

# Submission to LGBTI Youth Strategy

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## Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' first National LGBTI Youth Strategy. Focus Ireland is one of the largest housing and homelessness organisations in the State. We are driven by the fundamental belief that homelessness is wrong.

Youth homelessness in Ireland is increasing. We know that experiencing homelessness at a young age has the potential to have devastating consequences and young people experiencing homelessness now are at real risk of becoming the long-term homeless and rough-sleepers of the future. Like all instances of homelessness, with the right mix of policies and service supports, it is a problem that can and must be ended. However, in order to do so, we must fully understand the pathways into homelessness for young people. Some important research on youth homelessness is being undertaken in Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

However LGBTI youth homelessness<sup>2</sup> is an area which has yet to be meaningfully examined in an Irish context. International research outlined below suggests that LGBTI young people can be disproportionately represented in the youth homelessness population. Services that have the knowledge and supports in place can better meet the needs of LGBTI young people.

Finally the issue of secure and stable accommodation is as critical for young LGBTI people as for the rest of the population and must be recognised in the forthcoming strategy.

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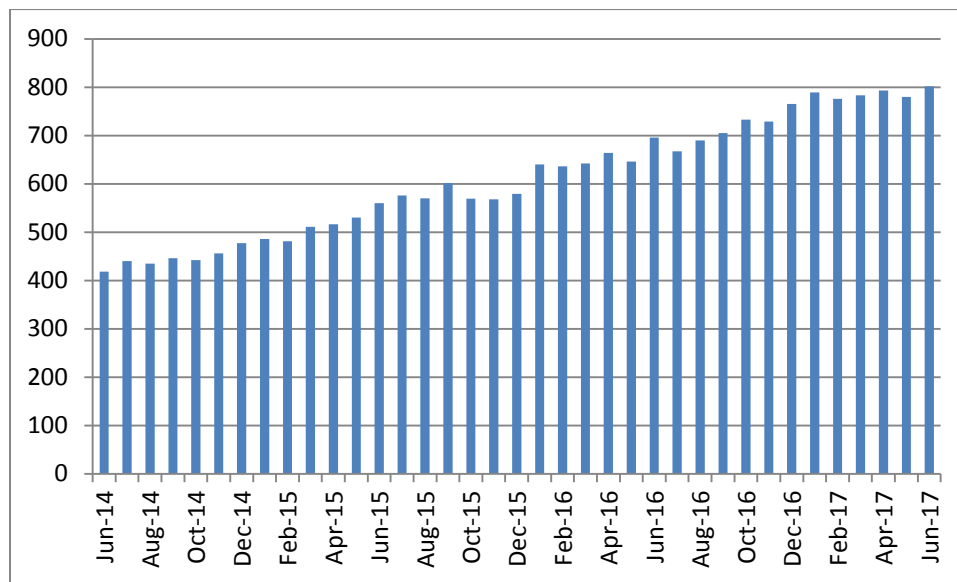
<sup>1</sup> Mayock P and Parker S (2017) *Living in Limbo: Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*, Dublin: Focus Ireland

<sup>2</sup> While we note that the Department uses the acronym LGBTI, some of the research quoted below relates to individuals who identify as LGBT or LGBTQ. As such, all three acronyms will appear in this submission.

## Youth Homelessness

The number of young people experiencing homelessness in the State has increased steadily during the recent housing crisis. The graph below shows the increase in the number of 18 to 24 year olds experiencing homelessness each month.<sup>3</sup>

In June 2017 there were 802 young people experiencing homelessness in the State, with 573 of these accessing services in Dublin. However, this figure may be a substantial underestimation, as young people are more likely to stay with friends and relatives in situations of 'hidden homelessness'.



There is very little robust information about the young people experiencing homelessness in Ireland. Qualitative research has provided some important insights into smaller cohorts, and has enabled us to analyse youth homelessness into three broad groupings: young people who grew up in the care system, young people without a care history, and young people who are parents and are experiencing homelessness with their children.

Additionally, research into the pathways of young people into homelessness in Ireland has identified 4 dominant typologies: histories of State care, household disruption and family instability, family conflict and/or violence, problem behaviour and neighbourhood stressors.<sup>4</sup>

While quantitative data on homelessness is now quite robust, our understanding of the demographic and personal characteristics of this young population is limited. Our knowledge comes from smaller-scale qualitative research. While this is invaluable in understanding the

<sup>3</sup> Source: Dublin Region Homeless Executive monthly statistical reports

<sup>4</sup> Mayock P, Parker S and Murphy A (2014) *Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*, Dublin: Focus Ireland

complex pathways into and out of homelessness for this cohort, we are still far away from having a full picture of youth homelessness in the State.

## LBGTI Youth Homelessness

One area that is particularly overlooked in homeless research and advocacy is the experience of young people who are LBGTI. In *Every Child a Home: A Review of the Implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy* a broad “lack of understanding of the issues” of LBGT homeless youth was noted.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Geoffrey Shannon, the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection appeared before the Joint Committee on Health and Children. In his opening statement, Dr Shannon stated that ‘a targeted response is required to deal with those who are highly represented among the homeless, for example Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LBGT) people’.<sup>6</sup> Research from the UK, US and Canada support his assertion.

In the US, research as shown that LBGT young people make up as much as 40% of the homeless youth population.<sup>7</sup> Research from Canada points to similar prevalence levels, with between 25% and 40% of the homeless youth population identifying as LBGTQ.<sup>8</sup> Research conducted by the Albert Kennedy Trust in the UK has estimated that LBGT young people made up 24% of the homeless youth population.<sup>9</sup> It’s worth noting that the slightly lower rate UK rate may be attributable to the research methodology, which involved asking service providers to estimate the percentage of LBGT young people they work with. The US and Canadian reports used self-reported data.

## Data Collection

At present, no data in relation to sexual orientation or gender identification is recorded by service providers. While these matters should not impact on service provision, the lack of data makes it difficult to fully understand the scale of the issue. The Department must consider whether improved data collection processes should be introduced. This lack of data collection also means that young LBGT people are relatively invisible to most housing and homelessness services and staff may lack awareness of the issue.

## Research

There have been no research studies which examine the needs of this subgroup in Ireland. Focus Ireland believes that it is timely to address this gap. The LBGTI Youth Strategy should

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Dr Geoffrey Shannon, Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Health and Children, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2013

<sup>7</sup> Durso & Gates, *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*, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Abramovich, *No Safe Place to Go: LBGTQ Youth Homelessness in Canada*, 2012

<sup>9</sup> The Albert Kennedy Trust, *LBGT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response and Outcome*, 2015

commit to funding a comprehensive research project. This should involve a qualitative study with LGBT young people, capturing their experiences, opinions and perspectives of their homelessness and their interaction with services. In addition, service providers could also be interviewed to determine their understanding of the cohort's needs. Any research produced should include related recommendations.

In order to reach young LGBT people with experiences of homelessness, it is likely that the proposed research study would have to involve collaboration between homeless, youth and LGBT organisations. Focus Ireland has attempted to obtain grant funding for similar research in the past, but has been unsuccessful. We would be happy to meet with the Department to discuss our research proposal in more detail.

## Services

Focus Ireland advocates for person-centred service provision for young people. While we recognise that young people's experience of homelessness can largely mirror that of older adults, young people have specific needs which must be considered in service provision. More fundamentally, young LGBT people must feel safe in accessing services, and must be certain that providers will work to tackle discrimination.

## Preventative Services

The best way to end youth homelessness is to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place. Focus Ireland advocates for a preventative emphasis across services, but this becomes even more important when we consider the impact that periods of homelessness can have on young people.

A number of the international research studies cited above considered the pathways of young LGBT people into homelessness. In the Albert Kennedy Trust report, 69% of young LGBT people reported that parental rejection was a reason for their homelessness.<sup>10</sup> In the US study, above, 46% of respondents stated that they 'ran away because of family rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity'. 43% stated that they were 'forced out by parents because of sexual orientation or gender identity'.<sup>11</sup>

The Department should consider funding a family mediation service to support young LGBT individuals and their parents or carers. Focus Ireland developed a Family Mediation service on foot of a recommendation in research conducted by Mayock, Parker & Murphy.<sup>12</sup> The study into youth homelessness found that family breakdown featured heavily in participants'

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<sup>10</sup> The Albert Kennedy Trust, LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response and Outcome, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Durso & Gates, 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, 2012

<sup>12</sup> Mayock, Parker & Murphy, Young People, Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, 2014

pathways into homelessness. Focus Ireland is currently using external funding to provide this service, which is positively impacting young people and their families. A similar model could be used to develop a preventative service for young LGBT people at risk of homelessness.

### **Emergency Accommodation**

Young people over the age of 18 who are homeless in Ireland are placed in adult emergency accommodation. There are very few specialist youth hostels; the vast majority are forced to reside in adult hostels. In Canada, literature on the topic shows that “LGBTQ youth are avoiding support services and shelters due to the ongoing violence and discrimination they are subjected to, which suggests that it is homophobia and transphobia that is segregating youth from much needed homeless services”<sup>13</sup>. Transgender young people face particular discrimination and may avoid emergency accommodation for this reason.<sup>14</sup>

If these findings are mirrored in the Irish experience, service providers must examine their anti-discrimination policies and must ensure that services represent a safe place for LGBTI youth. The Department of Housing previously developed guidance for housing authorities in assisting victims of domestic violence. DCYA should consider whether similar guidance could be developed for service providers in supporting LGBT young people experiencing homelessness. DCYA should also consider whether staff training is required. It is important however, that the development of any such guidance must be informed by the experiences of young LGBT people themselves.

### **Policy**

The forthcoming LGBTI Youth Strategy is an opportunity for DCYA to develop a policy document which recognises the different dimensions of young people’s lives. In doing so, the Department must be cognisant of the intersectional discrimination faced by LGBT young people experiencing homelessness. In order for young people to thrive, they must have access to stable and secure housing. This is true of all young people and strengthens calls for investment in youth housing and the Housing First for Youth model. While young LGBT people experiencing homelessness may have specific needs, particularly from a preventative perspective, the majority require the same supports that any young person experiencing homelessness requires.

### **Summary Recommendations**

It is worth reiterating that the recommendations in this submission are based on research from other jurisdictions. We do not yet have the evidence base to determine the levels of need and best design of service or policy most needed in Ireland.

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<sup>13</sup> Abramovich, No Safe Place to Go: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Canada, 2012 page 46

<sup>14</sup> Abramovich, “Homeless LGBT youth face discrimination, violence in shelter system”, available at: <http://healthydebate.ca/opinions/homeless-lgbt-youth>

1. DCYA should invest in research aimed at understanding the level and experience of LGBTI youth homelessness. DCYA should consider whether current data collection and documentation methods are sufficient.
2. In light of the above findings, DCYA should review service provision and ensure young LGBTI individuals can safely access housing and homelessness supports.
3. DCYA should assess whether targeted prevention programmes might prevent homelessness for this group and what these programmes should look like. Focus Ireland would welcome the opportunity to discuss our Family Mediation service if the Department feels this would be useful.