



Policy Briefing  
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@HousingRightsNI

**Consultation response to the Northern Ireland  
Housing Executive's draft Chronic Homelessness  
Action Plan**

**August 2019**

**when everyone has a home**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Housing Rights is the leading provider of specialist housing advice in Northern Ireland, with over 50 years' experience of advising, supporting and representing clients on housing issues. We believe that prevention is the best cure, and work to prevent homelessness by sustaining our clients' tenancies wherever this is possible.
- 1.2 Our work with people experiencing chronic homelessness, for example through our Beyond the Gate project,<sup>1</sup> gives us insight into the complex needs of this vulnerable group, as well as the need for tailored and innovative approaches to meeting those needs.
- 1.3 Housing Rights commends the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) for their leadership in developing the first Action Plan in the UK specifically dedicated to chronic homelessness. It is our view that this Action Plan could have the potential to become the 'go-to' document on how best to respond to chronic homelessness within the UK. Housing Rights therefore wish to contribute a number of suggestions which the NIHE may wish to consider when amending and refining the existing proposals.

## 2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Housing Rights strongly welcomes the development of a Chronic Homelessness Action Plan and believes it is crucial that this Plan focuses specifically on how best to address the issues faced by those who experience/are at risk of chronic homelessness.**
- **Housing Rights believes it is essential that the content of the Plan has been informed directly by the views of those who have lived experience of being chronically homeless. The NIHE may wish to consider commissioning an external facilitator to ensure effective input from/consultation with people who have experienced chronic homelessness, in order to inform the development of the final Action Plan.**
- **In order to define and identify chronic homelessness/those at risk of chronic homelessness, it may be useful, in practice, for the NIHE to consider adopting a two-stage approach, involving an initial**

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the Gate works with repeat offenders across Northern Ireland. By co-ordinating wrap-around support for prisoners upon release, Beyond the Gate advisers work to reduce homelessness on leaving custody, and associated re-offending, by ensuring that their clients are supported with the initial transition back into independent living.

screening by frontline staff, followed by referral to a multidisciplinary team.

- The NIHE may wish to review the operationalisation of certain Housing Solutions and HOME Team processes to ensure that chronically homeless individuals do not face additional barriers in accessing services.
- The NIHE should consider including not only the development of protocols within the Action Plan but also how to ensure Protocols, when developed, are adhered to in practice and monitored effectively.
- Housing Rights would support legislative change and would recommend that this legislative reform should place a statutory duty to co-operate on each of the statutory bodies named in s6A (5) of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988.<sup>2</sup>
- There are a range of issues associated with the Private Rented Sector (i.e. supply, standards, security of tenure and affordability) and there are also a number of challenges faced by chronically homeless with regards to sustaining accommodation in the PRS which go beyond these issues. Collectively these make it unlikely this sector will make a substantive contribution to providing a suitable long term response for people who are chronically homeless.
- Housing Rights supports the adoption of a Housing First (as distinct from a Housing Led) approach and would suggest that the Action Plan clearly defines what is meant by 'Housing First' and how this would be implemented.

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<sup>2</sup>

- The Housing Executive
- The Health and Social Care Regional Board
- Health and Social Care Trusts
- Education and library boards
- Registered housing associations
- District councils
- The Secretary of State (in relation to any function concerning NI prisons)
- The Probation Board for NI
- The Department of Education
- The Department for Education and Learning
- The Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- The Department for Social Development

- **Housing Rights believes it may be useful for the NIHE to carry out a review of Out of Hours provision and ensure that any partners providing this service are given comprehensive training.**
- **Housing Rights is concerned about the detrimental impact of exclusion and eviction from temporary accommodation on chronically homeless individuals and would suggest that these issues should be explicitly considered in the Strategy and addressed in the Action Plan.**

### **3.0 OVERARCHING AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION**

3.1 Housing Rights would like to suggest the following overarching areas for consideration which may be of use to the NIHE in maximising the effectiveness of their planned interventions:

3.2

- *Bespoke to chronic homelessness*  
Housing Rights believes it is crucial that this Action Plan provides a tailored approach to addressing the specific issue of chronic homelessness, rather than homelessness in general. Housing Rights recognises that this is a challenging task, particularly given that the Action Plan is the first of its kind in the UK. **The NIHE therefore may wish to consider carrying out comprehensive and ongoing consultations with people who have first-hand experience of chronic homelessness**, in order to capitalise on their expertise and insight. It is our view that this would help to ensure the approach taken is sufficiently tailored to their needs to be impactful. This will be discussed further at 5.1.

3.3

- *Outcomes based approach*  
Housing Rights welcomes the NIHE's adoption of an outcomes-based approach in the Action Plan. However, it is our view that this approach could be strengthened in light of the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) recommendations in their 2017 report on Homelessness in Northern Ireland. **There the NIAO recommended the establishment of:**

- **Clear objectives that capture key high level expected outcomes and,**

- **SMART<sup>3</sup> key performance indicators to measure overall success.<sup>4</sup>**

3.3.1 In order to clarify how the Action Plan will be operationalised and how its impact will be measured, the NIHE may wish to consider:

- Ensuring that the outcomes identified are not the same as their associated action.<sup>5</sup>
- Ensuring that the outcomes clearly identify what the NIHE hope to achieve as a result of their action points.<sup>6</sup>
- Ensuring indicators are included to explain how the NIHE will monitor their progress.
- Ensuring that stakeholders are specifically identified who have responsibility for particular actions.<sup>7</sup>

3.3.2 **Housing Rights would therefore suggest that the Action Plan includes a clear, measurable Theory of Change** including:

- Actions
- Inputs
- Outputs
- Outcomes
- Impacts

3.3.3 Housing Rights would strongly welcome the inclusion of indicators to identify how the outcomes and impacts will be measured, as well the identification of specific stakeholders responsible for implementing each of the actions.

3.3.4 **In order to ensure the Theory of Change is effective in addressing the specific needs of chronically homeless individuals, Housing Rights would strongly welcome the involvement of service users in its development.**

- *Current operational processes*

3.4 The Chronic Homelessness Action Plan comes at a time when service users have had substantial experience engaging with Housing Solutions

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<sup>3</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time Bound.

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office, 'Homelessness in Northern Ireland' (November 2017)

<[https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report_0.pdf)> (accessed August 2019)

<sup>5</sup> For example, p33 Action Points 1-3: Both the action point and outcome are 'Promote prevention/early intervention.'

<sup>6</sup> For example, p34 Action Point 2: The Action Point is to 'Adopt innovative approaches...' and the outcome is 'Innovative approaches to preventing homelessness will be encouraged...' which leaves uncertainty as to the intended result.

<sup>7</sup> For example, p38 Action Points 3-4 place the responsibility on 'All Stakeholders' rather than specifying who this includes.

and the HOME Team. Housing Rights advisers have found that the current operationalisation of these processes has actually made it more difficult for chronically homeless individuals to receive the accommodation and support they require. **Housing Rights suggests that it may be useful to engage with chronically homeless people and those who work closely with them, to better understand how the operationalisation of certain processes could be adjusted to ensure the chronically homeless population do not face barriers in accessing services.** This will be discussed further at 7.3 and 11.1 - 11.6.

- 3.5 • Supporting People  
In addition to the need for close inter-agency and inter-departmental working, Housing Rights believes it is critical that there is close alignment between the Action Plan and the work of Supporting People. **The NIHE may wish to take this opportunity to ensure that the Chronic Homelessness Action Plan and the Supporting People Strategy are closely aligned, and the ways in which they will work together and complement each other are detailed in each document.**
  
- 3.6 • Welfare Reform  
The NIHE 2017 – 2022 Homeless Strategy recognises the challenges faced by the homeless population as a result of Welfare Reform.<sup>8</sup> It is our view that chronically homeless individuals are likely to face even more difficulties as a result of Welfare Reform, given the issues they face in accessing services. **It may therefore be useful for the NIHE to make reference to the challenges arising from Welfare Reform,** in order to ensure the Action Plan is considered in this context and mirrors the homeless strategy. This will be discussed further at 8.3.
  
- 3.7 • Partnership Working  
Housing Rights welcomes the NIHE’s commitment in the Action Plan to work collaboratively with partner agencies. Given the wide range of services required to meet the complex needs of people experiencing Chronic Homelessness, partnership working is key. **Following the review of consultation responses, the NIHE may find it useful to more clearly define the role and intended impact of partnership working throughout the Action Plan.**

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<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive, ‘Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-22’ (April 2017) <<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/f9f29204-bdc9-4f71-a908-5deb8fee7497/2017-2022-northern-ireland-homelessness-strategy.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>> (accessed August 2019)

- Rough Sleeping
- 3.8 Housing Rights welcomes the NIHE's recognition that Chronic Homelessness goes beyond rough sleeping. **It may also be useful if the Action Plan specifically highlights that rough sleepers are not a sub-group of the chronically homeless population, rather rough sleeping is one stage of the chronic homelessness cycle.**<sup>9</sup>

*Housing Rights wish to contribute some further comments in relation to each of the Action Plan objectives:*

## 4.0 OBJECTIVE 1

### CRITERIA

- 4.1 Housing Rights strongly welcomes the development of a process for defining and identifying chronic homelessness. Housing Rights agrees that the 7 criteria identified by the NIHE can be indicators of chronic homelessness. However, given the variety of needs experienced by our chronically homeless clients, we are concerned that operationally the criteria may be overly prescriptive and could inadvertently exclude certain individuals who are experiencing chronic homelessness, while including individuals who are not.
- 4.2 **In order to be of most practical use, the NIHE may wish to consider adopting a two-stage approach to identifying chronic homelessness involving an initial screening by frontline staff, followed by referral to a multidisciplinary team.** This multi-disciplinary team, with their diverse expertise, could delve deeper into an individual's specific circumstances, freeing up front line staff.
- 4.3 In order to guide this two-stage process, the NIHE may find it useful to consider a piece of research by homelessness expert S Fitzpatrick entitled "Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in the UK: Key Patterns and Intersections." This research identifies four 'domains of deep social exclusion' and the ways in which they intersect for people experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness (please see venn diagram below):<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is rare that an individual consistently sleeps rough, instead people experiencing chronic homelessness tend to be caught in a continuous cycle of moving between temporary accommodation, longer term tenancies, hospitals, prisons and rough sleeping.

<sup>10</sup> S Fitzpatrick et al. 'Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in the UK: Key Patterns and Intersections' (2011) <[https://pureapps2.hw.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/7456920/SP\\_S\\_MEHIntersectionsPaper.pdf](https://pureapps2.hw.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/7456920/SP_S_MEHIntersectionsPaper.pdf)> (accessed August 2019)

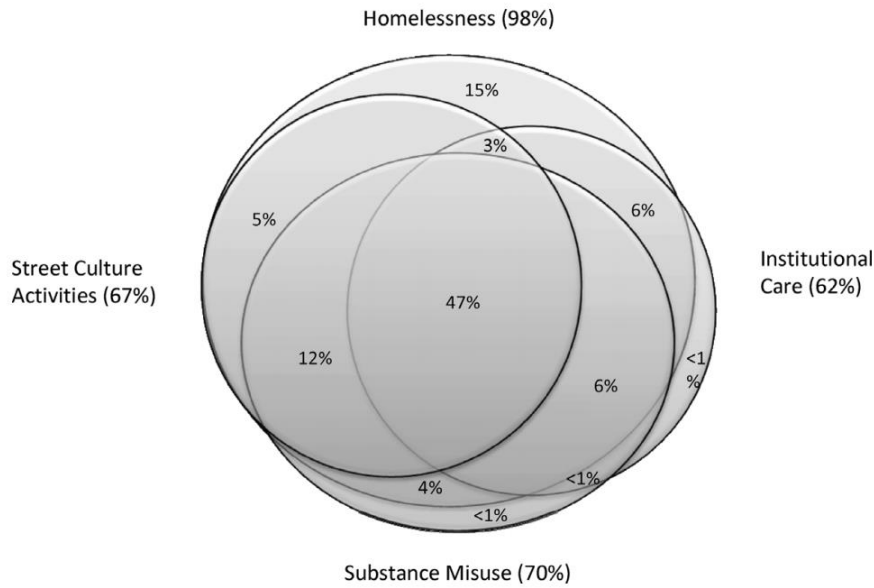


Figure 2. Overlaps between domains of deep social exclusion.  
Source: Census Survey, 2010. Base: 1,286.

4.4 Usefully, this study further identifies 14 indicators which can be used to investigate the four domains (please see table below):<sup>11</sup>

Table 1 Experience of deep social exclusion

Indicator
<i>Homelessness</i>
1 Stayed with friends, relatives or other people because had no home of own
2 Stayed in a hostel, foyer, refuge, night shelter or B&B hotel because had no home of own
3 Slept rough
4 Applied to the council as homeless
<i>Institutional care</i>
5 Spent time in local authority care as a child
6 Spent time in prison or a young offenders institution
7 Been admitted to hospital with a mental health issue
<i>Substance misuse</i>
8 Used hard drugs
9 Injected drugs
10 Used solvents, gas or glue
11 Had a period in life when had six or more alcoholic drinks on a daily basis
<i>Street culture activities</i>
12 Begged (that is, asked passers-by for money in the street or another public place)
13 Been involved in street drinking
14 Shoplifted because needed things like food, drugs, alcohol or money for somewhere to stay
Base

Source: Census Survey, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid



- 4.5 Housing Rights believes that the venn diagram above (at 4.3) may be useful in assisting frontline staff to carry out an initial screening as it broadly demonstrates the manner in which, for chronically homeless individuals, the experience of homelessness is intersected with other domains of deep social exclusion.
- 4.6 The indicators above (at 4.4), read alongside the 7 criteria identified in the Action Plan, may provide a useful basis for the NIHE to develop guidance for frontline staff in order to identify if an individual is experiencing any of the four domains of deep social exclusion. However, it would be important that these indicators/criteria are simply used to guide, rather than to prescribe.
- 4.7 Where there is an intersection between an individual's experience of homelessness and any of the other three domains of deep social exclusion, the individual would be referred to the multi-disciplinary team. **The diverse range of expertise of the multi-disciplinary team would enable a person-centred assessment, taking into consideration the specific circumstances and needs of the individual being assessed and identifying relevant support in relation to those needs.**
- 4.8 Where the initial screening identifies minimal intersection, an individual may be at risk of chronic homelessness rather than experiencing chronic homelessness. **Housing Rights believes it would be useful if individuals at risk of chronic homelessness are also identified through the NIHE's assessment process** as this would enable focused early interventions, based on their individual needs.
- 4.9 **Housing Rights would suggest that staff carrying out the assessments are provided with additional guidance and training.** In line with the commitment in the Action Plan to partnership working, **Housing Rights would welcome the sharing of NIHE guidance with partner agencies in order to maximise the support and advice they offer to those experiencing chronic homelessness.**

## 5.0 OBJECTIVE 2

### SERVICE USER FORUM

- 5.1 Housing Rights strongly welcomes the NIHE's recognition that the views of service users are 'an integral part' of the review of service provision. However, Housing Rights does not feel that it would suffice to devote one meeting per year of the Service Users Forum to Chronic Homelessness. **Housing Rights would therefore suggest that the NIHE explores additional means of engaging with service users, reviewing best practice examples of how to do so effectively.** Given the fundamental role that service user consultation plays in developing effective services, **the NIHE may wish to consider commissioning an external facilitator to carry out comprehensive and**

**ongoing consultations with people who have experienced chronic homelessness.** It is important that this should include people who are currently experiencing chronic homelessness.

## **6.0 OBJECTIVE 3**

### ONLINE ADVICE SERVICES

- 6.1 Many of Housing Rights chronically homeless service users have difficulties accessing online services and/or limited literacy skills. Therefore, **Housing Rights does not feel that the provision of website advice, proposed under Objectives 3 and 4, is the most effective way to support chronically homeless individuals.** If the NIHE wish to include this provision in the Action Plan, Housing Rights would suggest that details are included as to how people experiencing chronic homelessness would be supported in accessing this service.
- 6.2 Furthermore, **it may be useful for the NIHE to consider using and tailoring existing services provided by partner organisations to ensure efficacy and avoid duplication.** For example, NIHE funds HousingAdviceNI, a website which provides independent advice on housing and homelessness. In 2018/19, there were a total of over 8,700 views on pages regarding 'Help in an emergency' and 'Hostels, Night Shelters and Foyers.' This demonstrates the value of providing online advice to those supporting chronically homeless individuals and Housing Rights would suggest (both in the interest of ensuring accessibility and ensuring the best use of resources) that this website is used and developed rather than creating a duplicate service.

## **7.0 OBJECTIVE 4**

### REVIEW OF PROTOCOLS

#### Content

- 7.1 Housing Rights welcomes the review of Protocols proposed under Objective 4. Housing Rights advisers have found that the Prison Protocol has helped to ensure that clients being released from prison have an equal opportunity to access accommodation as other members of the public do. It is our view that the focus on early intervention and planning in this Protocol is particularly effective.
- 7.2 Given the similar needs and vulnerabilities experienced by individuals leaving other institutions, such as hospital or care, **the NIHE may wish to consider the development of a shared protocol model for discharge from any institution, based on the good practice example of the Prison Protocol.**

The NIHE may wish to consider asking the Inter-departmental Homelessness Action Group to co-ordinate this work.

## Operationalisation

- 7.3 In addition to reviewing their content, **the NIHE may wish to consider how they can ensure Protocols are adhered to in practice and monitored effectively.** This may require reviewing other processes to ensure that they do not inadvertently undermine the intention of the Protocols. For example, see Case Study 1:

### **CASE STUDY 1**

Client is a young vulnerable woman with chronic and complex needs. Housing Rights (HR) adviser submitted homeless application with supporting evidence and hostel referral to Belfast Housing Solutions Team (BHST) for assessment 28 days prior to release from prison. Area of choice and support services were in Ballymena which was outside HOME Team remit so hostel referral was also sent to CAP team. As is her right, client presented to Ballymena District Office on day of release to avail of temporary accommodation (TA). Contrary to the agreed Protocol, BHST had not registered nor assessed her homeless application. Additionally no hostel bed was available and/or would accept the client within the area of her support services. The client was frustrated and walked away from NIHE office. HR adviser successfully requested that client's housing file be transferred to Ballymena and attempted to contact the client for a number of weeks following this event without success.

In addition, it was noted by the Housing Rights adviser that, prior to the introduction of the HOME Team Model and as the Protocol outlines, temporary accommodation could have been secured prior to release and travel to temporary accommodation could have been arranged by the prison.

## PERSONS FROM ABROAD

- 7.4 Housing Rights welcomes the NIHE's proposal to improve accessibility for marginalised groups by ensuring staff are trained to provide advice and assistance to Persons From Abroad (PFA). It is our experience that some PFA clients have been incorrectly categorised as having "no recourse to public funds" when in fact they should be entitled to assistance. Given the significance of this decision, **it is important that staff, in a broad range of public agencies, have been adequately trained in correctly identifying whether a PFA individual is entitled to assistance.**
- 7.5 Housing Rights believes that, while there is no statutory duty to support individuals who are correctly categorised as having "no recourse to public funds"

category, there exists a strong moral duty to do so. **Given that the Inter-departmental Homeless Action Group was established to support the eradication of homelessness in our society, Housing Rights believes it would be appropriate for the Group to consider how the acute risks faced by people with no recourse to public funds can most appropriately be managed.** It may be useful for the Group to co-ordinate a small sub-group with representatives from organisations working people with no recourse to public funds, as well as service users (if feasible), in order to design and implement a plan to support this group of people effectively.

### INNOVATIVE APPROACHES AND TAILORED SUPPORT

- 7.6 Housing Rights agrees that innovative approaches and bespoke, tailored support are key in tackling chronic homelessness and believes that this should be one of the major focuses of the Action Plan. In line with the NIHE's partnership approach, **Housing Rights would welcome the creation of a 'Chronic Homelessness Innovation Fund' which would allow stakeholders to apply for funding for initiatives to address chronic homelessness.** The NIHE may wish to consider requesting inter-departmental funding to create this fund.

### LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

- 7.7 Housing Rights believes that prevention is the best cure for homelessness and therefore welcomes the NIHE's proposal to consider mirroring the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 by introducing statutory duties to prevent and relieve homelessness. Housing Rights further welcomes the proposals, under Objective 9, to review the use of priority need and to extend 28 days to 56 days as the statutory requirement to deal with threatened homelessness.

### Statutory Duty to Co-operate

- 7.8 Housing Rights believes that in order to maximise the efficacy of the current statutory duty, as well as the legislative changes proposed above, meaningful co-operation from other statutory bodies, such those with responsibilities for Health and Education, is crucial. **Housing Rights would therefore strongly suggest the Department for Communities place a statutory duty to co-operate on each of the statutory bodies named in s6A (5) of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988.**<sup>12</sup> This statutory duty to co-operate would be of

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<sup>12</sup>

- The Housing Executive
- The Health and Social Care Regional Board
- Health and Social Care Trusts
- Education and library boards
- Registered housing associations
- District councils

particular value in addressing chronic homelessness, given the complex health and social issues these individuals often experience.

- 7.9 Housing Rights believes that a statutory duty to co-operate across the public sector would help to address the lack of focused early intervention, as well as ensuring support services for those already experiencing chronic homelessness.
- 7.10 Housing Rights is mindful of the time and resource constraints increasingly facing providers of housing, healthcare and other support services. It is natural that under such constraints, bodies prioritise those duties which they are statutorily obliged to carry out. Housing Rights believes that a statutory duty to co-operate would ensure that those bodies with responsibilities in relation to homelessness, are able to appropriately prioritise their time and resources to tackle homelessness. Correspondingly, this statutory duty would ensure the necessary framework exists for such bodies to be held to account for failure to do so.
- 7.11 **The NIHE may find it useful to consider Housing Rights' Briefing Paper on this issue (see [appendix 1](#)), which includes suggestions regarding the operationalisation and wording of the proposed statutory duty to co-operate.**<sup>13</sup>

## **8.0 OBJECTIVES 5 - 8**

- 8.1 Given their interrelated nature, the NIHE's following proposals will be considered consecutively:
- Promoting access to and security of tenure in the Private Rented Sector (Objective 5)
  - Adopting a Housing First approach (Objective 8)
  - Making the stay in temporary accommodation as short as possible (Objective 7)

### **PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR**

- 8.2 In relation to the NIHE's proposals to 'promote PRS and security of tenure,' Housing Rights wish to make the following comments:
- 8.3 Welfare Reform has made it increasingly difficult for PRS tenants to sustain their tenancies. Recent research carried out by Housing Rights with support from

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- The Secretary of State (in relation to any function concerning NI prisons)
  - The Probation Board for NI
  - The Department of Education
  - The Department for Education and Learning
  - The Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety
  - The Department for Social Development

<sup>13</sup> Appendix 1: [Housing Rights, 'Briefing for Nichola Mallon MLA on Proposed amendments to the Housing \(Amendment\) Act 2010'](#) (September 2016)

CaCHE<sup>14</sup> confirms that although on average, private rents in Northern Ireland have increased roughly in line with inflation, these are experienced as increasingly difficult for PRS tenants in receipt of housing benefit, given the introduction of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and the subsequent decline in the level of this allowance, particularly since 2011. The research data shows that 100% of LHA rates in NI have now fallen below the 30th percentile and over a quarter of the LHA rates are now below the 10th percentile.<sup>15</sup> These tenancy sustainment issues have been heightened in the wake of Universal Credit. This is reflected in the experience of Housing Rights' Landlord Helpline; between July 2018 and December 2018, calls regarding UC increased by 600% with delays in initial rent payments being one of the top issues raised. **These tenancy sustainment issues, aggravated by welfare changes over the past decade, are acutely felt by the homeless population.**

- 8.4 Housing Rights would also like to highlight that the issues with using the PRS to address homelessness extend beyond affordability. **It is our view that recent developments in the PRS have not made sufficient improvements in standards, security of tenure and tenancy management to make the PRS appropriate for homeless households.** Therefore, Housing Rights strongly believes it is vital that the regulation and standards of the PRS are substantially increased before the NIHE begins any active policy of discharging to this sector. For more detailed analysis please see Housing Rights' policy response on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations: Proposal 4.'<sup>16</sup>
- 8.5 **Housing Rights recognises that the NIHE's proposals, under objective 5, to 'promote PRS and security of tenure' may help to take initial steps in addressing some of the needs of the general homeless population. However, it is our view that these proposals do not address the specific needs of those experiencing chronic homelessness.** While affordability, security of tenure and standards in the PRS are also issues for those experiencing chronic homelessness, it is our view that without the support required to address their complex needs, these vulnerable individuals would not be able to sustain a tenancy no matter how affordable and fit for purpose it may be.
- 8.6 **In this regard, the NIHE may find it useful to consider the findings of a piece of research carried out by Policis entitled "Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable homeless people in the private rented sector in**

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<sup>14</sup> Due to be published in Autumn 2019

<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, whilst rents in NI have kept roughly in line with CPI inflation since 2009, rents at the bottom end of the market have increased more (average 13%) compared to those at the top end of the market (average 9%). Data from the ONS on UK average household income shows that average income after taxes and benefits fell in real terms over the period 2009-2017 (a decrease of 1.7%), which would suggest that lower income households in the PRS are disproportionately affected by the double movement of rent increases in the context of reducing income.

<sup>16</sup> Housing Rights, 'Policy Response on A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations: Proposal 4' (December 2017) <[https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/Proposal%204%20-%20Housing%20Rights%20position%20paper\\_0.pdf](https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/Proposal%204%20-%20Housing%20Rights%20position%20paper_0.pdf)> (Accessed August 2019)

**Northern Ireland.**<sup>17</sup> (see [appendix 2](#)) Almost all of the vulnerable homeless people interviewed for this report had been unable to sustain tenancies for a variety of reasons, beyond affordability and standards, including:

- Serial offending with spells in custody causing tenancies to lapse.
- Extended stays in hospital causing tenancies to lapse.
- Alcohol dependence and drug addiction.
- Disruptive behaviour due to premises being adopted by a social or addiction network.
- Lack of life-skills or financial capability.
- Inability to manage health conditions without support.<sup>18</sup>

8.7 Therefore, **Housing Rights believes that in order for a chronically homeless individual to sustain a PRS tenancy, a substantial amount of additional support would be required to meet their complex needs.** (This support will be discussed further from 8.10 - 8.15)

### Shared accommodation model

8.8 Policis' report also identifies numerous issues for vulnerable people experiencing homelessness with regards to shared accommodation including:

- Confrontation, violence and tenancy breakdowns, particularly for those with anger management issues or a lack of interpersonal or social skills.
- Concerns about personal safety and the security of personal belongings.
- Concerns that sharing accommodation would set up the conditions for a return to the drink and drug culture that many were trying to escape.
- Concerns that, due to the above listed issues, shared accommodation was likely to fail and thus reinforce a pattern of instability and serial housing failure.<sup>19</sup>

8.9 In light of these issues, **it seems unlikely that there is merit in exploring a shared accommodation model for chronically homeless individuals.**

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<sup>17</sup> Appendix 2: A Ellison et al. '[Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable homeless people in the private rented sector in Northern Ireland](#)' (November 2012)  
<<https://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Meeting%20the%20Housing%20Needs%20of%20Vulnerable%20People.pdf>> (accessed August 2019)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

## HOUSING FIRST

- 8.10 In order to address the barriers to tenancy sustainment listed at 8.6, the report recommends the use of different Housing Models to address the various needs of the homeless population (please see table below):<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 2: Client needs and the fit with the new housing models**

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

- 8.11 As can be seen in this table, a Housing First (rather than Housing Led) approach is proposed for those experiencing chronic homelessness. Housing First puts the housing solution first and then builds multi-agency services and support around it. The support required will depend on the individual and can be intensive wrap-around 24/7 support on a permanent basis where needs be. Housing Rights believes that this approach would enable many of our chronically homeless clients to sustain a long-term tenancy. Housing Rights therefore strongly welcomes the NIHE's proposal under Objective 8 to adopt a Housing First approach, if it is as described in the figure above.
- 8.12 As a large number of different 'Housing First' projects have been rolled out across different countries in recent years, **Housing Rights would suggest that the NIHE is explicit in the Action Plan as to what they mean by 'Housing First' and how this would be implemented.** Housing Rights believes it is important that there is a shared understanding that, in order to avail of Housing First, an individual does not need to be 'tenancy ready.' Instead the support is

<sup>20</sup> Ibid



put in place to enable them to sustain their tenancy, whatever their circumstances.

**8.13 The NIHE should consider implementing the Pathways Housing First approach detailed in the Policis report which includes the following components:**

- Housing as a basic human right.
- Respect, warmth and compassion for all clients (a 'client' being a person using the Housing First service).
- A commitment to working with clients for as long as they need.
- Scattered site housing, i.e. ordinary PRS housing that is scattered across a city or region and not concentrated in any one building, street or postcode.
- Separation of housing and services.
- Consumer choice and self-determination.
- A recovery orientation in relation to mental health problems and drug and alcohol use.
- A Harm reduction, rather than abstinence based, approach in relation to drugs and alcohol.<sup>21</sup>

**8.14 While the Housing First model is used to support those already experiencing homelessness, the NIHE may also wish to consider also applying these principles when considering how to support those at risk of chronic homelessness.**

8.15 Housing Rights recognises that the implementation of a Housing First approach, would require significant financial investment. However, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) highlighted in their 2017 report on Homelessness in Northern Ireland, dealing with homelessness has significant financial implications across the public sector.<sup>22</sup> Whilst such financial considerations are important, Housing Rights strongly agrees with the assertion that “the human costs of homelessness must be our ultimate concern and that the successes of Housing First in stopping homelessness and improving quality of life of formerly homeless people with complex needs should be the determining factor in whether this model is used.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office, 'Homelessness in Northern Ireland' (November 2017) <[https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report_0.pdf)> (accessed August 2019)

<sup>23</sup> N Pleace and J Bretherton, 'The cost effectiveness of Housing First in England' (March 2019) <[https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/The%20cost%20effectiveness%20of%20Housing%20First%20in%20England\\_March%202019.pdf](https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/The%20cost%20effectiveness%20of%20Housing%20First%20in%20England_March%202019.pdf)> (accessed August 2019)

## TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

### *Making the stay as short as possible*

- 8.16 Housing Rights strongly welcomes the NIHE’s consideration of recent ISPHERE research on “Chronic Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation Placement in Belfast.” This key piece of research, based on interviews with Belfast service users who have experienced Chronic Homelessness, identifies the detrimental impact that extended stays in temporary accommodation can have on chronically homeless individuals, for example:
- The marginalisation of homeless people with complex needs, which can occur at every stage along the continuum of service provision – at point of access, placement, and stay.
  - The multiple experiences of actual harm and loss to service users within the temporary accommodation setting including violence, intimidation, theft, and exploitation.
  - The institutionalising impact of hostel and shelter accommodation often diminishing independent living skills, eroding support networks, and increasing feelings of isolation at point of move-on.<sup>24</sup>
- 8.17 These findings reflect the experience of Housing Rights clients, an example of which can be seen in Case Study 2:

#### **CASE STUDY 2**

Client lacks awareness of social boundaries as a result of childhood brain injury and is alcoholic. Behavioural problems and offending history have resulted in exclusion from most hostels and historically he is therefore placed at the Night Shelter. This vulnerable client is regularly attacked and financially exploited by other service users. He is caught within the cycle of temporary accommodation (TA) environments which compounds his alcohol abuse and associated offending behaviour for which he is found to be in breach of a Statutory Order and returned to prison custody. This client is chronically homeless and has been re-committed to custody 24 times since May 2015.

Following his most recent release, he was allocated alternative TA from 8pm-8am. As a condition of his Supervision Order, he was unable to access drop-in facilities at the Welcome Centre so remained in the City Centre to wait until the facility reopened at night. This resulted in drinking, associated decline in mental health, financial exploitation and physical attack by others also engaged in street activity. Following further unsuccessful TA placements, client was remanded back to prison, 3 months after his last release.

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<sup>24</sup> L McMordie, ‘Chronic Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation Placement in Belfast’ (July 2018) <<https://ihurerblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/chronic-homelessness-and-temporary-accommodation.pdf>> (accessed August 2019)

- 8.18 Housing Rights therefore strongly welcomes the NIHE's proposals, under Objective 7, to make the stay in temporary accommodation as short as possible and to review current provision to identify service effectiveness. However, **it is our view that in order to make the stay in temporary accommodation as short as possible, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness must have access to suitable permanent accommodation as well as the necessary wrap-around services to sustain their tenancy.**

### No second night out approach

- 8.19 Housing Rights supports the principle of the NIHE's proposal in Objective 6 to 'promote the prevention of rough sleeping.' However Housing Rights is unclear about what the NIHE's proposed implementation of a 'no second night out model' would entail. It is our view that any action taken to prevent rough sleeping must take into consideration the complex reasons why people rough sleep, indeed for some it is "a form of escape, a means of obtaining cognitive relief and physical refuge from the pressures and risks associated with the hostel environment."<sup>25</sup> In light of the issues with temporary accommodation listed at 8.16 and illustrated in Case Study 2, the **NIHE may wish to review the feasibility and efficacy of this model in the context of current provision in Northern Ireland, and consider pausing its implementation until these issues have been addressed.**

### Rapid rehousing approach

- 8.20 Whilst Housing Rights supports the principle of rapid rehousing, proposed under Objective 7 of the Action Plan, it is our view that in order to be effective, such an approach again requires the pre-existence of suitable permanent accommodation, alongside wrap-around support services, to ensure people are rapidly rehoused in sustainable tenancies. **It is not clear how a rapid rehousing approach would take place in the absence of sufficient housing and support for tenancy sustainment.**

### Eviction/recourse

- 8.21 **Housing Rights is concerned about the detrimental impact of exclusion and eviction from temporary accommodation on chronically homeless individuals and would suggest that these issues should be explicitly considered in the Strategy and addressed in the Action Plan.** The Belfast service users interviewed by ISPHERE explained that, in order to mitigate the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

stresses of living in temporary accommodation, many adopt coping strategies such as substance misuse. The wide spread availability of substances in hostels both enables and encourages their use.<sup>26</sup> Many services users are excluded or evicted from temporary accommodation due to this behaviour which often results in episodes of rough sleeping, deterioration in physical and mental health, victimisation and self-harm. Thus the experience of exclusion and eviction compounds the existing challenges these individuals are facing.<sup>27</sup>

8.22 Housing Rights believes that in tackling chronic homelessness, it is crucial that issues regarding exclusion and eviction are addressed. **Housing Rights strongly supports the recommendations proposed in ISPHERE’s service user-focused research, which the NIHE may wish to consider:**

- **An assessment of the exclusionary impact of eligibility criteria (including the background check process), accommodation rules, and eviction practices.**
- **The development of a clear and transparent framework for the monitoring of both abandonment of and eviction from temporary accommodation.**
- **The development of a means of redress for service users in respect to refusal of access, exclusion and eviction, including the development of peer advocacy and/or service navigator roles.**<sup>28</sup>

## **9.0 OBJECTIVE 5 (Continued)**

### **DIRECTORY OF SERVICES**

9.1 Housing Rights supports the NIHE’s proposal to ensure Patch Managers work with their most vulnerable tenants to promote health, well-being and resettlement skills. Housing Rights believes that this support should be tenure neutral. **The NIHE may wish to consider how this support could be extended so that it can be accessed by those living in Housing Association properties or in the PRS.**

9.2 Whilst Housing Rights supports the NIHE’s proposal to promote a directory of services, it is our view that a directory in itself would not suffice, given the barriers in our current systems that limit people’s ability to engage with support services. Housing Rights believes **it may be useful for the Action Plan to include provision of support for individuals to connect services, alongside the ‘promotion of a directory of services.’** This could be done through projects such as Beyond the Gate, through which Housing Rights co-

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

ordinates wrap-around support for prisoners upon release in order to support clients with the initial transition back into independent living.

## **10.0 OBJECTIVE 6 (Continued)**

### HOMELESSNESS HUB

- 10.1 Housing Rights strongly welcomes the NIHE's commitment to support the creation of a Homelessness Hub pilot in Belfast with access to services including health and housing. Housing Rights further welcomes the opportunity that evaluation of the pilot will bring to identify how this model may be developed.

### OUT OF HOURS PROVISION

- 10.2 Housing Rights strongly welcomes the NIHE's proposal to review Out of Hours provision for homelessness given the crucial role this gateway plays for those experiencing chronic homelessness. Housing Rights are concerned that those providing out of hours support have not always been provided with adequate training in order to provide the most appropriate advice and support. For example, please see Case Study 3:

#### **CASE STUDY 3**

Housing Rights (HR) adviser contacted Out of Hours service to request temporary accommodation (TA) for a young woman who was at risk of exploitation and domestic violence. The client has longstanding complex mental health and addiction needs and has FDA. The Out of Hours social worker reported not to know what FDA status was and assessed that the client was intentionally homeless due to a recent hostel breakdown.

The Out of Hours social worker later informed HR adviser that his Out of Hours manager had confirmed that the client was intentionally homeless based on the hostel breakdown. Out of Hours service insisted that the client should stay with friends, family or access B&B or Hotel as there was no duty to provide TA. HR adviser advocated for a lengthy period that there was a statutory duty to provide TA however this argument was not accepted. This event occurred on 13/05/19 and the client remained transient and at risk of violence and exploitation until a hostel place was secured on 16/05/19. Housing Rights adviser has followed up with a complaint to Out of Hours service and NIHE.

- 10.3 Based on our experience with this service, **Housing Rights would suggest that the NIHE carries out a review of Out of Hours provision and ensures that any partners providing this service are given comprehensive training**

**to ensure that individuals can access the advice and support which they require and are entitled to.**

PEER SUPPORT

- 10.4 Housing Rights supports the NIHE's proposal to encourage the development of peer support to help people experiencing chronic homelessness. Based on Housing Rights' experience through our BME and prison peer support projects, we believe that peer support is of great value in providing accessible support and mentorship from people who have experienced similar challenges. **Housing Rights would suggest that the NIHE ensure that peers recruited for this support service have reached a stage where they have space to provide this support without compromising their own progression and stability.**

**11.0 OBJECTIVE 7 (Continued)**

HOME MODEL

- 11.1 Housing Rights welcomes the NIHE's proposal to evaluate the HOME Model. Housing Rights supports the aim of adopting a co-ordinated approach to temporary accommodation and ensuring that people are placed in suitable beds. However, Housing Rights' experience of this Model has been that it creates additional barriers for some chronically homeless individuals.
- 11.2 One of the obstacles the HOME Model presents to our chronically homeless clients is the fact that they have to present at their district office and register as homeless before they can be allocated temporary accommodation. This is a particular issue for those being released from prison due to the fact that:
- They have to travel to the NIHE district office, wait to be placed and then make their way to their accommodation. At the various stages of this process those with alcohol and substance dependencies are at risk of misuse.
  - They are left with uncertainty as to whether they will secure a temporary accommodation placement for the night and where it will be.
  - They are asked to repeat information regarding their personal circumstances (already provided during their homeless application and hostel referral), which can be traumatic and triggering.
  - The majority of places have already been allocated by the time they are released from prison and travel to the NIHE district office. This means they are often placed in the least suitable accommodation.

- 11.3 Case Study 4 below identifies how some of these issues manifest in practice:

**CASE STUDY 4**

Client is 65 years old, is alcoholic and uses a rollator walking aid. His first prison committal was at the age of 64. He was convicted of alcohol related offences on the lower risk of harm scale. Home Team requires that prisoners must present in in the afternoon to access temporary accommodation (TA) and therefore due to the lateness of his presentation no bed was available and he was placed in the Night Shelter. He was forced to queue for that placement for an extended period of time and leave the facility by 8am. During his stay, he felt intimidated and frightened by other service users who harassed him with demands to hide drugs in his rollator. Client drank excessively partly due to the availability of alcohol and the stress he endured in that environment. That correlated with his associated offending behaviour and recommitment to prison. This exact cycle has been repeated 5 times since client was first committed to prison in June 2018 and each time this elderly disabled man becomes more vulnerable and a further step away from breaking the cycle of chronic homelessness.

- 11.4 Under the previous system, Housing Rights advisers were able to contact hostels directly on the morning of a clients' release and, if available, beds could be held until their arrival. This provided certainty for vulnerable individuals upon their release from prison as to where they would be placed and meant that transport could be arranged to take them directly to their temporary accommodation.
- 11.5 In our experience, Housing Rights has found that the barriers presented by the current operation of the HOME model can be even more serious for those with no FDA.
- 11.6 **To effectively assist people who are experiencing, or at risk of, chronic homelessness, it is essential that the process of allocating temporary accommodation is streamlined for these clients, for example for vulnerable people leaving prison.**

**CENTRAL ACCESS POINT**

- 11.7 Housing Rights further welcomes NIHE's proposed review of access and referral arrangements for temporary accommodation via the Central Access Point (CAP). Housing Rights is concerned that some of our clients have been asked by CAP to provide their full criminal record in order to be allocated temporary accommodation. Housing Rights understands that, for risk and insurance purposes, CAP need to request information about current offences as well as previous sex offences or arson offences. However Housing Rights

believes that requests for a copy of an individual's criminal record is not proportionate and compromises their privacy. **Housing Rights would therefore strongly welcome that this practice be reviewed to ensure it is proportionate.**

## 12.0 **OBJECTIVE 9**

### *INTERAGENCY APPROACH*

- 12.1 Housing Rights strongly supports the NIHE's proposals to work across departments, and to support investment in a multi-disciplinary working system. **We further support the NIAO's recommendation that "the strategic approach to homelessness in Northern Ireland must also shift towards a cross-departmental strategy with those involved committing to a common goal."**<sup>29</sup> Housing Rights believes that the introduction of a Statutory Duty to Cooperate, proposed at 7.8, could help to facilitate this strategic shift.
- 12.2 Housing Rights believes that it is also important public bodies work with their counterparts across administrative boundaries to support chronically homeless individuals. Case Study 5 below demonstrates the issues that chronically homeless individuals can face when moving across administrative boundaries:

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<sup>29</sup> Northern Ireland Audit Office, 'Homelessness in Northern Ireland' (November 2017) <[https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report\\_0.pdf](https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/mediafiles/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report_0.pdf)> (accessed August 2019)



**CASE STUDY 5**

Client described in Case Study 2 has been on NIHE waiting list for general needs accommodation for several years. Requests for assessment by the Health Trust to determine among other services, his suitability for Trust supported accommodation have been thwarted due to his chronic homelessness and associated transience which has resulted in him moving between different Health Trust areas. Each time he moves out of a Trust area, including due to prison committal, his case is closed by the Trust concerned. As a result the client has never been fully assessed for Trust services and remains within the chronic cycle of temporary accommodation, the streets, sofa surfing and prison, as explained in Case Study 2.

- 12.3 **The NIHE may also wish to consider carrying out a joint review of NIHE and Health Trust duties to people with complex needs, including a review of administrative boundaries, exploring how best to ensure a co-ordinated approach.**

13.0 **OBJECTIVE 10**

*IMPLEMENTATION AND OVERSIGHT*

- 13.1 Housing Rights support the NIHE's proposal to put mechanisms in place to implement and oversee the Chronic Homelessness Action Plan. **Given the inter-departmental nature of the interventions required to address chronic homelessness, Housing Rights believes it would be of value for this issue to be included as a regular agenda item for the Inter-departmental Homeless Action Group, and for the NIHE to provide regular progress reports on accommodation elements.**

Housing Rights are grateful for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. For further information on this submission, please contact Housing Rights Policy Officer, Kerry Logan at [kerry@housingrights.org.uk](mailto:kerry@housingrights.org.uk).