



Simon Communities of Ireland

Submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Introduction

The Simon Communities of Ireland (SCI) would like to thank the Committee for their invitation to present today.

Youth Homelessness is a key concern for the Simon Communities in Ireland (SCI). For decades Simon services have worked directly with young people experiencing – or at risk of – homelessness. This work happens through street outreach, emergency accommodation, homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment, resettlement, as well as youth specific service provisions.

SCI are a member of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness and also sit on the National Homeless Action Team (NHAC). In these roles we have ongoing collaborative dialogue with the Department of Housing in the development of the upcoming Youth Homelessness Strategy.

In this briefing, the Simon Communities will highlight two cohorts of young people vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness:

1. Young People leaving State Care, and;
2. Young People who experienced household disruption or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), but did not officially enter Care.

We bring this discussion to the Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, as we believe that there is the potential to eradicate the experience of homelessness for hundreds of young people falling into these groups each year through targeted intervention and collaboration.

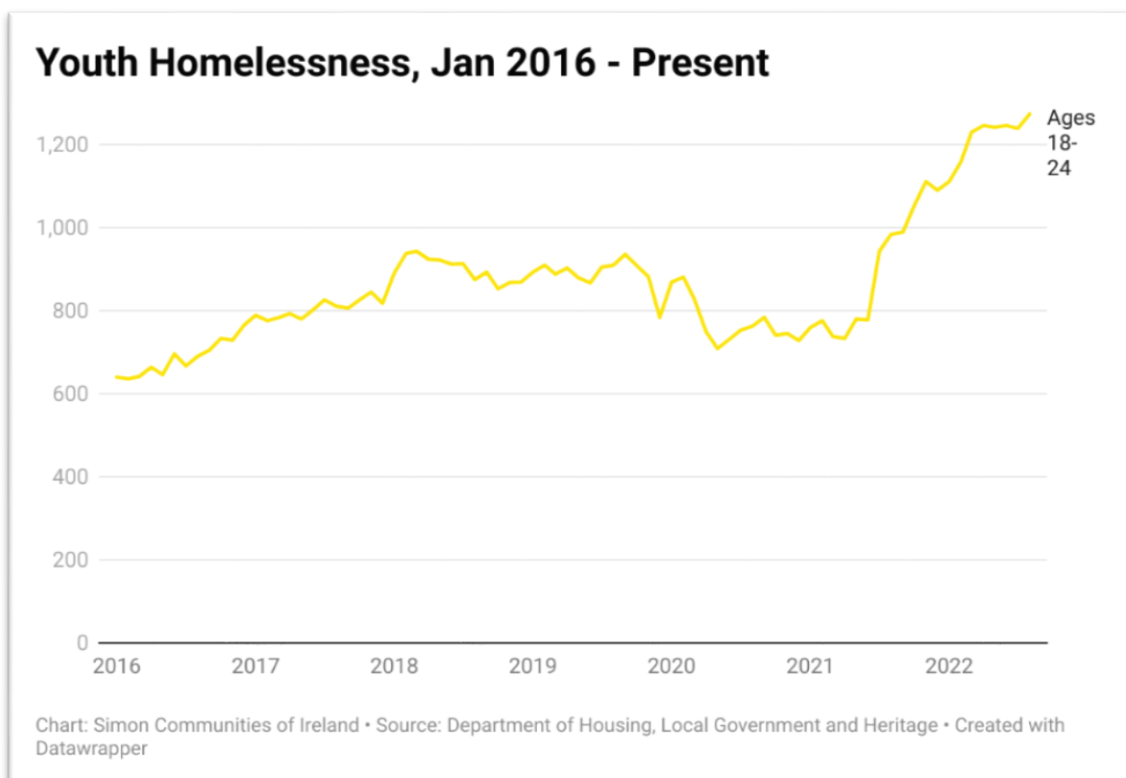
Youth is a time of self-discovery, growth, and development; the absence of safe, secure housing can have a deeply damaging effect during this critical time in life. Tackling homelessness for young people is not just about providing a roof over their head; it is about ensuring a compassionate transition from childhood, to teenage years, and into adulthood. These transitions require support to ensure healthy cognitive, social, and economic development.

The housing market is difficult to navigate for young people who are more likely to have a lower income. Young people who do enter the housing market are most likely to do so through the private rental market.¹ Rising rents, a low housing stock and few long-term renting options makes affordable, secure housing difficult to find. This is compounded for young people who do not have access to positive or supportive social networks or financial family support to fill their housing needs which can often be the case with children coming from care or who experienced household disruption as a child.

Without secure, safe housing, it can be difficult to address the support needs of our more vulnerable young people which in turn can compound disadvantage.

Overview of Youth Homelessness

As members of the committee are aware, 2022 has shown a continuing and deeply worrying upward trend in the number of people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. The most recent figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage revealed that there are 10,805 people living in emergency homeless accommodation; this is the highest number ever recorded by the Department.



The housing situation of too many people is insecure, due to rising rents in an already unaffordable private rental market and the impact of the growing cost of living crisis. The rise of youth

¹ Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp1hii/cp1hii/tr/>

homelessness is of particular concern to the Simon Communities. In the last week of August², 1,274 young people aged 18-24 were recorded as living in emergency homeless accommodation. This figure represents a 29.5% increase in Youth Homelessness year on year from August 2021, where 984 people aged between 18-24 recorded as living in emergency accommodation.

1,274 is a record high number of young people living in emergency homeless accommodation.

Hidden Homelessness

Young People are also more vulnerable to hidden homelessness than older age groups. At present, those counted as homeless in official figures only include those living in emergency accommodation funded through Section 10 of the Housing Act. In truth, homelessness often begins long before a person requires emergency accommodation. Hidden homelessness includes those couch surfing, living in overcrowded or unsafe accommodation, sleeping in cars, squatting, or living in domestic abuse refuges. It can be categorised as something unintended or forced.

SCI recently conducted a Red C Research poll looking at the extent of Hidden Homelessness in Ireland.³ 12% of young people who participated in the poll had directly experienced homelessness in the last year, compared to 8% of 25-34 year olds, and 5% of 35-54 year olds. Those aged 55+ had not experienced this at all in the twelve months prior.

Addressing and understanding ‘hidden’ homelessness is central to tackling homelessness for our young people. A six-year Irish study showed that young people trying to exit homelessness ‘demonstrated enormous determination in their attempts to sustain housing and took specific steps to avert a return to homelessness. It is significant that their strategies and actions included efforts to avoid homeless hostels, settings which most perceived as undesirable and stigmatising’.⁴

Young People Who Experienced Household Disruption in Childhood

While developing submission to NHAC – and in subsequent conversations with stakeholders and officials within the Department of Housing – it became clear that young people who experienced household disruption as a child or teenager, but never officially entered the care system, were often marginalised or even forgotten in the discussions around youth homelessness.

Young people who were officially taken into the care of the State are an identifiable population to whom, housing supports and homeless prevention assessments can be targeted. However, there is an additional cohort of young people who experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) at some point in their youth, but were not taken into the care of the State. Included in this cohort are young people who became known to Tusla due to welfare concerns – likely because they experienced family breakdown as a late teenager – but did not officially enter care possible because they ‘aged out’, or circumstances at the time were not deemed to be at a level of risk that warranted significant intervention. This can include those who experienced abuse within childhood, who were surrounded by addiction, or who experienced family breakdown in their late teens.

ACEs have a documented long-term effect. In Ireland, there is a recorded high prevalence of ACE’s among early school leavers (ESLs), as well as the increasing levels of marginalisation, socioemotional,

² Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>

³ Available at: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/hidden-homelessness/>

⁴ Available at: <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Young-Peoples-Homeless-and-Housing-Pathways.pdf>

mental health and behavioural difficulties.⁵ A 2021 Canadian study found that the lifetime prevalence of ACEs is substantially higher among homeless adults than among the general population, and ACE exposure might be associated with prevalence of mental illness, substance misuse, and victimisation.⁶

The concern here is that this group is – to a certain extent – considered to be unknown or ‘invisible’. There is little to no research on the group, and there appears to be less awareness of their needs, which we fear is compounding the issue. However, the Simon Communities are encountering these young people nearly every day, particularly in our dedicated Youth Service in Galway Simon. Here, while two-thirds of young people receiving housing support have come from a care background; the remaining third fall into this category of young people that ‘aged out’ of the system before they could receive meaningful supports.

These young people often require just as much support as care-leavers, but they are falling through the cracks in our social support system making them vulnerable to homelessness, poverty, and educational disadvantage:

- These young people do not have access to social support similar to that provided those in aftercare (which prepares young people for the transition into adult life with tailored supports);
- They often receive a lower social welfare rate which compounds their experience of poverty and can trap them in homelessness;
- We fear that they will end up in hidden homelessness situations as they do not have the support to navigate or afford the housing market;
- They are not entitled to housing support or targeted homelessness prevention such as CAS for care leavers;
- They are not entitled to educational supports for children in care and aftercare such as the Tusla and DCEDIY Bursary Scheme to young adults aged between 18 and 30 who have had a care experience of at least 6 months.

About the Galway Simon Dedicated Youth Service

The Simon Communities across the country work with young people every day who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. We have found that a partnership approach is critically important. A multi-agency partnership that exists between Galway Simon, Galway City Council and Túsla – to ensure youth services are well informed and young people are well supported – is proving effective in the outcomes that it is having for young people. In particular we are seeing increased rates of employment in the group. There is further potential in this model if appropriate housing can be sourced. We acknowledge that this might look different in other areas where working relationships differ, but the core principle of a dedicated partnership service has proven very effective.

Policy Recommendations

The upcoming Youth Homelessness strategy appears firm that it will focus on young people after the age of 18. However, for vulnerable young people, the threat of homelessness and housing security

⁵ *Adverse childhood experiences and trauma informed practices in second chance education settings in the Republic of Ireland: An inquiry-based study*, 2020. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105338>

⁶ *Adverse childhood experiences and related outcomes among adults experiencing homelessness: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, 2021. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00189-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00189-4)

begins well before their 18th birthday. The Simon Communities believe that Tusla has a central part to play to ensure this group have access to timely and meaningful supports that can prevent homelessness within this group. Early homeless interventions provided by Tusla to young people under the age of 18 have to date failed to prevent homelessness for a significant cohort of these children and more effective strategies need to be developed. The learnings from the development of new homelessness prevention strategies for care leavers should in turn inform the provision of additional supports for other children at risk of homelessness outside of the care system. This will not only prevent homelessness in the short term, but also support a young person to find a path that is less likely to see cyclical and entrenched homelessness over the course of their lives.

The Simon Communities ask that the Committee on Children, Disability, Equality and Integration work with Tusla to better identify these young people and ensure homeless prevention support is provided in a timely manner. The Simon Community are happy to support the Committee in tackling this issue in whatever way we can. Through a coordinated, universal response, policy measures can be developed and implemented to protect this group from homelessness and housing insecurity as they enter adulthood.

- **Key Worker:** Key workers within Tusla can provide support into early adulthood including homeless prevention provision, information and support to provide skills needed to live independently. Given the known connection between adverse childhood experiences and issues later in life (such as educational disadvantage, homelessness, and social exclusion), additional care and life supports need to be made available to vulnerable young people who have not entered the care system.
- **CAS:** Existing homeless prevention policies such as CAS for care leavers needs to expand and adapt to be more inclusive of all young people at risk of homelessness, especially those who endured welfare issues as a child. This is a housing-led response that has the potential to eradicate the threat of homelessness for many vulnerable young people. (The need to expand CAS is reiterated below).
- **Improved Social Welfare:** Following updates from Budget 2023, young people under the age of 25 are still subjected to a lower social welfare rate of €117.70. While some categories of young people have been included in the higher social welfare rate, this particular ‘welfare’ group are not. This compounds their risk of poverty and homelessness.
- **Increased Collaboration:** Galway Simon’s Dedicated Youth Service is a prime example of successful collaboration between a range of stakeholders achieving a common goal; to support young people out of homelessness. SCI see value and potential in this model and wish to work with the Committee and other agencies to promote and extend this type of collaborative work.

Reforms for Young People Leaving Care.

It is well document that young people leaving the care system are at a heightened risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. As reported by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, approximately 500 young people leave care every year upon reaching 18 years of age⁷; a difficult age for anyone to face into the housing market alone. According to the most recent Tusla Annual Report, 2,943 young people were being supported through aftercare services at the end of 2020⁸.

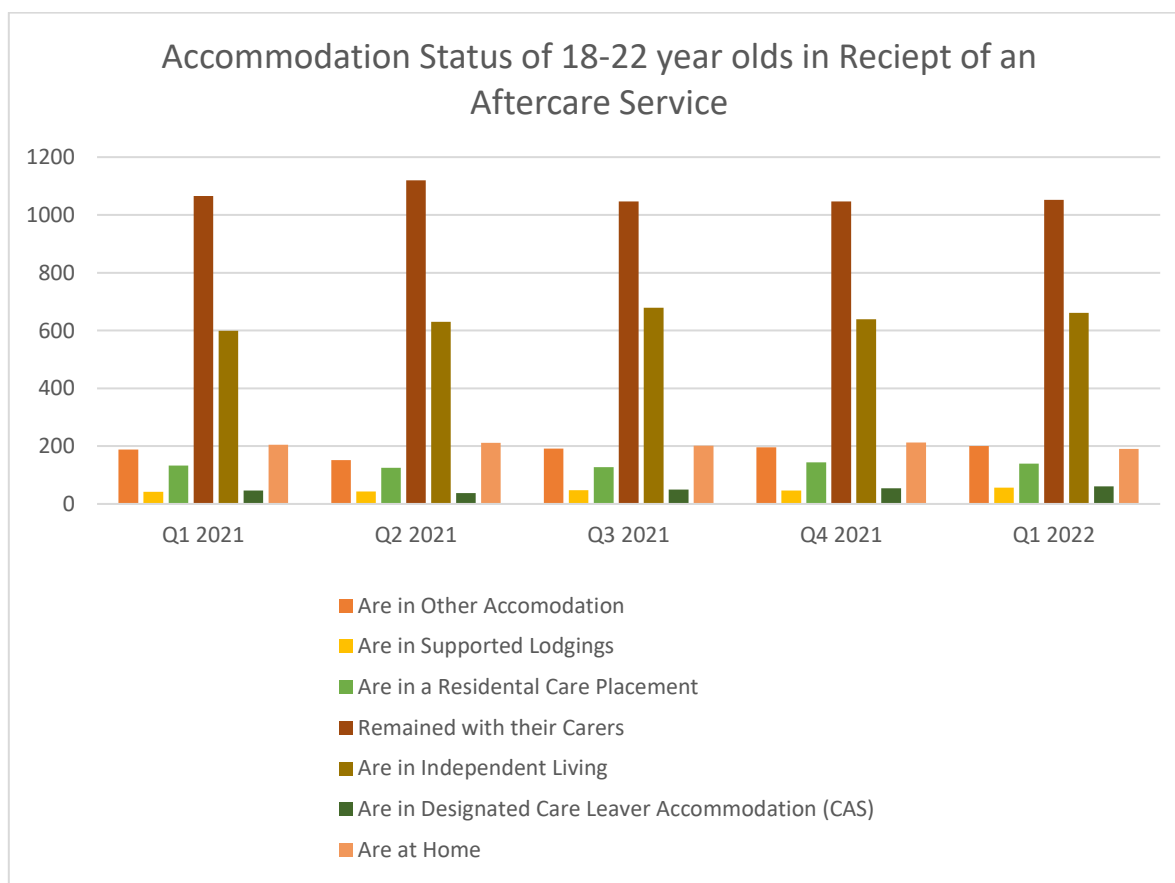
⁷ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d7c8d-minister-ogorman-launches-largest-ever-examination-of-the-lives-of-children-in-care-and-adults-who-were-in-care-as-children/>

⁸ Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/TUSLA_English_Annual_Report_Spreads.pdf

Countless studies and research shows that young people leaving the care system face a heightened risk of homelessness. The non-profit group Empowering People in Care (EPIC) in their most recent advocacy report shows that finding suitable accommodation to meet their needs was one of the greatest difficulties for young people with a care background, with 14% of cases living in homeless emergency accommodation.⁹ A UK study reported that 14% of care leavers became homeless, while a total of 26% had experienced periods of hidden homelessness including couch surfing.¹⁰

This is extremely concerning. Homelessness and housing insecurity is a known risk for care leavers, yet they continue to fall through the gaps and remain over-represented in homelessness.

Homes provided for Care Leavers can be funded through the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS); a welcome housing innovation but it needs to expand to ensure at least 14% of care leavers can be housed through the scheme. At present, only 48 (or 2%) of 18 to 22 year olds accessing aftercare services are accommodated through CAS.¹¹ At the same time, an average of 9% of young people are living in ‘other’ accommodation. While not officially defined within Tusla, this includes homeless accommodation and institutionalised settings such as prison. Not included here are the young people who have left State Care and who have no aftercare support. Their accommodation status is largely unknown.



⁹ Available at: <https://www.epiconline.ie/epic-advocacy-report-2020/>

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/care-where-care-leavers%E2%80%99-accessaccommodation>

¹¹ Available at: <https://datacatalog.tusla.ie/metric/961>

Housing for All commits to ‘provide capital funding for further development of housing for the specific vulnerable cohorts eligible for CAS funding’.¹² Considering 14% of young people require housing support upon leaving care, the number of properties available for young people coming from the Care System needs to be increased as a priority to ensure there is sufficient supply to house new care leavers at risk of homelessness each year. This can only be achieved through collaboration and support from the Department of Children and relevant agencies including Tusla.

More robust reporting and data in this area could help keep young people coming from care out of homeless services by ensuring sufficient resources are available to meet demand. Robust data on the connection between homelessness, housing insecurity, and care leavers would mean it would be possible to determine the number of housing units required and the type of support needed to sustain these tenancies each year. The announcement from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the research and data project to examine the lives of children in care and adults who were in care as children is welcome.¹³ However, to date, there has been no reference that housing and homelessness will be a consideration. Housing status and homelessness data for this group needs to be considered and prioritised as part of this research and all data collected on care leavers.

Policy Recommendations

Expand CAS: SCI believe that there is potential for CAS to be expanded both in terms of eligibility and also in terms of ambition. In our pre-budget submission, SCI called for an additional 70 one-bed properties to be delivered through CAS in 2023 to support new young people in need of this vital housing support.¹⁴

Increased Reporting on Homeless Status of Young People in receipt of Aftercare Experiencing Homelessness: Expansion and greater detail of the ‘Other Accommodation’ category would help us to improve our understanding of young people coming from Care in Homelessness and thus ensure the right resources are available to stop homelessness for this group.

¹² Housing for All Housing Policy Objective 10.1

¹³ Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c30a0-research-data-project-on-children-in-care-adults-who-were-in-care-as-children/>

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/pre-budget-submission-2023/>