

Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable homeless people in the private rented sector in Northern Ireland

Anna Ellison, Nicholas Pleace and Eric Hanvey - November 2012

Executive Summary

"The longer I stay in here, the more I'm going to become useless. I've seen people, like 40 or 50, and they're just sitting in hostels. I don't want that.

I want to get out and live on my own and get a job or get into education and training."

Hostel Resident



Introduction

This report was commissioned by Housing Rights Service in 2011 and the bulk of the research was carried out by Policis during 2012. The full report is available on our website www.housingrights.org.uk. The purpose of the research was to help identify and overcome any barriers which may exist for vulnerable homeless people in both accessing and sustaining settled accommodation within the private rented sector. The study is intended to stimulate discussion and engagement with this important issue and to inform policy debate around how best to meet the housing needs of the vulnerable homeless in a private sector context.

The report has a particular focus on the most vulnerable, “chronic exclusion”, homeless clients with complex needs, whose voices are not often heard in public debate, and seeks to place the issues for this client group in the wider context of the potential role of the private rental sector in addressing homelessness. It brings together existing evidence, original research with homelessness service users, perspectives from Government and other stakeholders, research with private sector landlords and consultation with domain experts in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Key findings

- It is unlikely that the social housing sector will ever be in a position to meet future housing need in Northern Ireland. Against the background of a decline in the social housing stock and no realistic prospect of new social housing build on any scale, housing authorities are increasingly looking to the private rental sector (PRS) to meet housing need.
- The major barrier to the use of the PRS to house those on welfare benefits, who have little chance of being housed within the social housing sector, is affordability. Rents are significantly more expensive than the social housing sector in any case, while the requirement for a deposit and rent in advance poses an insuperable barrier for many.

“It’s the deposits they’re wanting. They’re on a different planet. Where am I ever going to get that kind of money?” Hostel Resident

- For the serially homeless and those at greatest risk of homelessness, such as those leaving care or ex-offenders, the affordability barriers are compounded by issues around mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, financial and social exclusion, and a lack of life skills. From the landlords’ perspective, such individuals can be considered as undesirable tenants. Tenancies have, in these cases, a high propensity to breakdown.

“The biggest problems have been with heavy drinkers. Alcoholics – that’s one I would avoid if I could. That and drug addicts obviously, but you don’t always know.” Landlord

- The reduction in funding for self-contained accommodation for the under 35’s will be a major barrier to accessing and sustaining housing for those at greatest risk of homelessness, who frequently have difficulties with social interaction, and are thus likely to struggle in shared accommodation.

"Private is really good because it's quick and all, but it's when like, you need help, the landlord doesn't care about you one bit. He just cares about the house not the people in it." Homeless person

- PRS landlords have little appetite for housing vulnerable or high risk tenants. They are however open to propositions which guarantee rent, length of tenure and assurances that the property will be returned in good condition - providing these features are also combined with tenant support to minimise disturbance to neighbours and exit management in the event of a tenancy going badly wrong.

"I'm only supplying a house, you know. I'm not a social worker." Landlord

- Housing experience for many homeless people has been a revolving door of temporary placements and serial housing failure. It is clear that a significant degree of support is required if the vulnerable homeless are to sustain tenancies.

"I think I'd need some help with that (moving into a rented property), setting it up and sorting myself out, especially for the first six months. I'd be too anxious otherwise." Hostel Resident

- Older homeless people, which included some of the most high risk and vulnerable individuals, were highly resistant to the idea of living in other than a hostel environment and reluctant to move away from familiar staff on whom they were often highly dependent for safety and support.

"They (hostel staff) make sure I'm taking my meds. They're checking me every hour in my bed. I couldn't live on my own because I'd be able to drink whenever I want. And I would just end up dead" Hostel Resident

- Vulnerable homeless people aspire above all to self-determination, a space of their own, and an opportunity to re-set their lives.

"I just want somewhere that's my own space. If I had a bit of a garden, even better. Just somewhere that's set aside for me and that's it." Homeless person

- Policy approaches based on the reaction to crisis and serial placement in temporary hostel accommodation have not served the homeless well. Similarly, providing individuals with housing solutions without an appropriate degree and mix of support have set individuals up to fail.



Key recommendations

- A move away from temporary accommodation and towards the use of 'Housing First' and 'Housing Led' models is required - which puts the housing solution first and then builds multi-agency services and support around it. (See the chart below which describes these models.)
- The 'Housing First' model will need to be deployed in combination with an expanded Social Lettings Agency approach to address the barriers to vulnerable individuals entering the PRS in order to overcome landlord resistance to housing vulnerable tenants and to build the life skills which will make tenancies sustainable. It needs to be recognised however that, as a stand-alone service, the Social Lettings Agency model is only appropriate for those with low support needs.
- For those with more complex needs, and recovering from chronic and serial homelessness, a more intensive multi-agency support service will need to be developed within a 'Housing First' framework offering:
 - Intensive wrap-around 24/7 support on a permanent basis for the relatively few very high risk individuals who need this approach
 - Less intensive, potentially time limited, support for those with less complex problems who may need extensive support in the transition period but may be able to live independently with less support on an on-going basis.
- Consideration needs to be given to the risk of homelessness and the implications of adopting a 'Housing First' approach when framing the implementation of welfare reform in Northern Ireland.

Housing and Support Models

	High support	Medium support	Low support
Characteristics	Entrenched chronic homelessness Complex multi-dimensional needs	Serial homelessness At risk of entrenched homelessness Vulnerable but less serious / complex needs	At risk of / circumstantial homelessness Financial and practical barriers to accessing housing
Solutions	Housing First Housing as human right Client self-determination Integrated multi-agency approach 24/7 wraparound support Not time limited Harm reduction not abstinence	Housing led Housing solution first Less intensive floating support Integrated multi-agency approach Potentially time limited Visiting and on call support	Social Lettings Agency model Self financing Addresses entry barriers to PRS via deposits Tenancy management service to address landlord resistance Tenant support services Skill building



For further information	Housing Rights Service Middleton Buildings 10-12 High Street Belfast BT1 2BA	T. 028 90245640 E. hrs@housingrights.org.uk W. www.housingrights.org.uk twitter.com/HousingRightsNI
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