

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



**Belong To Submission to the Consultation on Youth Homelessness
Strategy**

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Contact: Moninne Griffith (Moninne@belongto.org), Matt Kennedy
(Matt@belongto.org)

Introduction

Belong To is the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) young people in Ireland. Since 2003, the organisation has worked with LGBTQ+ young people aged 14-23 years old to create a world where they are equal, safe, and valued in the diversity of their identities and experiences. BeLonG To also advocates and campaigns on behalf of young LGBTQ+ people and offers a specialised LGBTQ+ youth service with a focus on mental and sexual health, alongside drug and alcohol support. BeLonG To responds to the needs of LGBTQ+ young people in Ireland and helps them thrive.

BeLonG To welcomes the commitment by Government to develop a Youth Homelessness Strategy, as articulated in Housing for All as part of the goal of “ending homelessness by 2030”¹ and the whole of government approach taken to address the issue of youth homelessness, which we believe to be essential to an effective Youth Homelessness Strategy. As a member of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, BeLonG To aims in this submission to highlight the shared values, aims, issues and solutions outlined in the coalition submission while also giving specific attention to the additional needs and issues facing LGBTQ+ young people who are effected by homelessness.

Homelessness is a devastating experience that has a significant negative impact on an individual’s physical and mental health, well-being, functioning, human development, and life trajectory. LGBTQ+ youth are significantly overrepresented in homeless populations compared with the general population. In the US, research has shown that LGBTQ+ young people make up as much as 40% of the homeless youth population.² Research from Canada points to similar prevalence levels, with between 25% and 40% of the homeless youth population identifying as LGBTQI+.³ Research conducted by the Albert Kennedy Trust in the UK has estimated that LGBTQ+ young people made up 24% of the homeless youth population.⁴

In 2020, through extensive research Focus Ireland, BeLonG To and University College Dublin, shared the experiences of 22 young LGBTQ+ people who have experienced homelessness in Ireland.⁵ This research demonstrated that parental rejection of LGBTQ+ young people’s sexual orientation and gender identity can be a key trigger in the decision to leave home and can subsequently lead to homelessness. The LGBTQ+ participants also revealed a deeply concerning connection between homelessness and mental health problems as well as complex experiences of stigma and shame. The report identified a high degree of fear and anxiety among the young people when engaging with homeless

¹ Government of Ireland (2021) ‘Housing for All: A new Housing Plan for Ireland’ available at: gov.ie - *Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland* (www.gov.ie) p54.

² 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: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund.

³ Abramovich, A. (2012) ‘No Safe Place to Go - LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Canada: Reviewing the Literature’, *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, 4, pp. 29-51.

⁴ The Albert Kennedy Trust (2015), *LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response and Outcome*.

⁵ Quilty, A. & Norris, M (2020) *A Qualitative Study of LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland*. Dublin: Focus Ireland, BeLonG To Youth Services.

services. The majority of 22 young people interviewed were unwilling to enter a space, such as a hostel, where they feared that they would encounter a lack of understanding or blatant homophobic and transphobic attitudes among both other service users and staff. The young people interviewed expressed a dual process of self-imposed silencing and secrecy in relation to their LGBTQ+ identity and homelessness experiences. This 'double closet' is instructive for the greater understanding of the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ youth.

The main findings in the report include the following:

- Young people who are LGBTQ+ not only experience all the interpersonal, familial and intrapersonal problems of the young population-at-large (including leaving care, family breakdown and the shortage of affordable accommodation) but also have a range of other challenges associated with their sexuality and gender identity. In particular, the complex experiences relating to coming out and/or transitioning create an increased risk of homelessness and vulnerability within homelessness.
- The young people's stories and experiences captured in the research also highlighted the sobering reality that – despite significant progress in Ireland – homophobia and transphobia persist.
- Many young LGBTQ+ people without a home, avoid homeless services and live in a precarious world of 'sofa surfing' with friends and acquaintances.
- Many of the participants were still in precarious accommodation or formal homelessness but these young people still showed exceptional levels of resilience through a range of agentic strategies.

In addition to this qualitative report, research conducted by BeLonG To on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth during the COVID-19 pandemic⁶ found that 56% of LGBTQ+ young people said they are not fully accepted in their home environment. During the pandemic, many LGBTQ+ young people were spending their days confined to homes that were unsupportive of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The relationship between LGBTQ+ young people, their home environment, and those they are living with is complex. In analysing the responses, it emerged that many young people who felt somewhat accepted in their home environment had made a conscious decision not to come out as LGBTQ+ at home. This was often due to uncertainty of how their family would respond or based on a pre-existing knowledge that their family is unaccepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Many young people stated that while their family accepted their sexuality, they were unaccepting of their gender identity/expression. This demonstrates the ongoing challenges LGBTQ+ young people face in gaining acceptance from their families, particularly if they have a gender identity/expression that is not cisgender. This research highlighted the ways in which unaccepting home environments and a lack of familial acceptance affect the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth and make them vulnerable to homelessness.

In light of the emergent qualitative research on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Ireland, we sought to capture the experiences of young people affected by homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research in 2021 found that 6% of young people who responded to the survey had experienced some form of

⁶ BeLonG To Youth Service (2021) *LGBTI+ Lives in Lockdown- One Year Later: A Survey For LGBTI+ Youth About The Impact Of COVID-19 Restrictions*. Research Report

homelessness⁷. Of the 119 LGBTQ+ young people who had experienced homelessness in the last year:

- 34% were forced to stay with friends that they would not usually live with due to being forced to leave their homes as a result of the LGBTQ+ identity or following an experience of domestic abuse.
- 32% were forced to stay with family that they would not usually live with. 14% were forced to stay in temporary accommodation e.g., hotel or Airbnb.
- 8% were forced to stay in emergency accommodation and/or a family hub.
- 13% were forced to sleep outdoors.

For some LGBTQ+ young people who experienced homelessness, this occurred as a result of being forced out of home by family members who did not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. For others, it was a result of financial instability.

As our recent qualitative study on LGBTQ+ homelessness with Focus Ireland and University College Dublin indicates many homelessness services, supports, and spaces are not safe, nor do they provide adequately for the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. This finding resonates with international research as a report based on a survey by ILGA-Europe in association with the LGBTIQ Youth Homelessness organisation True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender (SCSG) at Hunter College points to a large prevalence of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness across Europe, with over 60% of LGBTQ+ organisations surveyed saying they have worked with young people who have experienced homelessness while homeless services lack the skills and competencies to provide safe and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ people.⁸

A comparative report from the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) also finds that nearly three-quarters (72%) of respondents indicated that no national policy exists specifically addressing the issue of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and over half of respondents (59%) reported a lack of governmental support for programmes that focus on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, including nearly half (47%) reporting a lack of funding support for such programmes.⁹

The ILGA-Europe survey finds that the most prevalent cause for LGBTQ+ youth homelessness is identity-related family conflict, as reported by 71%, while lack of institutional support and social rejection are reported by 44% as a major cause.

⁷ BeLonG To Youth Service (2021) *LGBTI+ Lives in Lockdown- One Year Later: A Survey For LGBTI+ Youth About The Impact Of COVID-19 Restrictions*. Research Report

⁸ Shelton, J., Ritosa, A., Van Roozendaal, B., Hugendubel, K. & Dodd, S.J. (2021). *Perceptions: Addressing LGBTI Youth Homelessness in Europe and Central Asia - Findings from a Survey of LGBTI Organisations*. ILGA-Europe, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College

⁹ Ritosa, A., Shelton, J., Stakelum, R., Van Roozendaal, B., Hugendubel, K. & Dodd, S.J. (2021). *Perceptions: Comparative findings from a study of homeless service providers and LGBTI-focused organisations about LGBTIQ youth homelessness in Europe*. FEANTSA, ILGA-Europe, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College.

Recommendations

Based on the overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth within youth homelessness, the specific triggers experienced by LGBTQ+ youth which lead them into homelessness and international research, BeLonG To makes the following recommendations to the new Youth Homelessness Strategy.

Preventing Homelessness Among LGBTQ+ Young People

1. The 'Youth Homelessness Strategy', committed to in the Programme for Government should include a 'homelessness prevention' pillar with specific reference to the particular risks and pathways into homelessness which LGBTQ+ youth are likely to experience. The Strategy should put in place educational, family and youth service supports to help prevent homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth.
2. This youth homelessness preventative pillar should consider and include measures to mitigate against the role of conflict and rejection by parents and caregivers regarding emerging LGBTQ+ identities in young people's departure from home and thereby their homelessness.
3. The Strategy should provide increased funding to extend the lifetime of the existing Youth Homeless Prevention Mediations Service. Existing homelessness services should ensure that specialist training is provided for its mediation workers related to supporting families where a child or young adult is LGBTQ+ or is exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.
4. The Strategy should also address the specific challenges which may face LGBTQ+ children in foster care and residential care.
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 LGBTQ+ youth.

Health

6. 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 LGBTQ+ homeless youth.

Emergency Accommodation

7. The Strategy should ensure the development of privacy and safety strategies for young LGBTQ+ people using emergency accommodation, informed directly by LGBTQ+ youth, which could be implemented by the homeless service providers.
8. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage should facilitate homelessness services in collaboration with LGBTQ+ organisations to further research the international evidence on the impact of dedicated LGBTQ+ emergency accommodation within homeless services.

Data and Measurement

9. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 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 LGBTQ+ youth. All data collection decisions should be informed by GDPR protocols, international best practices, the experiences of homeless service providers and should consider and evaluate the purposes to which the data will be put.
10. The review group should consider initiating a pilot data-gathering project using PASS, building on the learning from the review process, with a sample of frontline services.

For further information regarding this submission please contact:

Moninne Griffith
CEO
BeLonG To Youth Services
Moninne@belongto.org

Matt Kennedy
Policy and Research Officer
BeLonG To Youth Services
Matt@belongto.org