



Briefing

Communities

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homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Communities Committee Briefing

Introduction

1. Homeless Connect has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland since 1983. As a membership body, we represent organisations working with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and support people with lived experience of homelessness through our services: Home Starter Pack, Lived Experience Groups and FareShare NI.¹

2. Homeless Connect is acutely aware of the deepening housing and homelessness crisis this society is facing. For several years now, the picture has been gradually deteriorating. Three statistics starkly highlight the reality of the situation:

- The number of households on the Social Housing Waiting list assessed as having Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status under the homelessness legislation, the Housing (NI) Order 1988, has dramatically increased over the last decade. In March 2013 there were 12,341 households on the list. By September 2023, this figure had **increased by 122% to 27,566 households**.²
- The number of households living in temporary accommodation (TA) has more than doubled over the last five years. In January 2019, 2,065 households were living in TA. This **has risen by 121%** to 4,556 households in January 2024. **The number of children living in TA has increased by 99%** over the same period, going from 2,433 in January 2019 to 4,844.³
- While the numbers in housing need have grown, **the number of social housing allocations has fallen**. In 2002/03, 12,150 allocations were made including 8,766 allocations to new applicants.⁴ By 2022/3, this had fallen to 8,218 allocations including 5,716 allocations to new applicants.⁵ This is a fall of 32.4% in total allocations and 34.8% in allocations to new applicants.

3. These statistics are merely illustrative of the growing challenges. **Behind these statistics are tens of thousands of people unable to access housing are living with the uncertainty and anxiety of homelessness**. The consequences go far beyond the households impacted but ripple out to wider society. Several factors have contributed to this situation developing as it has which go back to decisions made over decades as well as wider societal changes. Rather than going over the past, in this short briefing, we are going to highlight five policies which, if implemented, could make a real difference going forward.

Key asks

Area	Ask
Housing, Homelessness and Government	Increasing housing supply and ending homelessness must be a top priority for the NI Executive.
Supporting Staff, Supporting People	Increasing funding to the Supporting People Programme by at least the rate of inflation; adequately funding homelessness prevention; and multi-year budgets.
Shifting to a Housing First Culture	Supporting and investing in the expansion of Housing First.
Preventing Homelessness	Legislative reform in the area of homelessness to introduce a duty to prevent homelessness and require government departments to work together.
Housing Supply	Pressing for the NI Executive to collectively adopt the Housing Supply Strategy and ensuring it is adequately resourced.

Housing, Homelessness and Government

4. Homeless Connect has been calling for the introduction of a specific, standalone housing outcome for several years.⁶ If an outcomes-based Programme for Government (PfG) is brought forward, it must include a standalone, specific housing outcome with emphasis on the prevention and reduction of homelessness. If any other form of framework is proposed, **it is imperative that housing and homelessness are considered as a key priority**. Access to suitable, affordable and good quality housing is a foundational bedrock for every person to live a flourishing life. Without suitable housing, it is very difficult to achieve goals in areas such as education, health, employment, welfare and justice to name only a few. We do not believe that housing and homelessness should be submerged or elided with other priority areas considering its fundamental and foundational nature. We know that representatives of all of the current Executive parties as well as the Opposition have outlined their support for a standalone outcome in the past. We hope that the Communities Committee will collectively push to ensure this is included in any PfG which is brought forward.

Supporting Staff, Supporting People

5. Homelessness services do incredible work to support people they are working with. While there are people and families in services with low support needs, there are also people struggling with mental health and/or addiction issues. This is a very challenging time, as the sector as a whole is struggling itself. Research we commissioned in 2022, funded by the Housing Executive, conducted by two Queens University Belfast researchers highlighted how homelessness services are struggling with staffing issues. The key findings from the research include:

- **Policy: The lack of funding and investment in the sector and the need for improved support infrastructures.** “The data highlights that the lack of financial investment in the homelessness sector is a fundamental challenge. One of the key findings regarding the issue of funding was the widely held view that the current funding levels are completely inadequate... there remains great need for policy level commitment and improved policy and legal supporting infrastructure. For example, whereby there is interdepartmental commitment, legislative underpinnings, and formal pathways connecting the homelessness and statutory sectors. These policy level commitments and supporting frameworks appear to be essential if the sector is to receive the recognition, investment and support it deserves.” (p81-2)
- **Practice: Staffing levels, recruitment and terms and conditions.** “Key areas of concern noted in this research include issues regarding the terms and conditions of employment (in particular, remuneration), the need for further professionalisation of the sector, and staffing level challenges, particularly regarding recruitment and retention of staff... The dissatisfaction with pay and the Ts & Cs afforded to staff more generally poses a very real threat to the sustainability of the sector. Staff expressed how they feel both disheartened and disrespected by the level of pay they receive for the work they undertake... Insufficient staffing levels will, undoubtedly, pose a serious threat to the sustainability of the sector.” (p82)
- **Societal issues: External factors exacerbating the challenging nature of the work.** “The social, emotional, psychological, and medical needs of the service users was one of the most commonly cited challenges expressed by the research participants... staff also discussed the abuse and aggression they face in their day-to-day dealings with service users. The result of which has a subsequent impact on staff’s own mental health and sickness.” (p83)
- **Psychological/wellbeing: Staff satisfaction and wellbeing.** “This research points to the severely detrimental impact working in this sector can have on its employees and, as such, points to necessary actions to protect wellbeing for the sake of the employees and that of the success and sustainability of the sector... It appears that the poor wellbeing of staff is exacerbated by a number of factors: The ever-increasing challenge of the work environment (complex needs of service users, abuse etc.); The lack of time for staff to look after themselves; Poor formal mental health support...; Inadequate sick leave and holiday entitlement.” (p84)

6. While this research was published eighteen months ago, unfortunately the situation has only worsened since then with the sector under even more pressure as the number of people who need housing support has increased. **If we are going to prevent and reduce homelessness, a properly resourced homelessness sector is crucial.** As the summary of the research set out above notes, it is not solely about financial resources but this is at the core of the difficulties the sector is facing. Unfortunately, **homelessness services have been underfunded for well over a decade.** The two key funding streams for homelessness services here are the Supporting People Programme (SP) and the homelessness services budget. In 2022/23, 39.6% of the SP budget is given to organisations

providing support via the homeless thematic group.⁷ As departmental officials have outlined to the Committee, the Department for Communities has only been able to protect the SP budget in cash terms.⁸ The consequence of this has been that the baseline for SP has not risen with inflation. In only one year has the baseline increased since 2007- in 2022/3- and even in that year it did not rise to the level of inflation.

7. The failure to provide inflationary uplifts has very real consequences for these services and for the people they look to support. **Providers are struggling to recruit and retain staff. Some providers are barely able to pay above the minimum wage and are simply unable to invest in the training and support they know their staff need due to a lack of resources.** Staff in the homelessness sector are in the main highly committed people who often view their work in vocational terms- however, they are being stretched to the limit by the failure to invest in homelessness services.

8. The Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP), co-chaired by Homeless Connect and NIFHA, recently surveyed independent providers on the impact the increase in the minimum wage from April 1 will have. The minimum wage increased for people aged 21 and over from £10.42 to £11.44. No additional funding has been provided thus far to organisations to cover the increasing cost this imposes. Responses were received from 23 providers across the four thematic areas covered by the programme. **91% of the providers indicated that they were concerned about the impact of the minimum wage increase on their budgets.** When asked whether their organisation would be able to afford the minimum wage increase 9% indicated that they would not be able to do so while a further 26% were unsure. 96% were concerned about what the impact of a further rise in the minimum wage would be in 2025/6. This comment from one of the providers summarises the views of many organisations who responded to the survey: **“The lack of increases in Supporting People funding in recent years has had a significant negative impact on our services. We are now gravely concerned about the sustainability of the accommodation service. As well as minimum wage increases there is also the impact of general inflation. The situation is not tenable.”**

9. Requests to increase the baseline funding for SP in line with inflation have consistently been rejected. Again and again, other areas across the Executive departments have been deemed to be a higher priority. In our view, these effective real terms cuts must end. The SP programme needs at least an inflationary increase to its baseline funding every year. One off, non-recurring payments such as was made at the end of this financial year, while helpful, do not assist with improving the terms and conditions of staff in the medium term.⁹ As departmental officials have acknowledged to the Committee, the Department “have concerns moving forward about the ability of some of those providers to continue and for services to be sustainable.”¹⁰ We echo those concerns. **We would flag to the Committee that if any services have to hand back contracts due to the lack of financial investment that this will have significant knock-on effects both for people in need of these services and for NIHE.**

10. Exacerbating the funding challenges has been the lack of a multi-year budget for the NI Executive. Northern Ireland has not had a multi-year budget since 2015. The single-year budgets we have been

operating with make planning services to respond to multi-faceted issues like homelessness incredibly challenging. It can lead to inefficient and wasteful spending at a time when the Executive is facing increasing financial challenges. We are aware that many providers are operating with considerable uncertainty which flows from the operation of a single-year budget. We are aware that in the immediate future that a multi-year budget will not be possible until the next UK Government spending review, but we would strongly urge the Committee to press for a multi-year budget at the earliest possible opportunity.

11. In summary, **this sector needs properly resourced if it is going to play the vital role this society needs it to play in preventing and reducing homelessness.** We urge the Committee to do everything in its power to ensure that funding for homelessness service providers is increased in 2024/5 and beyond. Failure to increase investment will only exacerbate all of the problems which the research starkly highlighted.

Shifting to a Housing First Culture

12. 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. NIHE is currently conducting "independent research to assist with the scaling up of Housing First and create a Northern Ireland Scale model including Staffing; Property requirements; Timescales and; associated costs and comparative analysis with existing portfolio, identifying value for money potential as appropriate."¹³ **We strongly support efforts to scale up the use of Housing First.** This approach is not a silver bullet which will address all of the issues we are facing around housing and homelessness, but it is a key intervention for households experiencing chronic homelessness which can make a transformative difference on the ground.

13. It is pertinent to mention a related but distinct programme which has developed in recent years in NI: the Complex Lives programme. We fully support the programme and commend Belfast City Council for the leadership they have shown in driving forward progressive change. The programme, even in these early stages, has already started to bear fruit in terms of positive impacts on the ground. The Complex Lives model illustrates what effective wraparound support involving multiple statutory partners for people experiencing chronic homelessness can look like. We know that those involved in the project would- rightly- say that there remains a long way to go and that one of the key issues they face remains provision of suitable, affordable housing for those they are working with. For the Housing First model to work, it must involve the kind of wraparound support which is being co-ordinated by the Complex Lives Programme. Housing First has potential to have a transformative effect for people experiencing chronic homelessness here. However, this will only be achievable if it is invested in and properly resourced.

Preventing Homelessness

14. Our legislative framework for homelessness, the Housing (NI) Order 1988, needs to be reconsidered. England, Scotland and Wales have reviewed and fundamentally reformed their homelessness legislation with the goal of **shifting the emphasis to preventing homelessness** before it happens rather than reacting to it after the fact.¹⁴ NI can learn from what has been done in other jurisdictions to develop our own approach. Such an approach would need to include a statutory duty to co-operate between Executive Departments so that siloed ways of working can be broken down.

15. In considering legislative approaches to preventing homelessness, we would particularly like to draw the attention of the Committee to the Housing (Scotland) Bill recently brought forward to the Scottish Parliament.¹⁵ Part five of the Bill includes a section focused on homelessness prevention. As our sister representative body in Scotland note, this part of the Bill “contains new ‘Ask and Act’ duties which make preventing homelessness a shared responsibility across the public sector. The overarching policy objective of the homelessness prevention measures is to shift the focus away from crisis intervention and towards prevention activity which can eliminate the need for a household to go through the trauma of homelessness in the first place, but without diluting the existing rights for people who are homeless.”¹⁶ The bodies which are subject to the duty include health boards, local authorities, Police Scotland, Registered Social Landlords and Scottish Minister’s functions where they relate to prisons and young offenders institutions amongst others.

16. In and of itself, legislative reform will not prevent and reduce homelessness. However, **effective legislation can assist in the goal of helping this society to take the journey it needs to take if we are to prevent and reduce homelessness.** We would urge Committee members to press the Department for Communities to launch a consultation on reform of the homelessness legislation in this society.

Housing Supply

17. **It is impossible to prevent homelessness without an adequate supply of suitable, affordable and high-quality housing.** An adequate supply of such housing is a necessary condition to prevent and reduce homelessness. The issues which cause homelessness do go beyond bricks and mortar. However, you still need the bricks and mortar if you are to prevent and reduce homelessness. The relentless growth in the number of households on the social housing waiting list referenced above and the skyrocketing in rents in the private rented sector¹⁷ starkly highlight the difficulties we have with housing supply. In the 2017 to 2022 Assembly mandate, the Department for Communities developed through an extensive consultation process a Housing Supply Strategy. The adoption of this Strategy, accompanied by suitable resources, is imperative.¹⁸

References

- ¹ See <https://homelessconnect.org/> for more details.
- ² See <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/deposited-papers/2022/dp1743.pdf>, Housing Executive data for up to date FDA figure.
- ³ Department for Communities, "[Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin July-December 2023](#)", 14 March 2024, see tables 3.5 and 3.3
- ⁴ See Department for Social Development, *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2002/3*, 2003, 43.
- ⁵ Department for Communities, "[Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin October to December 2023](#)", 22 February 2023, accessed 19 March 2024, see table 2.1.
- ⁶ See Homeless Connect, "[Submission to the Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation](#)," 15 Jan 2021, accessed 19 Mar 2024
- ⁷ At least part of the spending on the young people thematic group would be perceived as being on homeless services as well. See Housing Executive, "[Supporting People Annual Report 2022-23](#)", December 2023, accessed March 2024, 6.
- ⁸ See comments of Mark O'Donnell at the Committee on 29 February 2024: "You know traditionally you've heard us say despite budget cuts everywhere else, we've protected the budget for Supporting People but we've by and large, we've only really been able to protect it and in cash terms and it's subject to the same pay and price pressure as everybody else."
- ⁹ Department for Communities, "[Minister announces a further £3m for Supporting People programme](#)", 6 March 2024.
- ¹⁰ See comments of Gillian Martin at the Communities Committee on March 7.
- 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 Pleace, Baptista and Knutagård, "Housing First in Europe: An Overview of implementation, strategy and fidelity", Housing First Europe Hub, 2019, 10.
- ¹³ Housing Executive, "[Ending Homelessness Together: Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 Year 2 Action Plan](#)", January 2023, 5
- ¹⁴ For an excellent summary of the reforms made in England, Scotland and Wales, see Suzanne Fitzpatrick & Liz Davies "The 'ideal' homelessness law: balancing 'rights centred' and 'professional-centred' social policy", *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 43:2, 2021, 175-197.
- ¹⁵ Scottish Parliament, "[Housing \(Scotland\) Bill](#)", 27 March 2024.
- ¹⁶ Homeless Network Scotland, "[Housing \(Scotland\) Bill published](#)", 27 March 2024.
- ¹⁷ "Average private rent in Northern Ireland increased by 9.3% in the 12 months to December 2023, down from 9.5% in November 2023. This was lower than the record-high annual rise of 10.0% in March 2023, which was the highest annual rise since this series began in 2016." See Office for National Statistics, [Private Rent and House Prices](#), UK: March 2024, 20 March 2024,
- ¹⁸ Department for Communities, [Housing Supply Strategy](#), 8 December 2021



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