



Housing | Health | Recovery

## **Submission to the Youth Homelessness Strategy Consultation**

### **About NOVAS**

NOVAS is a national housing and homeless charity, providing supports and services to more than 5,500 people annually. We provide services throughout Munster and in Dublin, including homeless accommodation, social housing, Housing First, disability services, addiction and recovery services and dedicated services for young people who are at risk of homelessness.

Opened in 2007, DIAL (Developing Independent Active Living) House is a six-bed residential service which accommodates care leavers with learning disabilities and/or mental health issues, at risk of falling into the cycle of homelessness. It provides a safe, home-like environment for residents. DIAL House offers a two-year life programme to clients and residents, teaching them skills in cooking, cleaning, paying bills and money management, in a bid to equip them for independent living. Peer led learning is at the core of the DIAL ethos. To complement in-house training, all residents are actively encouraged to participate in further education. DIAL also offers an out-reach programme, for young adults living independently in the community, who require tenancy sustainment and life-skills training support. DIAL House provides accommodation and community support for young people throughout the Mid-West and collaborates with Tusla, the local authorities in the region and the HSE.

NOVAS also operates Bellevue House, a six-bed residential service for unaccompanied minors from outside the EU, seeking asylum. It is a long-term specialised Children's Service, catering for minors between the ages of 12 and 18. Young people who leave the service at 18 years are supported to live in the community or in their transition to the direct provision system. NOVAS also supports young people who experience homelessness as part of their household, through its family services.

NOVAS is a member of national and European advocacy groups, including The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, which has campaigned for a national strategy on youth homelessness since 2017.

## **Recommendations**

The number of young adults in emergency homeless accommodation in Ireland has nearly doubled in the last six years. The monthly Homeless Report for January 2022 shows that 1,111 people aged between 18 and 24 accessed emergency accommodation.<sup>1</sup> This is a significant rise in the last twelve months. We know that there are many more young people, who experience 'hidden homelessness' (couch surfing, rough sleeping, overcrowded, tenuous and substandard accommodation), who are not enumerated in official figures. Young people who have experience of state care, young people from the LGBTQI community and young people with fractured family relationships are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

As service providers it is incumbent on all of us to prevent homelessness and provide interventions that prevent pathways into large, emergency, hostel-style accommodation, where high-risk behaviours, drug use and institutionalisation can become more entrenched.

### **1. Redefine the definition of a Young Person:**

Extend the definition of *Young Person* to 16-24 years (currently 18-24 years), so that at-risk young people are supported before they turn 18 and more prevention measures are put in place.

Homelessness among young people is not random. Children who have experience of state care or state interventions in their households are more likely to become homeless as young adults. So too are children who grow up in overcrowded housing (including young mothers), young people from minority backgrounds, young people who identify as LGBTQI and young people who have experienced significant trauma in their childhood. Extending the definition provides greater opportunity for interventions before adulthood, thus preventing homelessness altogether. Extending the definition of a young person to include the years prior to adulthood is essential to the success of the Youth Homeless Strategy.

### **2. Family Support and Mediation Services:**

As indicated throughout this submission, the trajectory for young people into homelessness is very often tracked from early childhood. Young people who grow up in homes that experience significant social and economic marginalisation, overcrowding, addiction and trauma are over overrepresented in youth homeless figures. Knowing this allows greater scope for early intervention. Intensive supports, including mediation, in these households is a critical prevention tool. Such intensive support should be targeted at both the young person and the parents in the household. There should be significant emphasis on maintaining and restoring relationships between teenage children and their parents as youth homelessness often derives from family breakdown. A multidisciplinary approach to identifying and supporting at-risk families is essential.

### **Restore full payment of Job Seekers Allowance for Young people under 25 years:**

An unintended consequence of reducing Job Seekers payment for young people more than a decade ago was the acceleration of pathways into homelessness and blocking exits from homelessness among at-risk young people. This practice must cease and restoration of full payment must be

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Housing, *Local Government and Heritage, 2022, Monthly Homeless Report January 2022.*

immediate so that young people have the same opportunities as other cohorts to live independently.

### **Continued Aftercare for Young People beyond 21 years:**

Aftercare must be provided to all young people who have experienced state care up to the age of 24 years (as per the definition of a young person), irrespective of their education status. By linking Aftercare support to education, marginalised young people who have often experienced disrupted education as children, are further discriminated against.

Moreover, dedicated Aftercare workers must be assigned to young people in a timely and orderly fashion (before they turn 18) so that safe and trusting relationships can be developed and collaborative planning can take place between the young person and their Aftercare worker.

### **Dedicated housing options for young people:**

The provision of dedicated housing options for young people, including Housing First for Youth, is essential to prevent pathways into large, low-threshold hostels for this vulnerable group. A combination of visiting and on-site supported housing options should be available to at-risk young people. Sufficient single units of social housing stock is essential to meet the needs of young people. Elevated HAP payments are essential so young people can compete for scarce units of accommodation in the private rented market.

DIAL House is an excellent model of care and support. Placements are planned and staged and the inclusion of a respite bed gives young people the opportunity to experience living there before making a long-term commitment. The respite bed also supports young people in crisis who require emergency placement, who otherwise might be placed in large STA accommodation. The combination of residential and outreach support, provides a range of options for young people, some of whom are reluctant to live with on-site supports. We believe an emulation of this model in other parts of the country, as well as a similar service that caters for low-threshold young people would be very beneficial for young people at risk of homelessness.

A recent SROI (Social Return On Investment) analysis into the DIAL House model of residential and outreach support, found that the service generated a social value of between €5.30 to €6.26 for every €1.00 invested in the service. The analysis found that DIAL House offers a unique mixture of accommodation and life skill training to help young people with preparing for transition into adulthood. It creates important outcomes for young adults who are leaving care or are at-risk of homelessness, such as an increased ability to live independently, improved mental wellbeing, increased social support and better coping and resilience skills. These have potential to change the course of young people's lives, by setting them up to progress to independent living, education and employment, and avoid negative experiences, such as homelessness, addiction or unemployment. DIAL House significantly benefits young people who are transitioning from care to living on their own, especially individuals with complex, intersecting needs including poor mental health, substance misuse, learning difficulties or lack of practical support in their lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quailty Matters, 2021, *A Social Return on Investment Analysis on the Impact of DIAL House*, p. i.

**Interactions with Young People should be rooted in Trauma Informed Practice:**

Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness have often experienced considerable trauma and multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences. All services supporting young people should be rooted in Trauma Informed Practice (TIP), developing safe and nurturing relationships between young people and staff and ensuring sustained engagement in services. The six principals of Trauma Informed Practice – safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment and consideration of history and culture – help to create better services for young people. Committing to train staff in TIP ensures that staff can recognise trauma induced behaviours, are equipped to deescalate such behaviours and are much less likely to unintentionally re-traumatise a young person engaged in their service. This creates opportunities for sustained engagement and better outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness.