

Position Paper on the Reform of Temporary Accommodation in NSW

Background and purpose

This Position Paper has been developed by Yfoundations in consultation with a working group of its members in the context of the NSW Government's forthcoming reforms of the Temporary Accommodation Program. The Position Paper is informed by a comprehensive Background Paper that provides more detailed analysis of the key issues and potential solutions identified herein.

The primary purpose of this Paper is to identify the key principles that must be taken into account to ensure that the reform of temporary accommodation meets the needs of young people who become homeless in NSW.

As these principles include the essential requirements for better and more effective delivery of temporary accommodation for young people, they are provided to assist organisations that intend to seek funding under the Homelessness Innovation Fund for this purpose.

Yfoundations position is that these principles must guide the Government's assessment of all proposals that include the delivery of temporary accommodation to young people aged 16 to 24 years.

Key issues

Temporary accommodation, coupled with specialist homelessness services, constitute the safety net that must be designed and funded to catch those that become homeless, including young people. The inadequate resourcing of specialist homelessness services is well documented, such that 50% of the young people nationally that seek crisis accommodation in refuges have to be turned away.

Despite the difficulties in accessing crisis accommodation, young people also only represent 16% of the total population that are provided with temporary accommodation. 16-18 year olds represent less than 3% of those that are provided temporary accommodation.

Yfoundations members explain, and can provide numerous case studies showing, that current allocation and operational processes and procedures make temporary accommodation inaccessible and inappropriate for young people. As a result, many young people remain stuck in a cycle of homelessness, couch surfing, sleeping rough and taking risks that they should not have to take, simply to survive.

The under-representation of young people in temporary accommodation is a failure of the safety net that is supposed to ensure that young people's experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring. As such it is also a failure to meet young people's fundamental human right to adequate housing.

Even where young people are able to access temporary accommodation, in most cases it is provided in inappropriate facilities and without the supports required to be of effective assistance and to connect them to longer-term solutions to their homelessness. Too often young people are placed at risk due to the nature of the accommodation provided and the other residents there.

These risks must be addressed as part of the Government's reform agenda. These risks must not simply be transferred from one form of temporary accommodation to another in an effort to move expenditure on temporary accommodation away from private hotels and motels.

Without specialist age-appropriate support, the time that young people spend in temporary accommodation will continue to be ineffective and inefficient in helping to break their cycle of homelessness. The expertise required to provide this support sits in the youth specialist homelessness services sector. However, support must be adequately funded. It cannot be provided from within the existing resources of the sector.

Whilst the youth specialist homelessness services sector has traditionally been able to provide accommodation and support in crisis refuges at a similar or even lower cost than unsupported temporary accommodation in for-profit facilities, the provision of supported temporary accommodation that is safe and effectively contributes to addressing youth homelessness does not necessarily equate to short-term savings in expenditure. The primary focus and intent of reforming temporary accommodation for young people must be achieving better outcomes over the short, medium and longer-terms.

Solutions

Where adequately resourced and implemented, there is significant potential for supported temporary accommodation to act as an entry point for young people into a more effective, coordinated and systemic response to addressing their homelessness.

As the core focus of the support provided would be on connecting the young person to the services they require and moving them as quickly as possible to the accommodation or housing solution best suited to their needs, the reform of temporary accommodation must be accompanied with increased investments in age-appropriate models of crisis, transitional and medium-term housing.

There are two broad models under which specialist homelessness services can provide supported temporary accommodation, with different potential service delivery mechanism for each:

- Support provision only - support could be provided to young people in existing temporary accommodation facilities. Youth specialist homelessness services could also work in partnership with community housing providers to deliver support in newly established and operated accommodation facilities. There may also be scope to support young people in under-utilised, public housing 'hard-to-let' properties such as bedsits.

- Accommodation and support provision – specialist homelessness services that are also housing providers could be the accommodation and support provider to young people in temporary accommodation. This could be supplied in existing facilities not already being utilised for crisis or other accommodation, via investments in new infrastructure or accessing accommodation owned by others such as government agencies or developers that have facilities available for meanwhile use.

The relative merits of projects based on these different models will need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Whilst it is understood these assessments will be conducted against the criteria identified for Homelessness Innovation Fund proposals, it is also critical that a principled approach be taken that responds to the current issues and risks in the delivery of temporary accommodation to young people.

Accordingly, Yfoundations position is that the Government’s reform agenda and the future delivery of temporary accommodation to young people, must occur in accordance with the following guiding principles.

Guiding principles for the reform and delivery of temporary accommodation for young people

1. To ensure adequacy of the safety net to respond to youth homelessness in NSW and that children and young people’s right to adequate housing is supported, young people must be viewed as a priority cohort for the reform of temporary accommodation.
2. The primary purpose of investment in supported temporary accommodation for young people should be to achieve better outcomes for the young people in the short, medium and longer-terms.
3. A more sophisticated approach to measuring the economic benefit of investments in supported temporary accommodation is required to take account of all of the benefits achieved, not just the cost of bed nights compared to that in hotels and motels.
4. Where unable to initially gain access to specialist homelessness crisis accommodation, placement of a young person in a temporary accommodation facility should be viewed as the starting point for interventions to resolve their homelessness.
5. Placement in supported temporary accommodation should initiate a comprehensive assessment of need and case planning processes aimed at channeling young people to accommodation options best suited to their situation at that time, as quickly as possible.

6. Conduct of this assessment and case planning should be factored into the cost of providing supported temporary accommodation.
7. To minimise the length of stay, an investment in supported temporary accommodation needs to be accompanied with increased investments in crisis, transitional and medium-term housing for young people.
8. The physical environment of new supported temporary accommodation established under the reform agenda must meet minimum standards, be safe and appropriate for young people to reside in and comply with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. To achieve this, consideration needs to be given to the mix of residents in a supported temporary accommodation facility, including their age and gender, as well as security infrastructure and availability of supports after hours.
9. The cost of providing the accommodation component of new supported temporary accommodation must factor in these minimum standards and safety considerations.
10. To ensure that young people receive the type and level of support they require, any provider of temporary accommodation that is not a youth specialist homelessness service must partner with a youth specialist homelessness service for that support provision.
11. Whilst a key objective of supported temporary accommodation should be on moving the young person into a more appropriate accommodation arrangement as quickly as possible, the length of stay should be determined by the young person's needs and the availability of an appropriate exit point, not programmatic or budgetary requirements.
12. The level and amount of support provided should be informed by the assessment of need and case planning conducted and be focused on all aspects of a young person's wellbeing to ensure they do not become further dislocated from services, supports and social and cultural connections.
13. Support provision should be funded on a person-centred, rather than a 'one size fits all' basis.