

**Submission  
No 63**

**OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE  
ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE**

**Organisation:** Yfoundations

**Date Received:** 13 August 2021

**Yfoundations Submission**  
**Inquiry into options to improve access to  
existing and alternate accommodation to  
address the social housing shortage**

August 2021



## About us

For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the New South Wales (NSW) peak body representing children and young people affected by homelessness, as well as the services that support them. Our membership and board are primarily made up of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) and Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) providers, who have a wealth of knowledge about the issues facing homeless youth in our state.

Our approach focuses on five foundations:



**Safety and  
Stability**



**Home and  
Place**



**Health and  
Wellness**



**Connections and  
Participation**



**Education and  
Employment**

We believe all five foundations must be present for young people to flourish and have meaningful lives.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our member services and our Youth Homelessness Representative Council members for their time and contributions to this submission. We would also like to thank Youth Action for their input and support. We acknowledge that this submission was produced on the land of the Gadigal and Bidjigal peoples. We acknowledge that sovereignty in these lands, and all Aboriginal land across New South Wales, was never ceded.

## Definitions

**Social housing:** Rental housing which is provided by either non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or government bodies, aimed at assisting people who are unable to access suitable accommodation in the private rental market. Social housing includes public housing, community housing and Aboriginal-owned or managed housing, as well as other services and products. Eligibility for social housing in Australia is restricted to citizens or permanent residents (DCJ, 2021). In general, principle social housing tenants are over the age of 18, however, some social housing programs accept young people aged 16 and above (DCJ, 2021).

**Meanwhile use:** Refers to vacant property or land which is temporarily used for social or economic gain, until it is returned for commercial use.

**Children and young people:** In line with the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1999 and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare guidelines (2007), this submission considers those under the age of 16 as “children,” and those between the ages of 16 and 24 as “young people.”

**Specialist homelessness service (SHS):** The NSW Government funds SHS providers to deliver crisis accommodation (refuges), transitional accommodation and case support to people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. In this submission, we will use ‘SHS provider’ to refer to NGOs who are funded to deliver a range of packages under the SHS program. This includes crisis and transitional accommodation, case support, Youth Foyer and the Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP).



# Summary of recommendations

Recommendations to address the NSW social housing shortage and its impacts on young people

1

The NSW Government must commit to building at least 5,000 new social housing properties per year for the next ten years, including new youth-specific social housing which is tailored to meet the needs of young people.

2

The NSW Government must expand and evaluate the Transitional Housing Plus (THP) program, while also investing in the development of a Housing First for Youth model.

3

The NSW Government must consult with young people when developing options to address the social housing shortage, and incorporate their lived experiences into decisions which will affect their housing futures.

4

Meanwhile use has the potential to work for young people if it meets certain conditions, but it must be accompanied by a higher investment from the NSW Government in new, youth-specific social housing.

5

The NSW Government must raise the age of leaving out-of-home care from 18 to 21. This would give young people adequate time and support to transition to adulthood, thereby reducing homelessness amongst care leavers and diverting young people from social housing.

6

The NSW Government must expand the Premier's Youth Initiative program to cover all regions of NSW and adopt the recommendations set out in the program's evaluation.

7

The NSW Government must expand the Youth Foyer program to meet demand and assist at-risk young people to make the transition to adulthood without becoming homeless. The NSW Government must also invest in independent research to identify which components of the diverse Foyer models work best.

8

The NSW Government must provide data on Rent Choice Youth participant numbers and outcomes, and promptly evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a 'step-down subsidy' model.

9

Crisis accommodation, although a necessary part of the homelessness system, is a temporary solution and is not fit-for-purpose for long-term housing. It should never be considered as a replacement for social housing.

## Introduction

Contrary to community perceptions, youth homelessness remains a significant issue in our state. Last year in NSW, almost 13,700 children and young people aged between 15 and 24 years presented alone to homelessness services, seeking accommodation and assistance (AIHW, 2020). Many of these young people will require some form of social housing on their journey out of homelessness. Unfortunately, the dire shortage of social and affordable housing in NSW restricts these young people's options, trapping them in housing insecurity and further homelessness.

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Considering our expertise, our submission will focus on addressing the social housing needs of young people, particularly those affected by homelessness. This submission will draw on consultations with our members and our Youth Homelessness Representative Council, an advisory group of young people in NSW with lived experiences of homelessness. It will address the following Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

- options to better support 'meanwhile use' (temporary supportive accommodation), and the current major planning barriers to 'meanwhile use'
- options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing
- options for crisis, key-worker and other short term accommodation models

We acknowledge that this Inquiry aims to address the social housing shortage through means other than new construction. As such, this submission will provide some recommendations aimed at reducing the demand for social housing without building new dwellings. However, we believe that these measures alone will never solve the social housing crisis.

Without a substantial investment in new social housing, young people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity will continue to face an increasingly unaffordable rental market, cycling between short-term private rental assistance and subsidised transitional accommodation. These supports alone, while valuable, only act as stopgaps and cannot provide the long-term housing security which many young people need. In light of this, **our primary recommendation to address the social housing shortage is for the NSW Government to commit to a substantial investment in new social housing, including youth-specific models.**

## Background

### NSW Government's social housing policy has failed to keep up with demand

The NSW Government's ten-year vision for social housing is set out in the Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW strategy. Released in 2016, Future Directions aims to address the social housing shortage by simultaneously building new social housing, while also reducing the demand for existing social housing (DCJ, 2016). The strategy includes a commitment to delivering up to 23,000 new and replacement social housing dwellings by 2026 (DCJ, 2016). It also includes private rental assistance products, such as the youth-specific Rent Choice Youth (RCY), which aim to divert people away from social housing and into the private rental market.

However, the strategy's aim to address the social housing shortage has fallen short. In 2020, there were almost 50,000 people on the social housing waitlist in NSW (AIHW, 2021). One in eight of these people (6,175) were part of 'greatest need households,' meaning that they were homeless, at risk of domestic and family violence, under extreme rental stress or living in housing which posed an immediate risk to them (AIHW, 2021).



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The social housing commitments in Future Directions are completely insufficient to meet this demand. Out of the 23,000 dwellings committed under the strategy, only 9,380 will be new builds, with the rest being the renewal of existing stock (Barnes et al., 2021). This equates to the construction of approximately 938 new social housing properties per year, between 2016 and 2026 (Barnes et al., 2021). Not only is this insufficient to address the 50,000-person social housing waitlist, but it is also out of step with the rest of the country. The NSW Government spends less on social housing per capita than almost every other state in Australia, reaching a five-year expenditure low in 2019-20 (Barnes et al., 2021).

### Young people face greater housing pressures than any other age group

While the need for social housing is felt by people of all ages, young people face greater challenges than any other age group in securing sustainable and affordable housing. In part, this is because young people are economically disadvantaged. They experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and precarious work than the general population (Tiller et al., 2020). This has been a consistent trend for the past decade, with young people's wages falling since the Global Financial Crisis, as older Australians' wages have continued to rise (Productivity Commission, 2020). The economic situation for young people has only worsened during COVID-19, as they are disproportionately affected by the closures of the tourism and hospitality industries (Tiller et al., 2020).

"We need more housing supply for young people. Young people are so resilient, but the housing challenges they face can make them take a back step. Often, we see some of the good work completely dismantled because they don't get access to long-term housing."

**SHS provider**

As well as earning less than the rest of the population, young people in NSW are facing record-high private rental costs. According to Anglicare's recent Rental Affordability snapshot, in March 2021 there was not a single rental property throughout Australia which would be affordable for a young person on Youth Allowance. In particular, regional NSW is becoming increasingly unaffordable for young people, with rents surging by 11% in the past year - the sharpest annual rise ever (Chau, 2021). Young people are also more likely to experience rental stress than older Australians. In 2017-18, over half (55%) of 15 – 24-year-olds paid more than 30% of their income on housing costs, which was a higher proportion than any other age group (ABS, 2019).

Even when young people can afford to rent privately, they face further challenges when trying to secure a property. These include age-based discrimination, a lack of rental references and insecure share-housing (Hall et al., 2020). A large-scale 2017 survey of Australian renters found that the majority of young people (55%) had experienced housing discrimination, with the most common reason being their age (22%) (Choice et al., 2017). This is reinforced by recent research from the Tenant's Union of NSW and Youth Action (2021), which found that many young people surveyed had had negative experiences with real estate agents and perceived a power imbalance between them and their agents.

"Even if you are successful as an individual in your study and employment, this does not negate the high cost of living, cutthroat competition in the private rental market, abysmal investment in social housing, and the stigma attached to young people by real estate agents."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

Low and precarious income, increasingly unaffordable private rentals, and discrimination in the housing market are all factors that push young people into homelessness. In NSW last year, the main reason that 18 – 25-year-olds sought help from homelessness services was because they were experiencing a housing crisis (AIHW, 2020b).



These housing pressures also cause young people to experience homelessness at higher rates than the general population. Last year, almost **one in three** single people who accessed homelessness services in NSW were aged 15 – 24 (AIHW, 2020c), despite this age group only making up **one in eight people** across the state (ABS, 2016). It's clear that the NSW housing system is failing to provide young people with the sustainable, safe housing they need to achieve their goals and transition to independence.

Certain groups of young people face higher rates of housing discrimination than others, putting them at greater risk of housing insecurity and homelessness.

### Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



Due to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic racism, young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness and housing insecurity at a much higher rate than the general population. On Census night, 20% of all people experiencing homelessness identified as Indigenous, despite Indigenous people only making up 3% of the total Australian population (ABS, 2018). And last year in NSW, one in three young people aged 15 - 24 who sought assistance from homelessness services identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (AIHW, 2020c).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also 2.3 times more likely to experience rental stress than the rest of the population (AHURI, 2017). In NSW, this is directly exacerbated by the fact that there is a shortfall of 11,000 social housing homes for Aboriginal families (AHURI, 2017).

### Young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities face significant challenges in finding private rental accommodation which is accessible and meets their needs (AIHW, 2020d; VCOSS, 2016). They are affected by the same lack of affordable housing that all young people face, but depending on their disability and situation, may have less capacity to afford private rentals than their peers (VCOSS, 2016). There is also some evidence to suggest that they face discrimination from real estate agents and landlords (Productivity Commission, 2019). These factors limit housing options for young people with disabilities. As our interviewees noted, they either have to find disability-accessible rentals - which are typically rarer and more expensive - or apply for social housing, where they face long wait times due to the lack of accessible properties.

"My disability means that any private rental needs to be physically accessible for me – which is, unfortunately, less widely available and hikes up the price of rent to an even more unachievable figure. In terms of social housing, needing my house to be on the ground floor without stairs or narrow doorways bumps up my wait time to ten years. Living in regional NSW further limits my options when it comes to available housing."

Young person with lived experience of homelessness

### Young people who do not have permanent residency or citizenship

Young migrants and refugees experience higher levels of income insecurity than the rest of the population, but are ineligible for income support and social housing until they have residency or citizenship (Flatau et al., 2015).

This leaves young migrants and refugees at risk of exploitative practices in the private rental market (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020), and traps them in crisis accommodation with no pathway out (National Advocacy Group, 2018).

"We see a lot of young people who come in who are from New Zealand or the Pacific Islands on special category visas. They come over when they are children and grow up here, then as young people they experience family breakdown, and are ineligible for Centrelink and housing and can't get support."

**SHS Provider**

### The urgent need for youth-specific social housing

As discussed above, young people are facing extraordinary housing pressures which have only been exacerbated by COVID-19. The combination of skyrocketing rental prices and low wages creates significant barriers to securing sustainable housing. And without adequate housing, young people are pushed into homelessness.

"The whole process completely exhausted me. I was so tired and defeated, I actually did not care anymore whether or not I slept on the street. I just needed rest. I went to leave school to find somewhere to sleep and my principal grabbed my arm and started pleading with me to stay, and said that they would figure something out. I fell to the ground, and everything went black. I had a complete mental breakdown and lost touch with reality and dissociated.

I woke up the next morning in a mental health facility where I would spend the next three months homeless, suicidal, and still looking for long term accommodation."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

When young people become homeless, they can access support through crisis accommodation (usually up to three months), and then transitional accommodation (usually one-two years). However, with the lack of affordable private rentals, young people become "stuck" after transitional accommodation - they have nowhere to go. This has distorted the intended role of homelessness services and created a bottleneck (Bullen, 2019; Bullen & Baldry, 2019), whereby homelessness services are struggling to meet demand.

"For young people, the 24/7 refuge model is a short-term option until we can get them into something more stable or returned home. What happens though is that they get stuck in crisis because there are no exit points. But then we keep getting referrals so young people are waiting to access crisis. We can't get the kids out who are ready to go out and so we can't get new kids in."

**SHS provider**

One option for young people looking for pathways out of homelessness is to join the social housing waitlist. However, an applicant's younger age does not alone make them eligible for priority housing (AIHW, 2021). This means that young people on the social housing waitlist face an average wait time of five to ten years (Barnes et al, 2021), despite being less equipped than older age groups to support themselves independently during that period. There is no policy that requires community housing providers (CHPs) to put aside a certain amount of housing stock for young people, and some evidence suggests that CHPs are less likely to prioritise young people's applications because they view them as risky tenants (Mackenzie et al., 2020).

Mainstream social housing also does not offer wraparound support to help young people develop the skills to maintain a tenancy and transition to adulthood (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Melbourne City Mission, 2021).



Finally, for young people who are in crisis, navigating the bureaucratic housing application system can be difficult.

All of these factors are reflected in the low rates of young people holding social housing tenancies: 15 – 24-year-olds make up just 2.4% of main tenants in public housing, and 4.9% of main tenants in community housing (AIHW, 2021).

"Accessing social housing is a pretty complicated process, especially when you are homeless. We really have to advocate to get our young people on the housing list.

If young people can't access social housing, their options are limited. They will couch surf, stay in overcrowded dwellings or stay in the crisis system, which blocks it up. If they do get a private rental, they end up stuck in a tenancy that they can't afford."

**SHS provider**

"When I was 16 my mum passed away, so I had to move back to my stepdad's house. After a few months, it became unsustainable. I was still in the care of the Minister, but my stepdad went to Child Protection and told them we couldn't live together anymore.

That same day, I was moved to a refuge in Bowral. I stayed there two months or so, then I was forced to move to a different refuge, in Fairfield. Then I was moved to transitional housing, where you had to be working or studying to stay there. It was the first time I was on my own, and they helped me as much as they could. But I still felt alone - I was 30 kilometres away from home.

After 18 months, I was moved to community housing. I was the only one there. I got no support; I was forgotten about. It wasn't the greatest place, there were lots of drugs and alcohol, a lot of vices around. But I was happy to stay there."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

## **Yfoundations' proposal: more youth-specific social housing, accompanied by an expansion of other models**

To address this gap in the housing system, the NSW government must invest in building more youth-specific social housing. This will provide much-needed housing security for young people who are on low incomes and are affected by homelessness. Large-scale investment in new social housing is not only the right thing to do for young people, it would also provide significant returns to the NSW economy. Recent modelling has shown that building 30,000 new social housing units would create between 15,500 and 18,000 new jobs and increase NSW's GDP by \$5.8 billion - \$6.7 billion (SGS Economics & Planning, 2020).

Yfoundations recommends complimenting an investment in new social housing builds with an expansion of existing supports and models for young people discussed in this submission. However, these alternative models either require an evaluation to determine their efficacy (Rent Choice Youth), or have restricted eligibility criteria (Youth Foyer and Premier's Youth Initiative). Further, most of these models are based on supporting young people to access low-cost, affordable or community housing in their area. Due to the tightening of the private rental market (particularly in regional areas), demand for these select properties is extremely high, and several programs are often competing for the same dwellings. This can limit the effectiveness of private rental subsidy models and head-leasing models.

"We have nine DCJ-funded programs. Most of them require that we have housing to perform our support role, and we just don't. We have the staff and the support funding, but we just don't have the housing stock."

**SHS provider**

As such, these models must work alongside new, youth-specific social housing, which can offer the built-for-purpose, long-term tenure that many young people need to transition out of homelessness.

"We do try to get young people into a private rental if it is right for them, but the reality is, some young people need long-term social housing."

**SHS provider**

With this in mind, the following sections outline options to address the social housing shortage and its impact on young people, in order of priority.

### **Build more youth-specific social housing**

As discussed above, addressing the social housing shortage and its negative impacts on young people must involve building new youth-specific social housing. Youth-specific social housing refers to a model of social housing which is designed to meet the unique needs of young people. Our consultation suggests that youth-specific social housing models should include the following components:

- Long-term tenures, which allow young people the time to develop the skills and support needed to live independently
- Access to on-site, 24/7 support as needed
- Close links to amenities and public transport
- Case support to assist young people to meet their psychological, health and financial needs, and address their educational and employment goals
- Low or medium-density housing, to reduce the potential for high geographic concentration of disadvantage
- Application processes which are clear and easy to navigate
- Flexible rent models which can support young people's changing economic situations, as they shift between casual, part-time and full-time work, and education and training
- Options for disability accessible accommodation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and managed accommodation, and accommodation which is available to non-Australian residents and temporary visa holders

"Everyone deserves a place of their own - somewhere to be safe and comfortable. They shouldn't always be worrying about where they are going to go next. So long-term housing should be given to our young people, with maybe six months or even a year's grace period.

They should also get support in the form of case workers, maybe cooking skills or workshops like how to shop for groceries on a budget. But this needs to be on a case-by-case basis."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

Importantly, youth-specific social housing includes a range of housing models which cater to the varying needs and abilities of different young people. Not all young people require lifelong social housing. Some will require social housing for a few years while they build their education and employment experience, before transitioning into the private rental market. Other young people will require a longer period of supported social housing, to support them while they recover from trauma, abuse, and neglect (Mercado et al., 2021; Osgood et al., 2010). New youth-specific social housing should cater to young people's needs across this spectrum.

"A large number of our clients will require longer-term, or even lifelong public housing and support. These are young people who have experienced trauma, which leads to reduced capacity and deficits – they need housing and support. Currently, these young people are ending up in boarding houses, where they are often exploited, or in the youth justice system."

SHS provider

## Two models of youth-specific social housing: Transitional Housing Plus and Housing First

### Transitional Housing Plus: social housing for young people with the capacity to work and study

Transitional Housing Plus (THP) is a youth-specific social housing program, delivered by My Foundations Youth Housing. THP provides young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness with up to five years of social housing and support. The program currently offers approximately 90 community housing properties across Sydney, Newcastle and the Mid-North Coast. To be eligible, young people need to be between 16 – 25 years and be involved in education or employment. The THP involves a stepped rent model, with rent beginning at 25% of private market rent and increasing year on year until it is commensurate with private market rent at the end of the five-year period. The aim of the THP is that by the end of their five-year tenure, young people will have had enough time and support to exit the program with the capacity to sustain a private rental tenancy.

The THP has not been externally evaluated. However, program data indicates that the THP is achieving positive outcomes, particularly due to its long tenure period, which at five years is the longest in the youth homelessness system. Over three years, 59% of tenants who exited the program achieved secure independent housing (40% private rental, 19% social housing), with another 29% having another long-term positive outcome, such as living with family and friends or returning to Country (Mullins, 2021).

However, given the work and study requirements and the lower levels of case support, the THP model is not appropriate for all young people. Young people with higher needs, or those who are not ready to engage in education and employment, require alternative social housing models. In addition, though rent reductions and delays are offered, the THP rent model cannot accommodate young people who have long pauses or reductions to their income over a long period of time, such as if they choose to significantly reduce their work hours to study. This does not mean that the THP model is not working successfully – indeed, recent THP tenant interviews indicated that participants have had largely positive experiences with the rent model. However, it does mean that for those who have significant, long-term changes to their income, there needs to be support from other models.

"The THP model has a lot of positives; they are quite flexible, and they arrange for handymen to come to you when you need them. Everyone in my building is in a similar situation to me and everyone is of a similar age. There are lots of young people who come from refuges or who can't live at home. In that way, it is good, because there is a sense of community.

The only downfall is for me that every year the price goes up, and by the fifth year you're paying market value. So, the rent you pay is not dependent on your income. I am in my 3rd or 4th year I'm not earning as much as I was when I was working full time because I am studying now. My rent now is eating into my savings so I'm moving to another program called Rent Choice Youth, where my first year I will go back to paying 25%."

Young person with lived experience of homelessness

## Housing First: social housing for young people with complex needs

Young people with complex needs, including those who have experienced chronic homelessness, require social housing which can meet them where they are. An example of this kind of model is Housing First, which is distinct from other youth housing models (such as THP and Youth Foyer) as it does not involve any commitment to stay in education or employment. Rather, it provides people experiencing homelessness with permanent, independent housing with no pre-conditions so that they can begin to access the supports they need and work towards independence (Johnson, 2012).

The Housing First Model has been implemented internationally for adults, and evaluations have demonstrated that the model is more effective and less costly than 'treatment first' approaches (Goering & Streiner 2015; Ly & Latimer 2015).

For young people who have behavioural issues resulting from trauma, severe mental health conditions, substance dependencies and/or certain types of disabilities, Housing First is a sustainable housing solution. An Australian youth-specific model could learn from the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) program implemented in Canada (Gaetz, Walter & Story, 2021).

Youth Housing First models should also be informed by lessons learned from the NSW Government-funded Together Home program. Together Home provides 24 months of head-leased accommodation and wraparound support for people who are sleeping rough, and is the closest model to Housing First in NSW. While it is technically available to people over the age of 18, because Together Home is targeted to rough sleepers (the least common form of homelessness amongst young people) (ABS, 2016), most young people who are homeless do not benefit from this program. Further, while it is showing promising outcomes, Together Home is limited by a lack of exit points, as it only provides two years of head-leasing without increasing permanent social housing stock.

Young people in NSW require a separate, tailored social housing program based on Housing First principles, which can support those who are most vulnerable and have been affected by trauma and chronic homelessness.

"We supported a 34-year old female client through Together Home [NSW's Housing First model]. She had been homeless for the past seven years, sleeping rough in parks and squatting. This client had experienced child abuse and then domestic violence, which pushed her into homelessness.

All the services this client had received in the past had been traumatising, because of the idea of "conditional support." Since receiving unconditional housing, the client's dysregulation and drug use has decreased, and her formal supports and positive social connections have increased. Most importantly, where there haven't been changes, such as where she is using and having issues with domestic violence, she doesn't lose the support offered to her.

If this client had been given a house with no conditions when she was a young person, she would not have fallen into such violent relationships or drugs as heavily as she did when becoming homeless, because she wouldn't have needed those men for protection on the street. And if she was properly diagnosed instead of judged by services, she may still have her children with her and be living in her own rental."

**SHS Provider**



**Recommendation 1: The NSW Government must commit to building at least 5,000 new social housing properties per year for the next ten years, including new youth-specific social housing which is tailored to meet the needs of young people.**



**Recommendation 2: The NSW Government must expand and evaluate the Transitional Housing Plus program, while also investing in the development of a Housing First for Youth model.**



**Recommendation 3: The NSW Government must consult with young people when developing options to address the social housing shortage, and incorporate their lived experiences into decisions which will affect their housing futures.**

### Explore meanwhile use for youth-specific social housing as a temporary measure

"Meanwhile use can have great impact, but it only buys options while the bricks and mortar social housing is being built."

**Youth community housing provider**

Our consultations with our members and young people with lived experiences of homelessness have demonstrated that there is cautious support within the youth homelessness sector for meanwhile use projects aimed at housing young people. However, to successfully meet the needs of young people, our interviewees expressed that meanwhile use projects need to include the following factors:

- Service design must begin with planning for the end of meanwhile use, to avoid exiting young people into homelessness when the meanwhile use period ends
- Meanwhile use properties need to be integrated with local services which provide appropriate assistance (e.g., mental health, AOD services, therapeutic family services), and offer on-site, 24/7 support
- Service design needs to be led by local providers and involve partnerships between SHS providers and CHPs so that SHS providers can support and advocate for young people if they are at risk of losing their tenancies
- Meanwhile use properties should have a proportion of accommodation that is accessible and appropriate for young people with disabilities

"Every meanwhile use project needs to start with asking – what does the end look like? You need to make sure that you aren't moving people into homelessness when you leave. We weren't going to start by taking on high-needs clients knowing that they wouldn't be ready to move on at the end of the project. You have to design around what kind of building you have and how long you have it for."

**Youth community housing provider**

"Where Together Home is different from meanwhile use, is that there is a plan for afterwards. That's where my concern sits – Together Home has wraparound services which include support from SHS, community housing and DCJ. It is collaborative.

If it didn't have these supports, we would ask ourselves 'what happens after two years?' If people weren't housed privately, then they would become homeless again. So, if meanwhile use doesn't have a safety net, all of the previous work doesn't matter."

**SHS provider**



## Meanwhile use case study: The Addison Project

Meanwhile use as a model for youth-specific social housing has not been extensively trialled in Australia or internationally, with the majority of meanwhile-use projects either involving non-residential projects or accommodation for women and families. The exception is the Addison Project, which was a “pop-up” accommodation model for young people on low incomes in metropolitan Sydney.

The Addison Project was a partnership between TOGA, a property developer, and youth community housing provider My Foundations Youth Housing. While waiting for development approval, TOGA donated the use of the empty former Addison Hotel. The property was loaned by TOGA without a requirement for financial return, meaning that MYFH only needed to secure funding to subsidise the on-site service component of the model. They did this by operating the bottom half of the hotel as temporary accommodation. The building contained 42 fully furnished studios, which were made available to young people at risk of homelessness, at \$180/week (around 25% of the market rent). MFYH provided 24/7 on-site support and security, free internet and utilities, food relief and laundry services.

Given that the property was initially loaned to MFYH for 12 - 18 months, MFYH designed the project with the end of the meanwhile use period in mind. This meant that every young person who was accommodated in the Addison Project had a clear exit plan, and the capacity to enter the private rental market after a year of support. This reduced the likelihood of taking on at-risk young people for a short time, only to force them back into housing instability at the end of the meanwhile use period. At the conclusion of the project after four years, all young people were sustainably housed.

However, our members felt that meanwhile use cannot be viewed as a ‘silver bullet’ to address the social housing shortage. Rather it must be accompanied by an investment in new, permanent social housing. Research has shown that in isolation, meanwhile use can reinforce geographic disadvantage, urban precarity and gentrification (Harris et al., 2019; Lyessen, 2018). Without more permanent social and affordable housing solutions, when the building is returned for commercial use, young people who cannot afford to rent in the private market may still struggle to access accommodation. They may be forced to relocate away from their support networks, live in overcrowded dwellings to afford inflated rent, or couch-surf.

Further, meanwhile use is not an appropriate model for all young people. Due to the short-term nature of meanwhile use, this model is best suited to young people who will have the capacity and means to exit sustainably into the private rental market when the building is no longer available. This means that while it is a beneficial model for some young people, if meanwhile use is pursued in isolation - without a commitment to other social housing models - our most vulnerable young people will continue to be left behind.

"These programs are good because they do give you time to save money. But it doesn't mean they should replace social housing. You can't not have social housing. What happens if a young person can't get on their feet for one or even two years, they aren't going to make the rent and so they may be pushed back into homelessness."

Young person with lived experience of homelessness



**Recommendation 4: Meanwhile use has the potential to work for young people if it meets certain conditions, but it must be accompanied by a higher investment from the NSW Government in new, youth-specific social housing.**

## Better support young people leaving care

Aside from building more social housing and exploring meanwhile use, the NSW Government should consider better supporting young people leaving the out-of-home care (OOHC) system. This would not only assist a highly vulnerable group of young people, but would also reduce pressure on the social housing system by providing support and building capacity earlier.

Young people leaving care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness (AIHW, 2020). A recent national survey of care leavers undertaken by CREATE has shown that 30% of participants were homeless at some stage within their first year of leaving care. And of those who experienced homelessness, 37% were homeless for more than six months (McDowall, 2020).

30% of young people leaving OOHC were homeless at some stage within their first year post-care



These young people leaving OOHC are expected to transition to independence at the age of 18, without adequate preparation and without the same family and social safety nets as their peers (Campo & Commerford, 2016). This expectation is not only unrealistic, it is increasingly out of step with community norms. Young people in Australia are living at home for longer before transitioning to independence, due to rising rental prices and the cost of undertaking education (Parkinson et al., 2019). And while parents are increasingly providing support to their children past the age of 18, the government does not do the same for young people leaving OOHC.

"Young people in care are dependent upon the government, their case worker, waiting lists... they are homeless, in temporary accommodation or couch-surfing. This is homelessness."

Young person with lived experience of homelessness

Raising the age of leaving care from 18 to 21 years would provide young people with the time and support they need to transition to adulthood. According to Deloitte's 2018 cost benefit analysis, raising the age would improve a range of outcomes for care leavers (less teen pregnancy, more educational engagement, less hospitalisation) and provide a net saving to the NSW Government. It also reduces the risk of young people becoming homeless by approximately 19.5% (Deloitte, 2018), as care leavers would have more time to build support networks, access employment and secure independent housing. In turn, this relieves pressure on the social housing system as a large group of young people who experience homelessness and require social housing is diverted from the system.



**Recommendation 5: The NSW Government must raise the age of leaving out-of-home care from 18 to 21. This would give young people adequate time and support to transition to adulthood, thereby reducing homelessness amongst care leavers and diverting young people away from social housing.**

In addition to raising the age of leaving care, another solution to addressing youth homelessness and the social housing shortage is expanding the Premier's Youth Initiative (PYI). The PYI offers support to eligible young people leaving care, including a multidisciplinary team who assists the young person to achieve their leaving care goals. The program also offers accommodation support through head-leased housing, provided by CHPs.

Although it did note some shortcomings, the PYI program's recent evaluation was overwhelmingly positive. It found that the PYI achieved positive outcomes for certain groups of care leavers – specifically, those who had a history of homelessness while in out-of-home care (Taylor, et al, 2020). The evaluation showed that the PYI reduces the frequency that young people present at homelessness services after leaving care (Taylor, et al, 2020).

Currently, the PYI program has seven providers across NSW, and, as at 30 June 2019, had supported 545 young people leaving care (Legislative Council, 2021). However, as the program is a pilot under the 2015 Premier's Priorities, its funding is time-limited and program coverage does not extend across NSW.

Expanding the PYI program, adopting the recommendations set out in its evaluation and ensuring ongoing funding would mean that all young people leaving care would receive support and accommodation, and be less likely to experience homelessness. This would fulfil the NSW Government's obligation as the legal guardian for young care leavers, while also addressing the social housing shortage by diverting vulnerable young people away from homelessness and into housing.



**Recommendation 6: The NSW Government must expand the Premier's Youth Initiative to cover all regions of NSW, and adopt the recommendations set out in the program's evaluation.**

### Expand Youth Foyers

Youth Foyer is a supported youth housing model which is designed to develop education and employment pathways for young people, thereby encouraging independence. Youth Foyers offer young people accommodation and support for up to two years, in exchange for rent and a commitment to stay in education, training and employment. There are currently 15 Foyers or Foyer-like services in Australia. Only two of these are in NSW:

- Foyer Central (Sydney), which has 53 studio apartments
- Southern Youth Foyer (Illawarra), which has 60 units

The Brotherhood of St Laurence conducted an internal evaluation of their Education First Foyers in Victoria, which showed several positive results. The evaluation found that the model substantively improved participants' education, employment, housing, and health and wellbeing outcomes (Coddou, Borlagdan & Mallett, 2019). And these improvements were largely sustained a year after participants exited the program, showing long-lasting effects. Although Education First Foyers are costly to operate, KPMG's economic analysis found that this additional investment was offset by the participants' positive outcomes in education, housing stability, health, and lower levels of offending behaviours (KPMG, 2019).

"The Foyer model tries to move past a band-aid solution – it doesn't just give young homeless people a house, but also the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain tenancy and be successful in long-term independent living. This can also be augmented by programs such as 'Rent It, Keep It', which some Foyers require young people to complete before exiting."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

However, Youth Foyers are not a suitable housing model for all young people, particularly those who have complex needs or do not have the capacity to engage in Education, Employment and Training (EET).

"In a Foyer, there can sometimes be pressure for young people to maintain formal education, employment, and training, even if it is inappropriate in fear that they will be kicked out of the accommodation. In this sense, Foyer is about mutual obligation – young people are not given accommodation purely because they need it, or because housing is a basic right, or because there is a social responsibility to help disadvantaged individuals - they have to constantly prove that they are deserving and worthy of the help."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**



"In terms of young people with complex needs, mental or physical disabilities, or substance misuse, Foyers is not appropriate because not all young people have the skills/capacity to engage in education, employment and training. This also applies to the time limit placed on the accommodation – in expecting all young people to conform and be successful within the same standard time frame."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

This does not mean that the NSW Government should not invest in expanding Youth Foyers to help young people in the community, particularly as there are only two Youth Foyers in NSW. Indeed, though just opening at the start of 2021, Foyer Central in Sydney already has a waitlist for their services. Expanding the Youth Foyer program to metropolitan and regional NSW would assist more young people to secure housing and achieve their education and employment goals, thus reducing reliance on the social housing system.

However, to truly address youth homelessness and the social housing shortage, the expansion of Youth Foyers must happen alongside the provision of new, youth-specific social housing. The expansion of Youth Foyers also cannot replace existing youth homelessness services, as they provide different services. More Youth Foyers, combined with more youth social housing, will ensure that all young people, including those who are most vulnerable and cannot meet the requirements of the Youth Foyer program, can access housing.

"Models like meanwhile use and Foyer are good products for young people who are ready and will be able to transition to private rentals. But they don't work for the most marginalised, vulnerable cohort of young people. This is where we end up with the same issue time and again."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**



**Recommendation 7: The NSW Government must expand the Youth Foyer program to meet demand and assist at-risk young people to make the transition to adulthood without becoming homeless. The NSW Government must also invest in independent research to identify which components of the diverse Foyer models work best.**

### **Evaluate the effectiveness of the Rent Choice Youth program**

The Future Directions strategy outlines the NSW Government's aim of diverting people from social housing through the use of private rental assistance. An example of this is the Rent Choice Youth (RCY) product, which is available to young people on low incomes who are at risk of homelessness. RCY participants receive subsidised rent in a private rental property, combined with caseworker support. For the first 12 months of the program, young people pay 25% of their weekly income plus 100% of their Commonwealth Rent Assistance subsidy. After the first 12 months, the young person's contribution increases, with the view that over time the young person will be able to rent privately without any support.

Yfoundations conducted consultations with RCY providers in 2021, who largely indicated their support for the RCY program. However, they expressed concern that the program doesn't meet the needs of all young people, particularly those who are unable to live independently and work. In this way, they felt that the program could be self-selecting – those who had the least capacity and required the most support were excluded from the program before it began. Caseworkers also felt that the rising rental costs and low vacancy rates across NSW meant that when the program ended, young people would struggle to afford rental costs, particularly in more expensive areas such as Greater Sydney.

"Rent increased dramatically since RCY came to our area (Mid North Coast) which makes it much harder for people to afford a rental on their own after the program is over, particularly if they are single people who may not be working full-time."

SHS worker

Consultation with members has also suggested that due to a lack of social and affordable housing in some areas, the RCY program has become a last resort for young people who require assistance. This means that young people are pushed to enter the program, even when they are not ready. And many drop out before its completion.

"A key part of the RCY program is asking – is the young person ready? Are they linked into mental health and AOD [alcohol and other drug] support? Do they have financial counselling? Without that, young people are being set up to fail. That's the problem with the current system – the Department thinks that just because a young person is homeless, they should be in RCY.

This means that the young person gets into a house, sits there without being linked in, uses drugs and then loses access to the program and can't get in again. Often RCY is seen as the last stop, and it shouldn't be."

SHS and RCY worker

The RCY program has now been operational for five years, but the NSW Government has not published any data on the number of young people who have completed the program, those who have dropped out or those who have been excluded. Without this information, it is impossible to determine whether the program has been successful at diverting young people from social housing and into the private rental market.



**Recommendation 8: The NSW Government must provide data on Rent Choice Youth participant numbers and outcomes, and promptly evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a 'step-down subsidy' model.**

### **Crisis accommodation should remain for crisis only**

The Terms of Reference for this inquiry includes considering short-term accommodation models as a measure for addressing the social housing shortage. In the youth homelessness system, crisis accommodation (also known as refuges) provides accommodation and support to young people experiencing homelessness, usually for a period of up to three months. During this time, SHS providers work with the young person to identify longer-term housing solutions, whether that be returning to family, applying for social housing, accessing transitional accommodation or models like Youth Foyers, or entering the private rental market.

Caring for young people in crisis requires 24/7 SHS staff who are highly trained and can provide support to young people with complex needs. However, these staff members are not set up to provide longer-term accommodation solutions, as their work focuses on short-term, emergency responses. Nor is the crisis accommodation itself an appropriate location for social housing, as it largely takes place in youth refuges with single bedrooms and shared living spaces. These are not appropriate spaces for independent social housing tenures.





**Recommendation 9: Crisis accommodation, although a necessary part of the homelessness system, is a temporary solution and is not fit-for-purpose for long-term housing. It should never be considered as a replacement for social housing.**

## Conclusion

In this submission, we have presented several options for addressing the social housing shortage and its impacts on young people. However, Yfoundations calls on the NSW government to recognise that there is no large-scale, sustainable alternative to addressing the social housing crisis, except for building more social housing.

More youth-specific social housing, accompanied by an expansion of alternative models, will mean that young people can access accommodation that suits their needs, while still having the option to transition in and out of social housing as required. When implemented together, these recommendations will address the social housing shortage, both through the direct provision of new housing and the diversion of young people away from social housing via other programs.

More importantly, by investing in the models presented in this report, the NSW Government can ensure that all young people are given the support they need to transition to adulthood with safety and security.

"To have long-term housing is a gift.

For homeless youth, crisis accommodation is more of a temporary, time-limited, band-aid on a bullet hole. It does not provide the long-term solution to becoming an equal member of society. We need a long-term, safe and predictable living environment where we have a chance to access the services we need to heal, get an education, and become a valued member of society again.

I know this type of living arrangement works. Since being connected to my SHS and CHP provider, I have completed my HSC and am actively engaged in a university degree. I have had the chance and time to become connected to the community. I can now get the mental health treatment I need, instead of constantly moving addresses. If funding was directed at long-term solutions such as youth-specific social housing, it would create that environment that is conducive to healing and re-engagement back."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness**

"[We need to] address the complete lack of social or affordable housing. We have people out of jobs, and a lack of homes to put people in. Seems like a no-brainer to solve this problem. [Something like] Commonwealth job guarantees, where you are working to construct new homes for social housing with subsidised materials/labour cost. Let's get this done."

**Young person with lived experience of homelessness/social housing**

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