

Executive Summary

1. Homelessness can affect anyone in society. Contrary to popular belief it is not restricted to people who sleep rough. Many households, recorded in official statistics as homeless, are living somewhere that it is not suitable for them. Other households, not included in the statistics or visible on the streets, are the hidden homeless who may be squatting or sharing with friends. Homelessness is also often linked to mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependencies, street lifestyles and institutional experiences including prison and the care system.
2. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness but other government departments and public sector organisations also have a role to play. A household seeking help from NIHE can only be accepted as statutory homeless upon meeting certain criteria set out in legislation.
3. NIHE is required to publish a Homelessness Strategy every five years which sets out, among other things, how it intends to prevent homelessness, provide sufficient accommodation and advice and assistance. In April 2012 the Strategy for 2012-17 was published with a vision to eliminate long term homelessness and rough sleeping across Northern Ireland by 2020.

Scope of this report

4. In Part One we consider the scale and nature of homelessness in Northern Ireland. In Part Two we examine how progress in delivering the Homelessness Strategy 2012-17 was monitored and reported. In Part Three we provide an overview of the measures aimed at preventing homelessness and the arrangements to deal with households accepted as statutory homeless. In Part Four we look at the nature and extent of joined-up working across Departments, other public sector bodies and the third sector¹ in Northern Ireland.
5. We adopted a variety of methods in our review of homelessness and these are explained in more detail at **Appendix 1**.

Key findings

Trends

6. Since 2005-06 around 20,000 households each year have presented² to NIHE as homeless with on average around 50 per cent accepted as statutory homeless. The statutory homeless acceptance rate per thousand households is relatively high in Northern Ireland compared to other UK jurisdictions. This is partly because the number of presenters has declined in other jurisdictions following the

1 Includes voluntary and community organisations (both registered charities and other organisations such as associations, self-help groups and community groups), social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives. Third sector organisations generally are independent of government.

2 Applicants (individuals or households) who have applied to NIHE for a homelessness assessment.

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implementation of the Housing Options³ preventative approach. NIHE told us that there are also differences in legislation and how it discharges its statutory homeless duty.

7. The number of households presenting to NIHE as homeless reduced by 12 per cent between 2012 and 2017 but those accepted as statutory homeless increased by 32 per cent during the same period. Accommodation not reasonable has consistently been the category with the highest number of statutory homeless acceptances (around 30 per cent of the total). This category has been increasing year on year since 2011.
8. Around 80 per cent of the social homes that become available in Northern Ireland are allocated to households that are statutory homeless as opposed to a range of 13 to 38 per cent in other UK jurisdictions. It has been custom and practice for NIHE to discharge its homeless duty through the social housing sector and not the private rented sector. In addition, in Northern Ireland social housing is allocated on the basis of points awarded for housing need and homeless households are awarded a high number of points in the social housing allocation system. This inevitably weights the allocation of social homes towards the statutory homeless.
9. In the five years to 2017 at least £226 million of public funding was provided for measures to prevent and deal with

homelessness. In addition, welfare costs of £65 million in the form of Housing Benefits were incurred. There are wider financial costs across public services that arise from homelessness. For example, costs associated with chaotic use of the health service and repeat interaction with the criminal justice system. There is no doubt that the social costs of homelessness are significant and would be far greater without this public expenditure.

Preventative approach

10. NIHE has been slow to adopt the Housing Options preventative approach which has resulted in decreased levels of homeless presentations and acceptances in England, Scotland and Wales over a number of years. This preventative approach was further embedded through amendments to homelessness legislation in Scotland and Wales. England is currently in the process of amending its homelessness legislation. NIHE intends to implement its own preventative model, the Housing Solutions and Support (HSS) approach across all its offices by March 2018. We note that the new Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 has a greater emphasis on homelessness prevention.

Strategic approach and collaboration

11. We have seen evidence of considerable joined-up working across the public

3 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.

and third sector however, more needs to be done to break down silos across government and ensure that addressing homelessness is a strategic priority for the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole. Homelessness prevention is now at the core of NIHE's approach and the effectiveness of the HSS model is heavily dependent on collaborative working and coordination of public and third sector services across Northern Ireland.

Performance measurement

12. It is difficult to assess how effective the range of activities, detailed in the Homelessness Strategy 2012-17, were in dealing with and reducing homelessness. The Strategy's objectives were not linked to clear high level expected outcomes nor were there any outcome based targets. Reporting against performance was intermittent and focused on measuring activity at an individual initiative level, rather than progress towards the outcomes of preventing and reducing homelessness. This may have affected NIHE's ability to use available evidence to identify interventions/initiatives that were working.
13. It is encouraging that the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 has adopted an outcomes based approach and NIHE has given an undertaking to report annually to key stakeholders on performance and progress.

Temporary accommodation

14. Temporary accommodation services account for over 60 per cent of the total annual spend on homelessness, (excluding Housing Benefit), however detailed costing information was not regularly reported to the NIHE Board. During 2016-17, there were 2,777 placements in temporary accommodation. The Department for Communities' (the Department) recent review of the Supporting People Programme identified variations in costs across services and locations. The Department and NIHE are implementing the recommendations arising from this review to help ensure better value for money across accommodation-based services.

Official statistics

15. Data sets and statistics on homelessness that are published by the Department are less comprehensive than those published in other jurisdictions. Expanding the number of published datasets and statistics will improve comparability and benchmarking of data with other jurisdictions. This will enhance both transparency and accountability.

Data collection and analysis

16. We found weaknesses in analysis, interpretation and presentation of the data that NIHE collects. For example:

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- NIHE was unable to provide evidence based explanations for the year on year increasing number of homeless acceptances and homelessness trends across its regions;
- NIHE, in developing its new Homelessness Strategy, has only recently conducted preliminary analysis of the largest and growing category of accommodation not reasonable; and
- there is a lack of data analysis and statistics assessing and demonstrating how successful early interventions have been in preventing homelessness.

A specific action to examine homeless trends and develop new measures has been included in NIHE's Homelessness Strategy 2017-22.

Rough sleeping

17. The increase in "street activity"⁴ in Belfast City Centre has led to the perception that the level of rough sleeping in Northern Ireland has grown significantly in recent years. Rough sleeper counts have not been carried out on a regular basis across Northern Ireland. An exercise commissioned by NIHE in 2015 found that on average six people sleep rough in Belfast each night: an earlier 2008 exercise in Derry/Londonderry found an average of eight rough sleepers a night. Although circumstances can change rapidly, based on the latest available information, the scale of rough sleeping

does not appear to be as significant in Northern Ireland as it is elsewhere in the UK or in the Republic of Ireland.

Overall conclusions

18. Between 2012 and 2017 substantial financial resources of around £226 million, excluding Housing Benefit costs of £65 million, were committed to preventing and dealing with the complex issue of homelessness. A large number of activities and initiatives were funded to provide a wide range of services, however, over this period statutory homeless acceptances increased from 9,021 to 11,889 (32 per cent). We accept that the homeless numbers are dependent on many external influences and variables outside the control of the Department and NIHE. 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.
19. The flawed design of the performance system supporting the Homelessness Strategy 2012-17, including the lack of evaluation of the outcomes resulting from each activity, make it difficult to assess which activities are the most cost effective in reducing homelessness. Linking cost information to activities and outcomes is important to decision making and the NIHE Board and the Department cannot demonstrate that value for money has been achieved without this financial information. The challenge for the Department and NIHE is to consider

4 This term is used to describe street activities like rough sleeping, street begging and street drinking.

where future investment in homelessness services can best deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

20. The supply of sufficient, affordable housing is a corner stone of any Homelessness Strategy but particularly in Northern Ireland as NIHE discharges its homeless duty almost exclusively through the social housing sector. Alternative options for the Department and NIHE include investing in new social homes, sustaining and making best use of existing stock, and being innovative in making other affordable housing solutions available.
21. Third sector service providers and NIHE told us that they are dealing with a growing number of vulnerable homeless households with increasing complex needs (not just housing needs) such as mental health and drug and alcohol issues. The strategic approach to dealing with homelessness in Northern Ireland must shift further towards a fully cross-departmental strategy, with those involved committing to common goals, solutions and expected outcomes.
22. Given the complexity and scale of the challenges ahead the Department, and NIHE must drive forward the pace of change. Services and initiatives must be monitored closely to ensure that resources are being targeted where they are needed most, and make a difference to some of the most vulnerable households in Northern Ireland.

Recommendations

R1: NIHE needs to be more innovative in its analysis, interpretation and presentation of the homelessness data it collects. We recommend that, to fully understand the causes of homelessness, NIHE:

- carries out research to determine why the level of statutory homeless acceptances in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than in other UK jurisdictions;
- analyses the reasons for variations in acceptances across its regions; and
- analyses the data relating to the accommodation not reasonable category.

R2: We recommend that NIHE establishes:

- clear objectives that capture key high level expected outcomes; and
- SMART key performance indicators to measure overall success.

This should be part of their strategic planning process in all business areas.

R3: We recommend that NIHE systematically evaluates performance in dealing with homelessness against its strategic objectives and regularly reports progress to the Board and other key stakeholders.

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R4: We recommend that the Department and NIHE develop a system that captures data on intervention outcomes of its partner agencies and feeds this into the new customer management information system to help target resources appropriately.

R5: We recommend that the Department expands the number of data sets collected and statistical information published on homelessness in Northern Ireland.

R6: We recommend that an annual report is submitted to the NIHE Board which presents a summary of expenditure and benchmarked cost data demonstrating that accommodation-based services provide value for money.

R7: We recommend that the framework for addressing homelessness is developed in an integrated way with an emphasis on outcomes rather than existing departmental structures. This may lead to a widening of the scope of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group.

R8: We recommend that an in-depth cross-departmental review is jointly commissioned to identify and quantify health-related support needs for homelessness service providers and homeless households across Northern Ireland.

R9: We recommend that NIHE, in partnership with other service providers, develops improved systems for regularly monitoring and measuring the extent of rough sleeping throughout Northern Ireland to determine if action currently being taken is adequate.
