



Manifesto for the 2022 Assembly Election

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The coronavirus pandemic has deeply impacted society. With people required to stay at home on public health grounds, the importance of having access to safe, good-quality and genuinely affordable housing was starkly illustrated. For too many people in our society, having a home remains out of reach. Tragically, tens of thousands of households are experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless with all of the personal, social and economic consequences this entails.

Before the Covid pandemic arrived, increasing housing pressures were already evident. Ten years ago, the waiting list for social housing stood at around 34,500 households.¹ In March 2021, this figure stood at almost 44,000 households.² Around half of these households (22,200) are defined as statutorily homeless by the Housing Executive (known as Full Duty Applicants).³ These figures only reflect those who have come forward to the Housing Executive for assistance. It is well known that many others do not. However, more people who were perhaps “hidden” before are starting to come forward. The number of households in temporary accommodation has increased by an incredible 65% over the last two and a half years.⁴ The pandemic is undoubtedly a contributory factor.

The Covid pandemic has accelerated trends which were already evident to those working in the homelessness sector. The next Assembly mandate will be pivotal in seeking to help society recover from the impact of the pandemic. Without question, the challenges in the areas of housing and homelessness are daunting. However, we believe positive, transformative change is possible. The right policies, legislation and operational practices along with sufficient resources can make a real difference in preventing and reducing homelessness.

As the representative body for the homelessness sector, we have engaged with our members to determine what changes are needed to turn this crisis around.⁵ This document outlines a number of commitments we would like to see adopted in the manifestos of political parties in the next elections to the NI Assembly.

We call on political parties to commit to the following:

- 1. A standalone, specific housing outcome in the Programme for Government 2022-2027 with emphasis on the prevention and reduction of homelessness.**
- 2. Reforming homelessness legislation to**
 - **Strengthen protections for those experiencing homelessness and allow earlier interventions to prevent homelessness occurring**
 - **Introduce a statutory duty requiring Executive Departments to work together to prevent and reduce homelessness.**
- 3. Ending rough sleeping.**
- 4. Ensuring everyone at risk of homelessness gets the support needed to prevent it happening.**
- 5. Increasing the Supporting People budget to ensure people have access to the right type of support they need when they need it.**

- 6. Increasing funding and resources towards an expansion of 'Housing First'.**
- 7. Ensuring people with lived experience of homelessness are at the heart of policy development and the design of services.**
- 8. Introducing multi-year budgets to allow for long-term planning and delivery of homelessness services.**
- 9. Increasing investment for new social and genuinely affordable housing.**
- 10. Reforming the private rental sector to ensure it is fit for purpose.**

A standalone, specific housing outcome in the Programme for Government 2022-2027 with emphasis on the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

If we are to prevent and reduce homelessness, we need to make tackling the issue a top priority for government. One key way to ensure this would be for the next NI Executive to include a standalone, specific housing outcome which emphasises the prevention and reduction of homelessness in the Programme for Government. While a commitment was made in the New Decade, New Approach deal which restored the devolved institutions in January 2020 to include such an outcome, the draft Programme for Government produced in the current mandate did not include it to the deep disappointment of many working in the housing and homelessness services.⁶ Including a specific, standalone outcome with relevant indicators would see housing outcomes as one of the key measures by which the success or failure of the NI Executive would be judged. This would help to focus minds, drive collaborative working and deliver positive change in this area.

Commit to reforming the homelessness legislation to:

- Strengthen protections for those experiencing homelessness and allow earlier interventions to prevent homelessness occurring.**
- Introduce a statutory duty requiring Executive Departments to work together to prevent and reduce homelessness.**

The main legislation governing homelessness in this jurisdiction needs to be fundamentally reviewed. The Housing (NI) Order 1988 sets out the duties and obligations of the Housing Executive towards people who become homeless or are threatened with homelessness. In neighbouring jurisdictions, there has been substantial and progressive changes to similar legislation as well as the introduction of new legislation. For example, in England and Wales the law has changed to have more emphasis on reducing and preventing homelessness and in Scotland the distinction between 'priority' and 'non-priority' need has been removed. While legislative reform alone will not solve our homelessness crisis, it can provide better legal protection for those experiencing homelessness and ultimately lead to better outcomes.

One crucial measure that would need to be included is a statutory duty to require Executive Departments to work together. Unfortunately, siloed thinking and ways of working within government departments have had a negative impact on homelessness. However, the Covid pandemic has illustrated the difference effective interdepartmental working can make. A legal duty to work together would have a positive impact on homelessness service users and service providers. It could help

pave the way for more joint commissioning of services to achieve shared goals and to better meet people's needs.

Ending rough sleeping

Homelessness in Northern Ireland does not primarily manifest in the form of rough sleeping.⁷ This is in contrast to many other towns and cities across these islands which see considerable numbers sleeping rough. However, it remains the case that hundreds of individuals in society do sleep rough each year with all of the consequences this can have for their health and wellbeing. One person who feels like they have no alternative but to sleep rough is one person too many. A firm commitment from the NI Executive to end rough sleeping through ensuring support is available to anyone at risk would put us on a firm footing to eliminating rough sleeping here.

Ensure everyone at risk of homelessness gets the support needed to prevent it happening.

Preventing homelessness from happening in the first place is infinitely better than responding to it after it happens. As has been amply evidenced, homelessness can have devastating impacts for those who experience it in terms of health and wellbeing.⁸ Homelessness also comes with significant costs to society as a whole in terms of lost potential for those experiencing it and the costs for public services to assist those who find themselves homeless. Investment in early interventions which prevent homelessness can make a significant difference for those at risk of it as well as saving money for the public purse. Well-planned and sustainable investment in early interventions such as counselling and mediation services; advice services; services to assist asylum seekers and refugees who are at risk of homelessness; education and training programmes for those experiencing homelessness and staff in the homelessness sector; awareness raising; mental health services; specialist children and youth services; effective schools programmes; health interventions; employment support; and floating support services can pay dividends in terms of preventing homelessness. Strategies relevant to preventing homelessness adopted across Executive Departments need to link together alongside commissioning structures which facilitate preventative approaches. The causes of homelessness are complex and multi-faceted, so a variety of different flexible programmes and interventions are needed to tailor to the individual needs of those who are at risk. Key indicators should be introduced for statutory providers to allow for greater accountability around the prevention of homelessness.

Increasing the Supporting People budget to ensure people have access to the right type of support they need when they need it.

The Supporting People budget is one of the key funding streams for homelessness services operating here. The budget, whilst ringfenced in 2007, has not been increased since and was actually cut by 5% in 2018. This cut, on top of the failure to increase the funding, has led the budget to functionally erode by over 27% during this time period.⁹ Meanwhile, the needs of those experiencing homelessness have not abated. In fact, homelessness services are increasingly finding themselves supporting clients with very complex needs. There are reports that this has been exacerbated by Covid-19. Demand for services is extremely high and is projected to significantly

increase in the next decade. The Supporting People Needs Assessment conducted for the Housing Executive estimates that by 2030 there will be an undersupply of between 33 to 52% if the current supply of support remains as it is.¹⁰ Many service providers in the homelessness sector are struggling to recruit and retain staff due to cost pressures arising from the failure to increase this budget. The Supporting People budget is hugely important to the delivery of both accommodation based and floating support services. If we are serious about the continuation and future of quality supported homelessness services then the Supporting People budget must be increased.

Increasing funding and resources towards an expansion of 'Housing First'.

The international evidence in support of the use of 'Housing First' for those experiencing chronic homelessness is overwhelming.¹¹ As Pleace et al put it, "*Housing First is designed as an intensive case management service that supports people who have high and complex needs, with experience of homelessness, in their own independent housing. The service provides housing as soon as possible, without expecting someone to demonstrate that they are 'housing ready.'*"¹² 'Housing First' approaches are in use in this jurisdiction, but only on a relatively small scale. Expanding 'Housing First' is not a silver bullet to solve every issue around homelessness. However, it is one of the best interventions available for the cohort experiencing chronic homelessness and expanding its use would be a positive step forward.

The other strategic approach which should be considered is the use of 'housing-led' approaches in responding to homelessness. Housing-led "*designates a broad range of policies and services that prioritise the provision of stable housing to homeless households as the first action to take.*"¹³ Housing First is one housing led approach which is particularly effective for a relatively small cohort of households experiencing chronic homelessness. However, other housing-led approaches are available and can be effective for a wider group of households experiencing homelessness. For housing-led approaches to work, however, affordable and accessible housing is necessary.

Ensuring people with lived experience of homelessness are at the heart of policy development and design of services.

If we are to see homelessness prevented and reduced, those with lived experience need to be represented in policy development and service design. Their voices must be at the centre of our response to homelessness. Service user involvement can generate unique insights on policy and services which can lead to better approaches; can mutually enrich conversations with service providers and policymakers to develop better understanding; and can empower individuals who have experienced marginalisation. Sustained investment in the formation of a service user forum for those who have experienced homelessness would pay dividends.

Introducing multi-year budgets to allow for long-term planning and delivery of homelessness services.

Over the course of this Assembly mandate, budgets have operated on a single-year basis. This has led to major challenges in the planning, development and delivery of effective services in the

homelessness sector. Single-year budgets make it very difficult to plan for the future and can lead to inefficient spending of scarce resources. The homelessness sector needs a diversity of funding streams from a variety of Executive Departments which are commissioned and funded on a multi-year basis. Efforts to return to multi-year budgets need to continue in the next Assembly mandate and we urge all parties to commit to seeking the return of such budgets for the next term.

Increasing investment for new social and genuinely affordable housing.

The reality is that it is impossible to prevent or reduce homelessness without an adequate supply of housing. Even if we had the right legislation, policy and services in place, homelessness would not be prevented or reduced if there are not good-quality and genuinely affordable homes for people to live in. The social housing waiting list has grown by around 27% over the last decade and the trend looks set to continue without well-planned, consistent action and investment from the NI Executive. While additional investment from the Department for Communities in building social housing during this mandate has been welcome, it remains the case that social housing new starts and completions remain too low for the needs of households living here. The Department of Communities has moved to introduce a new fifteen-year housing supply strategy to be agreed by the Executive before the end of the 2017-2022 mandate.¹⁴ It will be critical for the Executive as a whole to implement this strategy with the requisite resources behind it to increase housing supply in a variety of tenures. Innovative policy solutions and investment which help households find suitable and crucially affordable accommodation for their needs will have a beneficial impact on the numbers at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This should include bringing more empty homes back in to use.¹⁵

Reforming the private rental sector to ensure it is fit for purpose.

During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Minister for Communities introduced the Private Tenancies Bill to bring in some much-needed reforms in the private rented sector.¹⁶ However, due to a lack of legislative time, this Bill has been described as the first step in a two-step legislative process of reform. For some households experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the private rented sector can be a housing option. However, the current regulatory and legislative framework in this area has failed to adequately support many people experiencing homelessness to access and sustain private rented accommodation on a sustainable basis. Early in the next mandate the Department for Communities should move to the second step in delivering reform in this sector. Much needed reforms around the regulatory framework for letting agents; fitness standards; landlord licensing; and oversight mechanisms need to be brought forward.

References

- ¹ Department for Communities, "Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2019-20 Section 3 Tables – Social Renting Sector", 17 December 2010, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/ni-housing-stats-19-20-tables3.ods> Table 3.5
- ² [AQW 18004/17-22](#)- Answered May 12, 2021, Keith Buchanan DUP, "To ask the Minister for Communities how many people on the homeless list are waiting housing allocation, broken down by constituency."
- ³ [AQW 18004/17-22](#)- Answered May 12, 2021, Keith Buchanan MLA, "To ask the Minister for Communities how many people on the homeless list are waiting housing allocation, broken down by constituency."
- ⁴ In August 2021, 3402 households were in temporary accommodation. In January 2019, the equivalent figure stood at 2065 households. This is an increase of 65% during this time period. Department for Communities, "Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin January - June 2021 Accompanying Tables", 16 September 2021, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/ni-homelessness-bulletin-jan-jun-2021-tables.ods> table 3.5
- ⁵ 'Homeless Connect' is the working name of 'Council for the Homeless (Northern Ireland)', registered charity in Northern Ireland (charity number 103325)
- ⁶ See Northern Ireland Office, 'New Decade, New Approach', January 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf p39 and Executive Office, "Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document", 25 January 2021, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/pfg-draft-outcomes-framework-consultation.pdf>
- ⁷ [Department for Communities](#), "2020 Rough Sleeping Count/Estimates"
- ⁸ "Long-term homelessness has significant impacts on health and well-being, with people experiencing chronic health conditions including cardiovascular and respiratory conditions, as well as mental health and substance-use disorders (Grech & Raeburn, 2018). People experiencing homelessness have greater morbidity and mortality rates than the general population and experience more co-morbidities than their housed counterparts (Lee et al., 2017). Alarmingly, there are marked differences in age at death between homeless and housed people. In the UK, for example, the average age of death of a single homeless male occurs at 47 years and 43 years in women. This is 30 years lower than the general population," Stacey Wilson, Andrea McCloughen, Jenny Parr and Debra Jackson, "If you are homeless you are welcome here": Social obligations for the homeless and socially disadvantaged," *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 2019;28:2721.
- ⁹ "In Northern Ireland... Supporting People funding has remained ringfenced and has therefore been protected to some extent from the cuts which have been made by local authorities in England, in particular since that ring fence was removed. This is not, however, to say that Supporting People funding in Northern Ireland has not fallen in real terms. Core funding has remained static for the past 10 years. Although in some years this has been supplemented by additional discretionary funding, 2017/2018 research on cost pressures showed that over the previous nine years the capping of the Northern Ireland Supporting People core grant amounted to a real term cut of 27%." See Nicola McCrudden, Mark Goldup, Tim Gray, John Palmer, Annie Field, Mia Rafalowicz-Campbell and Divya Krishnaswamy, "Strategic Review of Temporary Accommodation", October, 2020, <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/Homelessness/Strategic-Review-of-Temporary-Accommodation-2020.aspx?ext=> para 3.6.
- ¹⁰ "Projected increases in complexity of need, potential economic factors and the impact of Covid-19 are expected to create an increase in demand. As such, when looking at projections of unmet need, this indicative gap between supply and need is expected to further widen with an undersupply of 30-43% by 2023, and 33-52% in 2030 if current supply is maintained." Department for Communities, "Supporting People Strategic Needs Assessment", November 2020, 182.
- ¹¹ "The international expansion of Housing First has been driven in no small part by a rigorous body of evidence, including experimental studies conducted in multiple countries, of the effectiveness of Housing First in reducing homelessness." Thomas Byrne, Minda Huang, Richard Nelson and Jack Tsai, "Rapid rehousing for persons experiencing homelessness: a systematic review of the evidence", *Housing Studies*, 29 March 2021, 2.
- ¹² Nicholas Pleace, Isabel Baptista and Marcus Knutagård, "Housing First in Europe: An Overview of implementation, strategy and fidelity", Housing First Europe Hub, 2019, 10.
- ¹³ Alastair Roberts, "Housing rites: young people's experience of conditional pathways out of homelessness", *Housing Studies*, 2019, Volume 34, No 7, 1120.
- ¹⁴ Department for Communities, "Housing Supply Strategy: Call for Evidence", May 2021, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-housing-supply-strategy-call-for-evidence.pdf>
- ¹⁵ [AQW 24945/17-22](#)- Answered November 8, 2021, Mark Durkan MLA, "To ask the Minister of Finance how many houses stand empty in each constituency."
- ¹⁶ Northern Ireland Assembly, "Private Tenancies Bill", accessed 27 September 2021, <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/legislation/bills/executive-bills/session-2017-2022/2private-tenancies/private-tenancies-bill---as-introduced---full-print-version.pdf>



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