

Submission to the Consultation on the Youth Homelessness Strategy



The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014)¹ states that ‘*some young people become parents and such teen parents may need additional supports to access education, employment, and **housing** and to support their own parenting*’ (P 27).

The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Consultation on the Youth Homelessness Strategy. This submission will focus on the dual challenges of being both a youth and parent and what is required to meet the very specific needs of this group of young people.

The Teen Parents Support Programme

The Teen Parents Support Programme (TPSP) consists of eleven separate projects funded by TUSLA and the HSE and located throughout the country in a range of statutory, community and voluntary organisations. The TPSP works mostly with young people who become parents when they are under 20 years of age and supports them until their child is 2 years of age – or older if needed. Young parents over 20 years of age may also be supported depending on their needs and circumstances. Support is offered in all areas of the young person’s life such as parenting, health, relationships, education, training, childcare, social welfare entitlements, legal issues, housing, and anything else about which the young person is concerned. The aim of the TPSP is to provide early interventions which will enable these young people build their capacity as parents and, at the same time, complete their own development as they make the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood. See www.tpssp.ie

Young Parents and Homelessness

Each year since 2016, the TPSP has conducted a ‘census’ of all its service users with a serious housing need. The census uses the ETHOS² typology developed by FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. FEANTSA uses 4 categories to describe housing needs: Roofless, Homeless, Insecure, and Inadequate. This enables the TPSP to count those in ‘hidden homelessness’ and to try to intervene earlier regarding their housing needs.

The Table below shows how the housing situation for young mothers supported by the TPSP has deteriorated over the past six years.

Year	Roofless	Homeless	Insecure	Inadequate
2016	0	23	40	42
2021	1	30	64	47

These figures represent a 35% increase in the number of mothers with serious housing needs despite

¹ https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomesBetterFutureReport.pdf

² <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

(accessed 7th March 2022)

the early intervention and advocacy that they receive from the TPSP. In 2021, it represented 20% of all young mothers supported. Among the 142 young mothers with serious housing needs, 61 (43%) were known to have a social care history. This included 7 young mothers who were Care Leavers, 22 who were engaged with Tusla Social Work Services in 2021 and 32 who had been engaged with Tusla Social Work Services in the past.

At any one time, the TPSP supports approximately 25% of mothers who have given birth as teens. From this we can extrapolate that in 2021 there were at least 720 young parents in their late teens or early twenties who were in homelessness or on the verge of homelessness. The high incidence of young parents in homeless services is confirmed by a report by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive on new families who experienced homelessness in the Dublin Region during 2016 and 2017³. This report showed that 25% of these families were headed by a parent aged 24 years or under. More recently, a joint report by IHREC and the ESRI⁴ confirmed that young adults and lone parents are over-represented among homeless service users. Young mothers fall into both these categories. The TPSP also supports a small number of young fathers separately from the mothers of their children. Data for 2020 shows that out of 51 young fathers supported in this way, there were 8 (16%) with a serious housing need. This discrepancy in numbers between mothers and fathers in homelessness is because the TPSP supports several times more mothers than fathers. It is not a reflection of the housing needs of young men.

How do you think the housing needs of young people /young parents (age 18-24) differ from those of other age groups?

Young people/young parents have additional needs related to their age and stage of development and to their circumstances prior to their leaving their family home or state care. These young people, some of whom have poor mental health and problems with substance abuse, have very little adult life experience or coping mechanisms to deal with being homeless. For young women, this situation is heightened when they become parents and are responsible for nurturing a child as well as looking after themselves. Many young mothers leave the family home for reasons that are well founded without their being ready emotionally to live independently with their child. The practicalities of life like budgeting, understanding tenancy agreements, paying bills, setting up standing orders, while putting in place healthy routines for themselves and their children is outside their experience. They lack confidence dealing with services and asserting their rights. They may not always have the literacy required when it comes to forms and applications. For all these reasons, young mothers in homelessness (most of whom are single parents) need to be treated as a separate category within family services. In addition to concentrating on their housing needs, they need a holistic response which encompasses all aspects of independent living and which is sustained until they are capable of holding down a tenancy without support. The fact that young people under 25 years of age need additional attention and a separate approach to adults is evidenced by the existence of a government department for Youth, the existence of Youth Services, mental health services such as Jigsaw and the Teen Parents Support Programme. Their maturation as a 'youth' does not accelerate when they become a parent.

What do you believe are the main barriers to young people/young parents accessing housing?

There has been a significant shift in government housing policy from the provision of social housing to the use of income supports and housing transfers that subsidise rent in the private sector. This is one of the main barriers to young people/parents accessing housing. Young parents cannot compete in a highly competitive rental housing market. Most young mothers are single parents who are dependent on social welfare, have no savings and no previous rental history or references. Even when they are employed, they have low incomes and very little bargaining power with landlords.

³ Morrin H. & O'Donohue Hayes B. (2018) A Report on the 2016 and the 2017 families who experienced homelessness in the Dublin Region. Dublin Regional Homeless Executive.

⁴ Russel et al (2021) Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland. ESRI and IHREC.

Young men, meanwhile, are on reduced social welfare payments without any possibility of being able to hold down their own rented accommodation.

By virtue of being young, neither group are long enough on the housing list to secure social housing. There tends to be a stigma in relation to young parents, with their youth being interpreted by landlords (without any evidence) that they are irresponsible and unreliable.

Racism also plays a part in excluding young parents from rented accommodation. In the experience of the TPSP, young parents from a Traveller background experience extreme difficulty securing housing due to discrimination as do some young migrant parents.

The TPSP also sees young parents living in very difficult circumstances at home who cannot declare themselves homeless because their names are still on their parents' Rent Books.

These young parents and children resort to rounds of 'couch surfing' until they are eventually forced to return to the home they are trying to leave. Multi-generational households, which in the past were considered to have a housing need, now no longer reach this threshold and housing arrangements considered detrimental to children some years ago are now deemed adequate.

What do you think are the main risk factors that can result in a young person/young parent becoming homeless?

All young people approaching adulthood are at a crossroads/vulnerable time in their lives. If there are significant difficulties within the family home (such as a breakdown in family relationships, substance abuse, serious mental health issues, domestic violence or other adversities) this is a time when young people choose to break away from the family of origin, sometimes impulsively and without any appropriate or reliable support to sustain them. As stated earlier, some of these young people have poor mental health and addiction problems themselves.

There is a very strong co-relation between early pregnancy and social disadvantage and already difficult home situations deteriorate when a young woman becomes a parent. The creation of a second family within the home leads to further overcrowding and tensions which impact on other family members. For example, young school-going siblings are woken at night and other family members must give up their bedroom to the new mother and baby. This situation often reaches a crisis when the baby becomes mobile and requires more space for its development. For the young mother there is often no solution other than to declare herself homeless.

Inadequate preparation for independent living for young people in care and inadequate planning for their housing when they leave care results in their quickly falling into homelessness. In the experience of the TPSP this is particularly so for those placed in residential care in their older teen years and for unaccompanied minors neither of whom have not had enough time in placements to process the trauma involved. This unresolved trauma is reinforced by homelessness leading to greater challenges to their remaining drug and crime free, to holding down tenancies and making the transition to independent living.

How do you consider to be the main risk factors that a young person/young person faces when they become homeless?

For young mothers to be homeless is catastrophic with wide ranging and long-term risk factors. Homelessness affects all aspects of their lives and the lives of their children – their health, their ability to complete their own education, their ability to parent, their children's development, and their ability to sustain tenancies in the future. For several years now, TPSP staff have reported developmental delays in children living in homeless accommodation or other overcrowded, sub-standard or otherwise precarious housing.

Young men in adult homeless accommodation are exposed to entrenched high level drug use and criminal activity. They are very vulnerable sharing large dorm-style rooms in low threshold adult services. Young fathers in general are invisible in society. For the most part they have no contact with any social service or other agency that acknowledges and promotes their identity as parents. When fathers become homeless access to their children is disrupted and this breakdown in the child-parent relationship may never recover with resulting long-term damage to both the child and the father.

For young parents who were raised in the care system, homelessness represents a continuation of earlier trauma and makes recovery and the transition to a healthy adult life even more difficult.

What services/initiatives do you think should be introduced to prevent young people/young parents becoming homeless?

The joint report by IHREC and the ESRI referred to above identified ‘significant weaknesses’ in how homelessness is measured in Ireland and recommends that the State adopts the ETHOS Light approach. This would enable the State to get some estimate of hidden homelessness among young adults (including young parents) and to include their needs when housing developments are approved.

Housing First for Youth should be extended to young parents. This would ensure that they quickly access a secure home and afterwards be provided with a tailored and flexible support plan to meet their individual needs. This support plan would link them into local services and groups and help them integrate into their new community.

The duration of aftercare supports and the availability of step-back accommodation needs to be extended to give care leavers time to address the trauma in their lives and to develop independent living skills.

Transitional housing has proven to be hugely beneficial to service users of the TPSP. An extension of such services would lay the proper foundations for these young people/parents so that they can learn how to maintain a home and live independently.

Staff working in homeless accommodation need to be trauma informed and be trained in working specifically with the 18-25 age group.

What top five priorities should the Youth homelessness Strategy focus on?

1. Treat young parents under 25 years of age as a separate category within services for families.
2. Introduce a *Housing First* approach for young parents under 25 years of age.
3. Use new building programmes to increase the supply of supported units and transitional housing for young men, young parents and other vulnerable families.
4. Collect data on hidden homelessness to inform planning for the above.
5. Prevent homelessness among care leavers by better advance planning before they leave care and extended aftercare.

Case Study

In 2017, Aaron and Holly were both aged 15 years when Holly became pregnant. Aaron dropped out of school during the pregnancy and Holly dropped out 2 years later in Sixth Year.

In 2019, Aaron’s relationship with his mother broke down and he became homeless. He tried hostels but was very nervous of staying in them and slept between his grandfathers’s camper van in Dublin City centre, Holly’s home and the sofas of friends.

In 2019 Holly became pregnant again. Her family home was very overcrowded. She shared it with both her parents, two brothers, her sister and her sister’s four-year old child. Holly and her daughter shared a set of bunk beds.

In June 2020 she and Aaron went into Homeless Services with their daughter – a month before her new baby was due. They were placed in a B&B in Gardiner Street where they shared a bathroom with

4 other families. They found this experience very difficult. They were not allowed to have a key to their room so they could not lock it at night. They had to vacate their room during the day and could not return to it (so their daughter could have a nap, for example) until the evening because it was locked by staff. On one occasion when Holly needed to go to the Rotunda Hospital in an emergency Aaron brought their daughter to her grandparents in Finglas. When they both returned to the B&B they were not allowed in without their child and Holly (who was now 8 months pregnant) had to wait on the steps outside the B&B until Aaron returned from Finglas late at night with their daughter.

The TPSP advocated with a local Homeless Service to have this young, vulnerable family moved to a Family Hub nearby. They moved to the Hub on a Monday without any help and with 8 bags of belongings. On Tuesday it was discovered that some paperwork was missing from Dublin City Council's (DCC) file so Aaron and Holly (who was heavily pregnant) were moved back to their original B&B with all their belonging and the food they had bought for the Hub. On Wednesday their TPSP Project Worker intervened, sorted the missing paperwork and Aaron and Holly returned to the Hub – again on foot with all their belongings. Some of the shopping they had bought for the Hub had to be thrown out and replaced because there was no fridge in their room in the B&B. This is just one example of numerous difficulties which Holly and Aaron (who are still only 18 years of age) experienced in trying to find temporary housing.

In July 2020 Holly had her new baby. The family is still living in the Family Hub and trying to get rented accommodation through the Homeless HAP. They now have a support worker from DCC and their TPSP Project Worker also continues to support and advocate for them.

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