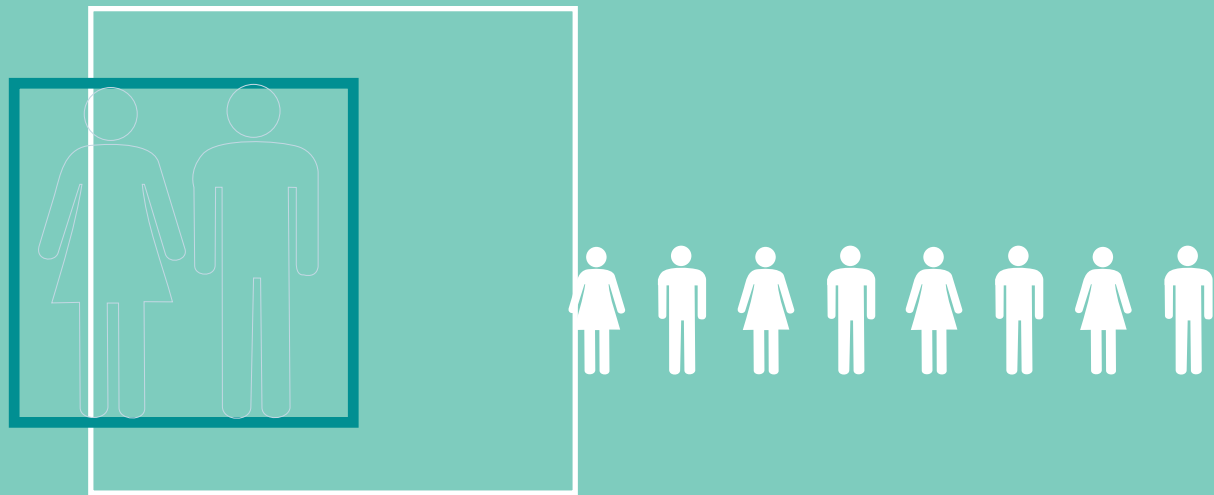


The Homelessness Strategy



“Decent housing
strengthens the
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Foreword

The Housing Executive has had statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness since the introduction of the Housing (NI) Order 1988. Since then many thousands of households have been assisted.

However, it is clear that the nature of homelessness has become more varied and complex and traditional responses to the problem are no longer adequate.

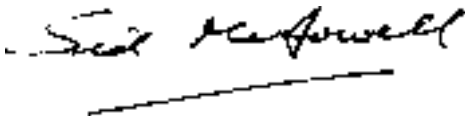
The Homelessness Strategy and Services Review has identified a wide range of improvements which need to be implemented. We will require a great deal of help from our voluntary and statutory partners to effect those improvements.

In particular we need to better understand the needs of individual homeless people and ensure that the range of services and forms of accommodation available respond to that better understanding.

This will require us to test out and implement new services and new ways of delivering them. It will raise resource issues which we will have to address.

The Homelessness Strategy and Services Review sets out the challenge and as such is only a starting point. I am confident that we can create a modern and effective service which can make a real difference to the lives of homeless people.

I am grateful to the many organisations who responded to the consultation in such a positive and meaningful way. I look forward to their continued support and assistance in implementing the Review.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sid McDowell". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a solid black horizontal line.

Sid McDowell
Chairman, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Homelessness Strategy



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Introduction

This report has been produced as the final element in the Homelessness Strategy and Services Review. A consultation report was issued for public consultation in September 2001. The consultation report remains available, together with this final report on the Housing Executive's web site at www.nihe.gov.uk.

Copies of the consultation document were circulated to a wide range of key stakeholders, including the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Housing Council, District Councils, Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts, voluntary sector providers and the Probation Board for NI.

Formal presentations were provided for Area Community Advisory Groups, the Housing Council, District Councils and a number of voluntary sector providers. Additionally, two public consultation seminars were organised for Health and Social Services staff, Housing Associations and the voluntary sector.

In addition to being available on the web site, 600 copies of the Summary Report were circulated as part of the consultation process.

The Homelessness Strategy and Services Review (the Review) has considered the responses to consultation and also the recommendations of the Social Development Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness, the NI Audit Office's report and the published Draft Housing Bill (NI) 2002. It represents the future direction and outcomes for homelessness services over the next number of years.

The Review sets out a new and comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness. It will build upon existing policies, particularly in relation to joint working and the frameworks established, and being established, in relation to Housing and Health - Towards a Shared Agenda, and Supporting People. The Review has been developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders including the Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts, the Probation Board, Housing Associations and the voluntary sector providers.

The Review Final Report is a companion document to the earlier consultation report document and seeks:

- To define the issues and responses required to tackle homelessness.
- To redefine current arrangements and service delivery as necessary.
- To provide a more strategic approach to prevention of homelessness.
- To highlight homelessness as a strategic priority, in order to refocus effort, policy and programmes and to respond effectively to homelessness and homelessness prevention.
- To set an agenda for both formal and informal partnership working.
- To propose recommendations which will establish an Implementation Plan.

Consultation Responses

A total of 43 written responses were received, all broadly welcoming the consultation report recommendations. Feedback was also received from the formal presentations and consultation seminars, in the form of recommendations arising from NI Audit Office and from the Social Development Committee's reports.

The substantive additional recommendations arising from the consultation relate to:

- Additional information needs to monitor equality.
- Further research.
- Formal adoption of a prevention strategy.
- Formal commitment to performance monitoring.
- Improvement in assessment of homeless clients' needs.

The additional recommendations expand and develop on the original Homelessness Strategy and Services Review recommendations and seek to set in place the necessary infrastructure and strategic direction to deliver a quality homelessness service.

A summary of the comments received is set out under the broad common themes below:

Prevention

A significant number of respondents, particularly from the advisory/voluntary sector, expressed the view that the recommendations lacked adequate emphasis on first time prevention of homelessness through the comprehensive provision of advice, advocacy and information services, linked to an objective to reduce homelessness.

Inter Agency Partnerships and Protocols

A majority of respondents commented on the need for meaningful partnerships with the voluntary sector, along with the need for commitment from other statutory agencies. For example, Health and Social Services and Probation to complement the Housing Executive's role in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable homeless.

Planning

Most respondents commented on this aspect of the consultation report, welcoming in particular the development of formal Homelessness Action Plans in each of the Housing Executive's Areas. The relationship between the Review and other policies, for example,

house sales, new build provision, arrears recovery policies and Supporting People was highlighted by many respondents.

Service Delivery

Respondents commented on those aspects of the Review dealing with day to day service delivery to the homeless. Some highlighted the need for a more thorough approach to assessment of homeless applications as well as the need for an independent appeals process. Others welcomed the proposals to abandon the means test for furniture storage and to reviewing the operation of the current after hours service. The establishment of appropriate performance indicators such as the reduction in B&B usage, time spent in temporary accommodation, and the time taken to permanently re-house homeless people were considered essential by respondents on this issue.

Temporary Accommodation

Respondents supported the consultation report's recommendations on temporary accommodation, and in particular the proposed increased provision of accommodation with support services as an alternative to B&B shared facility accommodation usage. Some questioned whether the number of additional units proposed would be adequate and urged caution on the pace with which the use of B&B shared facility accommodation was reduced until alternatives were available.

General

A number of general comments were received regarding the need for the Housing Executive's budgets to reflect the cost of implementing the recommendations e.g. increased regulation of the private rented sector and the need for changes to homelessness legislation to reflect the provisions of the Homelessness Act 2002 in England.

All of the comments received have welcomed the consultation report as being timely and comprehensive. In general the formal responses have reflected the verbal comments made at the consultation seminars and in the various presentations of the recommendations contained in the consultation report to interested groups.

Since releasing the consultation report a number of important reports and legislative proposals have been issued by the Northern Ireland Assembly, Department for Social Development and the NI Audit Office. The consultation report has also considered the potential impact of these reports and proposals.

The Draft Housing Bill NI 2002

The Draft Housing Bill NI 2002 was released for consultation ending on 30th April 2002. The key proposed changes in the Bill relating to homelessness include:

- New definition of homelessness in line with GB i.e. having no accommodation anywhere in the UK.
- Changes to who may be considered “intentionally” homeless i.e. if a person has contrived to become homeless.
- Certain persons will not be eligible for assistance for housing if they are from abroad and subject to immigration control.
- Certain persons who the Housing Executive decide are to be treated as ineligible for homelessness assistance because of previous anti-social behaviour.

NI Audit Office Report - Housing the Homeless

The NI Audit Office completed its audit of homelessness services within the Housing Executive and issued its report on 21 March 2002. A number of recommendations were identified by the audit which will be implemented by the Housing Executive. In broad terms however the NI Audit Office highlighted many of the issues already addressed by the Review. In particular the NI Audit Office reinforced the view that there was a need for:

- Increased primary prevention and a formal prevention strategy to tackle homelessness.
- Better management information and planning of homelessness provision.
- Reduction in the silting-up of temporary accommodation and the reliance on private sector temporary accommodation, especially B&B/shared facility accommodation.
- Proper performance targets that should be monitored to ensure effective delivery of services.
- Clarification and monitoring of standards within temporary accommodation.
- Economic Appraisals of all homelessness proposals involving investment decisions.

Social Development Committee Inquiry into Homelessness

The Social Development Committee released its recommendations in relation to homelessness in June 2002. Their report contained recommendations which in general reflected the findings and recommendations contained in the Review. In particular the Social Development Committee has stressed the importance of partnership working, the need for comprehensive needs assessment, the need for adequate support packages and the possible need for legislative changes concerning definitions of homelessness. A number of service delivery recommendations such as independent appeals and developing a code of practice have also been proposed.

The Review's recommendations mirror those of the Committee's, and specific details as to how they will be developed will be incorporated as part of the implementation of the Review's recommendations.

The Committee has recommended that homelessness is a Promoting Social Inclusion target and that an inter-Departmental approach is developed. This is particularly welcomed.

Equality Dimension

As part of the development of the Review, equality issues have been fully assessed. This assessment analysed the equality implications in relation to (a) access to information/preventative/assessment services, (b) the assessment process, (c) assessment outcomes and (d) temporary/permanent accommodation.

Respondents centred on the exclusion of certain groups from the Equality Impact Assessment, and on the need to develop proper monitoring and information sources. The length of time taken to re-house in certain areas and the potential impact on certain groups was also highlighted.

In considering the equality dimension, it recognised that specific equality based reporting systems are required in relation to homelessness and Section 75 groups. It is also recognised that the operation of complementary policies did result in some “adverse impacts” for homeless persons, such as longer waiting times for permanent housing. In all instances however where “adverse impacts” have been identified, they are considered to be outside the remit of homelessness policy.

It is also recognised that “differential impacts” do exist within homelessness policy, but are as a result of the homeless person’s specific needs (i.e. elderly, those with dependant children or at risk of violence or having other vulnerability). These impacts are not considered adverse.

Statement of Intent

The Housing Executive's response to meeting its statutory responsibilities to the homeless and providing other services to homeless households is spread across a series of strategies, plans and policies. These include its Housing Market Review, Corporate Plan, Business Plan and hitherto Temporary Accommodation Strategies.

The Review will however give a specifically homeless perspective to the planning and delivery of accommodation and services. In essence there are three key strands to the Housing Executive's proposed strategic approach to homelessness. The first will be primary prevention to help stop homelessness from occurring in the first instance. The second will be the provision of high quality temporary accommodation with proper assessment of needs and support requirements. The third will be the provision of appropriate "floating" support to help sustain tenancies and prevent recurrence of homelessness.

As a matter of general intent the Housing Executive will seek to ensure:

- The development of appropriate primary preventative strategies and services.
- That temporary accommodation is available for any household which requires it - taking account of the employment, educational and health needs of that household.
- That users are involved in the planning of services.
- That the needs of all homeless persons are assessed and adequately addressed.
- That the use of B&B shared facility temporary accommodation is minimised generally, and ultimately ceased for households with children.
- That appropriate physical and management standards for temporary accommodation are set and enforced.
- That appropriate support is provided for vulnerable households, both while homeless and to sustain them in tenancies when they are re-housed.

- That appropriate performance standards are set, monitored and evaluated.
- That strategic partnerships with the voluntary sector/housing associations are developed to further improve and extend their services in order to address unmet need.
- That strategic partners in the statutory, voluntary and housing association sectors are fully engaged in the formulation, delivery and evaluation of provision and services (including access to mainstream services).
- The timely provision of permanent accommodation through the social and private rented sectors.
- That all investment decisions are made after appropriate appraisal of options by way of economic appraisal.
- That in developing and implementing other Housing Executive policies the potential for creating homelessness is fully considered.

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Final Recommendations

The Housing Executive, having considered all of the responses to the consultation, and to the recommendations as proposed by the NI Audit Office and the Social Development Committee, has finalised a range of recommendations both strategic and service related that reflect those comments, and which will form the basis of an Implementation Plan to be delivered over the next number of years.

The Housing Executive will in relation to:

Strategy and Planning

Legislative/Housing Policy Changes	Monitor ongoing developments in relation to new legislation, government policy and best practice generally and revise policies and strategic approach as necessary.
	Finalise and publish an Equality Impact Assessment Report on homelessness policy and ensure ongoing monitoring for adverse impacts.
	Contribute to the PSI Working Group on homelessness.
Nature and Extent of Homelessness	Carry out specific research into the nature and extent of rural homelessness, rough sleeping, older homelessness and ex-offenders.
Prevention	Develop and implement a primary preventative strategy.
	Establish a methodology to track the level of repeat homelessness.

Temporary/ Permanent Accommodation	Seek the agreement of the DSD to the removal of land cost constraints in areas of acute homelessness.
	Seek the agreement of the DSD for the use of a special acquisition policy to deal with individual homeless households with special needs for whom normal supply will not meet need within a reasonable period of time.
Identifying Need/ Assessment	Assess accommodation/support needs of existing long term hostel residents (and match needs to new supply).
	Develop and evaluate a multi-disciplinary homeless needs assessment team (Belfast initially) which will include an assessment service for direct access hostels.
Plans	Develop Area Homeless Action Plans to assess all homeless needs and service requirements.
	Provide an additional 250 temporary accommodation units.
	Provide an additional 180 units of move-on/ supported accommodation through the Housing Association programme as identified by specific needs analysis of long term homeless clients.
Families/Single Parents	Finalise and publish joint research on families with children in conjunction with the Western Health & Social Services Board.
	Introduce a tenancy support scheme for young mothers.
	Change location/distribution and type of temporary accommodation units available to provide adequate locally available provision.

Domestic Violence	Assist Women's Aid to carry out a fundamental review of the need for refuges and the services they provide.
	Introduce a tenancy support scheme for victims of domestic violence.
	Re-train staff on dealing with victims of domestic violence.
Young People/ Single Homeless	Formalise joint protocols with Health & Social Services Boards/Trusts in relation to young people, particularly under 18 year olds.
	Publish joint Research with Simon Community on young people leaving care.
	Encourage the development of wider housing options specifically for young people including 'supported lodging schemes'.
	Develop and/or expand additional and existing Rent Guarantee schemes.
	Develop appropriate floating support models for young people leaving care/ single homeless to help sustain tenancies.
Mental Illness/ Addiction	Evaluate the Belfast Homeless Support Team model and its relationship to the proposed multi-disciplinary homeless needs assessment team.
	Develop move-on accommodation (as part of the supported housing programme).
	Introduce floating support to help sustain tenancies for those with mental health/ addiction issues.

Physical well-being/ Physical Disability	Promote a good practice model developed by N&W Belfast HSST.
	Ensure that adequate temporary accommodation units suitable for persons with a disability are provided to meet demand.
Rough Sleepers	Complete evaluation of "outreach" services in Belfast.
	Implement appropriate actions arising from commissioned research on rough sleeping.
	Develop move-on accommodation (as part of supported housing programme).
Leaving the Criminal Justice System	Contribute to Probation Board for Northern Ireland Accommodation Strategy.
	Develop appropriate floating support initiative in conjunction with Probation Board for NI.
Sex offenders	Assist in the development of risk management strategy within suitable accommodation.
	Introduce a reserve pool of "exceptional need" accommodation.

Service Delivery Issues

Reception Services	Ensure that the physical access and other issues highlighted in the 'Gateways and Gatekeepers' Report are implemented where physically practicable.
	Develop the proper 'sign posting' of homeless persons to appropriate Housing Executive offices and other services.
Assessment/ Enquiries	Deliver a comprehensive training programme for assessors of homeless applicants.
Information/Advice	Carry out a comprehensive review of information/advice (including prevention/advocacy).
After Hours	Develop an after hours service delivered through the Housing Executive.
Temporary Accommodation Placements	Standardise the management of placing clients into temporary accommodation.
	Introduce a computerised bed booking system and accounting system.
	Set comprehensive physical/management standards for temporary accommodation.
	Introduce enforcement procedures of standards.
	Evaluate a range of alternative models for the provision of temporary accommodation to help in the reduction of B&B shared facility usage.

continued	Carry out follow-up visits to homeless applicants in temporary accommodation at least every 3 months.
	Monitor reduction of 50% in the use of B&B shared facility temporary accommodation over the next 2 years.
Appeals	Review the appeals process and introduce a simpler and more widely advertised process.
Taxi Service	Review and introduce appropriate tendering and procurement procedures for taxi firms.
Furniture Storage	Formalise arrangements with the community sector for the delivery of the furniture storage service at times of community unrest.
	Seek approval from the DSD to abandon means testing for furniture storage.
Collaboration/ Partnership	Identify and select key strategic partners to help deliver a range of accommodation and support services.
Evaluation/ Reporting	Formalise project evaluation as part of the planning process prior to inclusion into programmes.
	Report Homeless Action Plans in each District Plan.
	Produce an Implementation Plan to deliver the recommendations of this Review.

continued	Establish a multi agency group to oversee implementation.
	Develop appropriate "equality" related information systems to monitor potential differential impacts of homelessness policy.
	Develop additional business plan performance targets and management information systems to monitor key homelessness services.
Resources	Submit proposals (on a project by project basis) to the Supporting People programme.
	Submit strategic requirements for inclusion in the Housing Association programme.
	Increase revenue investment within existing housing budgets.

Implementing the Review

In order to implement the recommendations contained in this Review an Implementation Plan will be produced. This will set out the recommendations, the desired outcomes, the tasks involved to achieve the outcomes and a time frame against which the recommendations/tasks are to be completed.

As stated earlier, a multi disciplinary team of senior representatives from Health & Social Services Boards and Trusts, The Probation Board for NI, the voluntary sector and the Housing Executive will oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Review.

A number of the recommendations will by necessity be developed centrally and cascaded down to the Area and District level. Others, including the production and development of the Area Homeless Action Plans will involve a bottom up as well as a top down approach. Key stakeholders and service users will be involved in the planning of services and projects.

Conclusion

The Housing Executive is committed to maximising its effectiveness in relation to homelessness and to achieving its strategic objectives. It will continue to develop and refine policies and procedures. Increasingly the role of strategic partners will become essential to delivery, and their capacity to become involved will be a key factor to achieving success.

The responses to homelessness contained in this Review have not been developed in isolation and the Housing Executive will continue to respond to wider developments in the housing sector including government policy and any relevant research or best practice emerging. As such the Review is not a static entity, it will continue to evolve and develop.