

Executive Summary

Limerick Youth Housing Evaluation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Limerick Youth Housing (LYH) initiative is an innovative approach to delivering youth homelessness services, which is available to young people at risk of homelessness in several locations in Ireland. It is a collaboration between Focus Ireland, Tusla and the local authority. Two notable features of Limerick Youth Housing include:

- 1 Young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are offered stable and secure housing.
- 2 Local services work collaboratively and in an interagency manner to ensure that young people receive a range of supports so that they can sustain their tenancies as they transition into adulthood.

In 2016, Focus Ireland in partnership with Tusla commissioned Just Economics to carry out an evaluation of the service as it operates in Limerick, where the approach was first piloted in May 2013. As well as gathering evidence on the extent to which young people are achieving positive housing and non-housing outcomes, the evaluation has documented key characteristics of the service and how it works, especially the partnership approach to delivering the service. The aim has been to identify the key ingredients that work well to inform future development and any replication.

Limerick is the most economically disadvantaged city in Ireland, and recent evidence suggests that its position has declined further relative to other cities since the financial crisis. Regionally, Limerick makes up half of all Tulsa work in the west of Ireland, yet it is not nearly as heavily resourced as Dublin. Limerick is notable for having successfully reduced the numbers of 'roofless' homeless people, and there are low numbers of rough sleepers in the city. Nonetheless, in response to the national housing shortage, homelessness began to rise in 2016 along with other areas of the country.

The service mirrors key components of the Housing First for Youth framework. Key features of this framework include: access to housing, a client-centred approach that is holistic and recognises the developmental needs of young people, and an emphasis on social and community integration. However, this service was not founded on these principles; rather it developed organically in response to an identified gap in provision for young people in the area, and the need for productive collaboration across a range of stakeholders. As such, while this report can contribute to the growing evidence base on a 'housing before treatment' approach to youth homelessness, it is an initiative which is firmly based within a local context, and is being evaluated on that basis.

Responding to the Needs of Homeless Young People in Limerick

The service was established due to a perceived housing need for young people in the region. This was viewed as having been caused by three primary issues. Firstly, there are **structural issues** such as the severe lack of suitable accommodation for young people in Limerick. For those at risk of homelessness, secure tenancies are particularly important to ensure that they do not enter the system in the first place. Secondly, youth homelessness tends to have its roots in family conflict and this is also the case for young people in this service. Young people often have multiple **personal needs** such as difficult family relationships, substance misuse and poor health and well-being. Thirdly, the way social **services** are configured can sometimes be a barrier to providing a holistic and effective response to youth homelessness. Limerick Youth Housing has responded to these needs by working responsively and creatively with young people to find solutions that work for them.

The partnership is based on strong, trusting relationships between local government and other statutory and voluntary agencies. Central to the approach is the 'allocations' meetings. This involves staff from Limerick City and County Council, Tusla and Focus Ireland and other stakeholders (where appropriate) convening every six weeks to discuss operational aspects of the service, and its delivery. The benefits of these meetings include:

- › Referrals are openly discussed.
- › Allows for creative thinking and forward planning.
- › Encourages discussion about the gaps in provision and ways to address them.
- › Provides networking opportunities, builds trust and nurtures the collaborative spirit of the initiative.
- › Provides an opportunity to resolve interagency problems, such as differing definitions of 'risk'.

The service has also developed a retention strategy based on positive youth development. Focus Ireland play the role of a 'sympathetic landlord' where eviction is a last resort and where young people in arrears are provided with additional support to develop their financial literacy. The aim is to gradually transition young people into a situation where they can manage a tenancy without support. The 'key-working' element of the service is therefore very important and there is an emphasis on the recruitment of well-trained, high quality staff who can adapt to this way of working.

Limerick Youth Housing is scatter-site and some units are shared. Decisions around sharing are based on the desire of the young people themselves and also considerations of their routines, for example their engagement with employment or training, etc. This information is captured at assessment and fed back to wider allocation group meetings.

The Study

54 young people have availed of the service since its inception. Existing data gathered by the service shows that a majority (85%) had achieved housing stability by the time they had left the service, and about half were managing their own tenancy. 46 young people (85%) had engaged in employment, education or training, although we do not know how sustainable this outcome has been over time. Almost a quarter of the young people have come from the care system. These care leavers are offered an aftercare worker up to the age of 21 if they stay in education or training. During the data collection phase of this study, there were 22 young people engaged with the service.

In total, 14 young people who were receiving the service or who had graduated from it participated in the study. The interviews were qualitative and semi-structured but included some quantitative scales to enable comparisons with other populations and to provide baselines for a potential follow-up study. In addition, three focus groups were carried out: two with service stakeholders and one with frontline staff. The research was guided by a Research Steering Group consisting of representatives of Focus Ireland, Tusla, Limerick City and County Council and an expert in the area of Housing First research.

The young people who engaged in the study were aged between 19 and 26, and the average age was 21. All of the young people were referred to the service through Tusla or the Housing Action Team in Limerick City. The young people were referred to the service due to their housing need. In addition, some reported poor family relationships, poor physical and mental health and/or substance misuse issues. Several had experiences of precarious living arrangements such as couch surfing. Six of the young people had histories of rough sleeping, and two had lived in emergency hostel accommodation. Two of the young people in the study had dependent children living with them.

Key Findings

There was clear evidence that Limerick Youth Housing has had a transformative impact on the lives of the research participants. The service offers young people space to recover from previous experiences, to develop their skills and plan for the future. Although the study focused on a relatively small sample, when young people were asked to compare their situations before and after entering the service, there were indications of improvements across a range of areas. The young people who engaged with LYH mainly attributed these positive outcomes to their involvement with the service. Most told us (12/14) they did not have other options at that time and things would otherwise have stayed the same or worsened. Three young people who had particularly precarious and unstable housing histories felt that the service has saved their lives. Other key findings included:

- › There was a very high level of satisfaction among the young people with the **housing** provided in terms of standard, location and proximity to services.
- › There were improvements in the participants' **physical health** (such as back pain and asthma) since moving into LYH. Seven young people described their health as 'good' or 'very good' before accessing LYH. At time of interview, this had increased to 12 young people. If this were replicated with ex-post and ex-ante data, it would bring the sample from well below average to being in line with average for self-reported health for Ireland (82%) (Eurostat, 2015). Additionally, 4 of the 14 young people had attended A&E in the past but none had done so since they had been housed.
- › All the young people felt that the **overall quality of their lives** would have been poorer had they not engaged with the service. Many described a ripple effect of their housing status which had a positive impact on the rest of their lives. Respondents were asked to rate their life satisfaction and feeling that life was worthwhile before coming to LYH. These received average ratings of 4.8/10 and 5.1/10 respectively. At the time of interview, this had increased to 8/10 and 8.1/10, bringing it above the Irish average for **life satisfaction** (7.4) (Eurostat, 2015).
- › Young people were positive about improvements in their **independent living skills**, and thought their skills in relation to money/debt management, housing management, self/health care were of a good standard.
- › All respondents reported improvements in feelings of safety, security and stability. The **feeling of stability** was especially important to them. To capture these data quantitatively, respondents were asked to complete the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS). We found an average for this cohort of 3.42, ranging across the questions from 2.7–4.2. This is below (but close to) the average **resilience** score found in a larger study of participants with mixed health status.
- › 7/14 were engaged in some form of **education/training**. This ranged from third level college, to adult education courses or online courses. 4/14 were actively job seeking or planning training or education. Research participants felt they needed more help with job seeking or researching training and educational courses.

- › Out of the sample, 6/14 that answered the question had been in contact with the **criminal justice system** prior to engaging with the service (none of these had resulted in a charge). There had been no contact with the system since residing in Focus Ireland accommodation. We can see from the existing data that 1 of the 54 young people who have engaged with LYH is in prison, which is relatively low given the established link between **homelessness** and **incarceration** (McNiel et al. 2005).
- › **Relationships** were another area where young people reported improvements since moving to LYH. Young people reported having more autonomy in their lives, which had positively impacted on their relationships with **family**. 90% of the respondents told us they had **friends** that they saw regularly but several had changed their friendship group since being housed, as they were aware of the risks of negative peer influences.
- › Most young people interviewed described that they had become more **confident in their interaction with services** since transitioning to LYH.
- › There was evidence of some unmet mental health support needs. Respondents completed the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale during interview which revealed this. While these scales were used for illustrative rather than diagnostic purposes, these findings were also supported through the qualitative data.

Although a **full cost-benefit analysis** was outside of the scope of this study, we compared the costs of delivering the service with the savings to the State from a reduction in demand for emergency service placements. This is a very narrow interpretation of benefits because substantial potential savings could accrue from improvements in employment, health and criminal justice outcomes. However, even on that basis the service is shown to be cost beneficial with a 'return on investment' of just over 1.6:1. In other words, €1.60 is saved for every €1 invested.

The research had several limitations relating to the sample size and lack of control group, all of which limit the scope of our findings. Notwithstanding these caveats, there were clear benefits seen in an interagency service which offers a 'Housing First' approach to working with homeless young people. In general, the young people we spoke to were extremely positive about the impact the service has had on their lives. This approach allows young people space to recover from previous experiences, to develop their skills and plan for their future. Key working was also valued by the group, especially the non-judgemental way of working. This was evident from their own personal stories and the quantitative data captured during the interviews. However, neither is the service a panacea. Whilst housing stability has certainly been achieved for these young people, they still needed ongoing support for substance misuse issues, mental health, limited work opportunities, life skills and family relationships. A follow-up study could provide greater insights into the sustainability of these outcomes over time among this cohort of young people.

Recommendations

There were several recommendations that emerged in this study which applied at a service, local and national level.

Service-level recommendations:

- 1** We recommend the introduction of a more systematic data collection system to introduce better monitoring of housing and non-housing outcomes.¹
- 2** The key worker approach was identified as central to the success of the project. With the expansion of the service both in Limerick and elsewhere, it is important to ensure that key workers' case loads are maintained at the current level.
- 3** Evidence from this project and elsewhere suggests that a greater emphasis on employment and training would enable young people to successfully exit the service into housing and sustain that exit. There is scope for enhancing this aspect of Limerick Youth Housing. This might, for example, involve building relationships with local employers to provide work placement opportunities or including this dimension at allocations meetings.

Local authority recommendations:

- 1** The findings from this research suggest that targeted mental health support ought to be improved in the service. One immediate step could be to link the service with local HSE Community Mental Health service.
- 2** There is a shortage of affordable, accessible and secure housing, and a need to ensure that there are housing allocations for vulnerable youth across all types of social housing.
- 3** Initiatives like this would benefit from a greater research culture to ensure that data is being regularly captured to build the evidence base around interventions that work. This is particularly important for cost-benefit considerations.

¹ Focus Ireland have commissioned Just Economics to develop a youth housing monitoring framework to be used across Focus Ireland Youth Housing services.

National policy recommendations:

- 1** One of the clear findings of this study is the partnership approach being a 'key ingredient of success'. This model should be actively supported and encouraged at national level – e.g. Tusla, Department of Housing, and other local Government structures.
- 2** There should be greater access to affordable housing for young people. There are high vacancy rates across Ireland and the Vacant Housing Strategy under *Rebuilding Ireland* must address how these units can be brought quickly into use, but also to ensure that a number of these units are made available to young people. There should be efforts to ensure that young people are in a position to afford private rented sector housing through efforts such as Housing Assistance Programme (HAP) across all areas of Ireland.
- 3** Better quality national data on youth homelessness and care leaver outcomes would be highly beneficial to better understand the phenomenon and enable comparisons in studies such as this.
- 4** There is a need to ensure that social welfare payments are not limited or restricted based on age categories. There were clear differences in how young people could manage depending on the payments they were receiving. Specifically, those on lower payments struggled with budgeting and often owed money at the end of the week.



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