

Focus Ireland Submission to the Young Lives at Risk project

January 2026

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Young Lives at Risk (YLAR) project. Through our services, we support both under 18s and 18–26 year olds who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In our advocacy and research, we are committed to identifying effective solutions to end youth homelessness in Ireland. We also hold the chair of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness (ICEYH), which has played an active role in monitoring the implementation of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy (2023-2025).

As of November 2025, a record 2,023 young people aged 18–24 were residing in emergency homeless accommodation in Ireland. With youth homelessness continuing to rise and the National Youth Homelessness Strategy ending in December 2025 without all actions completed, it is essential that ending youth homelessness remains a national priority, supported by coordinated action across all departments and sectors.

1. Pathways into Homelessness: Based on your organisation's experience, what are the most common life events, systemic failures, or social conditions that lead children and young people into homelessness or precarious housing in Ireland?

Through our work in youth-specific services and research on youth homelessness, Focus Ireland has found that young people experience a wide range of pathways into homelessness. This reflects the fact that young people are not a homogeneous group, and their routes into homelessness vary according to factors such as age, family circumstances, gender, and migration status.

[Research](#) published by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE) in 2025, analysing youth homelessness in Dublin during 2023, highlights this diversity. Young people aged 18–24 enter emergency accommodation both as single individuals and as part of a family unit, either as adult dependents living with their parent or parents or as parents themselves. This demonstrates a clear connection between rising rates of youth homelessness and family homelessness. It is therefore vital to recognise that children currently living in emergency accommodation are growing up in homelessness and that, without early intervention and appropriate family supports, many of these children are at risk of moving into the youth homelessness cohort.

For young people entering emergency accommodation as single individuals, the most frequently cited reason for homelessness is relationship breakdown, particularly

with a parent or other family members. A range of interconnected issues can contribute to these breakdowns, including conflict within the home, economic pressures, and overcrowding. Family rejection and conflict are also recognised [drivers of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness, further compounding risk for some young people.](#)

Another significant pathway into youth homelessness is the transition from State care. Focus Ireland's youth services and [research](#) consistently highlight the persistent link between experiences of state care and subsequent homelessness. Under current legislation, young people who have spent below a specified threshold of time in care are not entitled to aftercare supports. This gap also affects unaccompanied minors who have come to Ireland and are in the care of Tusla but may have spent limited time in care or are awaiting the resolution of their immigration status. Aftercare supports are essential to enabling young people to transition safely into adulthood and to avoid homelessness upon turning 18, with access to secure and appropriate accommodation being a critical component. While it is not always possible to predict who will experience homelessness, cases where a young person is approaching their 18th birthday, preparing to leave State care, and has no alternative housing available are clearly identifiable and preventable. Early intervention in these situations is essential to prevent young people from entering the trauma and instability of homelessness.

The DRHE research also highlights a clearly gendered experience of homelessness among young people. Of those aged 18–24 accessing emergency accommodation in 2023, 52.1% were male and 47.9% were female, demonstrating that young women are strongly represented in the youth homelessness population and challenging the dominant narrative that homelessness disproportionately affects men. Gender patterns also vary according to household type. Young men accounted for 64.4% of those accessing emergency accommodation as single individuals, while young women were disproportionately represented among those in family units, accounting for approximately 60% of this cohort. These findings highlight the need for gender-responsive prevention and support measures, including those tailored to the particular pressures faced by young mothers, especially lone parents.

Young migrants are another group at heightened risk. As noted above, unaccompanied minors not entitled to aftercare are particularly vulnerable. The DRHE research identifies young migrants as an emerging cohort accessing emergency accommodation. Migrant-specific pathways include family reunification and leaving Direct Provision. A stronger understanding of their experiences is needed to inform effective prevention and support measures.

Finally, it is important to recognise that many young people experience hidden homelessness, such as couch surfing or staying in insecure, sometimes unsafe, temporary arrangements. This includes young adult dependents and young parents who may be living in overcrowded households, often on an informal or temporary basis, due to a lack of access to independent and affordable housing. Hidden homelessness disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ youth, young Travellers, and young prison leavers,

who may avoid services due to concerns for their safety or a lack of trust in formal supports. This means a significant number of young people, beyond the 2,023 reported above, remain uncaptured by official figures and out of reach of support services.

2. Gaps in Prevention and Early Intervention: What are the critical points at which youth homelessness could have been prevented but wasn't? Are there missed opportunities for family support, school engagement, mental health care, or alternative accommodation?

As outlined above there is a persistent link between leaving State care and entering homelessness. A critical missed prevention point occurs during the transition out of care, where many young people experience a 'cliff edge' at age 18, with the sudden loss of structured supports. Current legislative thresholds mean that entitlement to aftercare is not universal, resulting in some young people leaving care without guaranteed accommodation or ongoing support. This gap also affects unaccompanied minors in the care of Tusla who may not qualify for aftercare due to limited time in care or unresolved immigration status.

In cases where a young person is approaching their 18th birthday without a stable housing plan, the risk of homelessness is clearly identifiable and preventable. However, insufficient coordination between child protection, aftercare, housing, and immigration systems often results in young people being required to transition to independence with little notice or preparation. Strengthening and guaranteeing aftercare supports for all young people leaving care, alongside early and coordinated housing planning, would represent a significant opportunity to prevent avoidable youth homelessness and support safer transitions to adulthood.

As also highlighted above, family breakdown is a leading contributing factor to youth homelessness. There are a wide range of reasons why a young person may experience conflict within their family, including relationship difficulties, financial pressures, overcrowding, and housing insecurity. Early intervention in these circumstances is critical to support young people and their families to navigate conflict, rebuild relationships where possible, and prevent family breakdown and subsequent homelessness. Youth Family Mediation plays a vital role in this regard and is further detailed in Question 5.

It is also important to acknowledge the wider social and economic pressures currently facing families in Ireland, particularly those related to housing affordability and cost-of-living pressures. Evidence from Focus Ireland's services demonstrates that early intervention and prevention of youth homelessness are often most effective during childhood and adolescence. This includes targeted interventions in the context of family homelessness to ensure that no child grows up in the trauma and instability of homelessness. It also involves early identification and support within schools and

community settings to reach children and families experiencing hardship or at risk of homelessness, including those not already known to services. The Upstream model is central to this preventative approach and is also outlined further in Question 5.

3. Barriers to Support and Stability: What challenges do vulnerable children and young people face in accessing appropriate housing and wraparound supports (e.g. mental health, education, employment, care after 18)? What makes it harder for them to exit homelessness and stay out?

A vital aspect of both preventing youth homelessness and supporting young people to exit homelessness is access to appropriate housing solutions. Emergency homeless accommodation is not an appropriate environment for young people as they navigate the often difficult transition from childhood into adulthood. Extended periods in emergency accommodation can expose young people to a range of traumatic experiences, which can further compound their needs and make exiting homelessness more complex.

Addressing youth homelessness does not lie in the provision of age-appropriate emergency accommodation, but rather in the availability of dedicated transitional youth housing, combined with individualised, wraparound supports that respond to young people's specific needs. An example of this approach is the [Supported Housing for Youth](#) (SHY) pilot, which Focus Ireland delivers in partnership with Clúid Housing as part of the National Youth Homelessness Strategy.

SHY is a transitional housing model based on Housing First for Youth principles for young people aged 18–24. It demonstrates how effective collaboration combat service providers, Approved Housing Bodies, and Local Authorities can help address youth homelessness by ring-fencing housing allocations for young people and providing housing alongside tailored, individualised supports.

It is vital that young people are not simply accommodated but are fully supported in their transition out of homelessness and into independent living. This includes emotional support, mental and physical health supports, and the development of essential life skills. Education and employment are also critical elements of this transition. For young people experiencing or exiting homelessness, accessing and sustaining education and employment can be particularly complex and requires flexibility, understanding, and coordinated support from social welfare services, education providers, and employers. Such support is key to maintaining employment, building confidence, and enabling young people to go on to live stable, independent lives. Further detail on these challenges and the actions required is set out in [Focus Ireland's submission](#) to the Pathways to Work 2026–2030 Public Consultation.

4. System Navigation and Interagency Disconnect: How effectively do current systems - including Tusla, housing authorities, youth justice services - work

together to support homeless or at-risk young people? Where do disconnects and contradictions arise?

Inter-agency and inter-departmental collaboration are essential to ending youth homelessness. Effective action requires coordinated engagement across the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Education and Youth, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, the Department of Social Protection, the HSE, local authorities, Tusla, and NGOs.

The National Youth Homelessness Strategy represented a key opportunity for these stakeholders to work within a shared framework to prevent and address youth homelessness. The Strategy set out 27 actions focusing on accommodation, education, health, and early intervention. While all stakeholders were involved in the drafting and implementation of the Strategy, the number of young people aged 18–24 in emergency accommodation has increased by approximately 42% since its publication in 2023.

As chair and member of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, Focus Ireland has been closely involved in monitoring the implementation of the Strategy. The Strategy concluded at the end of 2025 without most actions not completed. Our experience indicates that a key barrier to progress was the absence of consistent commitment and follow through across departments and agencies. In practice, this resulted in uncertainty around remits, hesitation among stakeholders to pilot initiatives, and missed opportunities to advance measures that could have had a direct impact on reducing youth homelessness.

The Strategy was also a missed opportunity to address the disconnects that are particularly evident at key transition points, including when young people leave state care, where responsibility shifts between systems without adequate planning or shared accountability. Differences in eligibility criteria, funding structures, and policy priorities across housing, child protection, health, and immigration systems further exacerbate these challenges, increasing the risk that young people fall through gaps in provision and enter homelessness.

In contrast, the SHY pilot demonstrates what can be achieved through collaboration. Through this pilot, the Department of Housing, the four Dublin local authorities, Clúid Housing, and Focus Ireland have delivered a youth specific, housing led response with a clear and measurable impact on preventing and exiting youth homelessness.

5. Models of Effective Support: Are there particular models, pilot programmes, or practices (in Ireland or internationally) that have proven effective in reducing youth homelessness and improving outcomes for at-risk adolescents?

As noted above, the SHY pilot demonstrates the effectiveness of dedicated transitional housing and wraparound supports in addressing youth homelessness. Early intervention and prevention models also are critical in reducing the number of young people entering homelessness in the first place.

Youth Family Mediation is an early intervention model that addresses family conflict and breakdown, a key driver of youth homelessness in Ireland. Focus Ireland's Youth Family Mediation Service, delivered in partnership with Tusla, works with young people aged 12–18 and their families to prevent crises from escalating into homelessness or care entry. An independent [evaluation](#) published in 2025 found the service to be both effective and cost efficient, improving family stability and preventing homelessness.

[Upstream](#) is an internationally recognised, school-based prevention model that complements Youth Family Mediation by identifying young people at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage. Successfully implemented in Wales, Australia, and Canada, and piloted in Scotland, Upstream uses whole-school wellbeing surveys to identify early indicators of risk, including among young people not previously known to services, and to connect them with timely, tailored supports.

SHY, Youth Family Mediation, and Upstream each demonstrate the importance of a coordinated, preventative and housing-led approach to youth homelessness. Individually, these models show how dedicated youth housing, family-based early intervention, and early identification of risk can improve outcomes for children and young people at risk of homelessness.

6. Policy and Investment Priorities: What three actions or policy changes would most improve housing stability and long-term outcomes for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Ireland?

To improve housing stability and long-term outcomes for children and young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Ireland, we recommend three key actions:

1. Reform aftercare supports to ensure that all young people leaving state care - including unaccompanied minors - are entitled to appropriate aftercare. Research and practice consistently show that exiting care into homelessness is a common pathway into youth homelessness. Strengthening aftercare, alongside investment in youth-specific housing solutions, will directly reduce the number of young people living in emergency accommodation.
2. Expand the SHY pilot and establish it as a national mechanism to both prevent youth homelessness and support young people exiting homelessness. SHY ensures young people are not only housed but also receive tailored, wraparound supports. This is a commitment in the Government's recent housing plan [Delivering Homes, Building Communities](#).

3. Invest in early intervention and prevention initiatives to stop youth homelessness before it occurs. This includes expanding Youth Family Mediation and implementing the Upstream model in Irish schools. Together, these two services provide complementary supports: Youth Family Mediation strengthens family relationships and resolves conflict, while Upstream identifies young people at risk early and connects them to tailored supports. This combination helps keep young people safely at home, stabilises families, and prevents homelessness before crisis points are reached.