

Position Paper on Youth Housing Models

Background, context and purpose

This Position Paper has been developed by Yfoundations in consultation with a working group of its members in the context of the new funding for social housing announced in the NSW and Commonwealth budgets in 2024/25. The Position Paper is informed by a comprehensive Background Paper which provides detailed analysis of the key issues, challenges and opportunities referred to herein. The Position Paper and Background Paper are also informed by the views expressed by the Yfoundations Youth Homelessness Representative Council as to what constitutes a 'home' for young people who have experienced homelessness.

The purposes of this Position Paper are to:

- Identify the need, and requirements, for investment in youth specific housing models;
- Identify the continuum of housing options best suited to addressing the needs of young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness in NSW; and
- Advocate for investment in these models.

Utilising the collective wisdom and expertise of its members, this Paper identifies the core housing related requirements of the forthcoming NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan to ensure the Plan can most effectively deliver the objective of making child and youth homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Yfoundations and its members are committed to working collaboratively with the NSW Government to implement the housing solutions identified in this Position Paper.

Key issues

Census and specialist homelessness service data confirm the alarming reality that child and youth homelessness is increasing in Australia and that the service system is inadequately funded to effectively respond.

Notwithstanding that the ABS accepts youth couch surfing is undercounted, in the 2021 census 23% of all people experiencing homelessness were aged 12 - 24 years. Over 50% of the young people who seek assistance from a specialist homelessness service have to be turned away due to the shortage of funds. Of those who are able to access crisis accommodation, only 25% are able to move onto medium-term or transitional housing, whilst only 4.3% are able to source long-term housing. The authors of the Ernst and Young evaluation of the specialist homelessness (SHS) program in NSW noted that, "there appears to be minimal availability of dedicated SHS youth-specific accommodation options when compared to the growing size of the youth cohort of clients".

Young people are also more disadvantaged by the current housing crisis. There are no properties in the private rental market across the entire country that are affordable to a young person on Youth Allowance.

The connection between child and youth homelessness and entrenched adult homelessness highlights the need to break the cycle for young people as early and quickly as possible. Whilst

having an adequate safety net of crisis accommodation services for young people is an essential first step, without appropriate housing options to move onto, young people will remain stuck in homelessness and be more likely to become the rough sleepers of the future.

Young people have different housing needs to adults. They need specialist housing solutions, delivered in a way that recognises and responds to their unique pathways into homelessness and their developmental needs. Building life skills and the capacity of a young person to sustain housing in the longer term is a critical component of effective specialist housing responses to youth homelessness.

Whilst the forthcoming new investments in social housing are welcome, it is important to recognise that the number of new homes to be built will not address the full waiting list for social housing in NSW, let alone be able to respond to the future housing needs of all the young people who are homeless today. This highlights the need for investment in housing models that can prepare young people for a life free of homelessness, that does not necessarily rely on social housing in the longer term and equips them to compete in the private housing market.

The Youth Homelessness Representative Council advises that housing tenure is a concept that often differs for young people. Medium-term and transitional housing provides a 'home' for young people whilst they develop into adults and determine their life goals and trajectories.

Access to the continuum of crisis accommodation, medium-term and transitional housing has been proven over many years to effectively enable young people to break the cycle of homelessness. At present, however, there is inadequate investment in medium-term and youth transitional housing across NSW, particularly in country and regional locations.

With a strong emphasis on supporting young people to develop the skills and knowledge to live independently in the long-term, medium-term and transitional housing models can and do regularly divert young people from permanent social housing when it is not required. Not only are these housing models essential to resolving youth homelessness, if adequately funded they would contribute substantially to ensuring that permanent social housing is available to those most in need.

This is not to say that some young people will not require long-term social housing. Access to medium-term and transitional housing is critical to ensuring young people are able to sustain permanent social housing tenancies. There is also potential to utilise the Housing First for Youth model to house the small number of young people whose complex needs will prevent them from meeting the pre-conditions of medium-term and transitional housing, in long-term social housing with wrap around supports. The international and Australian experience has found that Housing First is not a 'one size fits all' solution and needs to be implemented alongside the continuum of specialist accommodation and housing models for young people that experience homelessness. When providing a 'home' rather than permanent housing becomes the primary objective, the principles underpinning Housing First for Youth provide a useful reference point for the full continuum of accommodation and housing solutions.

The current funding and policy settings for the social housing system in NSW discriminate against young people and disincentivise investment in specialist housing solutions for this

cohort. These settings need to be adjusted to take account of the support requirements of young people, their lower and unstable incomes and the higher costs associated with providing homes for young people often on a shorter-tenure basis.

It must be recognised that the higher cost of providing specialist youth housing is offset by the outcomes it achieves, enabling young people to live productive lives, free of homelessness, and alleviating long-term demand pressures on the adult homelessness and social housing systems as well as broader support systems, including the health, welfare and criminal justice systems. Investment in youth housing models is an effective form of prevention and early intervention.

The way forward

Coupled with the NSW and Commonwealth Governments' new investments in social housing, development and implementation of the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan under the NSW Homelessness Strategy provides a once in a generation opportunity to achieve the objective of making child and youth homelessness, rare, brief and non-recurring.

It is understood that the Strategy and Action Plan will be underpinned by the following principles:

- Housing is a human right;
- Prevention is prioritised;
- Housing First principles are embodied into policy and practice;
- The service system is joined up and coordinated; and
- Service planning and delivery is flexible and localised.

Consistent with these principles, to ensure that the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan achieves its potential, Yfoundations identifies the following core requirements for the development and implementation of the Plan:

1. A significant component of the investment in new social housing under the NSW Budget must be quarantined under the Action Plan for specialist youth housing models. The amount quarantined must be at least proportionate to the percentage of the total homeless population that are aged 16 - 24 years;
2. The majority of the funding for youth housing is to be utilised for medium-term and transitional housing models with some also to be made available for long-term social housing;
3. The funding must take account of the full-cost of providing medium-term and transitional housing for young people;
4. The full cost must include resourcing for support provision as a fundamental component of these models. Funding for support should be targeted to youth specialist homelessness services to ensure effective utilisation of existing expertise:

5. The geographic distribution of funding quarantined for youth housing must be informed by thorough analysis of demand and supply and targeted according to unmet need. This information and analysis is largely already available;
6. The mix and configuration of youth housing models funded and implemented in specific communities under the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan is to be informed by existing localised, place-based, coordination processes, that utilise the knowledge and expertise of the youth homelessness sector;
7. Localised coordination must include the broad range of services and service systems relevant to, and required by, young people. This includes Commonwealth Government agencies and functionalities. Commonwealth funding for accommodation and housing should also be connected to the delivery of the NSW Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan;
8. Crisis accommodation must also be recognised as a fundamental component of the accommodation and housing continuum required by young people experiencing homelessness and as the gateway to providing a rapid housing response. The need for crisis accommodation must be considered as part of localised implementation of the Action Plan, with funding to be made available where unmet need is identified;
9. Prioritising the provision of 'homes' for young people over the importance of tenure, the following principles, adapted from the principles of the Housing First for Youth model, should underpin the continuum of youth accommodation and housing models funded in NSW under the Action Plan:
 - Young people should have access to the accommodation or housing solution best suited to their situation and needs, as soon as possible;
 - Young people should have choice about the type of housing and supports they can access and the flexibility to move between different parts of the continuum as required;
 - Youth housing and supports must incorporate a positive youth development orientation aimed at enabling young people to transition to adulthood and a life free of homelessness;
 - Support provision must be individualised and client-driven and committed to for as long as it is required;
 - A core focus of all youth housing must be on assisting young people to integrate and engage in their communities.
10. The funding and policy settings for social housing provision in NSW need to be adjusted to take account of the higher costs involved, and the lower incomes of young people, to ensure that community housing providers are not disincentivised from investing in, and providing, youth housing.
11. The funding of youth housing must also take account of the full cost of establishing new services, including planning and development costs, to ensure that smaller and mid-sized providers are able to offer youth housing when they are the organisation of best fit to do so in their community.