



Briefing

Justice Bill Vagrancy Act Amendments

May 2026

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Briefing on the Justice Bill Vagrancy Act Amendments

Introduction

1. Homeless Connect

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.

Homeless Connect support the repeal of the Vagrancy Acts set out in Amendment 70 tabled by the Minister of Justice for the consideration stage of the Justice Bill on Tuesday.

2. Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy Act (Ireland) 1847

The Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy Act (Ireland) 1847 criminalised a wide range of poverty-related behaviours, treating homelessness and begging as public order issues rather than matters of social welfare. The 1824 Act which initially only covered England and Wales created graded offences and empowered police to arrest without warrant for conduct including begging, rough sleeping and loitering. The 1847 Act extended similar offences and powers to Ireland, increasing penalties for begging, vagrancy and sleeping outdoors, and permitting inspection of lodging houses. At a later stage, the 1824 was also extended to Northern Ireland. Together, the Acts functioned as mechanisms of social control, penalising visible destitution rather than addressing its structural causes. In addition to previous submissions to the Committee¹, we present in this briefing our position on repeal of these Acts below.

Homeless Connect Position

3. Support for repeal and decriminalisation of rough sleeping and begging

Homeless Connect welcomes the Department's proposal to decriminalise rough sleeping and begging through the repeal of the relevant provisions of the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act 1847 and commends the Minister for bringing forward these proposals. A review of the evidence submitted to the Committee for Justice in relation to the Justice Bill (February 2025) also indicates a strong consensus in favour of reform². A number of submissions call for the repeal of offences concerning rough sleeping and begging, asserting that these provisions are

outdated and ineffective in addressing the structural drivers of homelessness. They maintain that the criminalisation of destitution is inappropriate and unjustified. Submissions further highlight that those affected are among the most vulnerable individuals in society and require person-centred, human rights-based support rather than punitive criminal sanctions.

We agree that criminal sanctions are an ineffective way to respond to what is, in most cases, a social issue and in fact criminalising poverty (including street begging) does not resolve the underlying drivers that lead people to beg or to sleep rough. In addition, attention should be paid to the discourse enclosed within the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights report on ‘Breaking the Cycle: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness and Poverty’³ as well as consideration of practices of several states within the Council of Europe that do not criminalise rough sleeping and begging⁴. In response to comments made by Committee⁵ we further suggest that impact of repeal should be monitored through post-legislative reporting and independent, external evaluation to provide a holistic assessment of outcomes. We encourage a focus on outcomes for people (e.g., reduced stigma, improved engagement with services, housing outcomes) rather than solely enforcement metrics.

4. Consideration of rough sleeping and begging as independent acts

Homeless Connect highlight the importance of distinguishing between rough sleeping and begging, noting that the two are not synonymous and should be considered separately.

Rough Sleeping - It is important that provisions are repealed due to the stigma that is attached to rough sleeping arising from the fact it is criminalised. Consultation with our Echoes of Home⁶ group highlighted that the law should work to protect those sleeping rough due to their vulnerability. As a society, we should be working to protect people in that situation rather than stigmatising them through criminalisation. We reject narratives that portray rough sleeping as a matter of individual “choice” and instead call for recognition of the complexity of circumstances, including the reasons why some individuals may not accept temporary accommodation and the additional barriers faced by entrenched rough sleepers in moving back into housing.

Begging - It is important that provisions are repealed as it is not appropriate to criminalise people who are simply begging where they are not otherwise engaging in behaviour that would attract criminal sanction. However, as our Head of Programmes and Policy outlined during his

presentation to the Committee⁷ *'we are not saying that some of the activities associated with begging should not be subject to the law if they are disruptive or causing antisocial behaviour'*. We call for statutory authorities to 'see the person' rather than their circumstances i.e. it is the behaviour that is criminalised rather than their circumstance ('rough sleeping') or means of survival ('begging'). We acknowledge that behaviours that are genuinely harmful or aggressive should be addressed through appropriate legislation, rather than through outdated vagrancy offences.

5. Inappropriate and discriminatory language

Homeless Connect request the removal of derogatory and outdated terminology used in the Acts, including terms such as "rogues" and "vagabonds". We also highlight provisions that single out disabled people (including references to "exposure of wounds or deformities" for the purpose of gathering alms), that are manifestly inappropriate. Law in Northern Ireland should reflect contemporary standards, human rights norms and respect for dignity.

6. Policing and enforcement

Homeless Connect have commended the PSNI's decision not to arrest or prosecute people who are sleeping rough under the existing vagrancy provisions. We do, however, believe that the continued presence of the offence in legislation sustains stigma and can shape attitudes and decision-making. **The fact that the PSNI do not currently enforce vagrancy provisions related to rough sleeping is another reason why it is right to support these amendments.**

7. Move away from a punitive response to a social/health response

Homeless Connect propose that a properly funded, trauma-informed, multi-agency approach rather than a punitive approach is more likely to generate positive outcomes for those experiencing homelessness. Criminal sanctions are presented as an ineffective way to respond to what is, in most cases, a social issue linked to poverty, exclusion and unmet need. As an organisation we call for an effective cross-departmental approach to address homelessness in Northern Ireland.

8. Wider housing and homelessness context (including Housing First)

Homeless Connect call for explicit acknowledgement of the housing and homelessness crisis in Northern Ireland and how this shapes and constrains individual choices. The rising use of temporary accommodation is linked to insufficient social housing and limited genuinely affordable options; and without addressing supply, pressures will persist. As an organisation we continue to

promote Housing First as a gold-standard, evidence-based approach⁸ to chronic homelessness, with strong support for its extension.

To conclude, **we urge you to vote in favour of Amendment 70 which would repeal of the Vagrancy Acts.**

Response to proposed Chair Amendments

In light of the consultations to date and review of all available evidence to the Committee we propose the following positions to the suggested amendments tabled for the Committee for Justice, Tuesday 2nd June 2026.

AMENDMENT	HOMELESS CONNECT RESPONSE
<p>After clause 23 insert— ‘Offence of trespassing with intent to commit criminal offence 23A.— (1) A person commits an offence if the person trespasses on any premises with intent to commit an offence (whether or not on the premises). (2) In subsection (1) “premises” means any building, part of a building or enclosed area. (3) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 months or a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale (or both).’</p>	<p>Given that the Homeless Connect position is to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy Act (Ireland) 1847, decriminalisation of rough sleeping and/or begging will mean that this amendment will not have direct impact on those experiencing homelessness in Northern Ireland. Should the Vagrancy Act be repealed, we would have no objections to the inclusion of this amendment to the Bill.</p>
<p>New Clause After clause 23 insert— ‘Arranging or facilitating begging for gain 23B.— (1) A person commits an offence if, for gain, the person arranges or facilitates another person’s begging. (2) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale (or both).’</p>	<p>As noted during previous consultation, Homeless Connect does not have specific expertise in policy relating to the facilitation of begging. However, we would urge caution in relation to situations where people experiencing homelessness may be supporting one another while sleeping rough. We recommend that members seek clarification from the Minister and the proposer of the amendment that: (a) such circumstances are not intended to fall within the scope of this provision; and (b) the Department, in conjunction with the PSNI, consider producing guidance to make this clear.</p>

References

- ¹ Homeless Connect Submission: Consultation on Repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy Act (Ireland) 1847. January 2025. Accessed here: [Consultation on Repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy Act \(Ireland\) 1847](#)
Homeless Connect Submission: Justice Committee Call for Evidence on the Justice Bill. February 2025. Accessed here: [Homeless Connect Submission to the Justice Committee Call for Evidence on the Justice Bill](#)
NI Assembly Committee for Justice: Justice Bill – Repeal of Vagrancy Legislation: Homeless Connect; Simon Community (13th November 2025). Accessed here: [committee-37694.pdf](#)
- ² Brown, K. (2025) The Implications for Northern Ireland of Recent Developments Concerning the Repeal of the Vagrancy Laws [20251014-p-kevin-brown-qub--the-implications-for-ni-on-vagrancy-repeal.pdf](#)
Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Alternatives Restorative Justice (2025) Joint written response to the Justice Committee [Microsoft Word - Draft response to the Justice Bill Aug 2025 \(1\).docx](#)
Simon Community (2025) Simon Community submission to the consultation on Repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824 & the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act 1847 [20250219-simon-community---response-to-consultation-on-repeal-of-the-vagrancy-act_redacted.pdf](#)
Commissioner for Victims of Crime (2025) [20250320-cvocni-response-to-amendments-of-justice-bill_redacted.pdf](#)
The Law Society of Northern Ireland (2025) NI Assembly – Committee for Justice Consultation THE JUSTICEBILL [20250321-response-law-society-of-northern-ireland---justice-bill-call-for-evidence.pdf](#)
British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) Comments on the Department of Justice Proposed Amendments to the Justice Bill (2025) [20250320-basw-ni---comments-on-the-department-of-justice-proposed-amendments-to-the-justice-bill_redacted.pdf](#)
The Northern Ireland Policing Board (2025) Policing Board’s response on the Justice Bill [20250321-nipb---response-to-justice-bill-call-for-evidence_redacted.pdf](#)
- ³ United Nations Human Rights Council, “Breaking the cycle: ending the criminalization of homelessness and poverty,” *Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*, Professor Olivier De Schutter, 26 June 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5661add3-breaking-cycle-ending-criminalization-homelessness-and>
- ⁴ *Homeless, Not Guilty! Ending the criminalisation of homelessness in Europe* (Dec 2024) https://www.feantsa.org/files/Themes/Housing-Rights/2024/Homeless-not-guilty/SANC_Brochure_EN_V1_1.pdf
- ⁵ NI Assembly Committee for Justice: Justice Bill – Repeal of Vagrancy Legislation: Homeless Connect; Simon Community (13th November 2025). Accessed here: [committee-37694.pdf](#)
- ⁶ Homeless Connect – Raising the voice of people with lived experience of homelessness. Accessed here: <https://homelessconnect.org/livedexperience/>
- ⁷ NI Assembly Committee for Justice: Justice Bill – Repeal of Vagrancy Legislation: Homeless Connect; Simon Community (13th November 2025). Accessed here: [committee-37694.pdf](#)
- ⁸ Gov.UK. Housing First Pilot: national evaluation reports. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-first-pilot-national-evaluation-reports?utm_source=copilot.com



Homeless Connect

Units 2-4 | Building 14 | Central Park
Mallusk Road | BT36 4FS

homelessconnect.org