

FOCUS IRELAND – CHALLENGING LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS IN COLLABORATION WITH BELONGTO LGBTQI+ YOUTH IRELAND

Independent research into LGBTQI+ Youth homelessness in Ireland identified the need for specific and targeting guidelines on LGBTQI+ and LGBTQI+ youth homelessness services and care. Focus Ireland outlines their development of a training programme for LGBTQI+ homelessness collaboration with the Homeless Network and BelongTo LGBTQI+ Youth Ireland. This includes in systems of prevention, emergency accommodation, and long-term support structures, to be aided by the integration of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness concerns into policy.



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INTRODUCTION

International research has indicated that young people who identify as LGBTQI+ are disproportionately represented amongst young people experiencing homelessness. In the United Kingdom, the Albert Kennedy Trust found that 24% of young homeless people identified as LGBTQI+,¹ while in Canada, 29.5% of young people experiencing homelessness self-identified as LGBTQI+.² In the Irish context, an EU Fundamental Rights Agency survey conducted in 2019 showed that LGBTQI+ Irish people experienced homelessness at a higher rate than the EU average,³ however this survey did not differentiate between the general population experiencing homelessness and the experience of young people. As of July 2020, when this survey was published, there was no research available on LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland.

In September 2020, 'A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland' was published.⁴ This independent research by Prof Michelle Norris and Dr Aideen Quilty, commissioned by Focus Ireland and supported by BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, was the first of its kind in an Irish context - a response to both international research and the experiences of frontline staff highlighting the issue.

In keeping with international research,⁵ the key findings of this report included a synchronous dual set of triggers into youth homelessness; those which effect young people generally, such as household disruption or familial substance abuse, as well as LGBTQI+ specific triggers such as familial relationship breakdown as a result of sexual orientation or gender identity disclosure. Additionally, a number of factors were identified as impeding access to homeless services for LGBTQI+ young people experiencing homelessness. These factors included internalised stigma and shame, and experiences of homophobia or transphobia within emergency sheltered accommodation. The research also addressed barriers to successfully exiting homelessness and underlines the importance of a safe and supportive environment within support services for young LGBTQI+ people's mental health and wellbeing during the journey to find safe, secure, and suitable long-term accommodation.

Upon publication of this report, Focus Ireland Director of Advocacy, Mike Allen, noted that –

"[t]his report is not the end of our work on this issue, but it marks a crucial stage from evidence gathering to action".

1 Albert Kennedy Trust (2015). LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response, and Outcome, UK: Albert Kenny Trust.

2 Gaetz, S, O'Grady, B, Kidd, S and Schwan, K (2016). Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

3 EU Fundamental Rights Agency (2020), Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Brussels: EUFRA.

4 Quilty, A. and Norris, M. (2020) A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

5 Ream, G.L., and Forge, N., (2014). 'Homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in New York City: Insights from the field', Child Welfare, 93 (2) 7-22.



The inclusion of LGBTQI+ within national homelessness policy serves to acknowledge the intersectional nature of homelessness and how it relates to sexuality and gender identity.”

DEVELOPMENT OF LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS TRAINING

The recommendations of this report included that Focus Ireland, along with the Homeless Network (a network of non-profit providers of homeless services in the Dublin region), should identify and commission appropriate specialist training from LGBTQI+ organisations for staff working in the key access points and services. Additionally, it was recommended that the forthcoming Youth Homelessness Strategy, which the current Government committed to developing in its 2020 Programme for Government, should include a ‘homelessness prevention’ pillar with specific reference to the particular risks and pathways into homelessness that LGBTQI+ youth are likely to experience.

These recommendations have directed the work of Focus Ireland on the issue of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness since the report’s publication.

The aforementioned Homeless Network agreed to be the sector-wide champion of this work and established an LGBTQI+ homelessness working group, co-chaired by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland. In 2021, the working group conducted a training needs analysis which involved a survey of 270 staff working in frontline homeless services, as well as focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The results identified four key areas of need for staff; to understand LGBTQI+ terminology; training on LGBTQI+ homelessness to ensure staff have confidence in their practice; to feel supported within their role by senior management; and to develop knowledge on pathways to LGBTQI+ specific support services. These key areas of need informed the development of a specialist training pilot programme by BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland. The pilot training was successfully delivered to both frontline staff and senior management of organisations within the LGBTQI+ homelessness working group in 2022.

The learnings taken from these pilot training sessions informed the development of a programme for LGBTQI+ homelessness training by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, which can facilitate the establishment of a network of LGBTQI+ friendly services across areas such as homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment, the provision of emergency accommodation, and long-term supported accommodation.

ADVOCACY WORK ON LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS

Simultaneously to the development of specialist training in partnership with BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, Focus Ireland strongly advocated for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ homelessness within regional and national homelessness policy since the publication of the report, both as an organisation and as a member of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. The primary focus of this advocacy work was campaigning for a national strategy on youth homelessness.

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ homelessness within national homelessness policy was achieved in the Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023 – 2025 (the first national strategy on youth homelessness since 2001) and launched by the Department of Housing in November 2022. This policy document acknowledged young people who identify as LGBTQI+ as being of heightened vulnerability to homelessness. As well as providing actions which, if implemented and sufficiently resourced, could ensure homeless service providers are capable of addressing the needs of LGBTQI+ young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The inclusion of LGBTQI+ within national homelessness policy serves to acknowledge the intersectional nature of homelessness and how it relates to sexuality and gender identity.

The strategy includes a commitment to provide LGBTQI+ youth homelessness training workshops for service providers across Ireland, which strengthens the position of the programme developed by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and the commitment to implement the recommendations contained within the 2020 report.

THE NEXT STEPS

In 2021 Ireland signed the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, committing to working towards ending homelessness by 2030. For this goal to be achieved, resources must be provided to tackle the pathways towards homelessness experienced by young people, including the unique pathways experienced by LGBTQI+ youth. As noted by Professor Stephen Gaetz at a seminar with Focus Ireland on the Canadian 'A Way Home' model –

“If you are not looking at LGBTQ homelessness you are not dealing with the causes of youth homelessness.”

The research developed on LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland in 2020 highlighted the pathways towards homelessness experienced by LGBTQI+ young people in an Irish context. The training programme developed by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and supported by non-profit providers of homeless services within the Homeless Network, provides the tools to address these pathways. The successful implementation of the LGBTQI+ specific actions contained in Ireland's Youth Homelessness Strategy requires cooperation and collaboration by State bodies and homeless service providers to ensure that LGBTQI+ people at risk of homelessness are supported through inclusive prevention measures, and that those currently experiencing homelessness are supported through their journeys to find safe, secure, and suitable long-term accommodation.