

BRIEFING NOTE

A REVIEW (2013) OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

JULY 2013

1. Purpose of the report

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) asked the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to conduct a high-level review of the implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy, published by the Department of Health and Children in 2001. The purpose of the review was to establish the extent to which the strategy has been successful, to identify challenges to its implementation and to make recommendations for future action.

The goal of the Youth Homelessness Strategy was ‘to reduce and if possible eliminate youth homelessness through preventative strategies and where a child becomes homeless to ensure that he or she benefits from a comprehensive range of services aimed at re-integrating him/her into his/her community as quickly as possible’.

The 2001 Strategy defined youth homelessness as: ‘Those who are sleeping on the streets or in other places not intended for night-time accommodation or not providing safe protection from the elements or those whose usual night-time residence is a public or private shelter, emergency lodging, B&B or such, providing protection from the elements but lacking the other characteristics of a home and/or intended only for a short stay.’

2. How was the review undertaken

The reviewers examined documentation and up-to-date information on service demand and provision; held interviews with a selection of stakeholders and service users; conducted a web-based survey; and held a workshop with stakeholders to validate findings.

3. Key findings from the review

- The Youth Homelessness Strategy was found to have made a significant contribution to addressing the problem of youth homelessness and has helped ensure that children sleeping rough on the streets is very rare. **The number of children and young people seeking services due to being homeless or at risk of homelessness has diminished** over the course of the strategy.
- The strategy has successfully facilitated **considerable improvements in accommodation options and services** to support children experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness.
- Investment and improvements in **family support, child protection and welfare services, residential and foster care for children in care, and youth services** have made a positive impact on the experience of children presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Children who present to services as homeless or at risk of homelessness are **now generally assessed and provided with services** on the same basis as children who present with protection and welfare concerns.

- Reviewers were hampered by the breadth of the **definition of youth homelessness** and **inadequate information systems** for monitoring youth homelessness.
- Stakeholders said that the 2001 strategy had identified **too many actions**, none of which were prioritised.
- Access to **mental health and intellectual disability services** for children in crisis or out-of-home remains problematic in some areas.
- Good examples of **interagency working** were found, but there remains a need for considerable improvement.
- Improvements are needed to support children in emergency settings to **continue engagement with education**.
- While considerable improvements have been made in the range and quality of accommodation supports for children, **deficits remain in some areas and a lack of flexibility**. Emergency residential hostels for children should be open throughout the day.
- The **needs of minority groups**, such as Travellers, ethnic groups and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth, need to be better understood in relation to homelessness.
- Accessing services through Garda stations, as the first port of call for first-time users, is **inappropriate and intimidating** for many children.
- Stakeholders said that **service responses** for children aged 16-18 need renewed attention.
- Managing the **transition between children and adult services** needs to be improved across a range of agencies.
- Young people **aged between 18 and 25** were identified by stakeholders as **needing additional support**.

4. Messages from the consultation with stakeholders on 'what works'

- **An integrated multi-agency approach** to meeting the needs of vulnerable or at-risk children.
- **An emphasis on prevention and early intervention**, which facilitates **an early exit from homelessness** where it does occur.
- **Flexible responses** in terms of accommodation and services to meeting local needs.
- **A planned and coherent transition into productive adulthood** and a managed transition into adult services if required.
- **High-quality aftercare support** based on assessed needs.
- **Reliable and meaningful data** to underpin service management and monitoring.
- **A change of term from 'homelessness' to 'out-of-home'** to more accurately describe children and young people's situations.

5. Overall conclusion

The review found that homelessness for children is rarely an isolated need and the reasons for it are complex. Outcomes for children who are out-of-home have improved over the last decade. More children are dealt with by way of prevention services or, if out-of-home, by better care services.

To ensure these improvements are sustained, services need to be based on high-quality and timely assessments of need and the provision of services and accommodation options to meet those needs. To support good, long-term outcomes for children who are out-of-home involves a planned and supported transition to adult services as appropriate to their needs.

In light of the changes over the past decade, the reviewers recommend that the needs of children who are out-of-home, or at risk of being out-of-home, are addressed equitably as part of the broader child protection and welfare response to any children in need.

6. Recommendations

The overarching recommendations that emerged from the review cover improving services for vulnerable children in relation to welfare, protection and risk of homelessness. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is to lead the implementation of the recommendations across relevant Government departments.

1. Governance and supporting effective multi-agency working

- 1.1 The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) should be the lead Department in relation to the implementation of these recommendations as part of a planned engagement with the Departments of Health; Environment, Community, and Local Government; Education and Skills; Justice and Equality; and Social Protection; as well as the Health Service Executive (HSE), HSE Children and Family Services and the voluntary and community sector.
- 1.2 The DCYA should monitor the implementation of these recommendations.
- 1.3 Emerging Children's Services Committees should be tasked with supporting integrated and comprehensive service responses at a local level. Where there are existing effective local interagency groups addressing youth homelessness, they should integrate with working groups for children at risk under the Children's Services Committees.
- 1.4 HSE Children and Family Services should ensure that there is planned and proactive engagement and linkage with relevant services outside of its own remit so that children receive integrated service responses and therefore achieve the best possible outcomes.

2. Emergency and follow-on accommodation review

- 2.1 The use of Garda stations at night by children accessing emergency accommodation for the first time should be stopped. HSE Children and Family Services should be tasked with developing alternative responses wherever practical.
- 2.2 HSE Children and Family Services should ensure that emergency residential accommodation in Dublin remains open to children throughout the day.

3. Meeting the needs of older adolescents

- 3.1 HSE Children and Family Services should plan prevention and early intervention services where they are required to support at-risk children in the 16-18 age group.
- 3.2 HSE Children and Family Services should continue to monitor the use of Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 as a way of providing support to children who are 16 and 17 years of age.
- 3.3 The DCYA should engage with other Government departments to ensure integrated services across key agencies in terms of service plan development and operational policy.

4. Continued support

- 4.1 As set out in the current National Aftercare Policy, the assessment for aftercare services and provision of services should apply to children who have been supported by HSE Children and Family Services under Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991.
- 4.2 All children (under 18 years of age) who are discharged from a detention school or prison should have an assessment of their aftercare needs undertaken and, where appropriate, an aftercare plan should be agreed with HSE Children and Family Services.

5. Education

- 5.1 Children who are out-of-home and at risk of dropping out of, or being suspended from, school should be flagged for particular attention by HSE Children and Family Services and Educational Welfare systems. Every effort should be made to ensure that those who are in temporary accommodation are assisted in attending school.
- 5.2 The DCYA should engage with the HSE and the Department of Education and Skills to address any unintended barriers to participation in third-level education by young adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, particularly those who are looking to re-enter education.

6. Transition to adult services

- 6.1 The DCYA should identify service implementation issues with HSE Children and Family Services and engage with other Government departments with responsibility for mental health services, education, disability, addictions and accommodation in relation to children who are in aftercare and with those who are in need of ongoing support as guided by the assessment of need by HSE Children and Family Services in transitioning to adult services.
- 6.2 The DCYA, in developing the new National Children and Young People's Policy Framework, should engage with other relevant Government departments to ensure that youth homelessness and the specific needs of 16-23 year-olds are addressed.

7. Information and evaluation

- 7.1 HSE Children and Family Services should provide clear information about services for vulnerable and at-risk children through its website and other available information outlets. This information should include responses for practitioners and the voluntary and community sector about children at risk of being out-of-home.
- 7.2 The DCYA should decide on revised definitions for 'youth homelessness' in consultation with relevant statutory and voluntary agencies.
- 7.3 The DCYA should continue to support building and expanding the evidence base on successful responses to taking action on or preventing youth homelessness within an overall context of achieving good outcomes for children.

Comments from young people looking back on their experiences

"As tough as it was for me to stay in education while going through all of this, somehow I done it, but it wasn't easy, and I can see how youths will drop out of education ... because all you're worried about is your next meal."

"Our voices should be heard."

"I've just struggled because I don't fit into any of the boxes and it's been my biggest struggle up until this day ... My brothers and myself just totally avoided care because when you're younger you're just told bad stories about care ... I always say to myself to this day when I'm filling out forms, why did I not go into care because it would have been almost easier for me."

A full copy of *Every Child a Home: A Review of the Implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy*, is available at: www.dcy.gov.ie or www.effectiveservices.org