

# POSITION PAPER

## What is a 'home'

A deep exploration of the meaning of home for a young person facing homelessness. How crucial is it to break their cycle of homelessness?

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## **About the Yfoundations**

For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the NSW peak body providing a voice for children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, as well as the services that provide direct support to them. Yfoundations is proudly a membership-based organisation with a network of over 50 organisations across NSW.

We aim to create a future without youth homelessness by campaigning for children and young people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. We work collaboratively with service providers, NGOs, government departments and community members to provide advocacy, sector development and policy advice, health projects, research, and services for children and young people.

## **About the Youth Homelessness Representative Council**

The Youth Homelessness Representative Council (YHRC) is a group of 10 young people (aged 18-25) with lived experience of youth homelessness. The YHRC meets quarterly to discuss and address issues that affect children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness. The YHRC is resourced and supported by Yfoundations to ensure that lived experience and expertise informs its role in supporting children and young people and the services that support them.

## **Context and purpose**

The YHRC has utilised its collective expertise to identify what constitutes a 'home' for a young person who has experienced homelessness.

This Position Paper has been developed by the YHRC to inform the roll-out of the NSW Government's new investment in social housing. It identifies the core requirements to ensure that this investment can most effectively respond to the needs of children and young people at various points in their journey out of homelessness and can provide a 'home' when it is most needed.

This position paper complements and can be read in conjunction with the YHRC Position Paper, 'Housing for young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness', dated August 2019.

# What does a 'home' look like for a young person?

Young people exiting homelessness have a range of requirements in order for the dwelling they are residing in to constitute a home. These requirements reflect the unique experiences of child and youth homelessness. The trauma associated with becoming homeless, coupled with not knowing where you will be living day to day, the sense of not having any control over the physical environment in which you reside and the experience of dislocation from family and community, are all critical factors that need to be taken into account in the design and delivery of housing for homeless youth.

Tenure is a concept that often differs for young people. Depending on their circumstances, a young person may consider a 'home' to be suitable accommodation that they can comfortably stay in for more than 6 to 12 months. What is more important to young people is the nature of that accommodation and the way it is provided.

Whilst permanent tenure is not necessarily the objective for young people, there is a clear need for a long-term commitment to resolving a young person's homelessness that gives them access to different housing products that supports them in their journey to establishing a home.

## The core requirements of a home for a young person that has experienced homelessness include the following:



### Empowering

Young people need a space they can call their own and that they feel safe and secure in. Young people need choices about the property or accommodation they are provided with. They need a sense of freedom to make decisions about their physical environment that reflect the same or similar rights as under a private rental agreement. This might include the ability to have photos on the wall or their own possessions, such as a mattress.



### Well located

Young people need homes that enable them to maintain a connection to their community and the support and services they require. As many young people cannot afford independent or private transport, they need homes that are within walking distance of public transport options so they can continue to engage with education and training, employment and training, medical appointments and other social and community activities.



### Affordable and comfortable

In order for housing or accommodation to feel like a home it needs to be affordable for a young person. Rents and other costs need to reflect the lower incomes of young people, including the lower rate of Youth Allowance as compared to Newstart. The cost of utilities, such as heating in winter and hot water, also needs to reflect the lower incomes of young people. As young people who have experienced homelessness often have few if any possessions, they need assistance to purchase furniture where that is not provided as part of the accommodation they are accessing.



### Good quality

Housing and accommodation for young people must meet minimum standards and be of good quality. A place that is sub-standard, that is damp or in disrepair or inadequately maintained will not feel like a home.



### Part of the community

In order to feel part of the community, a home for a young person must blend into the neighbourhood in which they live. Housing and accommodation for young people should not make them feel different to the other residents in their local community. It should enable them to build the local connections that are critical to recovering from the traumatic experience of homelessness.

## **How can the housing system, and housing providers, provide ‘homes’ for young people?**

There are a range of aspects of the way accommodation and housing is provided that can enhance or hinder a young person’s perception of it as a home.

### **Improving Support**

Support is a critical component of creating a home for a young person exiting homelessness. This support needs to be young person centred and focused on building the life skills that are critical to sustaining a home, such as cooking, cleaning and paying bills, as well as enabling and facilitating engagement with other essential services and supports. Support provision should be trauma informed and with an understanding of the young person’s specific needs and stage in the cycle of homelessness. Likewise, the nature of the life skills a young person needs to develop will change over time. The availability and provision of support should not be conditional on compliance with other requirements of the accommodation or housing in which a young person resides.

### **Understanding and non-judgmental**

Young people need understanding and a human approach to case management. They should not be judged on aspects of their situation that are outside of their control, such as their incapacity to access private rental accommodation where no affordable rentals exist or not having access to adequate mental health care when it is needed. Likewise, young people should not be judged or labelled simply because they have experienced homelessness. They should not, for example, automatically be viewed, or be made to feel like, criminals or that they present a risk to others, themselves or their accommodation facility. Case managers and other staff need access to ongoing training in trauma-informed practice.

### **Flexible**

Accommodation and support needs to be provided in a way that is flexible and that can adapt to the changing needs of young people. Making mistakes needs to be viewed as part of the process of a young person’s development and journey to independence. Service providers need to have less pre-determined guidelines and requirements that restrict their capacity to be flexible when it is needed.

### **Fair and consistent**

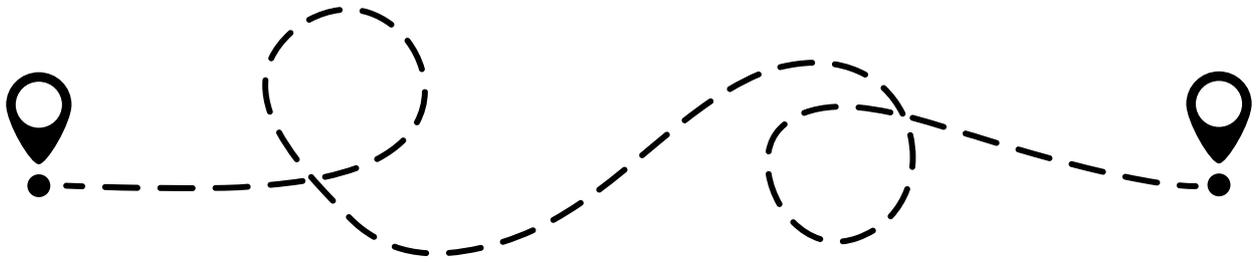
Young people need to be treated with fairness. There should be consistent access to housing and other supports. The funding and support available to young people leaving statutory care, for example, should also be available to a young person who has had similar life experiences and lacks familial support but was not taken into care.

### **Honest, transparent and accountable**

Service providers should be honest and transparent in their dealings with young people. Whilst being accountable is an important part of a young person’s development, service providers should also be accountable for their roles and actions. If promises made are not delivered or if other aspects of an accommodation or tenancy agreement, such as maintenance, are not complied with, there should be mechanisms in place for the resolution of those issues.

### **More coordinated**

There should be more coordination between different parts of the housing and homelessness systems. Unnecessary duplication in intake and reporting procedures can be re-traumatising for young people in crisis and should be eradicated wherever possible. Accommodation and housing should be better linked to other support services so those supports are easily wrapped around a young person as part of making the place they are living their home. There is a need for case managers to be pro-active in making these connections to assist young people to navigate what is very often a complex relationships between different service systems.



## **Pathways from homelessness to an independent home**

Young people need access to accommodation and housing options as they move through their journey out of homelessness and establish a home. Whilst the length of this journey will be different for each young person, what is important is that there is a long-term commitment to supporting their recovery from homelessness and that the right accommodation or housing option is available at the time it is needed.

### **Crisis accommodation**

Delivering a sense of safety, not a 'home'. Crisis accommodation is a critical first step in the transition from homelessness to independence. Whilst many of the same requirements apply, where provided for 3 to 6 months, crisis accommodation does not need to be viewed as a 'home' for young people exiting homelessness. Being in crisis accommodation should enable a young person to deal with the most urgent things in their life, like obtaining identification documents, accessing social security and resolving legal issues. It should also be an environment in which a young person can start to build their basic life skills, like cooking, cleaning and self-care. Being in crisis accommodation should also enable a young person to start planning for where they need to go next, be that to medium-term or transitional housing, or a permanent home, and to identify what they need to achieve to make that move. However, at present there are inadequate exit options for many young people who become stuck in a cycle of homelessness that includes repeat presentations to crisis services.

One of the most important objectives of crisis accommodation should be to enable a young person to feel safe. However, in an environment where there is no place for a young person to move onto, this objective can rarely be fully achieved.

### **Medium-term and transitional accommodation**

When delivered well, medium-term and transitional accommodation that is provided for 2 to 5 years is where a young person can establish a 'home' and start building their home of the future.

Where this housing is empowering, well located, affordable, of good quality and integrated into a community, where support is available and providers are understanding, flexible, consistent, fair and accountable, a young person can flourish and build the skills and resilience for a future free of homelessness. Having a medium-term or transitional home provides the stability needed by a young person to establish lasting community connections and the life skills critical to sustaining a long-term, tenancy whether that be in the private rental market or in social housing. Support in medium-term and transitional accommodation needs to focus on the life-skills needed to establish and sustain a home.

### **Long-term independent housing**

Independent living is the end goal of the homelessness and housing systems. Depending on their needs, for some this will be achieved within a shorter period of time than for others.

Young people need access to a range of independent living options. Whilst some young people may need to access social housing in the future, this is not the inevitable end point for children and young people that experience homelessness. Young people that have a positive and effective experience of the transition from homelessness to a long-term home can, and do, establish their independent home in the private housing market.

