

Homelessness in Northern Ireland

Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Kieran Donnelly, today publishes his report on 'Homelessness in Northern Ireland'. The report examines the scale and nature of homelessness and the strategies and measures in place to address this issue.

Mr Donnelly said: **“The homelessness trends reflected in official Departmental statistics indicate that the aim of reducing homelessness over the course of the Homelessness Strategy 2012-17 has had limited success”.**

Trends and policy

The number of households designated as statutory homeless has increased by 32 per cent over the past five years. This 5 year period covers the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy 2012-17, which was endorsed and monitored by the Department for Communities. Nearly 12,000 households were accepted as homeless in 2016-17. This is in contrast to the latest available figure (from a street count in 2015) indicating an average of six people sleep rough each night in Belfast. Currently there are no regular official counts of the number of people sleeping rough.

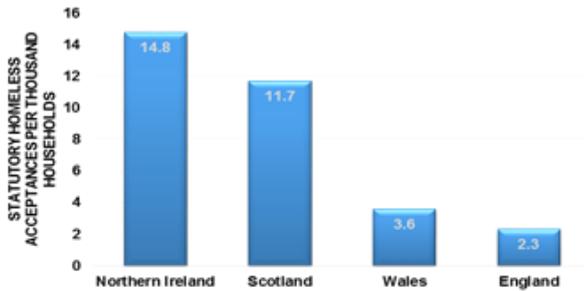
The majority of people recorded in official homelessness statistics are living:

- with friends or relatives;
- in temporary accommodation; or
- in properties which may be of an acceptable standard but are not suitable for their needs.

Mr Donnelly said: **“Contrary to popular belief homelessness is not restricted to people who sleep rough, it encompasses a much wider range of individuals in a variety of circumstances.”**

The statutory homeless rate per thousand households is disproportionately higher in Northern Ireland compared to other regions of the UK. The Department and NIHE have put forward a number of reasons for this but they are not supported by evidence.

NIHE deals with those who are homeless almost exclusively by providing them with a social rented home. As a result around 80 per cent of social homes that become available across Northern Ireland are allocated to households designated as statutory homeless.



Commenting on the report Mr Donnelly said: **“The practice of allocating a high proportion of available social homes to those declared under the wide category of statutory homeless carries risks. It can create an incentive for households who desire, rather than need to move from one house to another, to declare themselves statutory homeless.”**

“The Housing Selection Scheme has been operating since 2000, with few changes, and it is widely accepted that the system could be open to abuse. A fundamental review of social housing allocations policy is long overdue and proposals are currently out for public consultation”.

Cost to the public purse

In the period 2012-17 homelessness cost the public purse around £300 million. Expenditure in 2016-17 was £62 million, with more than 70 per cent - £44 million - spent on temporary accommodation services (including Housing Benefit). There are wider unquantified public sector costs with increased use of the health service and repeat interaction with the criminal justice system.

Mr Donnelly added: **“There is no doubt that the social costs of homelessness are significant but would be far greater without this public expenditure.”**

Measuring performance

The dedication and commitment of staff and volunteers providing front-line homelessness services in both NIHE and the third sector is commendable. NIHE has, however, been unable to fully demonstrate the impact of its work in reducing homelessness. There may be better ways to reduce homelessness but they cannot be assessed without key information being gathered and analysed.

Joined-up working

Homelessness is more than a housing issue. There are a growing number of vulnerable households with increasingly complex needs (such as mental health and drug and alcohol issues) seeking support. We found evidence of considerable joined-up working across the public and third sector but more needs to be done to break down silos to ensure that tackling homelessness is a strategic priority for the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole.

Mr Donnelly commented: **“My team was particularly struck by the commitment and dedication of the staff and volunteers, especially those who are working directly with people who are sleeping rough and in hostels. They found the care and compassion of these individuals to be inspiring and quite moving.”**

Preventing homelessness

Homelessness prevention has been a key objective for NIHE since 2002 and this continues to be the case. We found little first-hand evidence or published statistics to show how many households had been prevented from becoming homeless by the work of NIHE and its partners. NIHE was slow to adopt the Housing Options¹ preventative approach which, since its introduction across England in the mid 2000's, led to a significant decrease in statutory homeless numbers. NIHE's preventative model, the Housing Solutions and Support Service should be fully operational by March 2018.

¹ Under this approach when someone approaches a local authority with a housing problem they are offered advice on their options and choices in the widest sense. This approach features early intervention and explores all possible tenure options, including social housing and the private rented sector.

Recommendations

NIHE needs to be more innovative in its collection, analysis and interpretation of homelessness data. This includes research to determine why the level of statutory homeless acceptances are higher in Northern Ireland and regularly monitoring and measuring the extent of rough sleeping across Northern Ireland. In addition, to improve accountability and transparency the Department should expand the statistical datasets that it publishes.

An in-depth cross-departmental review should be jointly commissioned to identify and quantify health-related support needs for homelessness service providers and homeless households.

Mr Donnelly also recommended: **“That the framework for addressing homelessness should be developed in an integrated way with an emphasis on outcomes rather than existing departmental structures”**.

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He, and the NIAO, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) is an executive non departmental public body of the Department for Communities (the Department), originally established in 1971 with responsibility for social housing in Northern Ireland.
3. NIHE has statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness and is required to publish a Homelessness Strategy every five years. Housing legislation in Northern Ireland recognises that other public sector organisations are required to take the homelessness strategy into account when exercising their functions.
4. A household (individuals or families) can only be accepted as homeless if it meets legislative criteria. NIHE deals with around 20,000 households each year who consider themselves to be homeless. On average, 50 per cent of these households are designated as statutory homeless.
5. The Housing Selection Scheme sets out the social housing allocations policy in Northern Ireland.
6. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Kieran Donnelly or Anu Kane ((028 9025 1107)).