

FOCUS Ireland

Recommendations to Government: Housing for All Strategy 2021 Youth Homelessness

May 2021

**Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.**

Proposals for a Youth Homelessness Strategy

The following proposals for a Youth Homelessness Strategy were submitted to the Department of Housing in November 2020 as part of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. We are aware that a National Youth Homelessness Strategy will be developed in the coming months. The following submission has been included here for ease of reference and to emphasise the interrelatedness of both strategies.

Introduction

The number of young adults homeless in Ireland has almost doubled in the last six years. Of all age groups, they are most vulnerable, least likely to know where they can get help or present to services, and most likely to bunk in with friends and extended family, live in other precarious situations, or sleep rough. As such, many are not included in the official figures and are in 'hidden homelessness'.

The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness was established in September 2017 as a way of consolidating the work of different organisations who are trying to tackle youth homelessness. We hope that through the Coalition, we will be better able to draw attention to the issue and highlight our collective solutions. The CEYH comprises Focus Ireland, Barnardos, BelongTo, COPE Galway, Crosscare, EPIC, Foróige, National Youth Council of Ireland, Novas, Peter McVerry Trust, Simon Community, SVP, SpunOut.ie, Teen Parents Support Programme, Threshold, and the Union of Students of Ireland. For more information, visit our website: www.endyouthhomelessness.ie

The Coalition to End Youth Homelessness has campaigned for a national strategy on youth homelessness since 2017. The firm commitment to developing a Youth Homelessness Strategy given in the Programme for Government is a welcome acknowledgement of the urgency of this issue and the unique challenges young people face in finding a safe place to call home.

Young adults are at a crucial point in their emotional, cognitive and social development, transitioning from adolescence to adulthood; experiences at this stage have life-long impacts. To move successfully to adulthood, they need understanding, support, space and structure. Left to their own devices, those out of home often flounder and face a future of exclusion, potentially leading to a lifetime cycle of homelessness. However, with the right interventions their needs can be addressed and they can move out of homelessness and into productive, independent adulthood.

Young adults out of home are in crisis, without experience of independent living and the resilience of adulthood. They can have a range of needs and issues, stemming from adverse childhood experiences, which include poor mental health, behavioural issues, problematic drug or alcohol use, and sometimes all of these in combination. Some are parents and many are separated from their children because of their situation. Those leaving state care or detention, from migrant or ethnic groups, and who identify as LGBTQI+ are disproportionately represented in youth homelessness.

It is essential for the Youth Homelessness Strategy to be cross-departmental, intersectional and cooperative. A consultation process with stakeholders across the areas of youth and homeless services should be held to develop the contents of the strategy and as time goes on, to monitor and review its implementation.

The Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness present this document as a starting point for the strategy from our members' varied perspectives in housing, homeless, children and youth services.

Address policies that disadvantage young people

An adequate supply of housing is key to addressing and preventing homelessness and current government policies in this regard are welcome and must be accelerated. However, even with a better housing supply, young people will continue to be disadvantaged in accessing and maintaining tenancies if their right to live independently is not clearly recognised and supported in government policies. Implementing the following recommendations will begin to address some critical disadvantages:

- Clearly define 'youth homelessness' for the purposes of the strategy in line with the FEANTSA European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness¹. Currently, youth services and government documents refer to 'youth' with differing understandings of what ages this includes and at what point a young person is no longer eligible for these services. This confusion leads to inefficient policies and allows young people to fall through the gaps. The FEANTSA definition states: "*Youth homelessness occurs where an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing rooflessness or houselessness or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian.*"
- Restore the full rate of Jobseekers Allowance for under 26s. Their reduced entitlement denies them the ability to live independently. There are no youth discounts on food, gas, electricity and other necessities: it costs the same for them to live as other adults.
- Ensure an after-rent income based on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) developed by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. This will introduce equity across household types and age groups and help to improve the sustainability of renting.
- Plan to produce a more diversified social and affordable housing stock to include adequate units for single person households reflecting the full range of housing needs.
- Aftercare should be extended to the age of 26, in line with the definition of youth proposed above. Currently, aftercare supports beyond the age of 21 are only available to young people who remain in education, when often the most vulnerable young people are those who are unable to continue in education due to mental health or other issues. This exclusion from supports should be ended.
- The new Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures policy should include youth homelessness as a key issue.

Prevention and early intervention

Homelessness is not random. Its predictors are empirically established and understood. They are identifiable at an early stage by health services, schools and other community-based services. Intervening when needs and issues arise, before they become critical or entrenched, is a more efficient use of public resources and secures better outcomes for young people and their families.

- Ensure that the issue of transitioning to independent living is addressed in school and youth service programmes so that adolescents can learn what is involved in leaving home and how

¹ FEANTSA European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness. Available at: https://www.feantsa.org/download/framework-for-defining-youth-homelessness_final_pdf3614092469143708469.pdf

they can plan towards it, as well as the nature, risks and consequences of homelessness, and assistance available.

- It is well known that young people leaving care are particularly at risk of homelessness, yet many face long delays in accessing aftercare workers due to extremely high caseloads. In aftercare services run directly by Tusla, a caseload of up to 50 young people per aftercare worker is not uncommon. Funding additional aftercare workers would prevent young people from facing the 'cliff edge' of exiting care on their own.
- A review of the National Aftercare Policy should be commissioned, and ensuring care leavers have access to stable accommodation after they turn 18 should be seen as a key preventive measure. Under current legislation, young people leaving care are guaranteed an assessment of need but there is no guarantee of an aftercare plan. Every young person in care will have some aftercare needs, even if that need is simply to support them in an extended care placement with their foster parent.
- Family conflict or breakdown is a major cause of youth homelessness. Skilled family mediation services can effectively prevent or end homelessness for a young person by resolving the conflict in many cases (e.g.: there was no abuse or neglect). Tusla currently funds family mediators in Dublin, a service which should be expanded to the rest of the country.
- International evidence indicates that a disproportionate number of young homeless people are LGBTQI+. A recent Focus Ireland and BeLonGTo report into the experiences of homeless LGBTQI+ youth in Ireland² which called for the Youth Homelessness Strategy to include 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. Conflict with parents and caregivers regarding emerging LGBTQI+ identities is a trigger for young people's departure from home, and preventive work (e.g.: through family mediation services) should account for this through increased funding for family mediation services and specialist training for teachers and youth workers on LGBTQI+ issues.
- Continue intensive supports to families who are moving from homelessness in the areas they move to, to ameliorate the ongoing negative impact of homelessness on parents and children.
- Guarantee that where a young person does become homeless and presents to services that they will receive a comprehensive assessment and will be transferred from emergency accommodation within two weeks.
- The concentration of services for vulnerable young people in city centres is inappropriate and can place already vulnerable young people at greater risk. The strategy should commit to decentralising youth homeless services.

² Quilty and Norris (2020). 'A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland'. Available at: https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/LGBTQI-Youth-Homelessness-Report_FINAL-VERSION.pdf

Implement a national Housing First for Youth programme

Housing First is acknowledged internationally as the way to address homelessness effectively. We recommend the introduction of a national programme of Housing First for Youth in Ireland, to include:

- Ring fencing of appropriate accommodation from public housing stock, approved housing bodies, and private owners and the provision of specialist supports for young people who are homeless or at immediate risk of becoming homeless.
- Encompass the current arrangements for young people leaving State care, through the provision of housing under the Capital Assistance Scheme into Housing First for Youth.
- Creative solutions to young people's housing needs are necessary to meet demand and ensure the best options for young people. A range of options including self-contained and shared, supported lodgings and foyers should be explored.
- The implementation of tailored, personalised plans, based on an assessment of individual needs, talents and ambitions, and including support with independent living skills, education and preparation for work.
- Care leavers should be given priority status on social housing lists in all Local Authorities
- A coordinated approach to the implementation of individual plans, led by Children and Young People's Services Committees, to ensure that all services are mobilised, particularly mental health services, and that needs and issues are addressed effectively on a local area basis.
- Rigorous tracking and evaluation of the Housing First for Youth programme.