



Manifesto

for the 2023 Local Elections

Homeless Connect Manifesto

Local Government Election 2023

On Thursday, May 18, voters in Northern Ireland will go to the polls to elect four hundred and sixty-two local councillors to represent them across eleven councils. Local councils here make consequential decisions in a wide variety of areas such as community safety, planning, waste management and amenity provision.

Local Councils here indeed have fewer powers in the areas of housing and homelessness than councils in other parts of these islands. This has mainly been a consequence of the decision taken in the 1970s to introduce the Housing Executive which operates right across NI. Many of the powers related to housing and homelessness which councils held were transferred to the Housing Executive during that period.

However, it should be stressed that in several areas local councils can use their powers to help prevent and reduce homelessness in this society. This manifesto outlines eight specific asks in the areas of planning, consultation and coordination which, if implemented, would make a positive difference for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness here. The manifesto has been developed following consultation with Homeless Connect's Policy Forum which is made up of representatives of several of our member organisations.

We call on political parties to commit to the following:

- 1.** Ensuring local government services assist in **homelessness prevention**
 - Commit to conducting an **audit of council services** to assess how councils already contribute to homelessness prevention and to consider further actions that councils can take in this area.
 - Appoint a **'homelessness prevention lead'** in each council
- 2.** Ensuring **people with lived experience of homelessness** are at the heart of policy development and the design of services which impact them
- 3.** **Using planning powers** to ensure new social and genuinely affordable housing gets built where it is needed
- 4.** Enforcing the measures outlined in the **Private Tenancies Act 2022** to protect tenants
- 5.** **Including the homelessness sector** in policy development and marking the work it does
- 6.** Using the **powers of the Housing Council** to drive forward positive change
- 7.** Supporting and learning from the **'Complex Lives' Project**
- 8.** Working with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships to ensure **police adopt a compassionate response** to people experiencing homelessness

Ensuring local government services assist in homelessness prevention

It is well known and amply attested that experiencing homelessness can have devastating consequences for those who experience it. Homelessness can lead to negative consequences in terms of health, well-being and opportunities. It also has deleterious effects on wider society and can impose substantial costs on public services.

It is manifestly obvious that preventing homelessness before it happens is infinitely preferable to responding to it after the fact. As a society, we need to move from a reactive position of responding to homelessness after it happens to a proactive one of preventing homelessness upstream.

The first objective of the Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy for 2022-2027 is to "prioritise homelessness prevention." All levels of government, including local councils, have a role to play in helping to achieve this goal. We are aware that many councils run schemes which can and do assist in preventing homelessness. These can include funding

schemes to tackle food and fuel poverty; engaging in Multi-Agency Support Hubs focused on supporting vulnerable and marginalised groups with other relevant agencies; funding community networks; supporting social supermarkets; and providing support to migrants who have come to Northern Ireland.

There is no question that local councils here are, within the ambit of their powers, engaged in much valuable work which helps to prevent homelessness here. However, we believe that more can be done by councils in seeking to achieve this end. We have two constructive proposals which would make a positive difference:

We are calling on political parties to commit to:

1. Seeking an **audit of council services** to see what ways local councils already help to prevent homelessness and to consider further measures which could be taken to assist in efforts towards this end. We believe an audit could provide a benchmark for local councils in considering their role in preventing homelessness here. If multiple councils conducted an audit it would also allow for comparison between councils and **shared learning on approaches which can be taken to help to prevent homelessness.**

2. Seeking to ensure that a **homelessness prevention lead** is appointed in each council area. This individual would play a leading role in coordinating council services which help to prevent homelessness. They would further provide a **point of contact for the homelessness sector and other statutory bodies** to engage with in seeking to work with the council to prevent homelessness.

Ensure local government services assist in homelessness prevention.

ASK 1

HC Homeless Connect

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.

This applies to all levels of government, including local councils.

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.



Using planning powers to ensure new social and genuinely affordable housing gets built where it is needed

On 31 December 2022, 44,519 households in Northern Ireland were on the social housing waiting list. The list has grown by 70% since 2003 when 26,248 households were on the list. In 2003, around 4% of households living in Northern Ireland were on the list.³ This had risen to around 5.8% by 2022.⁴

Additionally, increasing numbers of households on the waiting list have homelessness status following assessment by the Housing Executive. On 1 December 2022, 25,613 households on the social housing waiting list had homelessness status- over half of the total list at that time.⁵ In 2013, the equivalent figure stood at 9,878.⁶ There has been an increase of 159.2% since 2013 in the number of households with homelessness status on the social housing waiting list.

By any estimation, these figures are shocking. Too many households in Northern Ireland are clearly unable to access good quality, affordable housing suitable to their needs through the social housing system. If this situation is to be turned around, we need every part of the housing and homelessness system to strain every sinew to see more social homes built.

Local Councils have a significant role to play in this effort because of their role in the planning system. As the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) point out,

“the Planning Act (NI) 2011 establishes that planning must secure the orderly and consistent development of land, working to do so in the public interest. Since 2015, councils have responsibility for the following key planning functions:

- **Local plan-making (Local Development Plan - LDP) – sometimes referred to as ‘forward planning’;**
- **Development management (excluding regionally significant applications)**
- **Planning enforcement⁷**

Local Development Plans adopted by councils should facilitate the building of additional social housing in sustainable communities. Different councils are at different stages in terms of the development of their plans, but we would submit that political parties should seek to ensure that all of the plans promote the delivery and effective management of additional social housing in their areas. It is well known that in some council areas, land availability has proven to be a constraint on the building of new social housing. Local Development Plans can make a valuable contribution to identifying suitable land for development.

Using planning powers to ensure new social and genuinely affordable housing gets built where it is needed

Planning Committees on local councils should scrutinise housing development proposals to ensure that they include affordable and social housing. Crucially, they should be willing to challenge applications which fail to include such housing. We are aware that some planning committees have been willing to challenge applications on these grounds.⁸

It is vital that councils seek to ensure the planning system seeks the common good of all citizens living in their local area, especially the vulnerable and marginalised such as people at risk of or experiencing homelessness

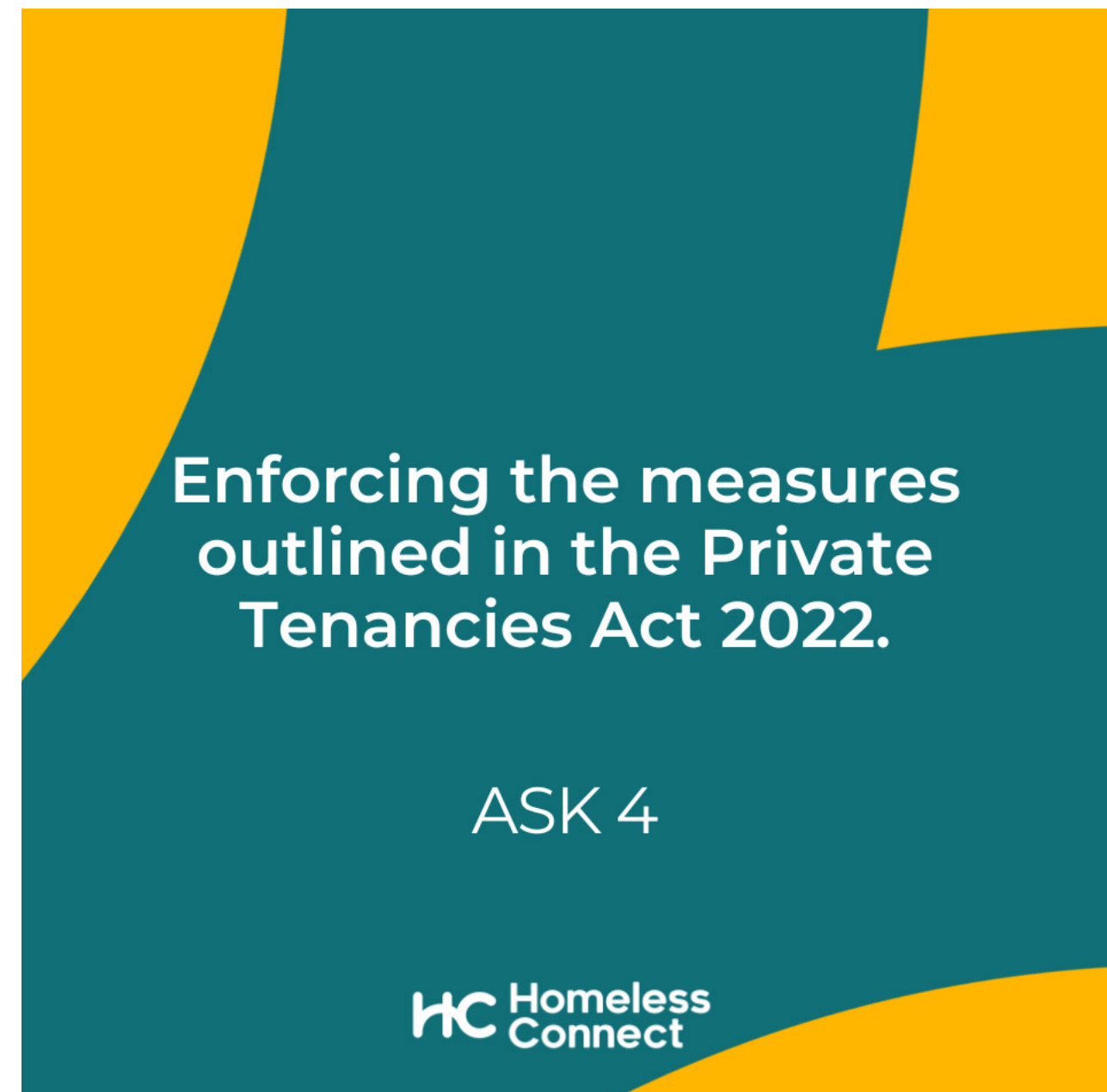


Enforcing the measures outlined in the Private Tenancies Act 2022 to protect tenants

During the 2017-2022 mandate, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed the **Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Act 2022**.

While this Act did not go as far as we had called for due to a lack of legislative time, it did introduce some important reforms to **protect tenants in the Private Rented Sector and make the sector more accessible**.⁹ The first phase of commencement for this legislation was due to take place on January 1 2023 but has now been postponed to April 1.¹⁰

For some households experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the private rented sector can be a housing option. However, it is widely acknowledged that the current regulatory and legislative framework in this area has failed to adequately support many people experiencing homelessness to access and maintain private rented accommodation on a sustainable basis. While the Private Tenancies Act improves the legislation in place, substantial difficulties remain with the legislative framework in this area.



Enforcing the measures outlined in the Private Tenancies Act 2022 to protect tenants

It is not within the gift of local councils to introduce further reforms to the law governing the Private Rented Sector.

However, it does fall to local councils to enforce the provisions set out in the Private Tenancies Act through their enforcement powers.

Without adequate and strong enforcement, the passage of the legislation through the Assembly will not make any difference to the lives of tenants.

We call on local councillors from all political parties to scrutinise the enforcement action of councils.

It is sadly a regular occurrence for organisations in the homelessness sector to hear that tenants either do not know what their rights are; do not know where to go for help; or if they do know their rights, feel they cannot exercise them for fear of being evicted. It is imperative councils take action against landlords who breach the measures introduced through the Private Tenancies Act 2022.

We are aware of the fact that the Department of Communities has not granted additional funding to councils to assist with the enforcement of the new provisions.

While we support efforts to obtain additional funding for this purpose, we call on local councils to seek to enforce this new legislation as far as they can within the constraints of the resources they have.¹¹

Include the homelessness sector in policy development and mark the work it does

We would submit that local councils should look to include the voices of the homelessness sector in policy development and design and recognise the valuable work of the sector here.

We are aware that many local councils work fruitfully with the homelessness sector in a wide variety of ways including awareness-raising and fundraising. It is important that these relationships are maintained, deepened and widened over the next council mandate. The sector has invaluable expertise which can assist in policy development and the delivery of services in local communities.

We want to particularly commend Derry City and Strabane Council for their initiative in holding a Homeless Heroes Awards during Homelessness Awareness Week 2022. This was an excellent example of a local council taking the lead in celebrating and raising awareness of the hugely valuable work of the sector in their local area. **We would recommend that other councils consider similar initiatives in the months and years ahead.**¹²



Use the powers of the Housing Council to drive forward positive change

When the Housing Executive was formed in the 1970s, a “Housing Council” made up of representatives from Northern Ireland’s local councils was set up. The “district chairman” of each council, or a nominated representative from each council, has the right to attend the council.¹³

According to the Housing (NI) Order 1981, the Council has the power to consider “any matter affecting housing” which they believe should be considered and can “make recommendations to the Department or the Executive concerning any matter which it has considered.”¹⁴

The Housing Council provides an avenue through which local councillors can positively influence housing and homelessness policy here. In recent years, while the council has been meeting regularly, it has had a relatively low profile.

We would urge political parties to consider how they can use the council to seek to constructively work with the Housing Executive and the wider homelessness sector to drive forward positive change in terms of reducing and preventing homelessness here.

The Housing Council may also provide a forum through which councils can seek to share learning on measures that local councils can take to assist in preventing and reducing homelessness.



Supporting and learning from the 'Complex Lives' Project

In the 2019-23 local council mandate, Belfast City Council has played a central and leading role in the development and implementation of a new approach to responding to the needs of people experiencing chronic homelessness in their area.

The Council, utilising its Community Planning powers, has sought “to mobilise a whole system approach to supporting vulnerable/ at risk people caught in a vicious cycle of homelessness, addiction to alcohol and/or drugs, poor mental and physical health, and offending behaviour, in Belfast.¹⁵ This approach, known as “Complex Lives”, has been utilised in other parts of the United Kingdom such as Doncaster in England.

In embarking on this venture in partnership with a wide range of statutory and voluntary sector partners, the Council has faced considerable headwinds around funding resulting

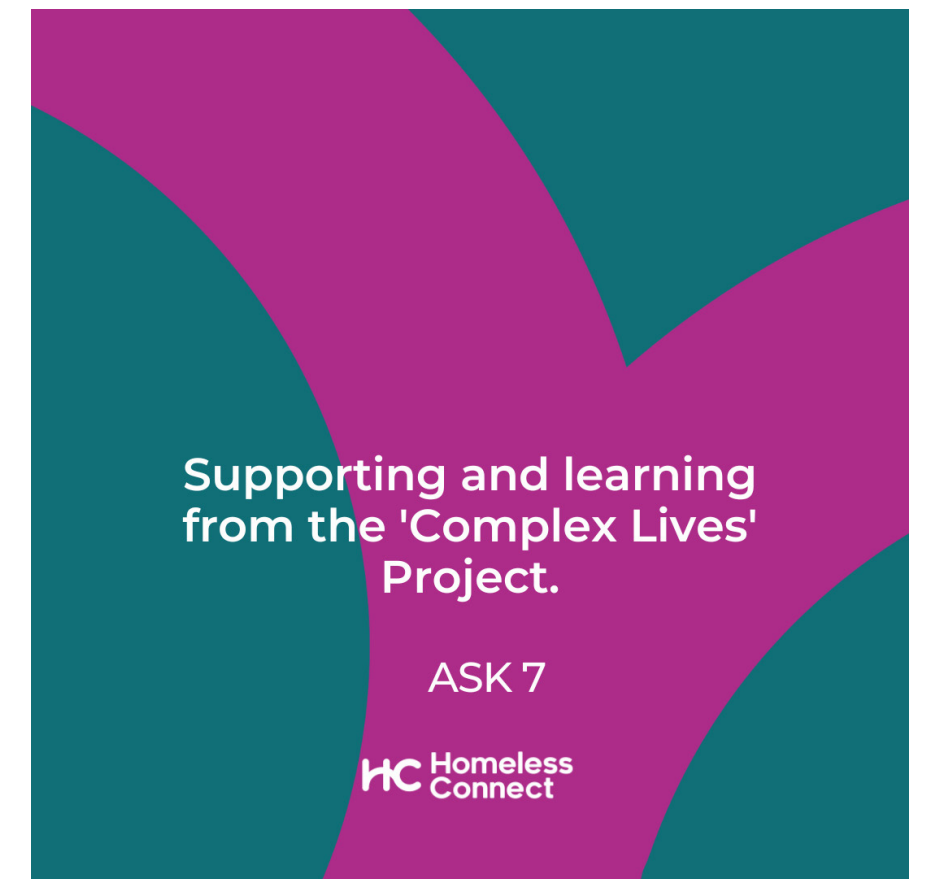
from the absence of a budget. This situation has arisen due to the current paralysis surrounding the devolved institutions.

Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that the introduction of ‘Complex Lives’ has made a valuable contribution to improving coordination between the statutory and voluntary sectors in trying to provide support and find sustainable solutions for this vulnerable group of people.

We urge political parties standing for election to Belfast City Council to commit to supporting the Complex Lives project in Belfast during the next Council mandate and to strive to seek a sustainable funding model for it going forward.

It is important to note that the lessons arising from the development and implementation of ‘Complex Lives’ are

not only of relevance to Belfast City Council. Similar issues impact other council areas in Northern Ireland (particularly Derry City and Strabane Council). In our estimation, every council across NI can and should learn from how Belfast City Council has played a leading role in facilitating coordination between the relevant statutory and voluntary sector partners for the benefit of people experiencing homelessness.



Working with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships to ensure police adopt a compassionate response to people experiencing homelessness

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) were introduced under the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. There are eleven PCSPs across NI, operating in each council area. The Partnerships are made up of both local councillors and independent members in each area.

PCSPs have a wide variety of functions including consulting with and engaging with local communities on policing and community safety; identifying and prioritising particular issues related to crime and community safety in different council areas; monitoring the performance of police; and seeking to deliver a reduction in crime and an enhancement in community safety.¹⁶

Like other marginalised groups, people experiencing homelessness for a wide variety of reasons find themselves engaging with the PSNI. From our work engaging with people with lived experience of homelessness, we have heard of both positive and negative accounts of this engagement. We have heard of PSNI officers who have provided a compassionate response and sought to support people who have been rough

sleeping by signposting them to services that can help them. We also know that PSNI officers have literally saved people's lives through the application of Naloxone after an overdose.

However, we are also aware of situations where PSNI officers have taken a more heavy-handed and punitive approach which can be counterproductive. This can include the use of the 1824 Vagrancy Act against individuals experiencing homelessness.

It is of course not for the PSNI to determine what the laws operating in this society are. However, the way in which the PSNI go about their work can make a real difference.

Adopting a compassionate response to people experiencing homelessness will lead to better outcomes both for the individual concerned and for wider society in terms of community safety.

We are aware of PCSPs engaging in constructive and positive projects in partnership with organisations in the homelessness sector. This has previously included the provision of funding for specific projects.

Working with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships to ensure police adopt a compassionate response to people experiencing homelessness

We also know that in different parts of Northern Ireland, good relationships between the PSNI and organisations within the homelessness sector have been built.

We would like to see those relationships develop where they have already been formed and built where they do not currently exist.

We would submit that political parties standing for election should commit to using PCSPs to ensure that the PSNI right across this society adopts a compassionate response to people experiencing homelessness. Specifically, we would put forward the following proposals to achieve this end:

- Proactively seek the views of people with lived experience of homelessness and the wider homelessness sector on policing in local areas
- Ensuring relevant PCSP initiatives reach out to the homelessness sector and those the sector seeks to support
- Ensuring police officers have an understanding of homelessness and know which local services to signpost people experiencing homelessness to if they need support



We urge political parties to join us on our journey to end homelessness.



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homelessconnect.org