older groups and should be addressed at the earliest opportunity, before issues become critical or entrenched. The right interventions can address the needs of young people, their emotional, cognitive and social development, and help them move out of homelessness into a productive and independent adulthood. The right interventions can prevent instances of youth homelessness occurring at all, for those who are at risk.

Recommendations

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. 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.

We believe that an effective strategy should address the needs of young people aged 16-24, using the life-cycle approach recommended by the National Economic and Social Council. 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 of 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.

¹⁰ Grotti et al. (2018) 'Discrimination and Inequality in Housing in Ireland', Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) p28.

¹¹ Eurostat (2022) 'People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex', available at: [Eurostat - Data Explorer \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&plugin=1) [accessed 9 March 2022].

Housing Solutions for Young People

Housing First for Youth

Housing First is acknowledged internationally as best practice in addressing homelessness effectively. In the National Implementation Plan 2022-26, Minister Darragh O'Brien cited Housing First as "*a critical element*" in working towards ending homelessness by 2030.¹² We agree with this support of Housing First, and strongly recommend the introduction of a programme of Housing First for Youth in Ireland, Focus Ireland Housing First for Youth in Waterford is proven to be successful, supporting 43 young people in accessing tenancies, including 25 young parents. The project has a sustainment rate of 84% with no discharges to homelessness, while access to safe and secure accommodation has enabled 28 of these young people to access education and employment.

The programme includes the provision of personalised support plans, which address issues such as mental health, education and training, preparation for employment and independent living skills as well as identifying suitable long-term housing appropriate to the needs of each young person. Addressing young people's needs at the earliest opportunity before issues become critical or entrenched disrupts a potential life-cycle of accessing homeless services.

The current arrangements for young people leaving state care, through the planned provision of housing under CAS, should be linked with Housing First for Youth. This has proven successful in Waterford and Wexford through Focus Ireland's Housing First Aftercare Service which is supported by Tusla.

The national implementation of Housing First for Youth will involve the designation of appropriate accommodation from public housing stock, approved housing bodies, and private owners as well the provision of specialist supports for young people. Housing First for Youth should be available to all young people who need this service, be they at risk of, or already experiencing homelessness.

Social and Affordable Housing Stock

While subsidization of rent through HAP and RAS has provided an exit from homelessness for many people, young people are less likely to avail of this route due to competition and discrimination in the private rental market, as noted above,¹³ which negatively impacts their ability to source accommodation. A housing stock of social and affordable units, including adequate units for single person households, reflecting the full range of housing needs must be produced. This will allow all young people the ability to live independently. Care-leavers should be given priority status on Local Authority housing lists, with provision to this cohort monitored through Housing Delivery Action Plans reporting, which Local Authorities are mandated to prepare and include an assessment of the provision of Age Friendly Housing, under Housing for All.¹⁴

¹² Government of Ireland (2021) Housing First National Implementation Plan 2022-2026. Dublin: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

¹³ n10.

¹⁴ Government of Ireland (2021) 'Housing for All: A new Housing Plan for Ireland' Dublin: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, p60.

Preventative Measures

Early Warning Systems

Identifying young people at risk of homelessness at the earliest possible opportunity is essential in the fight to end youth homelessness. This must involve schools, health services, youth and community services, and must be informed by the empirically established trajectories into homelessness experienced by young people. Many young people who experience 'hidden homelessness' or present to homeless services upon turning 18, are unaware of the services and supports that are, and had been, available to them.

Additionally, many young people who have been on the margins of state care and are ineligible for Aftercare support subsequently present to homeless services. The needs of these young people at risk of homelessness can and must be identified and addressed as early as possible, to avoid young people falling into adult homeless services following the cliff-edge of adulthood.

Family Mediation Services

Focus Ireland, in partnership with Tusla, operate family mediation services to intervene where relationship issues are likely to result in a young person becoming homeless, or where the relationship has temporarily broken down and a young person is accessing homeless services. Intervening at this early stage can prevent crisis entry into homelessness, and a subsequent cycle of accessing emergency accommodation. This service can reconnect young people with a vital support network and, where appropriate, can support the young person moving home. This service can also be implemented successfully with alternative carers to avoid placement breakdown.

This should be expanded and offered nationally and training should be provided to mediators to ensure they are sufficiently capable of addressing the specific needs of diverse groups of young people. With appropriate funding, this service can address the family relationship breakdown pathway to homelessness which research has consistently identified as a major contributor to youth homelessness,¹⁵ reducing the reliance on emergency responses and providing better outcomes for young people.

Aftercare

At present, Aftercare plan preparation may begin as late as six months prior to the young person reaching 18 years of age,¹⁶ this can and should occur sooner. Aftercare plans should be prepared as soon as the child has become eligible, allowing sufficient time for identifying suitable housing options. To be effective, there must be adequate resourcing of Aftercare workers to avoid unmanageable caseloads, which inhibit young people's access to their Aftercare worker and the provision of meaningful support.

In line with the definition of youth proposed, Aftercare support should be extended to the age of 24. The provision of Aftercare support after the age of 21 must not be contingent on the young person continuing education. This policy further marginalises those in most need of support, whose access to further education may be inhibited by adverse childhood experiences causing disruption to secondary education, or due to their need to care for their own children, for example. This policy does not

¹⁵ Bairéad, C. and Norris, M. (2020) Youth Homelessness in the Dublin Region: A profile of young, single emergency accommodation users in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

¹⁶ Child Care Act 1991, s. 45B(5)(a).

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encourage or enable young people to continue education, rather, as demonstrated by Focus Ireland's Housing First for Youth in Waterford, addressing the needs of young people, and providing targeted support and stability enables them to continue education or enter employment.

LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness

Independent research commissioned by Focus Ireland and supported by BeLonG To, has demonstrated that, in common with most jurisdictions, young LGBTQI+ people in Ireland face a high risk of homelessness, and distinct barriers to accessing services. It is important to note that the risk of homelessness for LGBTQI+ people has a specific correlation with youth, due both to the challenges of emerging sexual and gender identities at that age and the high dependence of young people on parents or guardians who may disapprove of emerging identities.¹⁷ For this reason, a youth homelessness strategy must address the specific pathways towards homelessness experienced by LGBTQI+ young people, and the specific needs of this group. Along with other recommendations highlighted in Focus Ireland and BeLonG To research, the Strategy should put in place educational, family and youth service supports to help prevent homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth.

Emergency Response

Appropriate Emergency Accommodation

At present, young adults who experience homelessness must access adult homeless services. Adult homeless services are not suitable to meet the needs of this vulnerable cohort. These adult services are centralized, often in Dublin, and place the young person at risk of entering a cycle of emergency accommodation usage, which often leads to intensified engagement in problematic behaviour such as substance abuse.

Similarly, children who access the Crisis Intervention Service/Out of Hours Service are often directed towards inappropriate, centralized emergency accommodation. This isolates young people and puts them at risk of exploitation. When these children reach 18 many are directed to adult emergency homeless services without appropriate supports and are mixed with adults with complex needs and critical or entrenched issues such as substance abuse. Suitable youth emergency accommodation should be provided and utilised as a measure of last resort for the shortest period possible.

¹⁷ n4.