

Response to Consultation Document:

Development of a Personality Disorder Strategy for Northern Ireland

Issued by Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety

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INTRODUCTION

Housing Rights Service was established in 1964 and is the leading provider of independent specialist housing advice services in Northern Ireland. We believe everyone has the right to a decent safe affordable home. Our services include:

- Providing a housing advice line
- Undertaking advocacy and legal representation on behalf of people with housing problems
- Providing online advice through our award winning website www.housingadviceNI.org and an email advice service
- Providing a specialist housing advice service within the prisons
- Delivering a skills and knowledge based training programme on housing
- Producing housing information resources
- Supporting (In partnership with Citizens Advice and AdviceNI) generalist advice agencies to deliver high quality housing in their local communities
- Providing client based comment to influence the development of relevant public policy and legislation

All our services are delivered throughout NI and focus on the key areas of preventing homelessness; accessing accommodation; tackling poor housing conditions and affordability.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Housing Rights Service has direct experience of housing and related issues facing people with personality disorder. This is more prevalent through our work in prisons. The Housing Advice in Prisons Service is a new, and developing, initiative managed and delivered by Housing Rights Service in partnership with the Housing Executive, NI Prison Service, Probation Board NI and NIACRO. The project provides a specialist housing advice and information service within the three Northern Ireland prisons with the principal aim of preventing homelessness amongst those leaving prison.

Within the field of criminal justice there is growing recognition of the need to promote the rehabilitation of prisoners and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. In recent years there have been a number of key policy documents which highlight the close relationship between prisoners re-offending and homelessness. Government statistics support this; with a significant number of those leaving prison without appropriate accommodation going on to re-offend. Our experience confirms this and also confirms that people with personality disorder are at a particularly high risk of re-offending and this can be related to their housing situation (this applies across the three prisons and relates to men, women and young people).

Housing Rights Service therefore welcomes the development of a NI strategy for services for people with personality disorder and in general agrees with the proposed recommendations. We agree with the statement in the draft strategy “successful engagement... is more likely if basic social needs are catered for”. However, in our experience a fundamental barrier to engagement with support services is the lack of appropriate accommodation. **It is our strong opinion that meeting the individual’s practical needs should be given more priority within the strategy with particular emphasis on meeting housing needs.**

SPECIFIC ISSUES

From our engagement with clients in prison the predominant issues for those with personality disorder are as follows:

1. Coming up to release clients seeking help due to homelessness can find it difficult to access hostel accommodation. Many find they are “barred” due to previous behaviour and attitudes. There is a low threshold of tolerance by some hostels even where they are in receipt of supporting people funding to accept referrals from vulnerable groups. This means that even those who have breached hostels rules at a very low level can find themselves excluded for long or life periods.

We acknowledge that the level of tolerance, support and supervision required for people with personality disorder is very different to that required in general needs hostels and that hostel providers have a duty of care to all residents. People with personality disorder require high levels of support and supervision to maintain stability in accommodation. In our view, high level supported temporary accommodation is necessary as a first step towards engaging with people with personality disorder. A resettlement work plan is also essential along with longer term supported housing arrangements to promote transition into more permanent housing e.g. via specialist floating support. We believe that this is a model which should be further explored. It requires highly specialist trained staff who will be able to supervise, support and motivate thereby increasing the chances of engagement with individuals who often are reluctant to engage. **Currently we feel there is a lack of specialist accommodation and support of this nature and recommend that this is addressed urgently and covered specifically within the strategy.**

2. Personality disorder may not always be recorded by the Housing Executive and therefore is not always recognised as a mitigating factor when being assessed for housing and homelessness assistance. This can lead to people with personality disorder being treated as ineligible for housing assistance because of their behaviour. Unless their behaviour changes or, for example, the individual can show they receiving support and assistance to address behaviour they could remain ineligible for social housing for a long period of time. There are cases where this information is recorded. However, because personality disorder is not classed a mental health issue this cannot be regarded as mitigating evidence. **It is vital that these issues are tackled when developing services aimed at supporting this client group.**

3. For the same reason, we believe that people with personality disorder are disadvantaged when being assessed for points under the Common Selection Scheme for social housing. We believe more consideration needs to be given to awarding points for personality disorder perhaps, for example, under Support/Care Needs or Primary Social Need/Other Social Need assessments. Personality disorder isn't individually specified within these points yet can have a tremendous impact on a person's ability to interact effectively and appropriately with the community and environment around them. **Any review of the selection scheme should take this into account.**
4. Adequate support resources are also not available via social services in the same way mental health teams provide support to people diagnosed with mental health problems.
5. The culminating affect of these issues is that often the only option available to clients is to find their own accommodation in the private rented sector where, there is less likelihood of engagement with statutory or voluntary support services and more chance of tenancy breakdown and homelessness. **This is clearly not the preferred option for this client group.**
6. We welcome the proposal to develop a Regional Personality Disorder Network Group to oversee the implementation of the strategy. We note that the Personality Disorder Working Group did not have representation from voluntary sector housing providers (i.e. registered housing associations and voluntary sector hostels). **We therefore recommend that the regional implementation group should invite representation from the NI Federation of Housing Associations and Council for the Homeless.**

SUMMARY

Housing Rights Service supports the introduction of this strategy and agrees with the proposal to convene an implementation group to oversee the development and co-ordination of services. In summary our recommendations are:

- **Given the central importance of accommodation issues, the strategy should give more priority to meeting individual's practical needs with particular emphasis on meeting housing needs.**
- **There is a lack of available specialist accommodation and support for people with personality disorder and this needs to be addressed urgently.**
- **As personality disorder is not classified as a mental health issue this can affect applicants' entitlement to housing and support services. This also needs to be addressed within the strategy.**
- **The Common Selection Scheme should be reviewed to include points awards for people with personality disorder.**
- **The regional implementation group should invite representation from the NI Federation of Housing Associations and Council for the Homeless.**

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