A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland

Executive Summary

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FOCUS Ireland

Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Trans Young People in Ireland



The views expressed in this research report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the funders Focus Ireland, Human Dignity Foundation and St. Stephens Green Trust.

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Report commissioned by Focus Ireland

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September 2020









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Abbreviations and Specialist Terminology

Intersex	Individuals who are born with sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, genitals, and/or hormonal structure) that do not belong strictly to male or female categories, or that belong to both at the same time.
LGBTQI+	LGBTI+ is an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex. The + denotes other sexual orientation and gender categories not accurately described by these terms. As there is a significant body of relevant international literature that includes the umbrella term 'Queer', the abbreviation LGBTQI+ is used throughout this report.
Homophobia	Negative attitudes towards homosexual people and homosexuality which may be manifested in discrimination, hostile behaviour, or hate crimes.
Transgender/trans	A person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex observed and recorded for them at birth. This term can include diverse gender identities.
Transitioning	The process through which some trans people begin to outwardly live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the one observed and recorded for them at birth.
Transphobia	The fear, dislike or hatred of people who are trans or are perceived to challenge conventional gender categories or 'norms' of male or female, which can result in discrimination against people who are trans.

Foreword

This report on the experiences of LGBTQI+ young people who find themselves without a home emerges from an exploration of the causes and solutions to youth homelessness which Focus Ireland has been engaged with for over 30 years. An important dimension of that work has been our engagement with researchers and activists across the world. Around 5 years ago, during a seminar at which we had invited Professor Steven Gaetz and Melanie Redman to talk to us about the Canadian 'A Way Home' youth homeless strategy, one of the slides included a statement that – 'if you are not looking at LGBTQ homelessness you are not dealing with the causes of youth homelessness.' An intern with the Advocacy team asked what was known about the issue in Ireland. This report can be traced back to the fact that the answer to that question was 'nothing at all'.

The seminar question initiated discussion in Focus Ireland and in the wider homeless systems, which reveal very different perspectives on this issue: people away from the frontline, while almost always sympathetic, just did not recognise this as an issue in Ireland's homeless services, irrespective of their own gender orientation and identity. On the other hand, lesbian and gay frontline staff told us it was a huge issue which they had been trying to get attention for over many years. This difference of perception also comes across very strongly in the ensuing report. This difference in perspective reflects the double invisibility of many of these young people – many of whom live on the margins of 'official' homelessness, while keeping fundamental parts of their human identity hidden, to protect their own safety.

A couple of decades of excellent research in Europe, the UK and the USA has repeatedly shown us that homelessness looks very different on the surface than at its core. Even people who work with 'the homeless' every day can miss important dimensions and trends which good research can reveal.

The report does what all good research must do – it brings something which was hidden into light and helps us to understand it. In helping us to understand it, it offers an opportunity for us to solve it.

What matters now is how the policy makers and the management in the homeless sector respond to the issues which this research brings into the light. All voluntary sector homeless services in Ireland are committed to values of inclusion and equality, we all aspire to be safe places for anyone who is vulnerable. It is distressing to hear, then, that our services are not always seen like that by young people who identify as LGBTQI+ or are still growing into a full understanding of their gender identity. The report recognises that the best response to the defects of the homeless system must always be to strive to eliminate the need for them at all by ending homelessness; and in that light it sets out some useful contributions to prevent LGBTQI+ young people becoming homeless in the first place. It also sets out some strategic and some practical responses to this for the sector and policy makers to adopt while homelessness persists. This report it not the end of our work on this issue, but it marks a crucial stage from evidence gathering to action.

In addition to the researchers themselves, Focus Ireland would like to thank all who participated in the Advisory Group for the report, former Research Co-ordinator, Sarah Sheridan, who initiated the research and her successor, Daniel Hoey, who brought it to completion, and to Paul Kelly whose advocacy for this issue in Focus Ireland services has extended over many years.

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About the Authors

Dr Aideen Quilty is Associate Dean of Social Sciences and Director of Gender Studies at the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin. Aideen locates her undergraduate and graduate teaching as a form of critical civic practice, deepening understandings of cultural diversity and inclusion. Drawing on intersecting queer, feminist and spatial theories her research seeks to make visible and challenge homo/bi/transphobia across a range of structural and socio-cultural contexts.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the support and advice they received from Focus Ireland's research department particularly from Mike Allen, Sarah Sheridan and Daniel Hoey and also from Moninne Griffith of BeLongG To. Thanks also to Dr Maggie Feeley and Dr Joanne Kelleher for their contributions in the early stages of this research. Finally, thanks to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this research, in particular the 22 young people who so generously shared their experiences of becoming, being and leaving homelessness. They made this research possible.

'When I think about housing, when I think about my landlord, when I think about rent, when I think about trying to search for a place or search for flatmates to move in with me, even talking about now, I can feel all the kind of physical symptoms that I would feel when I'm in a particularly anxious place. I can feel my heartbeat now.'



Research Context

This research study, commissioned by Focus Ireland, sought for the first time to make visible and give voice to the specificities of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland, with a view to informing the development of policies and services to meet their needs. There is a dearth of research on the specific experiences and needs of young Irish LGBTQI+ people who are experiencing homelessness. This contributes to difficulties in fully understanding the scale of the issue in Ireland and suggests that LGBTQI+ youth who are using housing and homeless services are relatively invisible to the providers of these services. In addition to those LGBTQI+ young people who are 'officially' homeless, there is likely to be a significant cohort of young people living without a permanent home and surviving by sleeping on friends' sofas, squatting or staying in other insecure or unsafe places, who are even more difficult to identify and consequently are often referred to as the 'forgotten homeless' or 'hidden homeless' (Curry *et al*, 2017)¹. As a result of this lack of evidence, there is a paucity of detailed policy and good-practice advice for supporting these young people and strategies for funding these services.

Curry, S. R., Morton, M., Matjasko, J. L., Dworsky, A., Samuels, G. M., and Schlueter, D. (2017). Youth Homelessness and Vulnerability: How Does Couch Surfing Fit? American Journal of Community Psychology, 60(1–2), 17–24.

The need for information on homelessness among LGBTQI+ young people is particularly urgent in view of the rise in youth homeless in Ireland in recent years. In February 2020, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) reported that 881 young people aged 18-24 were 'officially' homeless (i.e. living in emergency accommodation funded through Section 10 of the 1988 Housing Act). In contrast, only 642 people in this age group were homeless just three years earlier (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, various years)². There is also a strong consensus in the international research that LGBTQI+ youth face significant risks of homelessness (Curry *et al*, 2017; Rosario *et al*, 2012)³ and are overrepresented in the population of homeless young people (Lolai, 2015; Cochran *et al*, 2002)⁴.

This research sought to address this information deficit by examining for the first time the experiences of homeless LGBTQI+ young people aged between 18 and 30 years in Ireland with a view to informing the development of policies and services to meet their needs.

² Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, (various years). Homeless Report, Dublin: DHPCLG.

³ Rosario, M., Schrimshaw, E. W., and Hunter, J. (2012). Risk Factors for Homelessness Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: A Developmental Milestone Approach. Children and Youth Services Review, 34(1), 186–193.

⁴ Lolai, D. (2015). You're Going to Be Straight or You're Not Going to Live Here: Child Support for LGBT Homeless Youth. Tulane Journal of Law and Sexuality, 35(42): 37–62; Cochran, B. N., Stewart, A. J., Ginzler, J. A., and Cauce, A. M. (2002). Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Adolescents with their Heterosexual Counterparts. American Journal of Public Health, 92(5), 773–777.

Research Aims and Objectives

The broad aim of this research was threefold. It involved gathering and exploring information about:

- > the scale and triggers of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland
- first-hand qualitative experiences of young LGBTQI+ people who found themselves homeless, and
- > measures that might be adopted to combat LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland

To achieve this broad aim, the research addressed the following specific objectives:

- Explore the processes and 'triggers' that contribute to LGBTQI+ young people's homelessness or housing instability in Ireland
- Ascertain LGBTQI+ young people's experiences of frontline homeless and related support services in Ireland
- > Examine the potential obstacles to housing of LGBTQI+ young people in Ireland
- Compare the experiences of LGBTQI+ homeless young people in Ireland with the findings of the international research evidence on this cohort
- Make recommendations on the development of policies and services to meet the needs of young, homeless LGBTQI+ young people in Ireland, including recommendations on measuring sexuality and/or sexual identity in homelessness statistics

Research Literature, Parameters and Definitions

Counts of LGBTQI+ homeless youths are difficult to obtain and challenging to conduct for a range of reasons, including fear of disclosure and stigma (Rosario *et al*, 2012), sexual experimentation and identity confusion (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007)⁵. Furthermore, how one defines someone who is LGBTQI+ is a methodological challenge for researchers, not least as this can be a matter of changing definition for young people themselves (Tierney & Ward, 2017)⁶.

Such challenges notwithstanding, Ecker's (2016)⁷ comprehensive review of this research reveals that estimates of the size of the LGBTQI+ youth homeless population vary from between 8% and 37% of the total youth homeless population. Research on the triggers of youth homelessness also supports this consensus. It suggests that LGBTQI+ youth are at greater risk of homelessness because they are affected both by the factors which precipitate homelessness among the young population-at-large and by additional challenges related to their sexuality and/or gender identity which can directly or indirectly result in homelessness (Abramovich, 2012)⁸.

Two research cohorts were focussed on in this research:

- > young LGBTQI+ who had or were currently experiencing homelessness, and
- > key stakeholders in the homelessness sector in Ireland including civil servants, funders and homeless service providers and representatives of support and advocacy groups for young LGBTQI+ people.

⁵ Savin-Williams, R. C., and Ream, G. L. (2007). Prevalence and Stability of Sexual Orientation Components During Adolescence and Young Adulthood. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 36(3), 385–394.

⁶ Tierney, W. G., and Ward, J. D. (2017). Coming Out and Leaving Home: A Policy and Research Agenda for LGBT Homeless Students. Educational Researcher, 46(9), 498–507.

⁷ Ecker, J. (2016). 'Queer, young, and homeless: A review of the literature', Child and Youth Services, 37, 325–361.

⁸ Abramovich, A. (2012). 'No Safe Place to Go: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Canada: Reviewing the Literature', Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 4(1) 29–51

In total, following an extensive recruitment process, 22 one-to-one interviews with homeless, LGTBQI+ young people aged between 18 and 30 were conducted between December 2018 and August 2019. In addition, interviews with 14 policy makers and representatives of homeless service providers and support and advocacy groups for LGBTQI+ youth and care leavers were conducted between May 2018 and June 2019. These interviewees were identified in consultation with Focus Ireland, which commissioned this research, and the research advisory group which oversaw its implementation.

The expansive abbreviation LGBTQI+ – an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex was used throughout the research. The + denotes other sexual orientation and gender categories not accurately described by these terms and captures the continuous expansion of understandings of gender identities and sexualities (Savin-Williams, 2005).

The definition of homelessness employed in this research is the ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) typology devised by FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (undated)⁹. ETHOS identifies four types of homelessness and housing exclusion: roofless (without any shelter, sleeping rough); homeless (with a temporary place to sleep, in institutions or shelters); living in insecure housing (due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence) and living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, unfit housing, extreme overcrowding). LGBTQI+ youth in all these situations, or who had recently been in these situations (and are now adequately housed), were interviewed for the research.

⁹ FEANTSA (undated), ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion, retrieved from: https://www.feantsa.org/download/en-16822651433655843804.pdf.

Research Findings

The key findings from the youth LGBTQI+ interviews are presented in relation to three critical processes: Becoming Homeless; Being Homeless; and Leaving Homelessness. With regards to the policymakers, service providers and advocates interviewed there was a strong consensus that understanding the triggers, dynamics and experience of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness needs to be improved in order to develop more effective supports for this community. Key insights across both stakeholders and young LGTBQI+ people are outlined below.

Stakeholder Insights: Policymakers, Service Providers and Advocates

The 13 policymakers and representatives of homeless service providers and LGBTQI+ support and advocacy organisations revealed little consensus about the size of the population of LGBTQI+ homeless young people in Ireland. This reflects the lack of statistics collected on this population and mirrors the challenges associated with collecting these data in the international literature. These stakeholder interviews reinforced an important finding from the youth interviews, namely while some triggers of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness are common to the entire youth homeless population we can identify triggers of homelessness that are specific to LGBTQI+ youth, such as coming out and/or transitioning. The stakeholder interviewees also suggested that LGBTQI+ young people living in rural areas and from some minority ethnic and religious backgrounds are at particularly high risk of becoming homeless when they come out or transition.

There was significant agreement among these interviewees that the LGBTQI+ community is often subject to homophobia and transphobia by other users of homeless services. The adequacy of responses to this behaviour on the part of homeless providers varies. Some homeless organisations actively promote themselves as LGBTQI+-friendly spaces and enforce a policy of zero tolerance of homophobic and transphobic behaviour. In other organisations, this type of abuse is not treated as seriously as, for instance, racism. This finding was mirrored in the youth interviews and reinforces the particular challenges experienced by this cohort and as a consequence may contribute to their unwillingness to use homeless services and instead rely on couch-surfing or other forms of hidden homelessness for accommodation. Nevertheless, it was also clear from the interviews that LGBTQI+ staff of homeless services can play a vital role in supporting their young LGBTQI+ clients if and when they access these services. This complex relationship between young LGBTQI+ people and homeless services was also highlighted in the interviews with the young people themselves.

LGBTQI+ Youth Homeless Experiences: Becoming Homeless

The 22 richly textured, insightful and moving interviews conducted with LGBTQI+ young people provided valuable insights into the lives and experience of being LGBTQI+ and homeless in Ireland. A key insight into the high levels of homelessness among LGBTQI+ young people was the dual set of factors that can trigger their homelessness:

- > LGBTQI+ youth are vulnerable to a range of interpersonal, familial and intrapersonal triggers experienced among the young population-at-large including leaving care, family breakdown and the shortage of affordable accommodation.
- In addition, LGBTQI+ youth face particular triggers associated with their sexuality and gender identity that may increase their exposure to homelessness (Mayock & Corr, 2013)¹⁰ such as the complex experiences relating to coming out and/or transitioning.

Coming out featured prominently across the youth LGBTQI+ interviews and reinforced the fact that the coming-out process continues to present many young people with enormous challenges. There was significant evidence to link the process or acts of coming out within intimate family spheres with subsequent homeless experiences. The Irish context thus mirrored the international findings that parental rejection of young people's sexual orientation and gender identity is a key trigger of their decision to leave home and by extension of their homelessness (Dunne *et al*, 2002; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ecker, 2016)¹¹. The young people's stories and experiences also highlighted the sobering reality that – despite significant progress in Ireland vis-à-vis sexual and gender equality – homophobia and transphobia persist.

¹⁰ Mayock, P. and Corr, M. (2013). Young People's Homeless and Housing Pathways: Key Findings from a Six-year Qualitative Longitudinal Study, Dublin, Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

¹¹ Dunne G.A., Prendergast S., Telford D., (2002). 'Young, gay, homeless and invisible: A growing population? Culture, Health and Sexuality, 4 (1) 103–116; Durso L.E., Gates G.J., (2012). Serving our youth: findings from a national survey of service providers working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund, Retrieved from http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/safe-schools-and-youth/serving-our-youth-july-2012/

LGBTQI+ Youth Homeless Experiences: Being Homeless

The young LGBTQI+ participants in this research study evidenced a range of formal and informal ('living off-grid') homeless experiences. It was evident that many young people did not recognise themselves as 'homeless' and minimised their at times deeply distressing experiences of what could be interpreted as classic homelessness, and which map directly to the ETHOS typology devised by FEANTSA. This process of distancing is an important finding and may help deepen understandings of young LGBTQI+ people's broader invisibility and under-representation within the raft of homeless services available.

This research evidenced a deeply concerning, complex and bi-directional relationship between homelessness and mental health problems heavily bound up in complex experiences of stigma and shame. Just over half (thirteen) of the participants disclosed mental health issues, with five participants experiencing severe mental ill-health situations, including suicidal ideation. This level of mental unwellness and its implications for stable living are immense. The young people conjured a dual process of self-imposed silencing and invisibility in relation to their LGBTQI+ identity and homelessness experiences. This 'double closet' is hugely instructive for how we understand and therefore address the complex realities for LGBTQI+ youth homelessness. Particular challenges to coping and being well while experiencing homelessness were identified as acute tiredness, exhaustion and the hyper-vigilance required to stay alert, safe and out of harm.

Participants mentioned several reasons for their decision not to use homeless services. Influencing factors included the complexity of the homeless landscape or terrain, the lack of awareness of what was available to help or support them when they were most in need and an acute sense of deeply seated fear and apprehension about 'hostels' as being unsafe and dangerous for LGBTQI+ people. The majority of young people interviewed were unwilling to enter a space where they feared that they would encounter lack of understanding or blatant homophobic and transphobic attitudes among both other service users and staff, the potential for mis-gendering and fear of further isolation.

For those who did access frontline services and where those interactions were based on support, trust and open engagement the impact on the young person was overwhelmingly positive. This important role of frontline workers, including key workers, needs to be supported with sufficient education and training provided to increase awareness and understanding of the particular needs of young LGBTQI+ people. However, the young people interviewed also reported instances of less positive interactions with both staff and clients of homeless services. There are important messages here for the sector in terms of its role in LGBTQI+ youth homeless provision.

LGBTQI+ Youth Homeless Experiences: Leaving Homelessness

It is important to acknowledge how difficult exiting homelessness is for the young LGBTQI+ people interviewed for this study. Many of the young people were still in precarious accommodation or formal homelessness at the time of interview. However, these young people showed exceptional levels of resilience through a range of agentic strategies. Those young people who had successfully navigated an exit strategy highlighted the importance of community, queer networks and friendships in supporting them through their homelessness experiences. The second range of supports identified were within the LGBTQI+ NGO sector, in particular the provision of safe spaces and an environment in which people understood the lived reality of LGBTQI+ lives. A third major source of supports was identified within the formal homelessness, their aspirations reflected the desirability of tailored, dedicated LGBTQI+ homeless service provision and LGBTQI+ specific organisations.

Recommendations

The publication of this research, which is the first major qualitative study on LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland, is timely. This study has resulted in a series of recommendations which have the potential to inform the content and implementation of the Irish government's ground-breaking *LGBTI+ Youth Strategy* and the specificity of homelessness. The recommendations were designed to take account of the three overarching goals outlined in the *LGBT+ Youth Strategy*:

- Goal 1: Create a safe, supportive and inclusive physical environment for young LGBTQI+ people
- > Goal 2: Improve the physical, mental and sexual health of young LGBTQI+ people
- Goal 3: Develop research and data environments to better understand the lives of young LGBTQI+ people

The recommendations reflect the key findings of the research and the analysis of the young LGBTQI+ participants' experiences of becoming homeless, being homeless and leaving homelessness and in particular the way in which their LGBTQI+ identities and the homophobia and transphobia they experienced shaped these experiences. The recommendations also take account of the way in which services for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness are funded and delivered in Ireland by non-governmental organisations both in the private and non-profit sectors. The recommendations are framed around six critical categories: prevention; information, training and communication; education and awareness raising; health; emergency accommodation; and data and measurement.

Preventing Homelessness Among LGBTQI+ Young People

- 1 The 'Youth Homelessness Strategy', committed to in the Programme for Government 2020, should include a 'homelessness prevention' pillar with specific reference to the particular risks and pathways into homelessness which LGBTQI+ youth are likely to experience. The Strategy should put in place educational, family and youth service supports to help prevent homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth.
- 2 This youth homelessness preventative pillar should include consideration of the role of conflict with parents and caregivers regarding emerging LGBTQI+ identities in young people's departure from home and thereby their homelessness.
- **3** As an immediate step, Tusla should increase funding to extend the lifetime of the existing Youth Homeless Prevention Mediations Service. Focus Ireland should also ensure that specialist training is provided for its mediation workers related to supporting families where a child or young adult is LGBTI+ or is exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **4** The Strategy should also address the specific challenges which may face LGBTQI children in foster care and residential and review and build on the valuable work already conducted by Tusla to ensure that these challenges are addressed.
- 5 The strategy should ensure that specialist support, information and training is available to teachers and youth workers to enhance their interaction with and support for LGBTQI+ youth.

Information, Training and Communication on the Front Line

- 6 As part of phase 2 of this project, Focus Ireland should develop and produce a youth LGBTQI+ homeless services infographic that identifies the key access points and services across the statutory and voluntary sectors, including prevention and outreach services.
- 7 Focus Ireland, along with the Homeless Network, which includes non-profit sector providers of homeless services in the Dublin region, and in collaboration with the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, should identify and commission appropriate specialist training from LGBTQI organisations for staff working in the key access points and services. This training should include specific modules, devised in collaboration with appropriate organisations, to assist frontline workers in supporting young LGBTQI+ people from minority ethnic groups.
- 8 Focus Ireland should request the Homeless Network to develop a frontline 'LGTBQI+ Friendly Space' visual for display by those service providers who have evidenced that they provide LGBTQI+ friendly spaces through their training, education and mission statements.
- 9 The Homeless Network should consider establishing a network of key workers who have experience of working with LGBTQI+ homeless youth to share experiences and learning.

Education and Awareness Raising Across the Sector

- **10** Focus Ireland should deliver a series of webinars to publicise the key findings and recommendations of this research among policy makers, local authorities, non-profit homeless service providers and providers of other relevant services.
- 11 Focus Ireland should work with the Homeless Network and LGBTQI+ organisations to develop an awareness raising programme that highlights the presence and specific needs of young LGBTQI+ people including appropriate language and gender pronouns.
- 12 Focus Ireland should establish a process to monitor the implementation of recommendations from this research involving engagement with relevant government departments and statutory agencies with responsibility within those organisations.

Health

13 In reviewing and evaluating the mental, physical and sexual health services which are available to young homeless people, the forthcoming Youth Homeless Strategy should specifically consider the particular issues experienced by LGBTQI+ homeless youth.

Emergency Accommodation

- 14 As part of phase 2 of this project, Focus Ireland should work with the Homeless Network to develop privacy and safety strategies for young LGBTQI+ people using emergency accommodation, informed directly by LGBTQI+ youth, which could be implemented by the homeless service providers who are involved in the Network.
- **15** Focus Ireland should further research the international evidence on the impact of dedicated LGBTQI+ emergency accommodation within homeless services.

Data and Measurement

- 16 The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government should establish a group to review the process of collecting and publishing data on homelessness, including data on risk factors and at-risk groups, including LGBTQI+ youth. All data collection decisions should be informed by GDPR protocols, international best practice, the experiences of homeless service providers and should consider and evaluate the purposes to which the data will be put.
- 17 The review group should consider initiating a pilot data-gathering project using PASS¹², building on the learning from the review process, with a sample of frontline services.
- 18 Dublin's Central Placement Service and non-Dublin local authorities should consider introducing a third 'other' category when asking people who are seeking emergency accommodation their gender.

¹² The Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS) is an online shared system utilised by every homeless service provider and all local authorities in Ireland.



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