



Submission

Draft Programme for Government

November 2024

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Response to Consultation on the Draft Programme for Government

Introduction

Homeless Connect has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland since 1983. As an umbrella body, we represent over forty organisations working in the independent homelessness sector. We also support people with lived experience of homelessness to have their voices heard. We provide services that directly benefit people and communities, helping to sustain tenancies and diverting surplus nutritious food to charities and other not for profit groups.

Our response focuses on the areas where we have expertise, so consequently we do not provide comment on every aspect of the draft programme. The response has been informed by input from members of our public policy forum; from input provided at a seminar we held at our NI Homelessness Conference on October 10; and by meetings with people with lived experience of homelessness including our 'Voices for Change' group.¹

Consultation Questions

1. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?
 - a. Organisation

About you- Organisation

Please provide your organisation's contact details below:

Your organisation name and email address is collected for validation purposes.

1. Organisation name: (Required)

Homeless Connect

Organisation email address: (Required)

mark.baillie@homelessconnect.org

2. Which of the following best describes the sector you work in?

This will assist us in monitoring the range of respondents the consultation has reached.

Charity

3. Can we contact you to discuss your response to this consultation? This may be to follow up any specific points we need to clarify. (Required)

Yes

4. Can we contact you in future about the draft Programme for Government?

For example, to provide you with a link to the results of this consultation, to inform you of further consultations or provide updated information on the Programme for Government. (Required)

Yes

5. To support transparency in our decision-making process, we will publish a summary of the consultation feedback on the PfG webpage. This will sometimes include the responses themselves and may mention names of the responding organisation (if applicable). However, names of individuals responding on a personal capacity will only be published where consent has been given. Please note we will not publish contact details. (Required)

Yes

Doing What Matters Today: 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority

Regarding this priority, we would note the importance of work and a thriving economy to both preventing homelessness before it happens and supporting people out of homelessness. Notably, some members of our 'Voices for Change' group highlighted this as being one of the most important priorities out of the nine put forward in terms of preventing and reducing homelessness.

For a wide range of reasons, including elements of the design of the welfare system, people experiencing homelessness can face a range of barriers to employment. A particular barrier which we are aware of from some of our member organisations is the cliff edge people living in temporary accommodation face in taking up a job due to the impact this would have on their access to benefits such as housing benefit.² In October 2023, eligible weekly rent levels for the purposes of housing benefit in homelessness temporary accommodation ranged between £145 and £332.51. This level of cost can be an active disincentive for people living in temporary accommodation to seek employment. While there are no easy solutions to this problem available, reflection is needed on how this issue is contributing to people struggling to transition out of homelessness and the wider impact this has on the economy.

Homeless Connect welcomes the fact that the Programme includes a commitment that “Employees and businesses will benefit from a new Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund. This will help people in our communities, including disabled people and women returning to the labour market, find meaningful opportunities in local businesses.” We would submit that consideration should be given as to whether this could be extended to include people experiencing homelessness who have often had to contend with multiple forms of disadvantage and exclusion.

One of Homeless Connect’s projects, FareShare, has a particular interest in the publication of a Circular Economy Strategy. FareShare takes good quality surplus food from right across the food industry in NI and delivers it to over 170 community and voluntary groups. This is an invaluable service in terms of reducing food waste as well as seeking positive social outcomes. FareShare is already playing a significant role in the circular economy when it comes to food. Staff from the project are involved in groups such as the All-Island Food Poverty Network; the Social Supermarket Discussion Groups; and the Northern Ireland Resource Network (to name only some of the groups) which are engaged in conversations around the circular economy as well as addressing food poverty. Homeless Connect warmly welcome the inclusion of the Circular Economy Strategy in the draft Programme and look forward to contributing to the consultation on the strategy when it is published.

One further element to note regarding the Circular Economy Strategy is a pilot project our Starter Packs team have been engaged in regarding the provision of furniture. Through funding provided by Awards for All, the team has developed a voucher scheme whereby individuals moving in a new tenancy in Belfast are able to utilise a £250 voucher to buy furniture of their choice from East Belfast Mission’s ‘Restore’ stores. As East Belfast Mission note, “Restore is a chain of charity shops in Belfast, Antrim, Larne and Newtownards, which specialise in the sale of good quality furniture and bicycles, as well as clothes, books and

bric-a-brac. These items are donated by the public, collected from local council recycling centres and saved from landfill.”³

This pilot project is a practical example of how the principles behind the circular economy can generate positive social benefits for individuals on the margins of our society. On the basis of the pilot project, our team is applying for further funding to seek to expand the scheme to a wider range of clients transitioning out of homelessness.

Turning to the section as a whole, however, in what will be a recurring theme for several sections of the draft programme, we would highlight the inconsistency around the detail of how the programme will be implemented in practice and how it will be funded. At a number of points in this section specific costed figures are provided for some elements while they are not for others. So for example, “We will help businesses cut their energy bills by investing £15 million in the Energy and Resource Efficiency Support Scheme.” In several other instances though, such information is not included. For example, the “new Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund” is described but no detail is provided on how much funding it will receive.

We do recognise that the draft Programme has been produced in less than ideal circumstances in terms of the financial cycle and midway through this Assembly mandate. We also accept that part of the point of a consultation process is to allow for respondents to suggest amendments to the final programme. We would submit that in the final version, greater detail is needed in terms of where the funding is coming from and specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) targets are adopted. One of the weaknesses of the draft programme is that at points it is so high level that it is difficult to see how the Executive can be held accountable for what it has (and has not) achieved.

Doing What Matters Today: ‘Deliver More Affordable Childcare’

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' priority:

One element of our work at Homeless Connect relates to engaging with people with lived experience of homelessness. A consistent theme which has come up in several sessions we have held with individuals with lived experience has been the difficulties of being able to access affordable childcare for the purposes of employment or seeking access to services such as medical care.

This can pose particular challenges to households who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. It can mean that parents who wish to go out to work find it impossible to do so. This can increase financial precarity and restrict choices for parents in terms of affordable housing. We have found that some parents who would like to participate in our engagements with people with lived experience have been unable to do so due to this barrier. While we can take action to provide support to people in this situation to facilitate their participation, it is a good example of how a lack of affordable childcare can lead to particular voices being less likely to be heard.

Consequently, we welcome the inclusion of a specific priority calling for the delivery of more affordable childcare. This priority includes more detail in terms of funding than several of the other priorities although it is widely acknowledged that the amount of investment being made is insufficient for the level of need out there.

Doing What Matters Today: 'Cut Health Waiting Times'

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Cut Health Waiting Times' priority:

There is a strong and growing evidence base highlighting the negative impact which homelessness has on health outcomes. For example, in 2022, Queens University Academics McNeill et al provided the following overview of the health impacts of homelessness⁴:

“People experiencing homelessness (PEH) have poorer health than the general population. Mortality rates are much higher and morbidity trends show that infections, mental health, cardiovascular and respiratory conditions are more prevalent among homeless populations.⁵ Premature ageing and frailty are more common⁶ and PEH are also disproportionately affected by mental health issues. One study concluded that self-harm rates among PEH was 30 times higher than that of their housed counterparts.⁷

However, as a marginalised group, in practice it can be challenging for people experiencing homelessness to access healthcare, particularly primary and preventative services. This can be due to a litany of factors including instability due to their living situation, navigating the impact of traumatic experiences and a lack of understanding of how to navigate the health system. As Paisi et al put it, “homelessness can often mean that people live from one day to the next, focusing on immediate survival needs (shelter, food, addiction) and not addressing health. This can deprioritise the importance of good health habits and utilisation of services

among this population.”⁸ This increases the number of visits to emergency departments on the part of people experiencing homelessness. As McNeill et al explain, “PEH are frequent attenders at emergency departments but relatively low users of primary and preventative health services, which may indicate that health is often not a priority until a crisis point is reached.”⁹

It will be evident from the above that homelessness is a contributor to health inequalities in Northern Ireland. If the summation of the evidence set out above is correct, it is highly likely that preventing and reducing homelessness would generate positive health outcomes and potentially play a role in reducing health waiting lists. We are of course cognisant of the fact that there are several drivers behind rising waiting lists, but in our estimation there good are reasons to believe that poor quality housing and homelessness are a part of the picture.

We would further highlight to the Executive Office an important project which is being taken forward by the Administrative Data Research Centre NI regarding health and homelessness. The project, entitled “Understanding the predictors and consequences of homelessness in Northern Ireland,” has as one of its key aims the following: “To investigate the association between homelessness and health and social outcomes, including physical and mental health, and the use of health and social care services.”¹⁰

The project will involve the usage of “an anonymised, linked dataset that includes NIHE and health and social care data.” From our helpful engagement with the ADRC NI, we believe that this project has the potential to highlight the linkages between health and homelessness in a way which has never been illustrated in Northern Ireland before. As believers in evidence-based policy, it is our hope that this project will help to provide a strong evidence base for driving forward positive change in terms of health care service delivery for people experiencing homelessness here.

Considering the fact that people experiencing homelessness generally have poorer health outcomes than other parts of society, the current crises engulfing the health service in terms of access to care is having a particularly damaging impact on people in this group. It is vitally important that rising waiting lists are addressed not only for people experiencing homelessness but also for wider society.

We would finally add that consideration should be given to whether the language of health inequalities is the best language to use or whether the term ‘health inequities’ should be used. Some of our member organisations have eloquently made the point that the focus of the Department of Health should be on seeking to ensure that suitable healthcare is available

to those who are most in need- addressing inequity in access. We would invite the Executive Office to give consideration to the language utilised in this respect.

Doing What Matters Today: 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' priority:

We strongly welcome the inclusion of this priority in the draft Programme for Government. Tragically, it is a reality that violence against women and girls can lead to homelessness. The Housing Executive has recorded 19,027 presentations resulting from domestic violence since 2004/5.¹¹ 16,908 of these households were accepted as homeless. The number of presentations in 2023/4 stood at 1,199. The number of presentations has increased by 44.3% compared to 2013/4.

It is true that presentations made to the Housing Executive as a result of domestic violence are not exclusively female. However, the vast majority of heads of households presenting as a result of domestic violence are female. Several of our member organisations support women and girls who have experienced domestic abuse. This can be through provision of temporary accommodation or through floating support services. From our engagement with some of these organisations, we know that the inclusion of this priority is warmly welcomed.

These figures are one of the many reasons why it is so appropriate that Ending Violence Against Women and Girls is a priority in the draft Programme for Government. For everyone living in this society, home should be a safe place. It is obvious that for too many women and girls it is not. It is manifestly evident that this society has a real problem when it comes to violence against women and girls which unfortunately feeds through into the homelessness system.

While we welcome the inclusion of this priority, we would highlight- as we have with several other priorities- the lack of detail provided in the programme as to what specific actions will be taken or what funding will be available to fund these actions. We would urge the Executive to provide more detail in the final Programme with SMART targets included.

Doing What Matters Today: 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' priority:

We have no comments to make on this priority.

Doing What Matters Today: 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'

How much do you agree that the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' should be included in the Programme for Government?

Please select only one option

- Strongly agree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' priority:

We strongly agree with the inclusion of a specific housing priority in the draft Programme for Government. In our manifesto for the 2022 Assembly election, our number one priority was the inclusion of “a standalone, specific housing outcome in the Programme for Government 2022-2027 with emphasis on the prevention and reduction of homelessness.”¹² Our rationale for seeking the inclusion of a specific outcome was as follows: “If we are to prevent and reduce homelessness, we need to make tackling the issue a top priority for government... 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.”¹³

While the draft Programme moves away from inclusion of “outcomes” towards the inclusion of “priorities”, we believe that the inclusion of this priority is vitally important and we commend the Executive for taking this step. We believe inclusion of this priority is in line with what we called for in our manifesto for the last Assembly election.

The right to housing is a fundamental human right which can be found in several international human rights instruments which the United Kingdom has ratified.¹⁴ For example, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states the following: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the

right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”¹⁵ Adequate housing is a prerequisite of being able to uphold other rights and being able to participate in society. It is incumbent on the Northern Ireland Executive collectively to uphold this fundamental right. Consequently, it is right that the Programme for Government includes a standalone, specific housing priority. We believe that the inclusion of this priority will drive forward collaborative working and deliver the positive change we so urgently need to see.

There should be no question that Northern Ireland is in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis. The past decade has seen a staggering increase of 145% in the number of households with homelessness status between March 2014 to June 2024. On 30 June, 30,069 households here had homelessness status.¹⁶ The number of households living in temporary accommodation has also dramatically risen by 132% over the last five years. In April 2024, 4,784 households were living in temporary accommodation.¹⁷ 5,106 children were living in these households.¹⁸

If this society is ever going to see these figures fall, it will require a cross-Executive effort to address the myriad reasons leading to more and more people falling into homelessness with all of the consequences this has both for their own wellbeing as well as for wider society. The inclusion of a housing priority is a necessary condition for this goal to be achieved.

However, in and of itself the inclusion of a housing priority will not bring about the change we need to see. The priority needs to include properly funded and resourced actions which will generate real and meaningful change.

Speaking generally, we broadly welcome the actions included under this priority in the draft Programme for Government. There are some specific points which we wish to raise about the wording used, but it is important that we outline the welcome that the list of actions included has received from organisations in the homelessness sector.

The biggest challenge with the content of the housing priority is the same issue which impacts several of the other priorities. There is a lack of SMART targets outlined in the document and no clarity on where the funding is going to come from to achieve the actions outlined. This was a point which strongly came over at the sessions we held with members of our policy forum and at our Homelessness Conference where we held a specific session on the draft Programme.

The experience with the Homelessness Strategy for 2022-27 is salutary in this regard. This document was produced in collaboration with the homelessness sector in Northern Ireland. The consultation around the strategy was- alongside our experience with the Housing Supply Strategy- one of the best consultation processes we have been involved with on the part of a statutory body. While there were some aspects which we would have wanted to amend in the final document, we recognise that it is a positive and progressive strategy which, if implemented, would make a real difference. The problem the Housing Executive has experienced is that they have simply been unable to implement significant elements of the strategy due to a lack of funding.

The fundamental reality ever since the strategy was published is that the Housing Executive has been in a reactive posture, unable to meaningfully implement their number one objective in the strategy of “Prioritising Homelessness Prevention” because of the level of need they have had to respond to for temporary accommodation. Making this point is not a criticism of the Housing Executive, who have been faced with incredibly tight budgetary settlements in recent years. We are fully aware that the Housing Executive wants to implement the homelessness strategy in full and that they had (and have) every intention of implementing the strategy in full when it was launched. It is a fact though that the lack of funding has meant this has not been possible. This naturally generates frustration on the part of the homelessness sector as we have been left in a situation where we have a progressive strategy which has the potential to make a real difference without the resources to effectively implement it.

There is a very real risk that something similar could happen here with the proposed actions set out under the housing priority. In the final Programme, we would urge the Executive to provide clarity on where the funding is going to come from to deliver the actions set out in the strategy.

Before coming to the specifics, we would also highlight an inconsistency in this priority in terms of specific targets. In our estimation, a specific target for the number of social houses should be included in the Programme for Government. Reference is made on p38 to the fact that “the Executive has not been able to deliver on its ambition of 2,500 new social homes a year.” The document states that this was the ambition of the Executive, but does not indicate that this remains the case going forward. We note that the draft Housing Supply Strategy included an “aim” of 100,000 new homes over a fifteen year period with at least a third of these homes being social homes.¹⁹ It may be that this would be an appropriate specific target to include in the final document. There will be a legitimate debate surrounding what the precise target should be- indeed we believe there may be good grounds for a higher target

than that set out in the draft Housing Supply Strategy. However, we do believe that it is important that a specific target is included in the final document.

It may be that the draft Programme does not include a specific target in this space due to the fact that at the time it was published the final Housing Supply Strategy had not been agreed by the Executive. We do note that one specific target is included under this priority: “we will help people get a foot on the housing ladder by continuing our investment in shared ownership homes, supported by low cost loans to deliver 800 per year.” This is a fair and reasonable target. Indeed, it serves as a rare and welcome example in the draft programme of a specific target. We would urge the Executive to adopt more specific targets both under the housing priority and regarding other priorities. In the housing priority, this should include a specific target for social housing new starts and completions as well as consideration of a target around reducing the number of households with homelessness status.

Turning to the specifics of what is included in the draft programme. Firstly, we note on p38 and 39 the use of statistics regarding housing and housing stress. We have two comments to make on this. Firstly, we would urge the final programme to include the number of Full Duty Applicants (i.e. households with homelessness status) in the narrative describing the issue at hand. This is an easily accessible data point which illuminates the scale of the challenges facing the housing and homelessness systems here. It reveals the sheer level of need which is out there for social housing.

Secondly, we would recommend that the final Programme utilises both the number of households and the number of individuals in those households for all three data points: households on the list, households in housing stress, and households with homelessness status. As answers to Assembly questions have illustrated, this data is collected.²⁰ In our view both the number of households and the number of people should be included when considering statistics around housing and homelessness. This should be the case in the housing and homelessness bulletins- which currently utilise an inconsistent approach in this regard with some figures for individuals being provided while others are not.

One particularly welcome aspect about the housing priority is the fact that it adopts a ‘whole-system’ approach, considering issues such as planning right through to housing related support. We do not oppose any of the actions included as a matter of principle. However, as noted above, much will depend on the detail of the actions included.

The action around “seeking Treasury agreement for appropriate treatment of borrowing to enable the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to increase investment in its homes,

improve energy efficiency and contribute to new supply” is a potentially huge shift for the housing and homelessness systems. The detail of how this is implemented in practice will be important. We and our member organisation look forward to engaging with the Department and the Housing Executive around this action to ensure the best outcomes possible for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

We strongly support the inclusion of the action that “we will focus on preventing homelessness, making it brief, rare and non-recurrent by working collaboratively.” We passionately believe- and our members as well as those with lived experience that we consulted agree- that an explicit reference to addressing homelessness has to be in the final programme and we welcome the inclusion of this in the draft.

We are not opposed per se to proposals to develop “innovative funding models with third sector partners to purchase homes.” However, we would make three observations regarding this. Firstly, a lot will depend on the detail of what this involves in practice. We have been made aware of the proposed LAMA (Loan to Acquire Move on Accommodation) scheme which is currently being developed. We can see the merit behind the scheme in terms of expanding housing supply to people experiencing homelessness. However, we do not currently have enough detail on the operation of the proposed scheme to assess it fully.

Secondly, our ‘Voices for Change’ group noted the work of Scottish organisation ‘Social Bite’ in funding and introducing modular temporary accommodation villages in three parts of Scotland. This had been highlighted at Homeless Connect’s NI Homelessness Conference held on October 10. The group outlined how impressive these villages were and argued that consideration should be given to similar schemes being implemented in Northern Ireland.²¹ We would submit to the Executive Office that the use of modular housing may be a way to generate housing for use as temporary accommodation quickly and that exploration of funding arrangements in this space may prove fruitful.

Thirdly, we want to strongly warn against any idea that these “innovative funding models” should be viewed as a replacement for the funding for the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) for the building of new social homes. We can see how these funding models could supplement the SHDP for social housing. However, these models will not and cannot be an adequate substitute for funding provided to the SDHP. The level of need for social housing is such that increased investment in social housing capital funding is needed as well as the development of these models. The choice on the part of the Executive to substantively cut the level of funding provided to the SHDP in 2024/5 will undoubtedly exacerbate the housing crisis here in years to come as it will prevent new social housing

starts which we so urgently need. Public funding for the SHDP needs to be urgently increased in 2025/6.

We warmly welcome the reference to the pilot programme regarding young people coming out of care. Our policy forum and our lived experience group both agreed that the inclusion of such a programme is welcome considering the well known linkages between children coming out of care and the potential for homelessness. There is considerable interest among our member organisations who work with young people in what the pilot programme will look like.

Our 'Voices for Change' lived experience group flagged up a point which is worthy of note regarding this action. The group indicated that a further specific group should be considered here in terms of homelessness prevention: individuals leaving prison. A recently published answer to an Assembly question has highlighted how over the last five years 13-15% of prisoners released have been recorded as having no fixed abode after release.²² This is highly likely to lead to recidivism and increased costs to the state. We know through the Interdepartmental Homelessness Action Plan (IDHAP) that the Department of Justice are engaged in a range of actions in this space, but evidently we are facing a real challenge. Consequently, we believe consideration should be given to a specific reference to preventing and reducing homelessness amongst individuals coming out of prison.

We are very pleased to see a specific reference to prioritizing housing support for vulnerable people through the Supporting People Strategy. The clear and evident support for the programme from the current Minister for Communities and senior officials at the Department is noted and appreciated. During his appearance at the Communities Committee on October 24, the Minister for Communities outlined the following: "I will certainly work with the budget that I have to make sure that we do support these because in supporting the Supporting People Programme and the money that we put in there. I know that we're saving much more money later on, mostly for other departments, but also it takes pressure off us as well. So, it is a wise investment... we need to spend our money wisely, and the Supporting People Programme is a very wise use of resource."²³ We could not agree more with the Minister on this point.

Organisations on our policy forum did note, however, that while this support is indeed most welcome, it is critical that it is accompanied by increased funding in the years ahead. The Executive needs to prioritise making the "wise investment" of increasing baseline funding for the Supporting People. The failure to increase baseline funding to the programme in line with inflation for over a decade up to 2024/5 has come home to roost in terms of the negative

impact on staff recruitment and retention for organisations funded through Supporting People.

We know the enormous positive difference the programme makes for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.²⁴ However, many organisations funded through the programme suffer high levels of staff turnover because they are simply unable to pay wages and match conditions available in other parts of the economy. This has negative impacts on services and on the people they work, so hard to support. With the minimum wage likely to increase again next year, it is vitally important that increased funding at the very least in line with inflation is provided in the years ahead. Without sufficient funding, the very welcome commitment to supporting a Supporting People Strategy will not deliver the outcomes which are so badly needed.

The launch of a fuel poverty strategy is in and of itself a good thing. However, as with the Supporting People Strategy, much depends on the detail of what the strategy includes as well as what funding will be available to implement it. Nonetheless, it is welcome to see a direct reference to this issue in the programme.

We welcome the commitment set out to “continue our programme of reform of the private rented sector.” However, we would note that this is a vague commitment with no specificity as to what is involved or timelines provided. It is our view that further reform of the private rented sector is badly needed following the welcome passage of the Private Tenancies Act in the last Assembly mandate. However, we accept that this requires care and consideration to ensure that unintended consequences which could generate homelessness are avoided. We would submit that the final document should include more detail about what this commitment will actually involve in practice.

We would also like to highlight some further omissions which we believe should be remedied in the final Programme for Government. Firstly, we note that the section on housing does not include any reference to the involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness. Our ‘Voices for Change’ group highlighted this as a significant omission. We know from our work in this space that the direct involvement of people who have experienced homelessness generates better and well informed policy. We would recommend a reference to active engagement on the part of the Executive with people with lived experience is incorporated in the final document in this section.

Secondly, we would highlight that the 2022-27 Homelessness Strategy is not referred to in the draft Programme for Government. This is, in our view, a significant omission considering

it is a statutory requirement on the part of the Housing Executive to produce it and the fact that it plays such a central role in homelessness policy here. We would recommend that a specific reference is made to it- ideally in support of its implementation- in the final document.

Thirdly, our 'Voices for Change' group highlighted the fact that there is no direct reference to addressing chronic homelessness in the Programme for Government. Participants observed regarding Belfast City Centre that firstly the number of people sleeping rough or engaging in street activity such as taking substances has risen in recent years. The nature of the individuals has also changed, with more young people and especially young women engaging in street activity. The ongoing situation impacting on the Welcome Organisation drop-in centre and the Belfast Inclusion Health Centre is also having a negative impact on this client group. Consideration should be given to whether a specific reference should be incorporated around chronic homelessness.

Fourthly, we believe the final Programme for Government should make reference to the vital role that the voluntary and community sector play in preventing and reducing homelessness. As both NICVA and CO3 have pointed out, references to the voluntary and community sector are sparse throughout the draft programme as a whole. There is one reference to the VCS in this section with regard to "third sector" partners and "collaboration". We would submit that the final wording of this action should be reconsidered to explicitly mention collaboration with the voluntary and community sector. Ideally, this reference would also stress the need to ensure that the sector is adequately resourced. It is crystal clear to us- and we know statutory partners working in this space agree- that the voluntary and community sector will have a vital role to play if we are ever going to prevent and reduce homelessness.

Fifthly, we note the fact that the housing priority does not include specific reference to the importance of tenancy sustainment. It is acknowledged that homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment are two closely related concepts. However, in our view, it is important to recognize that they are distinct.

Our Home Starter Pack Service plays a valuable role in supporting tenancy sustainment for households transitioning from homelessness into a new tenancy. In 2023/4, 3598 Home Starter Packs made up of essential household goods were delivered to new social housing tenants across Northern Ireland, with 91% remaining in their tenancy 6 months after they received the pack. Feedback we have received from recipients tells us that the provision of these packs makes a real difference for households who can be struggling to afford basic necessities.

Sixth, we note the absence of explicit recognition given to housing inequalities in the text of the draft programme. When it comes to section 75 categories, we are aware that the Department for Communities collates some data on inequalities (albeit that further work is needed to capture data related to every group).²⁵ Having this data is important but even more critical is the need to address the inequalities which are highlighted. We would welcome further detail on how actions taken in relation to the housing priority will address inequalities amongst section 75 groups.

The example of our Home Starter Pack service illustrates the importance of actions specifically designed to sustain tenancies. Action to sustain tenancies of course does prevent homelessness, but it also generates a wide range of other benefits for households in terms of health and wellbeing as well as for wider society.

It is pertinent in finishing our comments on this section to reflect on one further point from members of our 'Voices for Change' group. The group observed that it is vitally important that the Executive can be held accountable for what it does in this space. In looking at what is included in this section of the draft programme and indeed the wider document, it is very difficult to see how the Executive can be held to account due to the lack of specific and measurable targets. We would urge the Executive Office to ensure that such targets are included in the final document.

Doing What Matters Today: 'Safer Communities'

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Safer Communities' priority:

We have three comments to make regarding the 'Safer Communities' priority. Firstly, we warmly welcome the action set out to embed "trauma informed, responsive systems." In our experience- and the experience of some of our member organisations- the adoption of trauma informed approaches can lead to better outcomes for people experiencing homelessness who may have had contact with the criminal justice system (both as a victim of or as a perpetrator of crime). We would urge the Executive to ensure that the homelessness sector is viewed as one of the sectors which could provide leadership in this space as well as being an area where investment in training for staff could result in positive dividends for people they are working with.

Secondly, and in line with our comments on the housing priority, we would urge the Executive collectively to actively involve the homelessness sector in the “development of a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending.” The homelessness sector has a wealth of experience in supporting people in this space and we would urge the Executive collectively to ensure that this expertise is not overlooked in the development of this strategy.

Thirdly, our ‘Voices for Change’ group raised an important point regarding the impact of paramilitarism in causing homelessness. Too many individuals in Northern Ireland have had the horrendous experience of being threatened out of their homes by representatives of paramilitary organisations who should have long left the scene. Between 2004/5 and 2023/4, 10,900 presentations have been made to the Housing Executive as a result of intimidation. 6,808 of these presentations have led to homelessness acceptances on the part of the Housing Executive.²⁶ Admittedly, not every presentation recorded will have been the result of paramilitary activity, but unquestionably a substantial proportion of these presentations will have been the result of the actions of representatives of these groups.

The group noted that the importance of addressing paramilitary activity in terms of the housing and homelessness system needs to be borne in mind. In particular, they referred to the question of social housing allocations and the operation of the Social Housing Selection Scheme when it comes to intimidation points. A process is ongoing around reform of the scheme, but it is notable that it is not referred to at any point throughout the draft Programme.

Doing What Matters Today: ‘Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment’

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' priority:

Homeless Connect recognizes the importance of protecting the environment and responding to the impact of global heating. It is right that Northern Ireland plays its part in reducing carbon emissions and the housing system has a part to play in that. It is widely recognized that the actions that we must take as a society in response to global heating will impose significant financial costs. We would urge the Executive in considering how to implement much needed environmental reforms how they can ensure this is managed in an equitable way which does not place undue financial burdens on people struggling to keep their heads above water financially. Environmental provisions- which we fully accept need to be implemented- should not lead people into poverty or even potential homelessness.

One specific issue we would also flag in this space is the need for financial support to be given to temporary accommodation providers and housing associations who serve as landlords for providers around financial support for insulation projects and other sustainability measures. Legislative and policy changes in this space imposing costs could lead to a range of consequences for these organisations including higher rents which could then be passed on to clients.

Our FareShare project plays a valuable role in reducing food waste with all of the environmental consequences this can have. In 2023/4, FareShare NI helped to avoid 120 tonnes of CO2 being released. 72,600 trees would be necessary to capture this amount of CO2. Additionally, the work of FareShare NI saved 159,600 tonnes of water, enough to fill 63 Olympic sized swimming pools. Our FareShare staff are ready to engage with officials in the development of the environment strategy.

Doing What Matters Today: ‘Reform and Transformation of Public Services’

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Reform and Transformation of Public Services' priority:

We welcome the inclusion of a priority to reform and transform public services in Northern Ireland. The failure to grasp the nettle of taking hard decisions around the reform and transformation of public services has in our view contributed to the housing and homelessness crisis we are experiencing here.

We have now reached a point where this Executive absolutely must address the range of issues around public services, many of which are set out in the draft programme. This is going to involve hard and unpopular choices, potentially including consideration of options to increase revenue. This needs to be considered in addition to the need for the British Government to play its part in ensuring that funding in Northern Ireland is at the level to meet the needs of people living here.

The practical reality is that overspending and failure to make difficult choices in one part of the Executive system has a range of spillover effects for other Executive departments. The Department of Communities has seen its funding squeezed over many years, making it ever more challenging to engage in vitally important work in responding to poverty. Funding for prevention- which everyone agrees is where we need to get to- is sacrificed to respond to

immediate and pressing needs. One major contributing factor to this has been ever increasing spending in other parts of the Executive system.

We of course fully accept that this is not straightforward and that a wide variety of factors have contributed to this situation developing. One of the key factors has been the instability around the NI Executive itself. For five of the last eight years, the Executive has not been operational. In our session with our 'Voices for Change' group, members highlighted the fact that everything goes on hold when the Executive is down and that has had real consequences for people experiencing homelessness. It is the view of Homeless Connect- and indeed many across this society- that all parties should commit to not using the tactic of bringing down the Executive. The current state of our public services illustrates why parties should not go down this path.

It is our view, and the view of our members, that multi-year budgets must become the norm in Northern Ireland going forward. We know that all Executive parties support multi-year budgets and we have been encouraged by our engagement with the Finance Minister as to her commitment to seeing this come into operation.

We particularly welcome the reference to the role of the Community and Voluntary sector in this section of the document. The homelessness sector in this society has been underinvested in over many years. In our view, this is an incontestable fact. In many cases, wages and terms and conditions in the voluntary and community homelessness sector do not compare remotely well to those in the public sector, especially when pensions are considered as a factor. Pay increases in the public sector- undoubtedly deserved- have not been mirrored in the homelessness sector or indeed in the wider VCS. Financial instability and precarity are the norm for far too many organisations working in this vital sector.

In our comments on the housing priority, we highlighted the issues facing organisations funded through the Supporting People programme. The deliberate choice taken over many years not to increase the Supporting People budget in line with inflation has led to real terms cuts for organisations working in the sector, negatively impacting on staff recruitment and retention as more and more people find that working in some highly challenging roles for pay at or near the minimum wage simply does not add up. To the credit of Minister Lyons, he has given the first above inflation increase to the programme for well over a decade. However, this must be only a first step to addressing the funding gap which arose from the failure to increase the budget in past years.

It is salient though to mention funding provided through the homelessness services budget to organisations, as it provides an excellent example of what the draft programme describes as “unpredictable funding arrangements.” Homeless Connect for three years between 2021/2 and 2023/2024 operated on quarterly budgets due to the way in which the homelessness services budget operates in practice. This was incredibly challenging. Matters have worsened in 2024/5 with Homeless Connect- alongside with several other projects- operating on month to month funding provided by the Housing Executive. Homeless Connect receives core funding through this funding stream, so is at existential risk if it was to be withdrawn.

In our response to the Department for Communities Budget Allocations Consultation, we made the following remarks on this subject:

“Historically, prevention and non-accommodation vital services have been funded out of the same funding pot as temporary accommodation provision in the private sector. Before the advent of Covid-19, spending on temporary accommodation in the private sector had been relatively low and consistent. This has dramatically changed, with the amount spent on this form of temporary accommodation rising by 495% between 2018/9 and 2023/4. The decision to keep prevention and non-accommodation services funded out of the same pot as temporary accommodation funding has created the serious situation where these services, and in some instances charities, are put at risk depending on the level of demand which enters the temporary accommodation system.

Ironically, the first priority of the Housing Executive’s homelessness strategy for 2022-27 is to “prioritise homelessness prevention.” As the strategy outlines, “Our current response to homelessness in Northern Ireland is still focused largely on responding to people who find themselves in crisis situations. Our ambition is to prioritise homelessness prevention through the provision of the right support at the right time with an aim to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place.” We wholeheartedly endorse this objective of the Housing Executive. However, the way in which the homelessness services budget is currently structured is actually prioritising crisis response at the expense of homelessness prevention. The more that is spent on temporary accommodation in the private sector, the less that will be available for homelessness prevention projects through this funding pot. It also has the negative effect of taking away resources from services which may reduce demand for temporary accommodation. This cuts directly against the strategy of the Housing Executive. Consequently, the Department and the wider Executive should reconsider whether this is the best way to fund homelessness prevention measures.

An additional issue which the current structure also generates is uncertainty for projects which are funded through the homelessness services budget. As there is considerable volatility around the need for temporary accommodation in the private sector depending on the level of need, organisations funded through this mechanism have to live with the potential threat to their funding if more and more resources continue to be needed to provide this kind of temporary accommodation. It further locks in short-term thinking and inefficient spending, as these organisations are unable to plan and prioritise beyond short-term funding timelines.”

It should not be controversial to say that this is a completely unsustainable way to fund organisations who are “key partner[s]” in responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland. It has very real consequences for the organisations impacted, who are unable to recruit staff and run the risk of losing staff who do not wish to live with the precarity of not knowing whether they will have a job going forward. We are cognizant of why this situation has arisen, but we do believe that this is a good example of an area where the urgent need for reform to budget processes for publicly funded organisations is highlighted. We would highlight to the Executive that without reform, even if the funding is found to keep organisations funded through the homelessness services budget through to the end of March 2025 (which at the time of writing is uncertain), the situation is highly likely to recur in 2025/6.

The actions included in this section are welcome, in so far as they can be assessed with the level of detail provided. We would welcome further detail and some specified targets for the work of the Reform and Transformation Unit and the Public Sector Transformation Board in the final programme.

Any Other Priorities

Are there any other priorities that should be included in the Programme for Government?

It is acknowledged that the selection of priorities in the programme is an incredibly difficult task. As previously indicated, we and our members are strongly supportive of the inclusion of a standalone housing priority in the Programme. In our view, it is crucially important that the final programme includes this priority.

For reasons which will be outlined in response to the questions around the ‘People’ mission, we believe there is a strong argument that the elimination of poverty should at the very least be given greater prominence in the final Programme. Indeed, we believe there is

considerable force behind the argument made by the Cliff Edge Coalition that this should be included as its own standalone priority.²⁷

It may be that the Executive determines that changes may need to be made to some of the priorities. However, we would caution against the inclusion of more than nine priorities. Amongst our member organisations, we have heard different views expressed on whether nine priorities is too many. Some have argued that some of the priorities included should be removed or merged. Others have outlined that nine priorities is the right number.

Without taking a stance on that question, we would indicate that we do not believe that more than nine priorities should be included in the final programme. In our view, the addition of further priorities may have the effect of diluting the focus of the Executive on the priorities it determines to include.

Building New Foundations

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure:

We welcome the much needed emphasis in this section on boosting housing funds; improving our planning system; and managing our water. These three areas all require reform and investment if we are going to prevent and reduce homelessness. It is a fundamental fact that you cannot prevent and reduce homelessness without an adequate supply of housing. For this society to increase housing supply, all three of these elements have to be considered and we welcome their inclusion.

One observation we would make is that the ‘boosting housing funds’ section seems to be exclusively focused on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. In our estimation, this is unduly narrow. Increasing funding for social housing provided by housing associations should be considered here as well as well as the reference to innovative funding models.

Missions

The Executive have set out a long-term strategy to deliver three Missions, People, Planet and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. How much do you agree with a Missions-based approach?

We are not opposed to a missions-based approach as a matter of principle. It is recognized that such an approach has been adopted at Westminster and there may be merit in adopting the same course. From the perspective of Homeless Connect, the key question is whether this approach delivers the change we need to see to prevent and reduce homelessness.

We know from our experience of working with Executive departments and statutory bodies that there is considerable inconsistency when it comes to interdepartmental working. We are aware of some examples where departments and statutory bodies collaborate effectively. It would be unfair not to recognize that. However, we also unfortunately have considerable experience of seeing poor collaboration leading to worse outcomes for people experiencing homelessness and the wider homelessness sector. If taking this approach helps to increase cohesion amongst Executive departments and helps to break down departmental silos and poor interdepartmental working, then it will be worth taking.

We would finally outline that it is our view that the Executive should involve organisations in the voluntary and community sector in any formal structures set up to monitor or drive forward the implementation of the Programme for Government. We would welcome the opportunity to be a part of this when it comes to matters related to housing and homelessness.

People

People Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?

Is there anything else that should be included under the People Mission?

We note the array of actions included under the People Mission. As with other parts of the document, we welcome many of these actions in so far as the detail included allows. So for example, we accept the point that is made around migration that the Executive “does not have the power to change many matters relating to asylum and refugee policy, and that these are matters reserved to the UK Government.” This is a statement of fact. However, the next statement is inherently vague: “However, we are committed to bringing forward actions to address the issues of integration and racism.” We would urge the Executive Office to provide greater specificity in the final Programme on what actions are in view here.

A similar issue arises over the following paragraph: “That is why we are taking steps to help those who are struggling, especially in areas where inequality hits hardest or where issues

like crime, poverty, addiction, poor mental health and other health challenges are most keenly felt. Through joint working across departments, statutory agencies, and voluntary and community organisations, we will work to keep people safe and allow them to achieve their potential.” We naturally of course agree with the sentiment here. However, there is no detail provided as to how this will be achieved, what the targets are or how it will be funded.

Earlier in our response, we have discussed the issues around poor mental health. This is the one and only reference to addiction in the document. It should be stressed that many people experiencing homelessness are not addicted to any substance, while some people who are housed face issues with substance dependency. However, with that point made, it is the case that some people experiencing homelessness do face challenges with addictions whether that be alcohol or another substance. We previously noted that chronic homelessness and rough sleeping are not directly mentioned in the housing priority; nor is addiction.

Considering the fact that since 2009 up to the end of Q2 in 2024, 4,474 deaths related to alcohol and 2,280 deaths related to drugs have been recorded in Northern Ireland, it is striking that this is the only reference to addiction in the document.²⁸ Far too many people experiencing homelessness facing challenges with substance dependency have been unable to access the support they need when they need it. In our view, greater specificity is required when it comes to the question of how the Executive will seek to provide support to people who are dependent on substances.

It is particularly important at this point to note how critical the anti-poverty strategy will be when it comes to homelessness. Academic Matthew Desmond has aptly said: “poverty isn’t a line but a tight knot of social maladies... a relentless piling on of problems.”²⁹ Housing is often at the centre of these difficulties. As we noted in a submission we made to the Citizens Initiative, “An important point to note about homelessness is that, as Bramley and Fitzpatrick noted in a paper published in 2018, “homelessness is not randomly distributed across the population, but rather the odds of experiencing it are systematically structured around a set of identifiable individual, social and structural factors, most of which, it should be emphasized, are outside the control of those directly affected.”³⁰ A central factor is poverty. As Bramley and Fitzpatrick note, while other factors such as health and support needs can be involved in causing homelessness, “their explanatory power is less than that of poverty.”³¹ Policy measures which lead to increased poverty and falling household incomes are consequently likely to generate higher levels of homelessness.”

People living in poverty are far more likely to be at risk of or actually experience homelessness. The claim which is sometimes made that any of us are only the loss of three

pay cheques away from homelessness, while an understandable claim in terms of seeking to generate greater interest in galvanising people to respond to homelessness, is factually not true. Some people living in Northern Ireland are far more at risk of homelessness than others and the key explanatory factor behind that is poverty. Consequently, the development and funding of an effective anti-poverty strategy will really matter.

We welcome the inclusion of the reference to the NI Food Strategy Framework and initiatives like the Food Action Plan. Our FareShare project has a direct contribution to make in terms of this area and looks forward to being a part of ensuring that food waste is reduced.

Planet

Is there anything else that should be included under the Planet Mission?

We would merely repeat what we have said under the Environment priority with regard to the Planet Mission.

Prosperity

Is there anything else that should be included under the Prosperity Mission?

We would highlight our previous comments in relation to the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority.

Peace

Is there anything else that should be included under the Peace Mission?

We would highlight our previous comments in relation to the 'Safer Communities' priority.

Understanding Missions by Tracking Wellbeing

The draft Programme for Government outlines how it will measure progress through a Wellbeing Framework. How much do you agree with the proposed approach?

We agree with the proposed approach but disagree with how it has been implemented in the draft wellbeing framework.³² In the draft version published with the draft Programme, the

data point for homelessness is marked with a green upward arrow for ‘improving’. In a context where over the last decade, the number of people with homelessness status has risen by 135% from 24,729 to 58,328; the number of households in temporary accommodation has reached unprecedented levels; and the number of children living in temporary accommodation has risen to over 5,100, we were deeply disappointed to see this data point included in this way. The data point included only considers one element of the homelessness system; homelessness presentations. However, to imply that things are improving with a green upward arrow on the basis of that one data point is highly misleading and runs the risk of diverting attention and resources away from the issue when it is compared with other policy areas.

To the credit of the Executive Office, when we raised this point at a meeting organised by NICVA, they made contact and have indicated that they will be looking at this data point again in light of the issues that we have flagged around it. While we are grateful that this has been the response from the Executive Office, we would highlight that this error was entirely avoidable. A conversation with organisations in the sector or civil servants in Departments such as the Department for Communities or at the Housing Executive in advance of putting something like this out there should have prevented this from happening. We would urge the Executive Office to reflect on how they can avoid this kind of error being made again in the future.

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