

Crisis

The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2016

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University & City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales

November 2016



The homelessness monitor

The homelessness monitor is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in Northern Ireland. It considers both the consequences of the post-2007 economic and housing market recession, and the subsequent recovery, and also the impact of policy changes.

This updated report provides our account of how homelessness stands in Northern Ireland in 2016, or as close to 2016 as data availability allows. It also highlights emerging trends and forecasts some of the likely future changes, identifying the developments likely to have the most significant impacts on homelessness.

While this report focuses on Northern Ireland, parallel Homelessness Monitors are being published for other parts of the UK.

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About Crisis UK

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

About the authors

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Disclaimer: All views and any errors contained in this report are the responsibility of the authors. The views expressed should not be assumed to be those of Crisis, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or of any of the key informants who assisted with this work.

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Acronyms

CHNI	Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DSD	Department for Social Development
DSS	Discretionary Support Scheme
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EHS	English Housing Survey
EU	European Union
FDA	Full Duty Applicant
GB	Great Britain
HHSRS	Housing health and safety rating system
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LHA	Local Housing Allowance
LP	Lone Parent
NI	Northern Ireland
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility
ONS	Office of National Statistics
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
PRS	Private Rented Sector
SAR	Shared Accommodation Rate
SMI	Support for Mortgage Interest
SP	Supporting People
TA	Temporary Accommodation
UC	Universal Credit
UKHLS	UK Household Longitudinal Survey

Executive Summary

Key points

The Homelessness Monitor series is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK.¹ This updated report provides an account of how homelessness stands in Northern Ireland in 2016, or as close to 2016 as data availability allows.

Key points to emerge from our latest analysis are as follows.

- Statutory homelessness rose significantly in Northern Ireland during the early 2000s and has remained at historically high levels since 2005/06.
- In 2015/16 some 18,600 households presented as homeless in Northern Ireland. Of these, 60 per cent – some 11,200 – were judged as ‘Full Duty Applicants’.² This represents a 13% increase in Full Duty Applicants since 2012/13. Trend over time analysis highlights ‘accommodation not reasonable’ as the ‘reason for homelessness’ category exhibiting the largest increase over recent years. It is understood that this category relates mainly to older people subject to rehousing having been judged no longer able to maintain a family home. If this category were excluded from the Full Duty Applicants total, the recorded increase since 2012/13 would have been 6%.
- In sharp contrast to the position in England, there has been no pronounced recent rise in the number of homeless applications prompted by the loss of rented accommodation. This likely reflects the differential impact of welfare reform in the two jurisdictions, and possibly also the fact that, unlike in Great Britain, direct payment to private landlords was retained after the Local Housing Allowance regime was introduced.
- Temporary accommodation use has been fairly steady in Northern Ireland in recent years. Between 2,800 and 3,000 placements are made annually.
- Statutory homelessness acceptance rates are higher in Northern Ireland than in the other UK countries. This is partly because acceptances have fallen elsewhere following the implementation of the ‘Housing Options’ model of homelessness prevention. It is expected that the imminent roll-out of a similar model in Northern Ireland (‘Housing Solutions and Support’) will see statutory homelessness rates move closer to those in Great Britain.
- The very large proportion (76%) of all Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the main social housing provider) lets to new tenants accounted for by Full Duty Applicants is also partly explained by the above local administrative traditions on rehousing older people via the statutory homelessness route. This is likely to change if policy proposals to reform social housing allocation policies and homelessness discharge protocols are eventually implemented.
- There has been considerable controversy over rough sleeping, begging and street drinking in Belfast over the past year. Five

¹ Parallel Homelessness Monitors are being published for England, Scotland and Wales. All of the UK Homelessness Monitor reports are available from <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

² ‘Full Duty Applicants’ are applicants who have passed the following four statutory tests, i.e. they are homeless, in priority need, eligible for assistance, and unintentionally homeless.

people died on the streets in a matter of months evoking considerable media attention. But a recent 'street needs audit' indicates that visible rough sleeping levels remain low in Belfast city centre, averaging six people per night.

- There are growing concerns over the impact of so-called 'legal highs' (New Psychoactive Substances) on young people and others living in homeless accommodation in Northern Ireland.
- It is estimated that there are between 76,000 and 136,000 adults currently living as concealed households³ in Northern Ireland who would prefer to live independently. At 4.4 per cent, the proportion of sharing households⁴ in Northern Ireland appears to be higher than in the UK as a whole, and to have risen in recent years. This may, however, partly reflect methodological inconsistencies⁵. Overcrowding affects 16,000 (2.4%) of households in Northern Ireland, a lower percentage than in the other UK countries.
- The content of the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland (2012-2017) commanded consensus, but its implementation was viewed as disappointing. In particular, there was a perceived lack of commitment from the Department of Health. A new five-year strategy is being prepared. It is expected to strongly emphasise the jurisdiction-wide roll-out of Housing Solutions and Support, and the expansion of Housing First-style provision for homeless people with complex needs.
- The Supporting People budget has been protected in Northern Ireland but frozen

at 2008 levels. There has been intense lobbying for an increase. A recent review by the Department of Social Development recommended moving away from primarily accommodation-based Supporting People provision to more floating support models. The review recommended this should be accompanied by a new strategic commissioning approach.

- There has been a much more extreme 'boom and bust' in the housing market in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. This has resulted in a heavily dislocated market with a much higher rate of negative equity than elsewhere in the country. However, mortgage repossessions still account for only a very small proportion of statutory homelessness cases (1%).
- The numbers of social sector lettings available to new tenants in Northern Ireland has declined over recent decades. It has fallen from around 10,000 a year in the 1990s to 8,129 by 2014/15. In sharp contrast, the private rented sector has quadrupled in size over the last 14 years.
- A wide ranging review of housing policy in Northern Ireland was initiated in 2012, but very little has been agreed or implemented. The future ownership and management of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock is a key structural issue that remains unresolved. Decisions on this are now further complicated by the potential reclassification of housing associations in Northern Ireland as public sector bodies.
- The Northern Ireland Executive has introduced, or is due to introduce, most of the welfare reforms now underway

in Great Britain, but with some notable exceptions or modifications. Following a prolonged political impasse at Stormont, an agreement was reached with the UK government to provide a substantial mitigation funding package. This was based on the recommendations of a Working Group chaired by Professor Eileen Evason.

- As a result, both the Spare Room Subsidy Limits (the so-called 'Bedroom Tax') and the Benefit Cap will be fully mitigated in Northern Ireland until 2020. There will also be important modifications to the operation of Universal Credit and the associated benefit sanctioning regime, and some transitional protection for households disadvantaged by the shift from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments.
- Overshadowing all of this is the potentially serious economic, political and social implications for Northern Ireland of the UK referendum decision to leave the EU.

The economic and housing market context

The overall UK economy has continued to gradually recover following the credit crunch downturn. However recovery in Northern Ireland has been much slower. Earned income levels are lower, and rates of unemployment and economic inactivity are higher, than elsewhere in the UK.⁶ It is also disproportionately dependent on public sector employment.⁷ Furthermore there is much greater uncertainty about the future prospects for the UK and Northern

Ireland economies in the wake of the EU referendum result.

The Northern Ireland housing market has over the decades followed a quite distinctive pathway compared to the rest of the UK. It is more closely linked to the fortunes of the Irish economy and housing market south of its border.

There was no 1990s boom and bust, but house prices began to rise from 1997 onwards, and rose very sharply after 2003. By 2007 Northern Ireland had gone from being one of the most affordable parts of the UK, to being one of the least. But, as in the Republic, the subsequent fall in house prices was also far more severe than across the rest of the UK. It has left behind a heavily dislocated market, particularly as a result of the higher proportion of households with negative equity, than anywhere else in the UK.

Although housing affordability has fallen back to relatively modest levels since 2007 in Northern Ireland, access to home ownership has become more problematic for would be first time buyers. This is due to the reduced flow of low deposit mortgage funds.⁸ While there has been some recovery since the housing market collapse, mortgage advances for first time buyers remain lower than at any time in the twenty five years to 2006.⁹

In this context, the rapid increase of the private rented sector in Northern Ireland (the sector has quadrupled in size over the last 14 years)¹⁰ has brought a welcome flexibility to the wider housing market. Against that, there is a relatively high level of insecurity associated with private tenancies, although

³ Concealed households' are family units or single adults living within other households, who may be regarded as potential separate households that may wish to form given appropriate opportunity.

⁴ 'Sharing households' are those households who live together in the same dwelling but who do not share either a living room or regular meals together. This is the standard Government and ONS definition of sharing households which is applied in the Census and in household surveys. In practice, the distinction between 'sharing' households and 'concealed' households is a very fluid one.

⁵ Explained further in chapter 4.

⁶ Table A07 in ONS (2016) *Regional Labour Market Survey Summary, June 2016*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/regionallabourmarketsummarya07/current>

⁷ ONS (2016) *Regional Labour Market: Regional Public and Private Sector Employment, March 2016*. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/march2016>

⁸ Chapter 3 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

⁹ Table ML2 in Council of Mortgage Lenders (2016) *First Time Buyers, New Mortgages and Affordability, UK Countries and Regions*. <https://www.cml.org.uk>

¹⁰ DSD (2014) *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014-15*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2014-15>

in Northern Ireland, unlike in England, there has been no pronounced recent rise in the number of homeless applications prompted by the loss of rented accommodation. This likely reflects the differential impact of welfare reform in the two jurisdictions (see below).

The numbers of social sector lettings available to new tenants in Northern Ireland has declined over recent decades, not least as a long-term consequence of the Right to Buy. In the 1990s new lettings averaged a little more than 10,000 a year, while since the turn of the century they averaged nearly 8,300. In 2014/15, there were 8,129 lettings to new tenants. A range of key informants reported that young people, single people and other lower priority groups were struggling to gain access to social tenancies.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive annual target for 2,000 new social dwellings a year over the five-year period from 2014 is close to independent estimates of requirements. However, output in the first three-quarters of the last financial year suggests that achieving this target may be challenging. Assessments of current housing needs in Northern Ireland are inherently problematic given the recent unprecedented levels of market instability, and the unpredictability of future levels of household growth, especially in light of the UK vote to leave the EU.

The policy context

Homelessness policy

As reported in the 2013 Monitor,¹¹ while the content of the current Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland (2012-2017) commanded general consensus, there was widespread disappointment regarding its implementation. This particularly related to the perceived failure to achieve effective inter-departmental working.

We heard heavy criticism levelled at the Department of Health about an apparent lack of commitment to the homelessness agenda. Adequate detoxification facilities for those with serious substance misuse problems was identified as a key service gap, with requirements that clients are 'clean' and engaged with community support for a specified period before entering the service seen as unhelpful. Also relevant here is the increasingly acute challenge posed by the use of so-called legal highs (New Psychoactive Substances)¹² by young people and others living in homelessness accommodation in Northern Ireland.

At the time of writing a new five-year Homelessness Strategy was being prepared. It is expected to place a strong emphasis on the Housing Options model of homelessness prevention, called 'Housing Solutions and Support'. This is currently being piloted in three areas of Northern Ireland, and is due to be fully rolled out across the jurisdiction by June 2017. This development was warmly welcomed by most of our key informants, across both statutory and voluntary sectors, albeit that there were some notes of caution expressed with respect to the interrelationship with the statutory homelessness safety net.

It is also anticipated that the new Homelessness Strategy will encompass expansion of Housing First-style provision for homeless people with complex needs. A pilot Housing First project in Northern Ireland, run by Depaul, has generated much enthusiasm and is due to report evaluation findings shortly.

Unlike in England, the Supporting People budget has been protected in Northern Ireland in recent years, albeit at a level frozen since 2008. In the light of additional

financial pressures on providers arising from the 'National Living Wage' and other factors, there has been intense cross-sectoral lobbying to have the Supporting People budget increased (by 10%).¹³

A recent Supporting People review¹⁴ recommended moving away from primarily accommodation-based provision to more floating support models. This seemed a less controversial notion than when we conducted fieldwork in Northern Ireland 2013. It is also in keeping with the enthusiasm for Housing First models noted above. A new strategic commissioning approach will be piloted in Northern Ireland. This will attempt to rationalise floating support and other Supporting People-funded services and achieve better value for money.

There has been considerable controversy over rough sleeping, begging and street drinking in Belfast over the past year. Extensive media attention ensued after five people died on the streets in a matter of months.¹⁵

While steps have been taken to address perceived shortcomings in emergency homelessness provision, many stakeholders feel that the key systems failures lie in the health domain, particularly as regards drug and alcohol treatment facilities (see above). We also heard suggestions of potential moves towards a more 'assertive' form of street outreach in Belfast, with the possibility raised that elements of enforcement may be introduced into policies designed to tackle begging and other street activities. However,

any developments of this nature are likely to prove controversial.

Key informants in 2016 were clear that there was scope for a more ambitious approach to addressing youth homelessness in Northern Ireland. The roll-out of Housing Solutions was seen to provide particularly promising opportunities to prevent homelessness amongst this group. It was also suggested that there was a need for intelligently targeted school-based and whole-family preventative programmes directed at 'at risk' children and young people.¹⁶ The disproportionate impact of welfare reform, particularly benefit sanctions, on young people,¹⁷ and the limited knowledge base regarding this in the youth homelessness sector in Northern Ireland, was noted as a concern (see below).

Housing policy

Housing has been a high priority in Northern Ireland relative to the rest of the UK, at least when measured in terms of the proportion of public expenditure devoted to it, although funding for Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock improvements in particular has fallen sharply since 2008/09.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Northern Ireland does not have a larger proportion of social housing than the rest of the UK (16%¹⁹ compared to 17% in England and 24% in Scotland²⁰), and as noted above, there has been a decline in the available social lettings in recent years.

A wide ranging review of housing policy in Northern Ireland was initiated in 2012, as detailed in the 2013 Monitor.²¹ However, while there have been a welter of consultations on

¹¹ See <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

¹² The production or supply of so called 'legal highs' has been illegal since May 26th 2016 when the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 came into force across the UK.

¹³ Spurr, H. (2016) 'Associations to demonstrate outside Stormont', *Inside Housing*, 11th May: <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/associations-to-demonstrate-outside-stormont/7015139.article?adfsuccess=1>

¹⁴ DSD (2015) *Supporting People Review Final Report*. Belfast: DSD; DSD (2016) *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Supporting People Review*. Belfast: DSD.

¹⁵ Archer, B. (2016) 'Latest death of homeless man in Belfast prompts emergency summit', *The Irish News*, 26th February: <http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2016/02/26/news/latest-death-of-homeless-man-in-belfast-prompts-emergency-summit-431453/>

¹⁶ See also: Watts, B., Johnsen, S., & Sosenko, F. (2015) *Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Review for The OVO Foundation*. Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University

¹⁷ Homeless Link (2014) *Young and Homeless 2014*. London: Homeless Link.

¹⁸ Chapter 3 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹⁹ DSD (2014) *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014-15*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2014-15>

²⁰ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2012) *The Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2012*. London: Crisis/JRF.

²¹ See <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

different areas of policy, very little has been agreed or implemented. One thing that has changed is the structure of Northern Ireland government departments.

The role of the Department of Social Development has now been substantially widened, and it has been renamed as the 'Department for Communities'. However, a key structural issue that remains unresolved involves the future ownership and management of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing stock.

Decisions on this issue are further complicated by the potential reclassification of housing associations in Northern Ireland as public sector bodies.²² If such a reclassification were to take place, borrowing by housing associations as well as by the Housing Executive would count as public spending. This would effectively remove the primary argument in favour of stock transfer (ie to get access to private sector funding for sorely needed stock investment).

There has been a similar lack of progress in implementing the results of a review of social housing allocations²³ completed at the time of the 2013 Monitor. An official consultation on the proposed reforms has long since been concluded,²⁴ but no policy announcement has yet been made. This is partly because of technical challenges to the overall Housing Strategy by the Equality Commission. Social housing allocation is acknowledged to be an extremely sensitive issue in Northern Ireland because of its interlinkage with residential segregation along religious lines.²⁵ It nonetheless seems likely that the review

will ultimately lead to at least some changes, including a downgrading in the priority given to statutory homelessness in allocations.

Welfare policy

The Northern Ireland Executive has introduced, or is due to introduce, most of the welfare reforms now underway in Great Britain, but with some notable exceptions or modifications. Following a prolonged political impasse at Stormont, an agreement was reached with the UK government to provide a funding package to enable Northern Ireland to mitigate those welfare reforms,²⁶ based on the recommendations of a Working Party chaired by Professor Eileen Evason.²⁷ As a result both the 'Bedroom Tax' – officially known as the 'Spare Room Subsidy Limits' – and the Benefit Cap will be fully mitigated until 2020. There are, however, inevitable concerns about the position when the mitigation budget expires in 2020.

Reforms to the Local Housing Allowance regime in Northern Ireland were introduced on the same basis, and to the same timetable, as for the rest of the UK. There is little hard evidence on their impact thus far, and while lower rents in Northern Ireland mean that the effects are unlikely to have been as substantial as in England, a growing gap between Local Housing Allowance rates and average rents may compound these impacts over time. Some key informants felt that the impact of the Shared Accommodation Rate on younger single people under 35 had already been greater than is generally recognised.

The Universal Credit regime is planned to be

introduced in Northern Ireland on a phased basis from September 2017. While there are concerns about the operation of the scheme, these have been eased by some important differences that will apply to its operation in Northern Ireland. In particular the arrangements for fortnightly payments, direct payments of the housing costs element to landlords, and the provision of 'cost of working allowances' all remove concerns that apply to the scheme as it operates in Great Britain.²⁸

The shift from Disability Living Allowance to the new Personal Independence Payment for working age claimants from June 2016 raises particular concerns in Northern Ireland. Just over one in ten of the population are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance; more than twice the average level across Great Britain. Concerns remain despite measures, following on from the Evason Working Group proposals, that provide transitional protection to existing claimant households disadvantaged by the new regime.²⁹

There have been growing concerns in Great Britain about the disproportionate impact of the intensified benefit sanction regime on vulnerable homeless people,³⁰ notwithstanding discretionary 'easement' powers introduced in 2014 to temporarily exempt claimants sleeping rough or in supported accommodation. Reforms in this area are set to be introduced to Northern Ireland in 2017 immediately following the planned introduction of the Universal Credit regime,³¹ albeit with a number of departures from the Great Britain arrangements.³² Thus the maximum sanction duration will be 18 months (half the three year maximum applicable in Great Britain) and the legislation mandates

monitoring of the operation of sanctions. The Evason report also recommends additional safeguards for vulnerable people, including an independent helpline to assist claimants appeal sanctions or access hardship payments.

Two further Housing Benefit reforms for Great Britain were announced in the 2015 Summer Budget and Autumn Statement. The first is that young childless people out of work (aged 18–21) will cease to be eligible for housing support in new Universal Credit claims from April 2017. The second is that from April 2018 the Local Housing Allowance rates will apply to limit Housing Benefit payments to new social tenants (after April 2016). While there are particular concerns about the impact of those provisions on supported housing schemes, the scope of the provisions in relation to such schemes are themselves under review.

At this stage, however, it is not entirely clear whether or when these measures will be introduced in Northern Ireland, or if they will be subject to any variation or mitigation provisions. They are, nonetheless, of very considerable concern in terms of their potential impact on young single people, and agencies providing support to that group. There are also wider implications in terms of their possible impact on future social rent policies in Northern Ireland.

Trends in homelessness Rough sleeping

There are no regular street count data or other trend data published on rough sleeping in Northern Ireland. However, a recent 'street needs audit' indicates that rates of visible rough sleeping remain low in Belfast

²² Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016 Briefing Paper*. Coventry: CIH.

²³ Gray, P., Keenan, M., McAnulty, U., Clarke, A., Monk, S. & Tang, C. (2013) *Research to inform fundamental review of social housing allocations policy. Final Report: Conclusions and Recommendations*. <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/fundamental-review-of-allocations-policy.pdf>

²⁴ Northern Ireland Executive (2013) 'Mccausland Starts Debate on Future of Social Housing Allocation', *Northern Ireland Executive News Release*, 10th December: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dsd/news-dsd-101213-mccausland-starts-debate.htm>

²⁵ Gray, P. & Long, G. (2009) 'Homelessness policy in Northern Ireland: Is devolution making a difference?', in Fitzpatrick, S., Quilgars D. & Pleace, N. (eds.) *Homelessness in the UK: Problems and Solutions*. Coventry: CIH.

²⁶ Northern Ireland Executive (2015) *A Fresh Start: the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive.

²⁷ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

²⁸ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*, Department for Social Development.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L. & Reeve, K. (2015) *Homeless People's Experiences of Welfare Conditionality and Benefit Sanctions*. London: Crisis; Johnsen, S., Watts, B. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) *First Wave Findings: Homelessness. Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change*. <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/WelCond-findings-homelessness-May16.pdf>

³¹ See <http://www.lawcentreni.org/welfare-reform.html>

³² Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report*. January 2016. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

city centre, averaging six people per night.³³ There has, however, been significant concern over a perceived increase in begging and street drinking in Belfast city centre, and controversy over a series of street deaths, as noted above.

Statutory homelessness

Statutory homelessness rose significantly in Northern Ireland in the first years of the millennium. It has remained at historically high levels since 2005/06. In 2015/16 some 18,600 households presented as homeless in Northern Ireland, of whom 60 per cent – 11,200 – were judged as ‘Full Duty Applicants’.³⁴ This represents an increase of 13 per cent in Full Duty Applicants since 2012/13. Trend over time analysis highlights ‘accommodation not reasonable’ as the ‘reason for homelessness’ category exhibiting the largest increase over recent years. It is understood that this category relates mainly to older people subject to rehousing having been judged no longer able to maintain a family home. If this category were excluded from the FDA total, the recorded increase since 2012/13 would have been 6 per cent.

In contrast, the number of homelessness applications that did not attract Full Duty status have fallen sharply. It seems unlikely, however, that this reflects a reduction in the underlying incidence of ‘non-statutory homelessness’. More plausible is that changing administrative practices, possibly influenced by the piloting of the Housing Solutions model, mean that more such cases are dealt with via informal processes that seek to prevent homelessness.

The use of temporary accommodation has been fairly steady in Northern Ireland in recent years, with between 2,800 and 3,000 placements made on an annual basis. Statistics on length of stay in temporary

accommodation are not published. It was reported in interviews, however, that the average time spent in temporary accommodation had plateaued at 36 or 37 weeks in recent years. It had been as high as 46 weeks in 2012. However, this varied considerably between different types of temporary accommodation. The longest stays tended to be in private sector self-contained accommodation.

Proportionate to total population, statutory homeless numbers in Northern Ireland are much higher than in England and Wales and somewhat higher than in Scotland. This partly reflects that while Great Britain-wide acceptances fell substantially in the mid-2000s (especially in England), because of the introduction of Housing Options, they remained largely stable in Northern Ireland. We would therefore expect to see Northern Ireland start to move closer to the wider Great Britain rate as Housing Solutions is rolled out across the jurisdiction.

Another contributory factor is local administrative traditions on the treatment of certain categories of applicant, in particular older people subject to rehousing having been judged no longer able to maintain a family home, who are treated as statutorily homeless in Northern Ireland but generally accommodated via mainstream allocation processes elsewhere in the UK. This local policy nuance probably also helps to explain the strikingly high proportion of Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing allocations accounted for by statutory homeless cases in Northern Ireland (76%). It is anticipated that this pattern of lettings will change when the much delayed review of social housing allocations is finally implemented (see above).

Predictions in 2013 that there would be a rapid increase in affordability related

homelessness in Northern Ireland do not, at least as yet, appear to have materialised. While loss of rented housing as a cause of homelessness increased modestly in the three years to 2015/16, the 12 per cent recorded rise is slight by comparison with the quadrupling of statutory homelessness cases attributable to the termination of assured shorthold tenancies in England in the last five years.³⁵ As noted above, this likely reflects the milder impact of the Local Housing Allowance regime in Northern Ireland, but also perhaps the fact that, unlike in Great Britain, direct payment to private landlords was retained after the new regime was introduced. Echoing the pattern seen elsewhere in the UK, mortgage default accounts for a small proportion of the Northern Ireland’s Full Duty Applicant cohort (1% in 2015/16).

There is a need for better statistical monitoring data of statutory and non-statutory homelessness trends in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that the roll-out of Housing Solutions and associated IT improvements will facilitate this.

Potential hidden homelessness

People may be in a similar housing situation to those who apply to LAs as homeless, that is, lacking their own secure, separate accommodation, without formally applying or registering with a LA or applying to other homelessness agencies. Such people are often referred to as ‘hidden homeless’.

A number of large-scale/household surveys enable us to measure some particular categories of potential hidden homelessness: *concealed households*;³⁶ households who are *sharing* accommodation;³⁷ and *overcrowded*

households.³⁸ Not everyone living in these situations will be homeless, but these phenomena are indicative of the kinds of housing pressures that may be associated with hidden homelessness.

There has been a small overall fall in the number of concealed potential households since 2010, perhaps associated with the recovery from recession, but the number of non-dependent children living at home has continued to increase. We estimate that between 76,000 and 136,000 adults are currently living as concealed households in Northern Ireland but would prefer to live independently. Over the longer term, younger adults in Northern Ireland have slightly increased their propensity to head separate households, relative to the UK-wide pattern where there has been a decline. This probably indicates easier housing market affordability conditions than elsewhere in UK, particularly England.

After a long history of decline, shared accommodation appears to have increased markedly in Northern Ireland since 2010, accounting for 4.4% of all households by 2015. This is around double the sharing rate of the rest of the UK (1.9%). This may, however, partly reflect definitional changes or methodological inconsistencies.

Overcrowding is less common in Northern Ireland than in the other UK countries, particularly England. The proportion of households with insufficient bedrooms against the standard is 2.4% in Northern Ireland, affecting about 16,000 households in total. Between 2010 and 2013 overcrowding increased significantly in England, with

³⁵ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

³⁶ ‘Concealed households’ are family units or single adults living within other households, who may be regarded as potential separate households that may wish to form given appropriate opportunity.

³⁷ ‘Sharing households’ are those households who live together in the same dwelling but who do not share either a living room or regular meals together. This is the standard Government and ONS definition of sharing households which is applied in the Census and in household surveys. In practice, the distinction between ‘sharing’ households and ‘concealed’ households is a very fluid one.

³⁸ ‘Overcrowding’ is defined here according to the most widely used official standard – the ‘bedroom standard’. Essentially, this allocates one bedroom to each couple or lone parent, one to each pair of children under 10, one to each pair of children of the same sex over 10, with additional bedrooms for individual children over 10 of different sex and for additional adult household members.

³³ NIHE (2016) *Belfast Street Needs Audit*. Belfast: NIHE

³⁴ DSD (2014) *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014-15*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2014-15>; DSD (2016) *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin, January-March 2016*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/housing-statistics>

a marginal increase in Northern Ireland, but reductions in Wales and Scotland. In Northern Ireland, as in the UK as a whole, crowding is more common for households who have relatively low income or suffer from multiple material deprivations.

Conclusion

Stasis combined with frantic activity seems to characterise many aspects of homelessness and related policy development in Northern Ireland - “*running on the spot*” as one of our key informants described it. This results largely from the wider political situation in Northern Ireland, particularly to the nature of the Northern Ireland Executive as a coalition of partners with very different ideological and religious bases. Looking forward there are a host of critical themes to track in monitoring homelessness developments in Northern Ireland in the coming few years. These include the impact of the Evason welfare reform mitigation package, the eventual fate of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the ultimate outcome of highly politicised negotiations over social housing allocations. At the time of writing, the existing five-year Homelessness Strategy was being evaluated and a new one was being prepared, for launch in April 2017. It will be particularly salient to monitor the part played by Housing Solutions, Housing First, and revised Supporting People commissioning processes in the development and delivery of this Strategy. It will also be important to ascertain whether ambitions to achieve a higher level of interdepartmental ‘buy-in’, particularly from the health sector are met. Likewise, it will be fascinating to see what, if anything, comes of suggestions to move towards a more ‘assertive’ form of street outreach in Belfast, possibly with enforcement elements. Overshadowing all of this, of course, is the potentially serious economic, political and social implications of Brexit for Northern

Ireland. This makes it all the more important to shine a light on the impacts of economic and policy change on its most vulnerable citizens, including homeless people.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study provides an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in Northern Ireland. It considers both the consequences of the post-2007 economic and housing market recession, and the subsequent recovery, and also the impact of policy changes implemented under the post-2010 UK Governments, as well as relevant Northern Ireland Executive policies. At the time of writing, shortly after the May 2016 elections, a new power-sharing Executive had taken up office, formed of the two largest parties (Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin), with an independent unionist as Justice Minister, and its draft ‘programme for government framework’ had been published for public consultation.³⁹

This ‘update’ report provides an account of how homelessness stands in Northern Ireland in 2016 (or as close to 2016 as data availability will allow), and analyses key trends in the period running up to 2016. This year’s report focuses in particular on what has changed since we published the last Homelessness Monitor Northern Ireland in 2013. Readers who would like a fuller account of the recent history of homelessness in Northern Ireland should consult with the previous Homelessness Monitor Northern Ireland available on Crisis’s website.⁴⁰ Parallel Homelessness Monitors are being published for other parts of the UK.

1.2 Definition of homelessness

A wide definition of homelessness is adopted in this study, and we consider the impacts of relevant policy and economic changes on all of the following homeless groups:

- People sleeping rough.
- Single homeless people living in hostels, shelters and temporary supported accommodation.
- Statutorily homeless households – that is, households who seek housing assistance from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) on grounds of being currently or imminently without accommodation.
- ‘Hidden homeless’ households – that is, people who may be considered homeless but whose situation is not ‘visible’ either on the streets or in official statistics. Classic examples would include households living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatters, people ‘sofa-surfing’ around friends’ or relatives’ houses, those involuntarily sharing with other households on a long-term basis, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations. By its very nature, it is difficult to assess the scale and trends in hidden homelessness, but some particular elements of potential hidden homelessness are amenable to statistical analysis and it is these elements that are focused upon in this study. This includes ‘overcrowded’ households, and also ‘concealed’ households and ‘sharing’ households.

Further details on the definitions used for each of these categories are given in subsequent chapters.

1.3 Research methods

Three main methods have been employed in this longitudinal study:

³⁹ Northern Ireland Executive (2016) *Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016*. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/draft-pfg-framework-2016-21.pdf>

⁴⁰ See <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

- First, relevant literature, legal and policy documents have been reviewed.
- Second, we have undertaken in-depth interviews with a total of 15 key informants. This includes representatives of service provider organisations and others well placed to comment on the homelessness impacts of policy changes and economic developments in Northern Ireland. In selecting these interviewees we sought to capture the experiences of a range of different homeless or potentially homeless groups, and also a sectoral balance that encompassed voluntary, statutory and independent perspectives.
- Third, we have undertaken statistical analysis on a) relevant economic and social trends in Northern Ireland; and b) the scale, nature and trends in homelessness amongst the four sub-groups noted above.

suggests that housing market trends and policies have the most direct impact on levels of homelessness, with the influence of labour market change more likely to be lagged and diffuse, and strongly mediated by welfare arrangements and other contextual factors.

The individual vulnerabilities, support needs and ‘risk taking’ behaviours implicated in some people’s homelessness are themselves often, though not always, rooted in the pressures associated with poverty and other forms of structural disadvantage. At the same time, the ‘anchor’ social relationships which can act as a primary ‘buffer’ to homelessness, can be put under considerable strain by stressful financial circumstances. Thus, deteriorating economic conditions in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK could also be expected to generate more ‘individual’ and ‘interpersonal’ vulnerabilities to homelessness over time.

1.4 Causation and homelessness

All of the Homelessness Monitors are underpinned by a conceptual framework on the causation of homelessness that has been used to inform our interpretation of the likely impacts of economic and policy change.⁴¹

Theoretical, historical and international perspectives indicate that the causation of homelessness is complex, with no single ‘trigger’ that is either ‘necessary’ or ‘sufficient’ for it to occur. Individual, interpersonal and structural factors all play a role – and interact with each other – and the balance of causes differs over time, across countries, and between demographic groups.

With respect to the main structural factors, international comparative research, and the experience of previous UK recessions,

1.5 Structure of report

Chapter 2 reviews the current economic context and the implications of housing market developments for homelessness. Chapter 3 shifts focus to the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive’s homelessness, housing and welfare policy agendas and their likely homelessness impacts. Chapter 4 provides a fully updated analysis of the available statistical data on the current scale of, and recent trends in, homelessness in Northern Ireland. All of these chapters are informed by the insights derived from our in-depth interviews with key informants conducted in 2016. In Chapter 5, we summarise the main findings of this update report.

2. Economic factors that may impact on homelessness

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews recent economic developments in Northern Ireland, and across the UK, and analyses their potential impact on homelessness. In Chapter 4, we assess whether the anticipated economic impacts identified in this chapter, and the potential policy impacts highlighted in the next chapter, are borne out in homelessness trends.

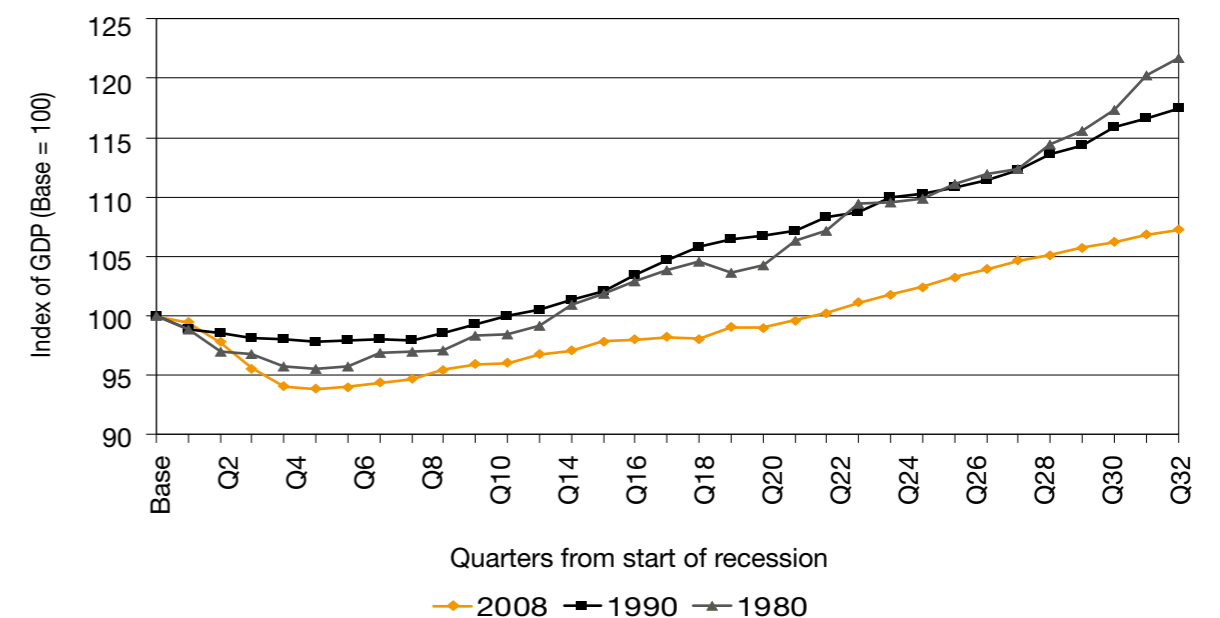
prospects are far from certain, especially in the event of the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU).

2.2 Post-2007 UK economic context

With three years of slow economic growth the UK economy has now effectively recovered from the post credit crunch downturn (see Figure 2.1). However future

The latest forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) is for modest growth of just 2.0 per cent in the UK in 2016, easing up rising to 2.2 per cent in 2017.⁴² However that forecast was made before the EU referendum, and all the uncertainties resulting from the result in favour of exiting the EU. While that OBR forecast suggested that claimant unemployment would remain at relatively low levels (i.e. below 1 million) in the years to 2020; it also suggested that it will be 2020 before earnings (in real terms)

Figure 2.1 Slow UK growth after extended economic downturn

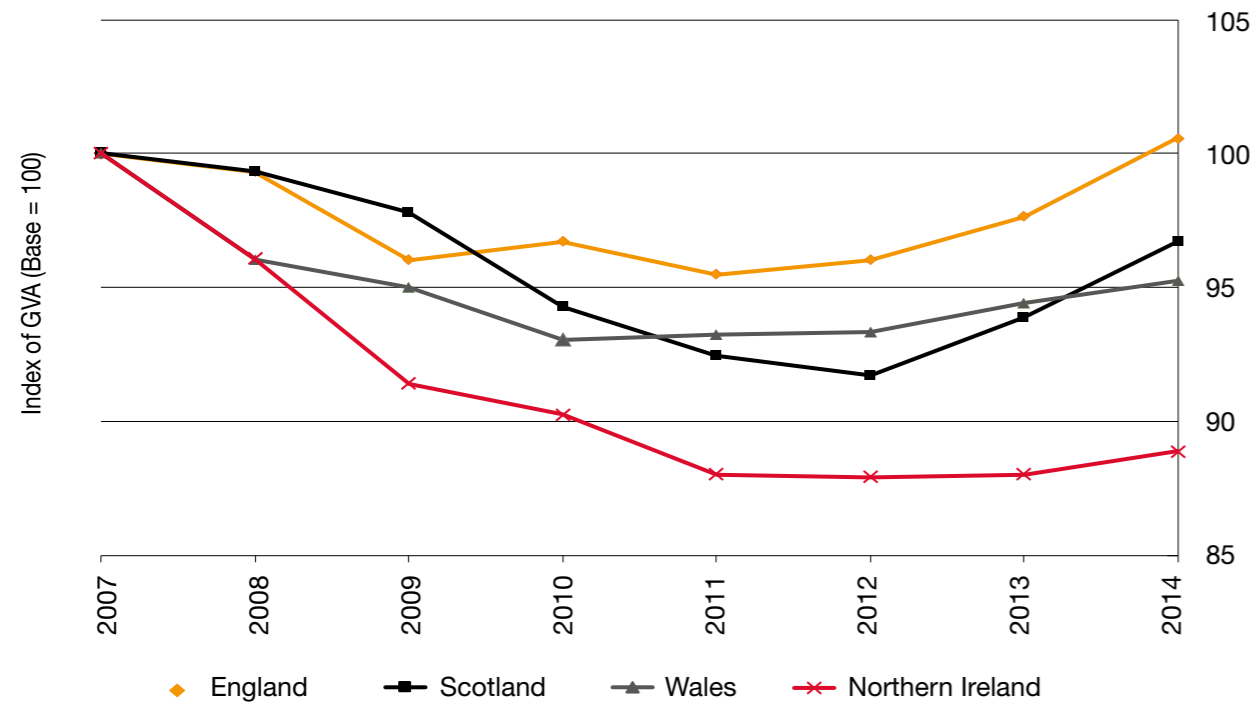


Source: Computed from ONS Quarterly GDP data (ABMI)

⁴¹ For a more detailed account of this conceptual framework please consult with Chapter 2 in the very first Homelessness Monitor: Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G. & Wilcox, S. (2011) *The Homelessness Monitor: Tracking the impacts of policy and economic change in England 2011-2013*. London: Crisis.

⁴² OBR (2016) *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*. London: The Stationery Office.

Figure 2.2 Northern Ireland recovery lags rest of UK



Source: Computed from ONS Annual GVA data adjusted by CPI

are restored to pre credit crunch levels. Once again, post referendum those forecasts must now be regarded as somewhat optimistic.

While the UK Government has introduced some budgetary measures designed to support economic recovery, these have been relatively modest, and set within the context of an overall concern to limit levels of government borrowing, and with continuing downwards pressures on most areas of public expenditure, and especially in respect of welfare provisions.

There are further uncertainties ahead over public spending plans that will need to be adjusted in the light of the referendum vote to leave the EU, and the subsequent lowering of

economic expectations. Among the manifold uncertainties raised by the Brexit vote is a particular concern about the future for the conflict resolution programmes in Northern Ireland currently funded by the EU.

2.3 The Northern Ireland economy

Figures for the Northern Ireland economy are currently only available up to 2014, and are for income based gross value added, rather than the wider and more inclusive concept of gross domestic product. However, on that measure the figures show that over the seven years since the credit crunch the Northern Ireland economy has recovered much more slowly than in the rest of the UK, and it will still be some years before it fully recovers.

That said it should also be recognized that the Northern Ireland economy grew a little more strongly than the rest of the UK in the two years prior to the credit crunch (see Figure 2.2).

While overall UK unemployment levels have now returned back to pre credit crunch levels, levels of unemployment and economic inactivity among the working age population are notably higher in Northern Ireland (32%) compared to the rest of the UK (27%).⁴³ It is also the case that public sector employment accounts for a far higher proportion of total employment in Northern Ireland (25%) than in the rest of the UK (17%).⁴⁴

One of the obvious consequences of that employment structure is the Northern Ireland economy will continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged by the public expenditure cuts still underway. While the distribution of those cuts between services is subject to decisions by the Northern Ireland Executive, their overall expenditure plans and policies are fixed by the budgetary framework and financial settlements provided by the UK Westminster government. The latest Spending Review provided the Northern Ireland Executive with a Resource DEL (Departmental Expenditure Limit) rising in cash terms from £9.7 billion in 2015/16 to £9.9 billion in 2019/20; however in real terms this represents an estimated cut of 5.0 per cent.⁴⁵

Northern Ireland is also characterised by low levels of pay, and household incomes,

compared to the rest of the UK. Indeed average full time earnings in Northern Ireland in 2015 were 12 per cent lower than for the rest of the UK, and lower than in Scotland, Wales and all of the regions of England.⁴⁶ Gross disposable household incomes in 2014 were 18 per cent lower than for the UK as a whole, and also lower than in all parts of the UK including all the regions of England.⁴⁷ The loss of public sector employment will further exacerbate the incidence of low pay, given that private sector pay in Northern Ireland is only some three-quarters of the level of public sector pay.⁴⁸

This relative economic weakness was acknowledged by some of our key informants:

"[Northern Ireland is an]... economic backwater, which is a problem in terms of growth of the economy... we're the slowest on recovery [in the UK] because we don't have a strong economic base. We're a branch line economy; we've only got two indigenous PLCs here... We still find it difficult to get inward investment from outside... we suffer from a scale issue; we're just too small." (Independent commentator, 2016)

The prospects for the Northern Ireland economy are also now subject to all sorts of uncertainty following the EU referendum. Northern Ireland exports represent 15 per cent of total annual sales, with three fifths of those exports to EU countries, and sales to the Republic of Ireland accounting for over three fifths of total EU exports.⁴⁹

⁴³ Table A07 in ONS (2016) *Regional Labour Market Survey Summary, June 2016*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/regionallabourmarketsummarya07/current>

⁴⁴ ONS (2016) *Regional Labour Market: Regional Public and Private Sector Employment, March 2016*. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/march2016>

⁴⁵ HM Treasury (2015) *Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015, Cm 9162*.

⁴⁶ ONS (2015) *Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings: Provisional Results*. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2015provisionalresults>

⁴⁷ ONS (2015) *Income and sources of income for working households by region, 2014*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/regionalaccounts/gross-disposablehouseholdincome/adhocs/005113incomeandsourcesofincomeforworkinghouseholdsbyregion2014>

⁴⁸ Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (2015) *ASHE for Northern Ireland by industry, occupation, age, public/private sector and skill level, 2015 (provisional) and 2014 (revised)*.

⁴⁹ Northern Ireland Department of the Economy (2016) *Northern Ireland Broad Economy Sales and Export Statistics*. <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/broad-economy-exports>

2.4 Post-2007 housing market downturn and partial recovery

The Northern Ireland housing market has over the decades followed a quite distinctive pathway compared to the rest of the UK, and is more closely linked to the fortunes of the Irish economy and housing market south of its border. There was no 1990s boom and bust, but house prices began to rise from 1997 onwards, and rose very sharply after 2003. While affordability was eased to some extent by the substantial reduction in interest rates after 1990, by 2007 Northern Ireland had gone from being one of the most affordable parts of the UK, to being one of the least affordable – and briefly was even less affordable than London.

But, as in Ireland, the subsequent fall in house prices was also far more severe than across the rest of the UK, and affordability has returned to more traditional levels (see Figure 2.3). This has left behind a heavily dislocated market, and a higher proportion of households with negative equity, as a result of buying in the boom years, than anywhere else in the UK.

While housing affordability has fallen back to relatively modest – and more typical – levels since 2007, nonetheless access to home ownership has become more problematic for would be first time buyers in this period, as the reduced flow of mortgage funds and regulatory pressures have drastically reduced the availability of mortgage products allowing purchase with low or no deposit, notwithstanding government programmes intended to support mortgages with only a 5 per cent deposit.⁵⁰ This sharp reduction in the availability of low deposit

mortgages across the UK has in effect created a ‘wealth barrier’ to homeownership for aspiring first-time buyers – on one estimate excluding some 100,000 potential purchasers each year in the UK.⁵¹

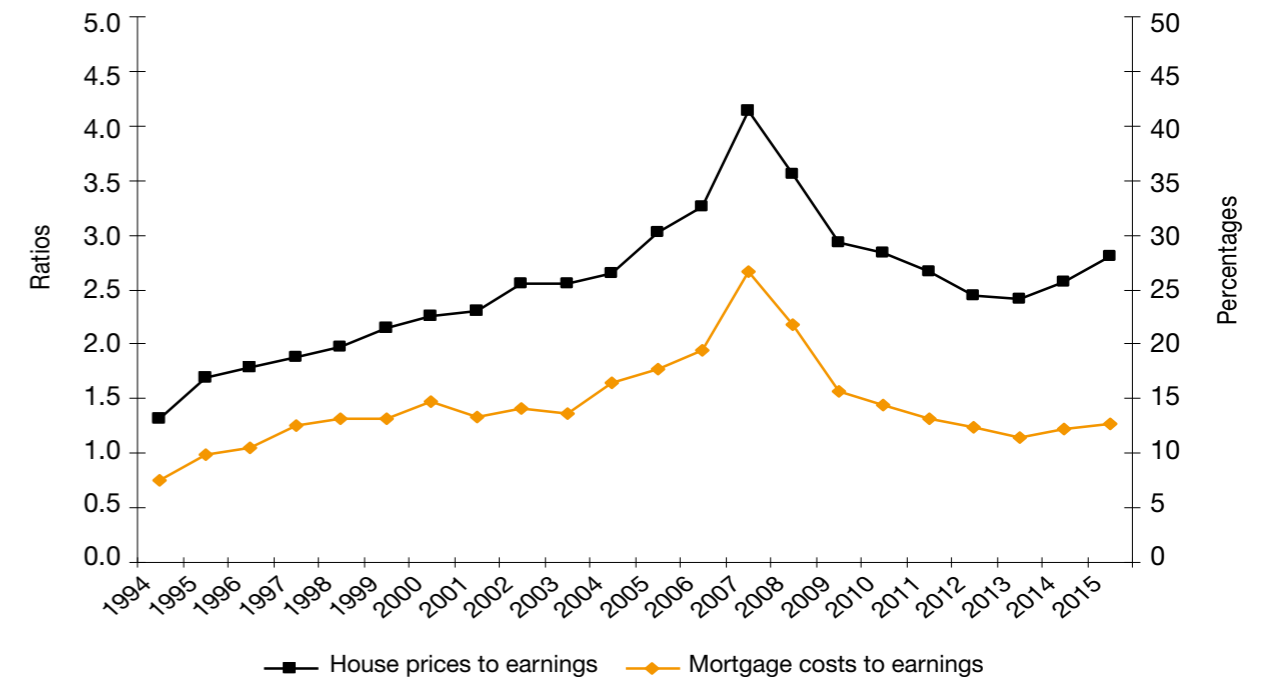
The Northern Ireland government does, however, support a substantial programme for shared ownership through the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association. This provides flexible opportunities both for those households that could not afford the repayments on a full mortgage, and for those that cannot raise a deposit, with options for anything between a 50% and 90% purchase share on dwellings valued up to £150,000.⁵²

Mortgage advances to first time buyers in Northern Ireland have recovered a little since the housing market collapse, to some 7,500 in 2015, but this is still little more than a half the average level over the 25 years to 2005.⁵³

There has also been some modest easing in the availability of low deposit mortgages for first time buyers in the last two years, in part because of the government ‘help to buy’ programme, but Financial Conduct Authority data on low deposit mortgages for all home buyers show that even by 2015, low deposit mortgages were still at only a quarter of the level in 2007, as a proportion of all mortgage advances.⁵⁴ Moreover, this constraint for would be first time buyers will be locked in by a tighter regulatory framework for mortgage lenders that will extend beyond the current dislocation of the market.

While house prices in Northern Ireland have now steadied and somewhat recovered over the last two years, future expectations for

Figure 2.3 Housing market affordability in Northern Ireland



Source: ONS mix adjusted first time buyer house prices, ONS working household incomes

housing market recovery are moderated by the low level of anticipated economic growth, anxieties about employment prospects in the face of public sector cuts, and the prospect that financial market pressures will result in rising interest rates.

A further important factor in the housing market volatility over the last decade has been the far more significant role of the private rented sector (PRS). The sector has virtually quadrupled in size in Northern Ireland over the last fourteen years, from 32,000 dwellings in 2000 to 103,000 in March 2014⁵⁵ and now fulfills an important and active role in providing accommodation for households at all income levels (see Figure 2.4). It is

also associated with high levels of mobility, consequently providing accommodation for a high proportion of all households moving in each year.

The PRS is also particularly important in Northern Ireland as the sector is far less prone to the levels of entrenched spatial religious segregation that remain a critical issue in the social rented sector.⁵⁶

The improved supply of private rented dwellings has brought a welcome flexibility to the wider housing market, and has also provided an alternative source of accommodation for households unable to secure housing in either the social rented or

⁵⁰ Chapter 3 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

⁵¹ Wilcox, S. (2010) 'The deposit barrier for first time buyers', p.8 in Pawson, H. & Wilcox, S. *UK Housing Review 2011/12*. Coventry: CIH.

⁵² <https://www.co-ownership.org>

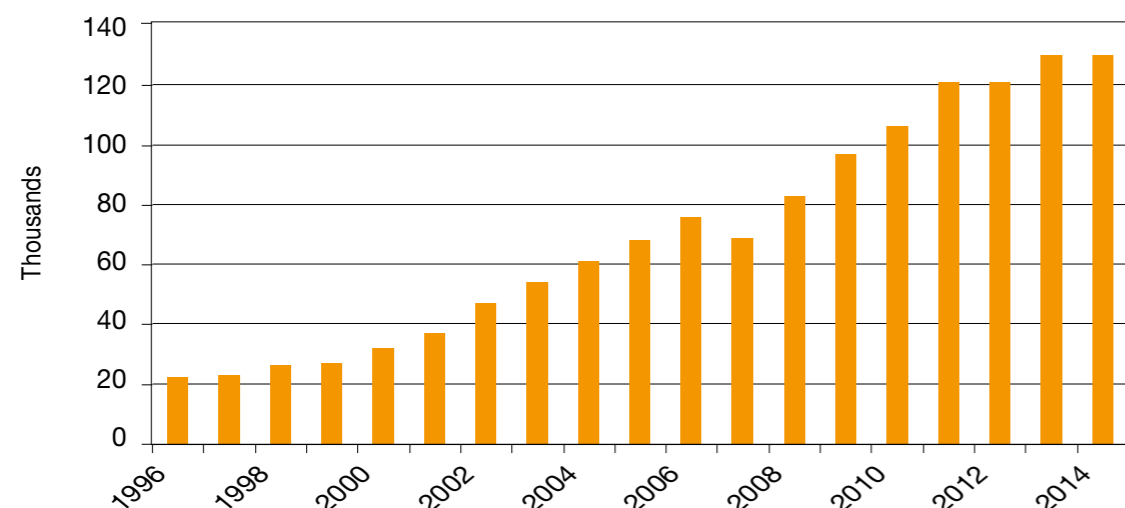
⁵³ Table ML2 in Council of Mortgage Lenders (2016) *First Time Buyers, New Mortgages and Affordability, UK Countries and Regions*. <https://www.cml.org.uk>

⁵⁴ Mortgage Lenders and Administrators Statistics, 2016. <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/prs/Pages/regulatorydata/mlar/2016/mar.aspx> and <https://www.the-fca.org.uk/firms/mortgage-lending-statistics>

⁵⁵ DSD (2014) *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014-15*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2014-15>

⁵⁶ Shuttleworth, I. & Lloyd, C. (2006) 'Are Northern Ireland's Two Communities Dividing?: Evidence from the Census of Population 1971-2001', *Shared Space*, (2): 5-13.

Figure 2.4 Rapid growth of private rented sector



Source: Data for Northern Ireland from UKHR & Northern Ireland Housing Statistics.

home owner sectors (albeit that the PRS may not be their preferred tenure).

The growth in the importance of the PRS for moving households is both in terms of moves into, but also within, and out of the sector. While data from England shows that less than one in ten moves by existing private tenants are either because the accommodation was unsuitable, or because of issues with their landlord,⁵⁷ this still suggests (on a pro rata basis) that there are thousands of 'pressured' moves in Northern Ireland each year. However, while in England the ending of private sector assured shorthold tenancies is becoming a far more important cause of statutory homelessness, particularly in London,⁵⁸ there is little sign of such a

pronounced trend emerging in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 4). This likely reflects the very different impact of welfare reform in the two jurisdictions (see Chapter 3).

Although it is clear that the PRS now plays a much more important part in the housing market, our understanding of the PRS is hampered by the lack of timely and robust data. There is no overall transaction data on lettings in the PRS, equivalent to the Land Registry data for house sales, and no robust long-term data series on PRS rents. Family Resources Survey data does show private rents rising over the last decade, in the years both before and after the credit crunch collapse in house prices, but small sample sizes mean

that figures for individual years need to be treated with caution.⁵⁹

However, since 2013 a detailed analysis of private rents has been published by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, based both on their own data, and data from propertynews.com (a widely used property website in Northern Ireland).⁶⁰ This found average rents of £560 per month in 2015, up slightly from £549 in 2014. It should be noted that these rent figures are inclusive of domestic rates, and for newly let tenancies only. The Family Resources Survey data shows considerably lower rents, but this includes the rents for existing tenants, which are typically somewhat lower than for new tenancies, and also lettings by 'non commercial' private landlords.

The inclusive (of domestic rates) private rent of £560 per month in 2015 represents some 23 per cent of average full time gross earnings in Northern Ireland in that year. This is significantly more than double the costs of an interest only mortgage for an average first time buyer priced dwelling (£118,200), and thus leaves buy to let investors with a significant potential margin even after adding in all their other costs. In contrast, a first time buyer with a standard repayment mortgage would face mortgage payments of £544 per month, and once the costs of domestic rates and maintenance costs for the first time buyer are added then their total outgoings are clearly rather higher than the average private rent.⁶¹

The combination of the underlying mortgage cost advantages for investors,

notwithstanding tax changes introduced by the 2015 UK Budget,⁶² together with the continuing constraints on the availability of low deposit mortgages, and funding for new social housing, mean that in the years ahead the private sector is set to become an even larger feature of the Northern Ireland housing market.⁶³ Policy changes described in Chapter 3 also make it likely that it will be expected to play an expanded role in tackling homelessness. This was a prospect welcomed by some of our key informants, but others voiced a note of caution:

"I think there are a lot of [private] landlords that are there but would rather not be, but are happy to let it out in the meantime and wait for the market to recover... and [they are] no longer in negative equity. So I think a disproportionate part of our private market is supplied by those sorts of people and to me then that is quite perilous because... They don't want to be landlords. They're not in it for life. It's not their business.... So... I would be very nervous about a strategy to tackle homelessness which rests on the continued availability and supply coming from the private rented sector..."
(Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

2.5 Household growth and housing market prospects

The Northern Ireland 2012 based household projections suggest an increase of 104,000 households over the twenty five years to 2037.⁶⁴ This is a 15 per cent increase over

⁵⁷ DCLG (2011) *English Housing Survey: Household Report 2009-10*. London: DCLG.

⁵⁸ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

⁵⁹ Table 89 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

⁶⁰ NIHE, propertynews.com & Ulster University (2016) *Performance of the Private Rental Market in Northern Ireland*. http://www.nihe.gov.uk/performance_of_the_northern_ireland_private_rental_market_jan-june_2013_published_january_2014.pdf

⁶¹ Author's calculations based on ONS first time buyer house prices, and CML data on average interest rates for new mortgage advances in 2015. Both investor and first time buyer mortgage costs calculated on the basis of a 100% mortgage, although in practice both would purchase with a combination of a capital deposit and a rather smaller mortgage. But this allows a more appropriate comparator against a 'full' rent.

⁶² A phased reduction in mortgage interest tax relief to the basic rate of tax, tighter controls on wear and tear allowances, and a 3% surcharge on stamp duty for buy to let investors. See chapter 6 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

⁶³ Chapter 6 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

⁶⁴ NISRA (2015) *Northern Ireland Household Projections (2012 based)*. <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp21.htm>

Table 2.1 Northern Ireland household and population projections, 2012-2037

Population & households	2012	2022	2037	Increase 2012 – 2037
Population	1,823.6	1,918.5	2,004.5	180.9
Households	708.6	752.9	812.7	104.0
Household headship rate	2.57	2.55	2.47	- 0.10

Source: NISRA

the period, or an average of 4,200 additional households a year. This compares with a 10 per cent projected population increase over the same period.

However, as can be seen from Table 2.1, the projected rate of household growth is slightly higher over the initial ten year period, when the average annual average growth is a little over 4,400. Moreover, 2014 based population projections for Northern Ireland have now been published,⁶⁵ and they suggest a marginally higher rate of population growth compared to those used as a basis for the 2012 household projections.

The projected rate of household growth is still very considerably lower than in the decade between the 2001 and 2011 Census, when it averaged almost 7,700 annually. A substantial element in the lower projections reflects the switch from inward net migration averaging just under 4,000 people a year over the decade to June 2010, to net outward migration averaging some 1,700 people over the following three years. On that basis, the 2012 population projections assumed a transition to zero net migration for the next 25 years. The 2014 population projections reflected the return to a modest

level of net inward migration in 2013/14, and assumed a declining level of net inward migration until 2020, with an average inward level of 1,000 people a year thereafter. In practice, outturn levels of inward or outward migration can be expected to continue to be volatile, especially in the aftermath of the UK vote to leave the EU.

In the wake of the recession, house building rates in Northern Ireland also fell sharply, but even so, new completions averaged some 5,875 a year over the five years to 2015, continuing to slightly exceed household growth, and to improve the crude household dwelling balance.⁶⁶

With regard to the building of new social/affordable housing, recent rates of provision have been just over the 1,000 units per annum level. Two recent studies have addressed the question of what level of new provision is needed, now and over the coming period, given demographic trends, existing needs and market supply. The first of these updates a conventional 'net stock' assessment in the context of a wider study of the nature and implications of demographic changes.⁶⁷ This study adjusts projected household growth over ten years to include

(narrowly defined) concealed households⁶⁸ and people in temporary accommodation, and compares this with projected private supply adjusted for vacancies and second homes. The resulting estimate is of a need for 1,500 additional social dwellings per year. However, it should be noted that this study was undertaken prior to the availability of the 2012 based household projections, and assumed a much faster rate of overall household growth.

The second study provides new 'snapshot' estimate of affordable housing need at the local authority level for 2011/12.⁶⁹ This suggests that there is a 'gross' annual need of 9,800 units per year, or a 'net need' (after allowing for relets supply) of 2,100, and that a quota of 20 per cent affordable housing in new build could be justified in some areas from a needs viewpoint (although not necessarily from a market viability perspective). This needs estimate takes into account likely new household formation, based on 2011 census data (the 2012 and 2104 projections were not available when this analysis was undertaken), affordability in owner and rental markets, and observed re-let rates in social housing, and draws attention to geographical differences in the balance between need and supply. The local house price data available for this study was not very satisfactory and this may lead to an underestimate of home-ownership affordability, although the main threshold for the needs analysis was based on private rent levels. The study uses a 10 per cent annual quota of the waiting list as a measure of 'backlog' need; this use of waiting lists may be questioned, but in Northern Ireland these data are considered good enough to

be used for a national government target (as discussed briefly in Chapter 4).

The NIHE annual target was for 2,000 new social dwellings a year over the five year period from 2014, based on its own assessment that it needed 1,200 a year to deal with emerging needs, and a contribution of 800 a year to respond to the backlog of housing needs.⁷⁰ While this target was reduced to 1,500 starts for 2015/16 following budget cuts⁷¹, this is still not too far away from the independent estimates despite their different methodologies and characteristics. More generally it should be recognised that any firm assessments of current housing needs are inherently problematic given the recent unprecedented instability in the Northern Ireland market, and the volatility and unpredictability of future levels of household growth.

2.6 The homelessness implications of the economic and housing market context

Housing market conditions tend to have a more direct impact on homelessness than labour market conditions⁷² and the last major housing market recession (1990) actually *reduced* statutory homelessness in Great Britain because it eased access to home ownership, which in turn freed up additional social and private lets.⁷³ However, this decline was not apparent in Northern Ireland, and the past decade has seen statutory homelessness trends for Northern Ireland continuing to contrast sharply with the remainder of the UK. Possibly associated with the housing affordability pressures

⁶⁵ NISRA (2015) *Northern Ireland Population Projections (2014 based)*. <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp20.htm>

⁶⁶ DSD (2016) *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin October-December 2015*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/housing-bulletin-oct-dec-2015.pdf>

⁶⁷ Paris, C., Palmer, J. & Williams, P. (2014) *Demographic Change and Future Housing Need in Northern Ireland*. http://www.nihe.gov.uk/demographic_change_and_future_housing_need_in_northern_ireland_november_2014.pdf

⁶⁸ See Chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of concealed potential households, defined more broadly.

⁶⁹ Department for Communities (2015) *Developer Contributions for Affordable Housing in Northern Ireland*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/developer-contributions-affordable-housing-northern-ireland>

⁷⁰ NIHE (2014) *43rd Annual Report 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014*. Belfast: NIHE.

⁷¹ NIHE (2015) *Corporate and Business Plans, Regional Services, 2015/16-2017/18*. Belfast: NIHE.

⁷² Stephens, M., Fitzpatrick, S., Elsinga, M., Steen, G.V. & Chzhen, Y. (2010) *Study on Housing Exclusion: Welfare Policies, Labour Market and Housing Provision*. Brussels: European Commission.

⁷³ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G. & Wilcox, S. (2011) *The Homelessness Monitor: Tracking the impacts of policy and economic change in England 2011-2013*. London: Crisis.

generated by the local house price boom (see Figure 2.3), acceptances doubled in the six years to 2005/06 and have remained at historically high levels thereafter (see Chapter 4). This reflects, in part, that the official policy emphasis on homelessness prevention as seen especially in England post-2002 had no parallel in Northern Ireland, though this is now changing as the ‘Housing Options’ prevention model (called ‘Housing Solutions and Support’) will shortly be rolled out across Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (see Chapter 3).

At the UK level, both mortgage arrears and repossessions rose sharply after 2007. However the increase in repossessions was far less marked compared to the early 1990s recession. While they did rise to nearly 49,000

in 2009 they have since steadily declined, and by 2015 UK repossessions had fallen to just 7,200 – lower than at any time over the last three decades. The sharp reduction in levels of mortgage interest rates post the credit crunch has clearly been a major factor in containing repossession levels over this period, and it remains the case across the UK that mortgage repossessions account for only a very small proportion of all statutory homelessness cases.⁷⁴

Nonetheless, it is notable that in Northern Ireland, unlike England and Wales, mortgage court claims continued to rise in 2012/13, and court claims remained well above pre credit crunch levels until 2014/15. While in 2015/16 they fell back to very low levels, even compared to the pre credit crunch

years, it is not clear how far this was a response to market changes, as at least in part it was a function of a legal hiatus in possession proceedings.⁷⁵

“If you look at the repossession figures for Northern Ireland though they’ve halved in the last year, but that’s purely down to a technicality because about 50 per cent of the lenders have not been taking repossession action over the last year because they’ve been embroiled in discussions with the Financial Conduct Authority but that’s all about to be unleashed again. So... it’s probably the lowest year for, I don’t know about eight or nine years but it’s a blip.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

While separate figures for repossessions (rather than court orders) are not available for Northern Ireland, there are reasons to suspect that repossession levels have been particularly high. The rise and fall of house prices was much more severe in Northern Ireland in the pre and post credit crunch years, with a consequently disproportionately high level of households left in negative equity. That in turns makes it more difficult for households in financial difficulty to voluntarily trade down or out of the housing market, and consequently leaves them more exposed to lender actions.

If repossession cases have now returned to pre credit crunch levels, there remain concerns about the potential impact of changes in the operation of the Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI) scheme, especially in the event of any future rise in mortgage interest rates. From this April, the waiting period for SMI has been increased from 13 to 39 weeks, and from April 2018 SMI will become an interest bearing loan rather than a welfare payment. Moreover, there are no

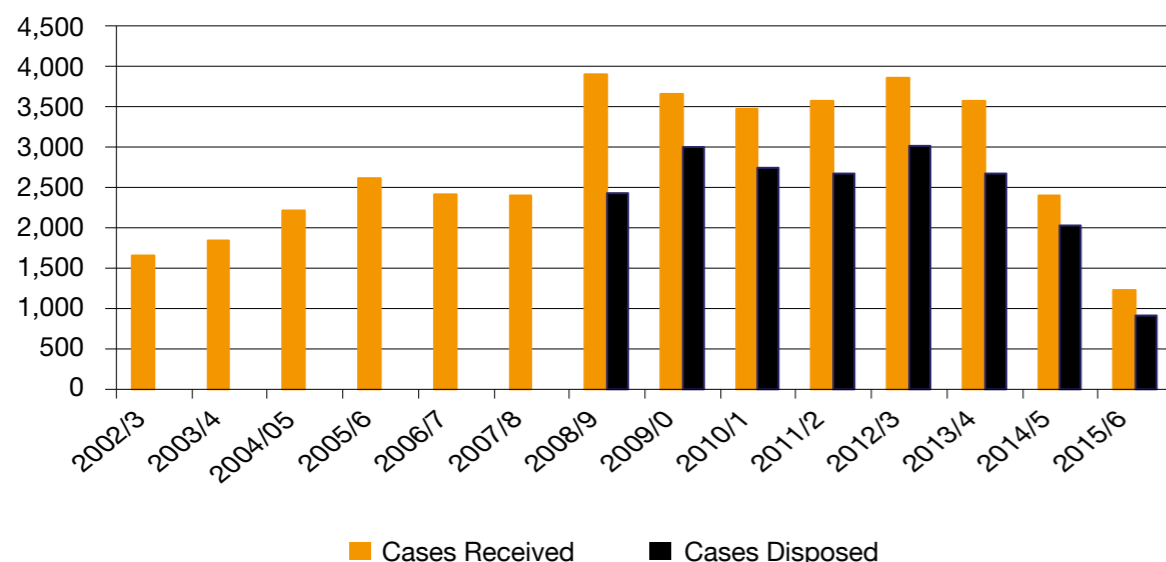
provisions for SMI for households claiming Universal Credit; instead there is a slightly higher ‘work allowance’ for some claimants with a mortgage.⁷⁶ These SMI developments were viewed with alarm by one of our key informants:

“[They] went virtually unnoticed because everybody was so focussed on welfare reform... [But] it’s a huge change for the clients we have, you know for the people in mortgage arrears... we always felt changes to SMI and changes to interest rates could be the two big drivers here.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

In the last Northern Ireland Monitor, there were said by some of our key informants to be particular difficulties whereby forbearance policies that made sense in the UK as a whole may be inappropriate in a context where there was as yet little sign of a housing market recovery. However, by 2016 these concerns seemed to have eased somewhat, with little evidence still of mortgage repossessions, or rent arrears, contributing in significant way to statutory homelessness (see Chapter 4). Therefore predictions in 2013 that there would be a rapid increase in homelessness “on grounds of affordability alone” – in the sense of people being ejected from accommodation that they can no longer pay for – do not, at least as yet, appear to have materialised in Northern Ireland. That said, a key informant from the advice sector reported:

“over the last couple of years... the fastest growing area of enquiry for us is related to affordability and that is across all tenures of the housing market... more people are contacting us now about affordability than ever have in the past and it is now our biggest area of enquiry across the board.”

Figure 2.5 Mortgage possession court orders ease back



Source: Northern Ireland Housing statistics; Mortgages: Actions for Possession January – March 2016, Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service.

74 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

75 Housing Rights (2016) *Changes to Support for Mortgage Interest: The Impact in Northern Ireland, Policy Briefing*. [http://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Policy%20Briefing%20on%20SMI%20Changes%20March%202016%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Policy%20Briefing%20on%20SMI%20Changes%20March%202016%20(1).pdf)

76 Housing Rights (2016) *Changes to Support for Mortgage Interest: The Impact in Northern Ireland, Policy Briefing*. [http://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Policy%20Briefing%20on%20SMI%20Changes%20March%202016%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.housingrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/policydocs/Policy%20Briefing%20on%20SMI%20Changes%20March%202016%20(1).pdf). The Universal Credit ‘work allowance’ is the level of income a household can earn before their Universal Credit entitlement begins to be tapered away.

(Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

These affordability concerns are increasingly related to the welfare reform restrictions discussed in Chapter 3. Younger people in particular were said to face combined difficulties associated with welfare cuts and market conditions that severely restricted their housing options:

“It’s about availability and affordability... A huge amount of the social housing waiting list is made up of young people, but I don’t think very many of them get housed. They certainly can’t afford to buy. So therefore you’re absolutely restricted to the private rented sector and now with the caps in the private rented sector and they’re competing now... with young professionals who previously by now would have owned their house, but now they’ve got to save up for their deposit because it’s not that the properties are expensive, but it’s the availability of the mortgages are so much tighter.”
(Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

2.7 Key points

- The overall UK economy has continued to gradually recover following the credit crunch downturn. However, recovery in Northern Ireland has been much slower, with earned income levels that are lower, and rates of economic inactivity that are higher, than elsewhere in the UK, and it is disproportionately dependent on public sector employment.
- There is also now much greater uncertainty about the future prospects for the UK and Northern Ireland economies in the wake of the EU referendum result.
- The 1990s decline in homelessness experienced in Great Britain was not apparent in Northern Ireland, and the past

decade has seen statutory homelessness trends for Northern Ireland continuing to contrast sharply with the remainder of the UK, doubling in the six years to 2005/06 and remaining at historically high levels thereafter.

- While these unique Northern Irish trends on statutory homelessness are partly explained by policy measures discussed in subsequent chapters, they also likely reflect the much more extreme boom and bust in the housing market in Northern Ireland than that experienced elsewhere in the UK, heavily influenced by developments in the Irish economy and housing market south of its border. Despite some recent slight recovery, there is still a heavily dislocated market and a higher proportion of households with negative equity than anywhere else in the UK.
- Although housing affordability has fallen back to relatively modest levels since 2007, access to home ownership has become more problematic for would be first time buyers due to the reduced flow of low deposit mortgage funds. While there has been some recovery, mortgage advances for first time buyers remain lower than at any time in the twenty five years to 2006.
- In this context, the rapid increase of the PRS in Northern Ireland (the sector has quadrupled in size over the last fourteen years) has brought a welcome flexibility to the wider housing market. Against that, there is a relatively high level of insecurity associated with private tenancies, although in Northern Ireland, unlike in England, there has been no pronounced recent rise in the proportion of homeless applications following the loss of a rented tenancy. This likely reflects the differential impact of welfare reform in the two jurisdictions.
- Predictions in 2013 that there would be a rapid increase in affordability related homelessness in Northern Ireland do not, at least as yet, appear to have materialised, with both mortgage repossession and loss of rented housing continuing to account for relatively small numbers of statutory homelessness cases. That said, a number of anxieties remain going forward, particularly with respect to the impact of welfare reform.
- The NIHE set an annual target for 2,000 new social dwellings a year over the five year period from 2014, but this was reduced to 1,500 for 2015/16. Even so this is close to independent estimates of requirements. Assessments of current housing needs in Northern Ireland are inherently problematic given the recent unprecedented levels of market instability, and the unpredictability of future levels of household growth, all of which is lent further uncertainty by the UK vote to leave the EU.

3. UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive policies potentially impacting on homelessness

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2 we considered the homelessness implications of the post-2007 economic downturn and subsequent recovery. This chapter now turns to review policy developments that might be expected to affect homeless people and those vulnerable to homelessness. We begin by considering recent developments in homelessness policies in Northern Ireland, before examining the distinctive housing policies of the Northern Ireland Executive and the NIHE, and finally reviewing the ongoing welfare reform agenda and its likely impacts in Northern Ireland. In Chapter 4 we assess whether the potential policy impacts highlighted in this chapter are evident in trends in the available datasets.

3.2 Homelessness policies in Northern Ireland

In the last Homelessness Monitor, in 2013, we reviewed the longer-term history of homelessness policies in Northern Ireland,⁷⁷ and identified the major areas of current concern at that time as including: the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland; the ‘Supporting People’ strategy; policies towards young homeless people and care leavers; an ongoing review of social housing allocations; and a ‘fundamental review’ of the NIHE. In 2016, we found that all of these issues remained current, and they are therefore discussed below. But there were three additional themes that emerged: the rolling out of the ‘Housing Solutions and Support’ approach to homelessness prevention by the NIHE; a clutch of recent

developments with regard to rough sleeping, begging and street drinking in Belfast; and a Housing First pilot project that has excited much interest. These too are considered below.

Homelessness Strategy

The first homelessness strategy in Northern Ireland – ‘Making a Difference to People’s Lives’ – was published by the NIHE in 2002. This was a non-statutory document but the Housing (Amendment) Act (NI) 2010 Act placed a statutory duty on the NIHE to formulate and publish a homelessness strategy, updated every five years, and an extensive range of public bodies are required to take into account the strategy in the exercise of their own functions. The ‘Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017’ was published in April 2012,⁷⁸ with its vision stated as to ensure that “long term homelessness and rough sleeping is eliminated across Northern Ireland by 2020”. At the time of writing, an independent evaluation of the 2012-2017 strategy had been commissioned and, in parallel, a new strategy was being prepared by NIHE, advised by a cross-sectoral steering group. It is a statutory requirement that this new strategy be in place by the end of April 2017, and NIHE are therefore committed to achieving an ‘ambitious’ timetable that would allow appropriate sign off and publication by April 2017.

Many of our key informants in 2013 had been involved as stakeholders in the development of the 2012-2017 Strategy and were generally fairly satisfied with its content, and in particular with its heralding of a stronger

emphasis on prevention. However, there was a lot of disappointment with regard to its implementation; comments that were echoed in 2016:

“I would read that Strategy now and I still wouldn’t disagree with one word that’s in it... So I think the shortcomings in the Strategy [are]... that the delivery mechanisms didn’t really last the course. I think a lot of that is to do with the inner turmoil in the Housing Executive... They’ve had a really rough ride. The staff in there is departing in their droves. There is a huge amount of expertise, skills and knowledge gone out the door.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

The other key barrier to implementation, alongside internal change in the NIHE (see further below), was perceived to be a failure to achieve effective interdepartmental ‘buy-in’:

“the ...biggest failure in the delivery of the homelessness strategy has been the lack of recognition that homelessness isn’t primarily a housing issue...There has been no commitment of resources... from education, from employment, from health, to fulfil that upstream prevention work.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

In particular, we heard strong and consistent criticism regarding the apparent lack of commitment from the Department of Health. While the Department provides part-funding for a Multi-Disciplinary Homeless Support Team, and a nurse to work with chronic homeless people in Belfast, there was a general feeling that much more was required:

“There is so much pressure on their budget and they don’t see homelessness as their problem and it’s definitely not a priority... which is understandable because there’s not enough resources – but if we

could actually crack that nut I think we could look more creatively about how we tackle homelessness.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Linked with this, a number of key informants highlighted growing problems posed by the increased availability of hard drugs (e.g. heroin) in Northern Ireland and so-called ‘legal highs’ (see further below):

“I would say five-to-ten years we have gone from a society where you could get cannabis, Es, speed to a place where you can get heavy-duty stuff; you can get heroin, you can get all manner of that. So we didn’t really have any services that could cope with that so I suppose we’re on the back foot.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

The inadequacy of drug and alcohol rehabilitation and detoxification facilities, particularly the requirement that clients are sober/clean for a set period prior to admission, was a prominent theme across the board:

“The...big gap or issue is reasonable access to detox and in-house detox for this client group as well, so there is like four beds I think in Belfast and you have to engage for 12 to 18 weeks with community services before you can get access to those, so it’s never going to work for this client group, and obviously community detox is an option for some people, but not a very realistic option for this client group either.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

“there’s a fundamental problem that we have as well that a lot of the healthcare professionals, so GP surgeries and all of that, and particular addiction and detox units won’t see people unless they’ve been

77 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2013) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2013*. London: Crisis/JRF.
78 NIHE (2012) *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017*. Belfast: NIHE.

clean for X number of hours or days. Now, if you're working with an addict that's not the way you can go. So we would have individuals who would be using drugs on a regular basis. We want to get them help but the prerequisite could be when you come in on Thursday you had to have been clean for 48 hours." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

However, one well received initiative funded by the Public Health Agency and NIHE, in a scheme managed by Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland, was the provision of 'home starter packs', providing toasters, kettles, bedlinen etc., to homeless people. Anecdotally this initiative was viewed as "very effective", with an evaluation commissioned about its contribution to tenancy sustainment. Indicative, perhaps, of the lack of priority given to homelessness by the Department of Health, was that personnel responsible for the homelessness brief had a very broad remit covering a range of unrelated areas.

Homelessness sector key informants were far more complimentary about the engagement of their criminal justice colleagues:

"who aren't such an obvious partner in tackling homelessness, but who have absolutely stepped up to the mark significantly more than health... I think it's their recognition of the fact that homelessness has a close link to reoffending... it's their willingness to be part of the solution... There is a discharge protocol from prisons and it is looked at and relied upon... whereas a huge gap is there is nothing for chronically homeless people being released from A&E." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Similarly positive sentiments were expressed from those in the criminal justice sector: *"I'd have no hesitation saying that the*

relationships between ourselves and the housing authority have been excellent." It was indicated that a significant turning point was introduction in 2001 of multi-agency arrangements between police, probation, prisons, housing and social services for managing high risk offenders, which brought NIHE into the offender management system formally. Another critical point too was the merger, in 2003, of those parts of the criminal justice budget used for running of approved premises with the Supporting People programme. Over time, these developments appear to have encouraged constructive working relationships between these two sectors, albeit that challenges remain, particularly around the rehousing of sex offenders and other high risk groups.

Another positive development reported since we last visited was an apparently much improved relationship between the voluntary sector and officials in DSD (now the Department for Communities):

"we now have people that we know by name that we invite along to things, that – and it's just transformed completely... I'm not saying that everything is always going to be positive. Of course it can't be. But it's – I mean two or three years, it's just completely different relationship." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

While the new Homelessness Strategy was just being prepared at the time of writing, and it was therefore too early to say what would be in it, key informants generally assumed that its strategic objectives would continue to focus on the eliminating the need to sleep rough and that prevention would be at the forefront, with new developments on Housing Options/Solutions and Housing First key to this. To some extent this reflects a 'reprioritisation' within the existing Homelessness Strategy that took place in

2014. There was also a widespread ambition for stronger interdepartmental working to be embedded within the new strategy, particularly with respect to health:

"We would like to see some commitment from health. So for example if health recognised that homelessness and health are a direct issue, they should be supporting us or other providers in trying to deal with that... In a project where we have individuals who are suffering from very serious mental health issues, why wouldn't we have funded on-site a psychiatric nurse, for example, or someone who can deal or a councillor?... But what we're saying to health is, 'At least acknowledge and make some kind of commitment to supporting us to support these individuals'." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Housing Options/Solutions

In 2013, there had been substantial engagement with the Scottish 'Housing Options' preventative approach, with a view to the introduction of something similar in Northern Ireland as a means of making a "significant contribution to reducing homelessness".⁷⁹ There had evidently been significant progress on this front by 2016. A Housing Options-style model, called 'Housing Solutions and Support', was being tested in three pilot areas (South Down, Causeway and (part of) Belfast), with a view to rolling it out across all of Belfast by the end of March 2017, and the whole of Northern Ireland by June 2017. Picking up on recent Scottish experience, it was emphasised by statutory sector key informants that Housing Solutions is 'not gatekeeping', and that a 'low threshold' will be maintained for taking a statutory homelessness applications:

"if they meet the homelessness threshold at that first interview, there will be a simultaneous homeless assessment done. Legislative duty will be applied... Certainly, we want to avoid gate keeping. We read the regulator report on Scotland and we know, some local authorities are excellent over there, others maybe have been accused of that, so we're mindful of that." (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Central to the Housing Solutions model is 'empowering frontline staff' to engage in earlier prevention work and to take a problem solving approach, based on "a comprehensive interview... which is designed to ascertain not just your housing but other needs as well" (Statutory sector key informant, 2016). There has been a major programme of training and development, and a revision of job titles and roles, with the new structure comprised of frontline 'housing advisors' (who deal with the initial inquiry and resolve more straightforward cases) and 'case managers' (who will 'stick with' more complex cases and those with support needs through their 'individual pathway' until resolution of their homelessness). The caseworker role was explained thus:

"there's an increasing number of people coming to us with complex needs... [after seeing the frontline housing advisor] we'll pass you to a back-office caseworker... who will basically hold your hand and provide support with you right through to a permanent sustainable housing option. They will find you temporary accommodation; they will find you appropriate support; they will liaise with whoever, in health trusts or wherever, debt advice, whoever; whatever you need relevant to your case." (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

⁷⁹ p.28 in Mahaffy, R. (2013) *Preventing Homelessness: The Housing Options Approach. A Review of the Scottish Experience and Considerations for Northern Ireland*. Paper presented at Preventing Homelessness – The Housing Options Approach Seminar, Ballymena, Northern Ireland, 11th October 2013.

Team leaders have been appointed to manage both new staff groups in each location, and while the balance between, e.g. walk in and appointment-based services, will vary depending on the level of footfall in different places, the same basic structure will pertain across Northern Ireland. While it is still early days, it was reported that, so far, staff had mainly been able to be slotted into the new roles and, echoing experiences elsewhere in the UK,⁸⁰ were said to be ‘enjoying’ them:

“we have delegated down the decision-making authority right down as far as we think reasonable from a governance point of view.... people I have worked with... in the past, I’m talking to, and they’re different people, so it does liberate them. You’ve just got to be careful from the governance point of view that it doesn’t... liberate them too much and they realise that statutory duty is there and has to be applied.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

There has been investment in improved IT to provide ‘real time’ data on lettings, supported accommodation vacancies and availability of floating support services to allow Housing Solutions staff to advise clients rapidly and in a realistic way about the options available to them:

“Decision making will be very much at the front end, where possible, so that when I’m interviewing you, I’d be able to give you a decision here and now as opposed to me saying, ‘Well, I’ll pass it up the line and get that person – and you’ll hear from us in a week or two.’ The whole thrust is to meet the needs of the individual where possible at the point of contact.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

This new IT platform should also, in time, allow for better statistics to be collated on interventions and outcomes (including tenancy sustainment), but for now the main focus has been their use as a management tool at local level. Positive trends with regard to prevention and the sustainability of housing outcomes were said to be emerging in the pilot areas, and there was optimism, albeit tempered with some caution, about the ‘scalability’ of these positive outcomes when it was rolled out across Northern Ireland.

The development of a ‘single access point’ for all those in housing crisis in Northern Ireland was viewed as an integral element of Housing Solutions, but there still seemed to be debate on exactly what this meant. The general idea seemed to be that whichever part of the ‘system’ those with acute housing needs came in contact with – whether they presented as homeless to the NIHE, came to the attention of housing managers in NIHE or housing associations, or wider voluntary or statutory sector support agencies – their case would be picked up by a housing advisor who would be their ‘single point of contact’ and resolve their needs where possible, or handover to a case manager where necessary. Also linked with this ‘collaborative’ approach, and dependent too on the upgraded IT platform, was ongoing work to develop a ‘common assessment framework’ and information sharing across statutory and voluntary sectors, which it is hoped may come to fruition by the time of the full roll-out of Housing Solutions next year. The ‘analytics’ emerging from this new data management system was intended to support the ‘reflection’ and ‘learning’ viewed as crucial to the success of the new approach. The need to ensure that data collection improved, especially on outcomes, was emphasised by some voluntary sector key informants (see also Chapter 4):

“One of the things about the housing options of course will be also measuring the outcomes because there has been quite a lot of, again at presentations, ‘oh we have prevented 392 from becoming homeless’ but what does that mean?... So I’d say that the evidence coming from the housing options stuff at the minute is very well-intentioned but not particularly robust, but I think they know they will have to because they’ll be putting a whole lot of money now into this new housing options model so they’re going to have to be able to demonstrate it is in some way working.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

It was clear, though, that this Housing Options/Solutions roll-out was largely welcomed by statutory and voluntary sectors alike:

“It’s going to be really brill. Really, it’s going to make a lot of difference. And there are very, very, they’re very firm that it will not be gate keeping. They’re very firm.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

“there is definitely commitment to stop blockages and to make the customer journey, as they call it, much easier and more straightforward for the people who need support and help. [Colleagues]... had a meeting with the housing solutions team recently and came back to me and said they... just felt really encouraged by it because there is actually a team of people there who are really, really trying to drive home change and have better outcomes for clients, so they have taken some of the very difficult clients and supported them into housing.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Some of the enthusiasm was directly linked to prospects for reducing the use of temporary accommodation:

“I do believe that a significant amount of people who are approaching the Housing Executive are ending up in temporary accommodation who shouldn’t be... Temporary accommodation is bad for people... Certainly bad for people if they’re in it for any length of time... I think that if we can look at options whereby the driver is to try and keep people in their existing accommodation, not even just to find them options of new accommodation but the focus is to try and look at ways where we can keep people in existing accommodation. That we’re looking at tying in with mediation services... There is a lot of work that needs to be done in regard to affordability in the private rented sector and all of that.” (Senior manager, voluntary sector, 2016)

The potential to offer a more personalised, sustained and ‘human’ service was also welcomed:

“you won’t have like ten people all taking your story. That named contact will have responsibility for helping you access those options and following you through until you are successfully either staying in your house, not being evicted or rehoused. And apparently will stay in contact with you even if you’re in temporary accommodation so that there’s going to be that... liaison between the Housing Executive who has statutory responsibility, and the support workers, which we haven’t had. It’s a really good thing.” (Senior manager, voluntary sector, 2016)

However, there a couple of cautionary voices too, and some puzzlement as to why Housing Solutions was being taken forward by the landlord rather than strategic arm of the NIHE. While it was explained to us that Housing Solutions had been framed as a standalone commissioned service working

across all social landlords, and the PRS, even though embedded in the landlord side of the Housing Executive, some in the voluntary sector remained anxious nonetheless:

“I don’t think anybody could say... the model of housing solution focus is wrong. Why would you argue against that? It’s absolutely right. The danger is if through the delivery of that model it in some way undermines your legislative duty. This is where my concern lies.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Linked to the roll out of Housing Options/ Solutions are existing efforts in Northern Ireland to facilitate access to the PRS for homeless households notably through the establishment of Smartmove in 2014, a payment-by-results PRS access scheme.⁸¹ There has been no formal evaluation of the scheme as yet (one is planned), but some key informants expressed the view that the payment-by-results model mitigated against the time investment needed to build relationships with landlords and to help accommodate those with more complex needs, such as offenders. In Northern Ireland there is no ‘compulsorily discharge’ of the main homelessness duty into the PRS at present, although whether to change this seemed to be a live debate.⁸² There also seemed to be some ambiguity in the interrelationship between the formal legal position and the role played by Smartmove with regard to statutorily homeless households:

“there [is] absolutely a move towards the [compulsory] discharge of duty into

*the private rented sector. It’s already happening through Smart Move. So if you go to Smartmove you have to voluntarily give up your FDA status...”*⁸³ (Senior manager, voluntary sector, 2016)

The current Smartmove contract comes to an end in 2017 and a decision will be made about whether to retain this approach or change tack. There was certainly a sense that this should be taken in the context of the wider push within ‘Housing Solutions’ to emphasise client options and (realistic) choices.

Supporting People

The responsible department for Supporting People (SP) in Northern Ireland is DSD (now Department for Communities) and the administering authority is the NIHE. The original SP strategy – ‘Supporting People, Changing Lives’ – covered the period 2005-2010, and a new SP Strategy – ‘Housing Related Support Strategy 2012-2015’ – had just been issued for consultation when we conducted fieldwork in 2013.⁸⁴ There have been no cuts to the SP budget as yet in Northern Ireland to match those in the rest of the UK, but the revenue funding has not been increased since 2008. While the ring-fence has been removed from SP funding in England, and also in Scotland, that has not as yet happened in Northern Ireland, a fact that was welcomed by voluntary sector providers in 2013 and again in 2016 (strictly speaking the funding has not been ‘ring-fenced’ but ‘protected’, but the practical consequences are the same, and it was ring-fenced this year). It was perceived by those in the voluntary sector that the ‘vast quantity of

lobbying’ that has taken place had helped to protect SP in the Northern Ireland context but there were still concerns:

“while we’ve been lucky enough...to continue to have ring fenced Supporting People money. And it appears that we may have it for another year. Once again there haven’t been any cuts but there hasn’t been any increase so we’re now on year nine of a frozen budget.... And so while we have a frozen budget people are right down to the wire, we also now have the national living wage... They are going to have to lose staff.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

There had been lobbying for a 10 per cent increase in SP funding, and pre-election optimism in the voluntary sector that this may be delivered, with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations demonstrating outside Stormont in favour of this as the political parties negotiated the Programme for Government.⁸⁵ While there was no mention of SP in the subsequent Programme for Government, consultations on the details are ongoing and there appears to be no post-election news thus far on the level of funding.

In 2015 there had been a review of Supporting People published,⁸⁶ which generally found that “Supporting People does a good job across all the client groups” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016) but made a series of 13 recommendations for improvement, and the Department now has a three-year implementation plan to deliver those improvements.⁸⁷ One key recommendation was to “move away a little from accommodation-based support to floating support”. This proposition seemed controversial when we conducted fieldwork in 2013 but by 2016 seemed to be the firm

direction of travel (see also discussion of Housing First below):

“with the move in health and social care towards self-directed support, it actually makes a whole lot of sense, because people are able to choosing their own – or able to choose their social care provision from those jointly commissioned services. The viability of some of those schemes, if you do it in the traditional way, might be quite challenging; whereas, actually, if you have a model of housing and then the support comes round where that person lives, rather than building specialised housing. It just makes a lot more sense... Because there’s a big push in the sector around Housing First. So, obviously, floating support makes a whole lot of sense, because you’re in a normal tenancy with building support services.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

In 2013, there also appeared to be a broad recognition in the homelessness sector of the need to ‘streamline’ floating support services, that had been expanding in Northern Ireland in a relatively uncoordinated fashion. These concerns persisted in 2016:

“[I] personally think the floating support needs to be reviewed and consolidated. I think there are too many floating support providers so you don’t have consistency... so I think that there is definitely going to be more of an emphasis on the use of floating support... within the next strategy... but I definitely think that we’ll have some consolidation and some agreement around standards.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

In 2013, we reported that a proposed move towards a new strategic commissioning approach within SP was welcomed, or at

⁸¹ CIH, DSD & SmartMove (2011) *Making the Most of Northern Ireland’s Private Rented Sector to Meet Housing Need*. <http://www.cih.org/resources/PDF/NI%20policy%20docs/Making%20the%20most%20of%20NI%20private%20rented%20sector%20to%20meet%20need.pdf>

⁸² There is some ambiguity about whether any legal change is necessary for the NIHE to discharge their main statutory duty into PRS fixed-term tenancies as the 1988 legislation does not specify that the accommodation secured for an FDA must be in the social sector or be an open-ended tenancy.

⁸³ Tenancies in the PRS procured via the Smartmove initiative are not “formally” offered as a means of discharging the main homelessness duty. So applicants can refuse such offers without penalty. However, if they voluntarily accept the Smartmove offer their status is altered to reflect their new improved housing circumstances, which in effect means that they lose their FDA.

⁸⁴ NIHE/SP (2012) *Housing Related Support Strategy 2012-2015*. http://www.nihe.gov.uk/housing_related_support_strategy.pdf

⁸⁵ Spurr, H. (2016) ‘Associations to demonstrate outside Stormont’, *Inside Housing*, 11th May: <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/associations-to-demonstrate-outside-stormont/7015139.article?adfsuccess=1>

⁸⁶ DSD (2015) *Supporting People Review. Final Report*. Belfast: DSD.

⁸⁷ DSD (2016) *Action Plan for the Implementation of the Supporting People Review*. Belfast: DSD.

least accepted, by the homelessness sector – until that point there had been no open, competitive tendering, but rather the direct commissioning of grant-funded SP services.⁸⁸ This was still the position in 2016, with a fairly cautious approach being taken by DSD who were intending, in light of the SP Review, to establish a pilot to test out competitive tendering approaches:

“As you might expect... a number from the sector weren't that comfortable with that but, at the same time, I think, we're broadly agreed that we should at least have an attempt at it and pilot it in some way and then see what the results of that shows in terms of its effectiveness around looking at the needs assessment, strategic priorities... We had some evidence around the cost of Supporting People schemes relative to what they provide, and some disparity in terms of cost...” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

This caution was explained thus:

“we couched the recommendations in the SP review around piloting [because]... we wanted to signal to the sector that they needed to get serious about... delivering value for money... Essentially, we're trying to get some breathing room to the sector to say pilot this, but if you don't sort yourself out... this is what's coming down the tracks” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

This seemed to be understood by the sector:

“they're going to start doing pilots. That is coming... [contracts] have rolled on for 13 years. And I think the sector [is] up for that, they recognise that you know, if money is tight, and money will be tight, even with ten per cent, and there is no more money than that then we need to redirect some

of that funding to be more effective... I think that competitive tendering is fine. As long as we ensure that quality is more important than price.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Concerns persisted around timing, with the SP review and implementation plan emerging before the Homelessness Strategy had been completed:

“There has been a tendency for Supporting People to develop strategy and the Homelessness Strategy to follow on afterwards... the priority has to be in getting the Homelessness Strategy right, and then, in terms of the priorities within the Supporting People strategy for homelessness, it follows it. Whereas at the moment the Homelessness Strategy has been running around trying to deliver things that Supporting People allow it to.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

However, there was reassurance on this point from statutory sector key informants, in that the same core group were responsible for both homelessness and SP in both the Department for Communities and NIHE. Moreover:

“a lot of the first year of the SP implementation is really, I suppose, around further research... around looking at and developing what potential improvements would be. Therefore, maybe in some respects, because that bit of work will be going in tandem with the homelessness strategy, it might work out quite well.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Rough sleeping

In last Monitor we reported that, while there was no routine collection of data on rough sleeping across Northern Ireland, numbers

were generally acknowledged to be low. Recently, however, a growing incidence of rough sleeping and street drinking in Belfast city centre has been perceived. This prompted NIHE to commission a 'street needs audit' of Belfast city centre. Undertaken by Depaul and the Welcome Centre over 12 weeks in summer 2015, the audit aimed to quantify street drinking and rough sleeping. Details are provided of the results in Chapter 4, but numbers sleeping rough on any one night were reported as small (averaging six).⁸⁹

Prior to the publication of the street audit, however, there was growing public disquiet associated with a succession of five rough sleeper deaths in the city, with a dim view taken of the ensuing media attention by many in the sector:

“We've had five street deaths since Christmas and it's generated a lot of interest in the media and generally around homelessness... but... it's not really raising the profile of homelessness, it's just shining a light on one very extreme chronic end of homelessness. To me that in some ways is doing almost a disservice to the bigger homelessness issue.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

“The media attention has pushed the Housing Executive and the Department into that very reactive thing about trying to do something very quickly on rough sleeping. Our point is, yes, it's great, you should do that but don't forget about the hundreds of thousands of people that you won't see or the media don't see. Let's focus on the bigger issue.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

In response, the Simon Community held a 'homelessness summit'⁹⁰ that some felt had

provided a helpful platform for 'enriching' the debate. However, there were mixed views on the prevailing narrative around these deaths, and in particular whether the deceased should have been described as 'homeless':

“each one of those individuals had accommodation. Whether that accommodation was in temporary accommodation or whether they actually had a flat, the issue that caused them to die on the streets was not one because they were cold and freezing, because we have great street outreach teams. It wasn't because they didn't have access to accommodation, because we have sufficient bed spaces. The issue was that these people had chronic addiction problems that no one was either doing assertive outreach with, or that they had had any kind of intervention further upstream. And, while we were saying as a sector, that we are not perfect and we do recognise that there are issues potentially around... not enough low threshold services for people with very chaotic lifestyles... [But] what we need is... [to] recognise is that...rough sleeping is an issue that has to be [dealt with] cross-departmentally...” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

A tri-Ministerial meeting involving the Ministers for Social Development, Health and Social Care, and Justice was called on the subject and:

“it would be fair to say that the main thrust coming from the [voluntary sector] providers... was that housing and homelessness isn't the problem here. The problem is the underinvestment from health and social care... Now, the trick is how we get health to review their services and deliver what's required with detox

⁸⁸ p.3 in CRISPP (2013) *Supporting People Housing Related Support Strategy: consultation response*. http://www.nifha.org/filestore/documents/responses_to_consultations/CRISPP_SP_consult_May13.pdf

⁸⁹ NIHE (2016) *Belfast Street Needs Audit*; Belfast: NIHE

⁹⁰ Archer, B. (2016) 'Latest death of homeless man in Belfast prompts emergency summit', *The Irish News*, 26th February: <http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2016/02/26/news/latest-death-of-homeless-man-in-belfast-prompts-emergency-summit-431453/>

etc.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

“I think the overwhelming view in the room at any meeting I was at was, although it is very much laid at the door of the housing authorities actually the big failure was health. The big failure was health and the links between health and housing, or indeed the lack of them for those chronically homeless people.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

There was therefore disappointment that of the 13 recommendations that emerged from that process, the majority related to housing and homelessness services, such as extending the hours of the outreach service and the number of emergency beds, and lowering service thresholds. Most interviewees felt they represented a ‘knee jerk’ or ‘lip service’ response rather than addressing deeper issues, with the recommendations with respect to the other departments described as ‘waffling’ about reviewing access to services.

“particularly with regard to chronic homeless, the gaps in services need health input... it is trying to get them and education and employment to the table... Although we’re always going to improve on the homelessness front and we strive to do so, there are gaps in getting those other departments in.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Others, felt, however, that the Action Plan developed after the tri-Ministerial meeting, while perhaps too heavily weighted towards actions by the NIHE, did provide a constructive framework and leverage for engagement with health and justice colleagues at a ‘cultural level’.

Another area of controversy related to the interventions by well-meaning non-experts, ‘pop up groups’ of local volunteer groups:

“now you have more volunteers on the street than you do actual people getting involved in street activity and it’s mad... it’s hampering...efforts [of] the outreach team...I think some people are beginning to see that okay, maybe we are doing more harm than good with the very best of intentions... I think local groups going out onto the streets have actually encouraged people to either stay out on the street or come onto the street.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

“I think the sectors’ view is there’ve been a lot of voluntary organisations that have emerged, often with a faith base background organised through social media, and have exacerbated, if anything, the problem. So what we were trying to do... [is] broker a set of conversations between those folks and the statutorily funded providers of homelessness services to say, look, if we can give you a bit of support to bring volunteers in and train them and let them work within your services, would you be willing to do that?... We’re trying to turn that natural human desire to help into something that can help in a positive and organised and directed way.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Particular difficulties were posed, for example, by these newly formed groups publicly identifying the deceased a very short time after death and before relatives had been informed. In the midst of the media controversy, statutory sector key informants clearly appreciated the intervention of voluntary sector colleagues:

“I think whenever central government try and push... a more realistic feel of how things are on the ground, I don’t necessarily think that that’s accepted, but those that are actually delivering those

services... the same things that bring a balance to the argument, I think certainly helps... They brought the real balance that was accepted by the media, and probably... by some of the politicians.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Finally, running alongside all of this, and linked with the results of the street audit, is a move to tackle begging in Belfast, being pursued by the Belfast Community Policing and Community Safety Partnership, with the support of statutory sector partners and some local homelessness organisations:

“We have increased begging, and we have two camps really... there is a group of migrants who are begging and then there is a group of UK/Irish/Northern Irish white people begging and they are largely, as we understand it, begging around drugs and alcohol related issues.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

A month long media campaign was undertaken in June 2016, headed by Depaul and the Welcome Organisation, with help from Thames Reach, a London-based homelessness charity involved in a similar campaign in the capital.⁹¹ There were some sensitive issues around the perceived emergence of some possibly organised begging by (exploited) foreign nationals in Belfast. But with respect to UK nationals begging, the campaign focused on explaining to the public that “*You’re feeding addictions*”; an assertion that evidence from elsewhere in the UK would support.⁹² It is worth noting, however, that the same research would also indicate that UK nationals begging will in all likelihood have a history of chronic homelessness, even if they are not currently street homeless.

Further down the line there is expected to be a debate about how far an ‘assertive outreach’ model should be used in tackling both rough sleeping and other forms of street activity, including begging, in Belfast:

“There’s a feeling, maybe surprisingly, from the professional outreach people that they’re pushing for the assertive model. You go softly, softly, ‘We’re here to help,’ and if they won’t engage for their own good, you come in with a harder, ‘We’re going to actually pick you up and transfer you to a place of safety.’ Now, obviously that’ll not be everyone’s cup of tea. I wonder what it’ll look like politically.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Any move in that direction was clearly viewed with a high degree of suspicion by some:

“I have visions of vans going round and throwing people into the back of them! So assertive outreach to help these people? Or is it assertive outreach to lift beggars off the street? Where is it going in terms of policy? I don’t know... will Belfast City Council go down the route of more assertive? I would doubt it... Will [they] want to be involved in something that means that people are being picked up off the streets in the same way that they would in Poland or Lithuania and taken to drunk tanks? I can’t see... that.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

It should be noted, however, that these quotes convey an understanding of ‘assertive outreach’ significantly at odds with the more common use of the term in GB,⁹³ and in other jurisdictions like Australia.⁹⁴ It is usually employed to mean pro-actively encouraging or persuading rough sleepers to sustain permanent exits from street homelessness,

⁹¹ See <https://ie.depaulcharity.org/begging-for-change>

⁹² Johnsen, S. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2007) *The Impact of Enforcement on Street Users in England*. Bristol: Policy Press.

⁹³ Homeless Link (2008) *Streets Ahead: good practice in tackling rough sleeping through street outreach activities*. London: Homeless Link.

⁹⁴ Phillips, R., Parsell, C., Seage, N. & Memmott, P. (2011) *Assertive Outreach (Positioning Paper)*. Brisbane: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

by challenging their mindsets and behaviours, including via methods such as ‘motivational interviewing’.⁹⁵ What is captured in these quotes seems instead to imply a rather aggressive form of enforcement.⁹⁶

Housing First

One of the most significant innovations since 2013, and mentioned several times in the discussion above, was the establishment of Northern Ireland’s first Housing First project, run by Depaul. At the time of writing, an evaluation of this project was due for completion, but there was evidently already a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism across both the statutory and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland for the model. It was reported to us that the project had successfully rehoused 54 people over a period of two years, in both social and PRS accommodation, and had worked well for some people who had previously been very difficult to place:

“For me it was very much about breaking down the myths around this client group and the limitations people saw for this client group, and I absolutely hold firm to the view that everybody deserves to have a house and a home and they can have [this] if they have the right supports in place... I don’t think we need more hostels, and we don’t need more hostel beds, what we need is more houses and less hostels.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

There was an expectation that the evaluation would recommend that the model be rolled out as part of the forthcoming Homelessness Strategy, and its launch at a Housing First conference in Limerick in July was eagerly awaited:

“certainly Housing First as a principle, a lot of organisations are very interested in it but they will, nobody’s going to fund anything

until the evaluation of Depaul’s pilot.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

“the Depaul pilot... anecdotal feedback, very good... it does provide a sustainable housing solution for some people at that chronic first end. It’s not cheap but it’s effective for particular individuals. It is probably something we need to sit down now and determine right, what do we next if we’ve a positive evaluation report?” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

It remains to be seen whether this development will mark a paradigm shift towards a Housing First approach in service provision for homeless people with complex needs in Northern Ireland. But there certainly seemed to be significant momentum behind it, and a recognition that it implies remodelling or closure of some supported/ temporary accommodation, alongside flexibility in mainstream allocations policies to allow people to move out of these congregate models. There was, however, one more sceptical voice:

“there’s a lot of talk now about a Housing First approach here. We know from experience that Housing First can and does work. The difficulty or the problem with it is, it’s incredibly expensive. I’m not sure that we have the budget to run a Housing First model. So if we say this has been the silver bullet in the past year, do we understand fully what it means? I’m not sure that we do so there’s an issue; I would have a concern about that, too.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Youth homelessness

Northern Ireland is unusual in a UK context in that 16/17 year olds and young care leavers do not have automatic priority need under the homelessness legislation, but must be

considered at risk of sexual or financial exploitation; a criteria described by experts as “really hard to prove”.⁹⁷ However, in 2013 we reported that there had been some recent improvements in frontline responses, in particular concerning joint working protocols,⁹⁸ joint commissioning of services and mandatory standards for accommodation provision⁹⁹ for 16/17 year olds and 18–21 year old care leavers. It should also be noted that Northern Ireland already benefits from Supported Lodging schemes¹⁰⁰ (albeit on a relatively small scale) and a Nightstop service is planned in Belfast, with the possibility for later expansion across Northern Ireland.¹⁰¹

However, while the 2012–17 Homelessness Strategy included a focus on youth homelessness, the specified actions tended to encompass reviewing existing provision rather than improving or expanding it. Key informants in 2016 were clear that there was scope for a more ambitious response to youth homelessness in Northern Ireland:¹⁰²

“There has certainly not been any transformation in the service for young people. There is a little bit of focus on it but there’s certainly not enough focus on it. I would say in the new [homelessness] strategy that’s something that should probably be escalated” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

The roll out of the Housing Solutions approach across NI provides an opportunity to improve homelessness prevention, with

one key informant very optimistic about the implications of these developments for young people specifically:

“they’re engaging with young people in accommodation to begin to look at a pathway out of it, trying to plan rather than what we would have here [where they] won’t touch you until you have 28 days [before] you’re homeless... and then they’ll start this process. That’s been a thorn in my side for a long time, and they’re now stopping that. The focus is on the client and the young person, and it’s about we’ll plan with you and we will walk you through this... you’re moving into supported accommodation or temporary accommodation – that’s not the end goal for you. The end goal is that ultimately we want to be able to get you into sustainable, independent [accommodation]... and there’d be a time for planning for that... We work within a system which is putting you at the centre and when you’re ready to move on we will get you the right accommodation and support you in moving into it and support you in being in it. I’ve begun to see some of that now... I’m delighted to see it.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

However, upstream from such Housing Solutions case work it was suggested that there was a need for intelligently targeted school-based and whole-family preventative programmes directed at ‘at risk’ children and young people:¹⁰³

⁹⁵ Wahab, S. (2005) ‘Motivational interviewing and social work practice’, *Journal of Social Work*, 5(1): 45–60; Wain, R. M., Wilbourne, P. L., Harris, K. W., Pierson, H., Teleki, J., Burling, T. A. & Lovett, S. (2011) ‘Motivational interview improves treatment entry in homeless veterans’, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 115: 113–119.

⁹⁶ Johnsen, S. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2007) *The Impact of Enforcement on Street Users in England*. Bristol: Policy.

⁹⁷ See Watts, B., Johnsen, S., & Sosenko, F. (2015) *Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Review for The OVO Foundation*. Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University

⁹⁸ Guidance on joint working was renewed in 2014. NIHE & HSC (2014) *Meeting the Accommodation and Support Needs of 16–21 year olds: Regional Good Practice Guidance Agreed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Health and Social Care Trusts*.

⁹⁹ Department of Health (2012) *Standards for Young Adults Supported Accommodation Projects in Northern Ireland*. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/standards-young-adults-supported-accommodation-projects-northern-ireland>

¹⁰⁰ Northern Ireland’s small scale Support Lodging’s schemes are targeted at care leavers rather than the broader youth homeless population. DHSSPS (2016) *Policy Circular FCPD 01/2015*. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/minimum-standards-supported-lodgings-young-people-and-young-adults-aged-16-21-northern>

¹⁰¹ Depaul (no date) *Depaul Nightstop: Providing safe emergency accommodation for young homeless people in a home environment within the local community*. Dublin/Belfast: Depaul.

¹⁰² See also: CHNI (2010) *Common Monitoring Study of 16–25 year old Young People Presenting as Homeless across Northern Ireland: Regional report, April 2010*. Belfast: CHNI. Watts, B., Johnsen, S., & Sosenko, F. (2015) *Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Review for The OVO Foundation*. Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University.

¹⁰³ See also: Watts, B., Johnsen, S., & Sosenko, F. (2015) *Youth Homelessness in the UK: A review for The OVO Foundation*. Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University

“There has been no commitment of resources, whether those be staffing resources or financial resources, from education, from employment, from health, to fulfil that upstream prevention work... they haven’t been doing the work that they need to be doing in schools, they haven’t been having school councillors recognising the possibility where a child might be, or a family might be at risk of homelessness and what interventions need to go in place.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

This echoes the findings of a recent participatory research project with young people with experiences of homelessness, which found that most young people felt their homelessness could have been prevented if better help (counselling, mental health and/or addiction services, family support and mediation services) had been available at an earlier stage.¹⁰⁴ The existing Homelessness Strategy also committed to reviewing the ‘pathways to independence’ available to young homeless people, but key informants in this study and young people¹⁰⁵ identified the availability of suitable ‘move on’ accommodation as a key challenge (see also Chapter 2):

“the move on options aren’t great, so what you find, is almost you’re having blocked beds, because young people who are tenancy ready, who have received a package of support are ready to move on, but there’s nowhere for them to go.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Some key informants in 2016 indicated that they were picking up signs of a rising demand for youth homelessness services in Northern Ireland:

“we’re seeing... an increased number of that 18-25 group presenting with us, so half of our service users across the [services] would be under the age of 25, that’s a change we’ve seen in the last couple of years, and that wouldn’t have been as apparent 5 years ago” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

The most prominent theme by far, however, was the increasingly acute challenge posed by the use of so-called ‘legal highs’ (New Psychoactive Substances)¹⁰⁶ by young people and others living in homelessness accommodation in Northern Ireland, and the sector’s limited capacity to respond, given the reported difficulties in accessing support with mental health or substance misuse:¹⁰⁷

“One of the biggest things impacting on youth homelessness in Northern Ireland and supported accommodation and projects for young people is legal highs... supported accommodation is an easy target, so young people in general are using legal highs and then our most vulnerable young people, either trying to escape or using it as a crutch... but if you imagine you have a 30 bed project and one young person brings legal highs in, the impact of that is phenomenal... the issues around legal highs is that they’re unpredictable, the level of violence with them... and then the psychological damage after” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

A renewed focus on youth homelessness in Northern Ireland – and a shift from the fairly narrow focus to date on 16/17 year olds and 18-21 year old care leavers – would seem apt given the likely disproportionate impact of welfare reform on young people, particularly the intensifying sanctions regime and various restrictions in Housing Benefit (see below).¹⁰⁸

An independent key informant was concerned that there is “not enough informed knowledge in the youth sector” about the likely impact of welfare reform on youth homelessness.

3.3 Housing policies in Northern Ireland

Housing has benefited from a high priority in Northern Ireland relative to the rest of the UK, at least when measured in terms of the proportion of public expenditure devoted to housing, albeit that funding for NIHE stock improvements in particular has fallen sharply since 2008/09.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, NI does not have a larger proportion of social housing than the rest of the UK (16%¹¹⁰ compared to 17% in England and 24% in Scotland¹¹¹). The more distinguishing characteristic is that while housing associations are now the larger part of the social sector in Great Britain, in NI the NIHE has by far the majority of the social sector stock, with housing associations only accounting for just over a quarter of the sector.¹¹²

As in the rest of the UK, however, virtually all new social housing in NI is now being provided by housing associations, and following budget cuts the government target was to start 1,500 new social and affordable homes in 2015/16.¹¹³ The previous target of providing 6,000 social homes over the four years to 2014/15 was met, with 1,658 new additions to the social sector stock in the final year. Outturn figures for 2015/16 now show that while that this lower target for starts was marginally exceeded (1,568), completions in the year fell to just 1,209.¹¹⁴

In the medium term a further factor that may impact on housing supply is the devolution of planning powers to the restructured eleven local authorities in April 2015. However those authorities are still at an early stage in drawing up their plans to cover the period to 2035.

While comparing housing pressures between the four jurisdictions of the UK is not straightforward, one measure that provides a useful indicator is the numbers of social sector lettings available to new tenants per thousand households in each country. On that measure (see Figure 3.1), Northern Ireland has slightly more social sector lettings available than for England as a whole, but less than in Wales, and far less than is the case in Scotland.

That said, the numbers of social sector lettings available to new tenants has declined over the decades, not least as a long-term consequence of the Right to Buy. In the 1990s, new lettings averaged a little over 10,000 a year, while over the years since the turn of the century they averaged nearly 8,300. In 2014/15 there were 8,129 lettings to new tenants. This has contributed to a sense of the social housing being under increasing pressure, as conveyed by a wide range of our key informants, with young people, single people and other low priority groups said to be struggling to gain access (see Chapter 2 and below).

Facing the Future

A wide ranging review of housing policy in Northern Ireland was initiated in 2012, as detailed in the 2013 Monitor. However, while there have been a welter of consultations on different areas of

¹⁰⁴ CHNI (2016) *Listening and Learning from Young Peoples Experiences – CHNI Speak Up Report 2016*. Belfast: CHNI.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ The production or supply of so called ‘legal highs’ has been illegal since May 26th 2016 when the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 came into force across the UK.

¹⁰⁷ CHNI (2016) *Listening and Learning from Young Peoples Experiences – CHNI Speak Up Report 2016*. Belfast: CHNI.

¹⁰⁸ Homeless Link (2014) *Young and Homeless 2014*. London: Homeless Link.

¹⁰⁹ Chapter 4 and Table 56 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹¹⁰ DSD (2014) *Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014-15*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-housing-statistics-2014-15>

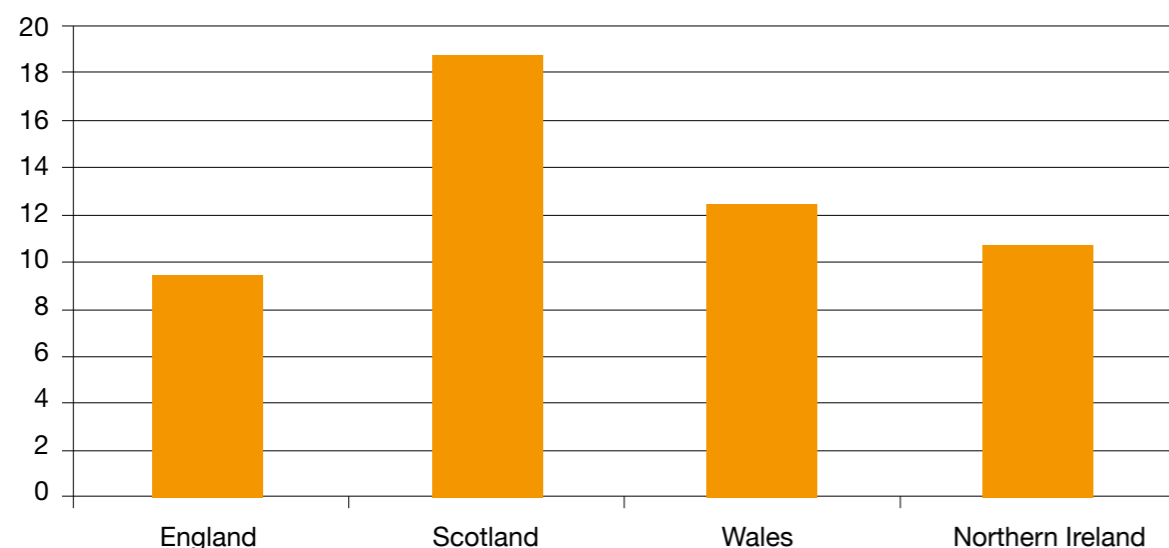
¹¹¹ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2012) *The Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2012*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹¹² Table 17 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹¹³ Chapter 4 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹¹⁴ NISRA/Department for Communities (2016) *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin 1st January – 31st March 2016*. NISRA/Department for Communities.

Figure 3.1 Annual social sector lettings to new tenants per each one thousand households



Sources: UK Housing Review 2016, ONS 2015 Household Estimates

policy, very little has been agreed or implemented.

One thing that has changed is that there has been a structural reform of Northern Ireland government departments. The role of the Department of Social Development (DSD) has now been substantially widened, and it has been renamed as the 'Department for Communities'. This change was underway at the time our fieldwork took place, in April 2016, with the housing team joining their regeneration colleagues in a 'Community Regeneration Group' – "So all housing policy and all regeneration policy and delivery will all be in the same place within the department" (Statutory sector key informant, 2016).

This was felt by many to be, at least potentially, a positive development:

"It could be good because some of the functions they're getting are around poverty and equality which I think arguably could help to increase the focus on homelessness... I think it has potential because it has brought in under the same department a number of what you would see as very critically aligned functions. The danger of course is it's massive... the transition and now [homelessness] will be competing for attention [within] a bigger departmental portfolio and it may not get it... but I can see how it could be a force for good." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

"Both positive and negative I think... broad equality strategies will be going to communities. That would potentially be good because you could get a more joined up approach to lots of social

problems... I think the challenges will be it's going to be a very, very big department, a huge department. But on the back of that it could be a well, a better funded department. It could maybe create the opportunity for more cohesion between the statutory and the voluntary sectors, and areas of homelessness being one of the areas." (Independent commentator, 2016)

This concern about the potential implications of the larger scale and wider remit of the Department were echoed by some from the statutory side too:

"housing has been the number one priority of the current DSD... it's always been the number one priority. Welfare more latterly, but housing has been – so I think there's a slight fear that [housing] might fall down the pecking order; particularly when it comes to things like budgets. [Housing has] generally [been] very successful at securing whatever [was] needed – [it] might not be [in future]." (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Another commentator was strongly sceptical:

"I think that it will have a difficulty in creating a vision and priorities because it's dealing with the controversial welfare reform through social security, plus the controversial Housing Executive reform, social housing and the housing debate and allocations and homelessness plus regeneration... it could be too big and too amorphous." (Independent commentator, 2016)

Two of the major issues raised within the wider housing policy review, and where an outcome is still awaited, involve the future role of NIHE, and the priorities and criteria for social housing allocations policy.

The future of the NIHE

At the time of our last visit in 2013, the demise of the NIHE looked imminent, albeit highly controversial. It certainly looked highly likely that the NIHE would be divested of its landlord function, though possibly it would survive to retain a slimmed down strategic role. By 2016, however, the picture had almost completely reversed, and we picked up strong indications that the NIHE would continue primarily as a landlord, refocused on core housing management concerns, with some of its strategic functions absorbed into the new Department for Communities:

"the Health Minister, effectively, has decided to do away with the health and social care board... and is bringing a large number of those functions back into his department, to have more direct control over. I guess there could be a model similar to that where some of those functions that are delivered by the Housing Executive may be delivered more effectively within the department." (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Some of those we interviewed were a little concerned about this prospect:

"There's certain logic, like they're abolishing the health and social care board for the same reason, taking up the strategy to the Department of Health and pushing down the operation to the health trusts.... So in housing, yes, there's a logic to it but where would it be in the Department of Communities? Will it disappear and will it be contested and will it be drowned out by the welfare reform and the benefits debate? Will it be kicked aside by the regeneration arguments in terms of the economy...?" (Independent commentator, 2016)

The fact that all we interviewed now seemed to expect the NIHE to be retained in some

shape or form was attributed in part to work undertaken by senior management in the Housing Executive in the intervening period, and in part to a changing political landscape:

“The DUP have shifted slightly. So... when you were here the last time, the dissolution of the NIHE, the setting up of a new strategic body, the handing over of the 80,000 properties, cut up in some sort of way to housing association movement, the removal of the landlord function etc... We are now looking really at perhaps a new strategic housing body becoming part of the Department of the Communities. But, there still being a NIHE... as a landlord... there’s definitely a movement towards retaining at least some, a substantial lump of Housing Executive houses” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

On why DUP seem to have changed their position, this view was proffered:

“I think they’ve been quite scared about the – how high housing association rents are. That’s not the housing association’s fault, but what they recognised is once you become beholden to the banks in order to develop rents will go up and you ultimately are... going to increase the Housing Benefit bill” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

However, concerns were ongoing with regard to the deteriorating condition of the Executive’s housing (see above), and there were sharply opposed views on how best to deal with this issue:

“I think there is still the significant investment deficit in terms of the Housing Executive stock... I think, essentially, it falls into two, either that that stock is sold off to one of a number of housing associations... Or that there is some way of being able to allow the Housing Executive to borrow,

essentially. I’m not sure of the extent to which the latter one is a runner, but again, I guess that’s a personal opinion.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

“as recently as last week, there were political hustings and all the political parties were there, and they were all saying, ‘Let them borrow. Give them the status to let them borrow. Give them new build back.’ There seems to be... There seems to be cross-party support to re-establish that role... There’s a feeling the housing association movement isn’t delivering on the new build.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

It was acknowledged that, should NIHE be allowed to borrow for investment, their rents would rise to be closer to that of housing associations, which would be controversial (see further below). The political history and segregated geography of Northern Ireland means that the location of any future social housing built by NIHE (or other providers) is also highly contentious (see further below). But as one of our key informants commented:

“I see that more as a political argument rather than something which your Housing Executive maybe can resolve by itself. I think the politicians have to decide what the strategy for social housing is. The Housing Executive... and the DSD’s responsible for housing policy and there has been controversy in North Belfast in particular because of the sectarian issues there... But to expect a Housing Executive to develop an entire strategy for building social housing for [a segregated] society is not really feasible. I think that direction has to come from the government and they have to decide about that.” (Independent commentator, 2016)

The options for the NIHE stock have now been further complicated by the review of

the status of housing associations within UK national accounts. Following a decision by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that English housing associations should be reclassified as public sector corporations (rather than private sector corporations), on the basis of the extent of government regulatory controls over them, the ONS have subsequently announced that they are to review the status of housing associations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.¹¹⁵ While the English decision was based on the particular regulatory framework in England, there is a strong likelihood that the same decision will be made for the rest of the UK, as if anything the regulatory regimes in the three devolved administrations have an even greater governmental involvement than in England.

The consequence of a re-classification decision in Northern Ireland would be that there would then be no difference between housing association and NIHE borrowing. They would both be public corporations, and in both cases their borrowing would count as public spending, albeit that it would be classified as ‘annually managed expenditure’ rather than within the more tightly controlled ‘departmental expenditure limits’. This would effectively remove the primary argument in favour of NIHE stock transfer (i.e. to get access to private sector funding for stock investment), and will reinforce the view expressed by a number of our respondents that NIHE should be permitted to borrow against its rental income without any artificial limit.

Social housing allocations

As detailed in the 2013 Monitor, allocations policy is “extremely sensitive” in Northern Ireland for historical and political reasons. The Housing Selection Scheme (sometimes called Common Waiting List or Common

Selection Scheme) is shared by all social housing providers, i.e. the NIHE and housing associations. It is a points-based system with a heavy weighting towards statutory homelessness, such that some key informants considered “homeless points” a virtual “prerequisite” for accessing a social sector property (a very high proportion of all NIHE allocations – 76% – are currently absorbed by statutorily homeless applicants, see Chapter 4). As elsewhere in the UK (outside of Scotland), some in the voluntary sector felt that the exclusion of most single homeless people from priority need status under the homelessness legislation was unfair, particularly given that this rendered their chances of accessing social housing slim:

“we need to [get rid] of the priority need. Because ultimately we are making a distinction upon people’s personal status as opposed to their housing need. And it needs to go.” (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

However, residential segregation in Northern Ireland provides an indispensable context for understanding the particular controversy surrounding housing allocation in the jurisdiction. A large proportion of social housing in Northern Ireland is segregated along religious lines, and this is said to reflect mainly tenants’ choice rather than the way the NIHE allocates its properties.¹¹⁶ Segregated housing means that demand for social housing from one community cannot be met from supply within the other group’s ‘territory’, even if the two areas may be in close proximity. This has led to a situation, particularly in some areas of Belfast, whereby some Protestant neighbourhoods are under-occupied whilst neighbouring Catholic areas suffer from overcrowding and a shortage of supply.

¹¹⁵ p.13 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹¹⁶ Gray, P. & Long, G. (2009) ‘Homelessness policy in Northern Ireland: Is devolution making a difference?’, in Fitzpatrick, S., Quilgars D. & Pleace, N. (eds.) *Homelessness in the UK: problems and solutions*. Coventry: CIH.

A fundamental review of social housing allocations in Northern Ireland was commissioned by DSD from the University of Ulster and University of Cambridge in an attempt to resolve a range of difficulties identified with the current system.¹¹⁷ The results of that review were published in 2013,¹¹⁸ and its proposed reforms put out for consultation.¹¹⁹ The review report recommended the retention of a primarily needs based approach to allocations, but with applicants placed in priority bands. Within those bands allocations to applicants were proposed to be based on waiting time. It was also proposed that there should be a reduction in the number of reasonable offers to which statutorily homeless households are entitled (from three to two).

However, in 2016 we found that there had been no progress on this issue:

“It is going in slow motion, really. Cambridge and the University of Ulster’s research was published. There was quite a lot of support for all of the recommendations, but then there was a wider issue – the Equality Commission challenged... the Housing Strategy [on technical grounds]... Essentially that took 18 months, so the allocations stuff kind of hit the bumpers and as a response more equality analysis [was commissioned]... and that analysis hasn’t been agreed yet... So we’ve hit the sand around that and... we’re walking through treacle... We’ll see what the new Minister wants to do. Everybody’s agreed that there are these things that absolutely have to be done, like removal of intimidation points, which creates

perverse incentives in the system.”
(Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

Nevertheless, there appears to be cross-party agreement that progress is required and so:

“the end result will still be that there will be a proposal of sorts around an allocation system that will then go out for consultation in the normal way... so certainly there will be something at the end of it where the sector and everybody else with an interest will have an opportunity to comment on.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

There certainly seemed to be broad agreement that the notion of “intimidation points”¹²⁰ had to be reviewed:

“[the] disproportionate additional priority that’s been awarded to them has in effect been a disservice to the whole of the homeless population... there are concerns about it being manipulated and so many people get awarded those points and then they’re generally quite high profile people in the local community and people know... if there really is a risk of life then there should still be a mechanism through which that person should be absolutely taken out of that situation of threat... I don’t think the way it’s currently administered is necessarily doing that.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

There was also a live debate over whether to move from the current ‘three reasonable offers’ allowed to statutorily homeless households to the ‘one suitable offer’ that is more usual in Great Britain, and on whether to shift

towards compulsory discharge of duty into the PRS. This has implications for throughput in temporary accommodation, as well as the overall numbers assisted as homeless:

“If we brought in [PRS] discharge of duty and we brought in one offer rather than three, there’s a whole lot of people wouldn’t come to our door” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

This was a matter of anxiety for some of those advising homeless applicants:

“My understanding... is that those proposals [on social housing allocations] will not be favourable for homeless applicants. One of the things I’ve heard bandied about is their view that homeless applicants should attract less priority than they currently do and that they should only receive one offer and they should then consider that to be their duty discharged. So I don’t get a sense that the proposals are going to be favourable in terms of increasing the opportunity or choice of people who are homeless to actually get settled accommodation.”
(Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

New consultations

Even as outcomes from earlier consultations are still awaited, two new consultations have been launched in recent months. These relate to the role and regulation of the PRS, and the ‘fitness’ standard for assessing the adequacy of dwelling conditions. While potentially quite wide ranging in its scope, the PRS consultation paper¹²¹ contains only a few specific reform proposals, principally in respect of some amendments to strengthen the current regulatory regime, which it broadly considers to be working quite well. It is not in favour of a landlord licensing regime, but is open to the option of extending the regulatory

framework to include lettings agents as well as landlords.

In one of its last acts, the Department for Social Development issued a discussion paper on the ‘fitness standard’ in March.¹²² Two options for reform are set out. One would be to enhance the fitness standard, with new or tougher requirements in respect of thermal comfort, fire safety and carbon monoxide detection, electrical safety, security and the prevention of accidental falls. The other would be to adopt the ‘Housing health and safety rating system’ (HHSRS) that now forms part of the decent homes standard in England. While both options have their merits they also carry substantial cost implications if private sector housing was to be improved to meet these higher standards. The estimate for the required private sector investment to meet the enhanced fitness standard is over £50 million, while the estimate to meet the HHSRS is over £115 million. In this context the consultation paper outlines the option of moving from a grant based system of support for private sector improvements, to a system that provides a mixture of grants and loans.

Rent policy

For the current year the Executive has announced a freeze on NIHE rents, and has recommended that housing associations should also apply a rent freeze. These decisions were made in response to a suggestion by HM Treasury that they expected to see savings in Housing Benefit expenditure equivalent to the savings in England that will result from the decision there to reduce social sector rents by 1% a year in cash terms for four years.

It remains to be seen how HM Treasury responds to these decisions given that they fall short of their expectations. However, given that council rents in England have

¹¹⁷ See <http://www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/Projects/Start-Year/2012/Fundamental-review-housing-allocations-policy-Northern-Ireland>; Agenda NI (2013) ‘The state of social housing’, *Agenda NI*, 3rd May: <http://www.agendani.com/the-state-of-social-housing>

¹¹⁸ Gray, P., Keenan, M., McAnulty, U., Clarke, A., Monk, S. & Tang, C. (2013) *Research to Inform Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations Policy. Final Report: Conclusions and Recommendations*. <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/fundamental-review-of-allocations-policy.pdf>

¹¹⁹ Northern Ireland Executive (2013) ‘Mccausland Starts Debate on Future of Social Housing Allocation’, *Northern Ireland Executive News Release*, 10th December: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/media-centre/news-departments/news-dsd/news-dsd-101213-mccausland-starts-debate.htm>

¹²⁰ Monaghan, J. (2015) ‘Over 1,000 tenants awarded intimidation points in three’, *The Irish News*, 29th December: [yearshttp://www.irishnews.com/news/2015/12/29/news/more-than-1-000-tenants-awarded-intimidation-points-in-three-years-365677/](http://www.irishnews.com/news/2015/12/29/news/more-than-1-000-tenants-awarded-intimidation-points-in-three-years-365677/)

¹²¹ DSD (2015) *Review of the Role and Regulation of the Private Rented Sector*. Belfast: DSD.

¹²² DSD (2016) *Review of the Statutory Minimum Housing Fitness Standard for all Tenures of Dwelling. Discussion Paper*. Belfast: DSD.

increased more rapidly than NIHE rents over the last twenty-five years the HM Treasury rationale for its expectations does seem rather weak. There is a similar weakness in the HM Treasury approach to the Scottish and Welsh Governments on this issue.¹²³

A more complex issue for social rents is the decision by the UK government to apply Local Housing Allowance rates to social sector rents in England, Scotland and Wales with effect from April 2018, with the expectation that Northern Ireland will follow suit. This is discussed in the following section as one of the many welfare reforms where Northern Ireland must decide whether or not to follow the UK government.

Draft Programme for Government Framework

There has also been consultation on the draft 'Programme for Government Framework', for the period from 2016 to 2021.¹²⁴ However, of the 42 indicators set out in the programme only relates directly to housing and that is set out in very broad terms as to 'improve the supply of suitable housing', to be measured by the numbers of households in housing stress.

This has been criticised by the voluntary sector, primarily on the grounds that it does not adequately deal with the issues of housing quality or affordability (see also Chapter 4).¹²⁵

3.4 Welfare reforms

In formal terms, Northern Ireland has the devolved responsibility for the design and operation of welfare policies, and is not automatically required to follow the policies

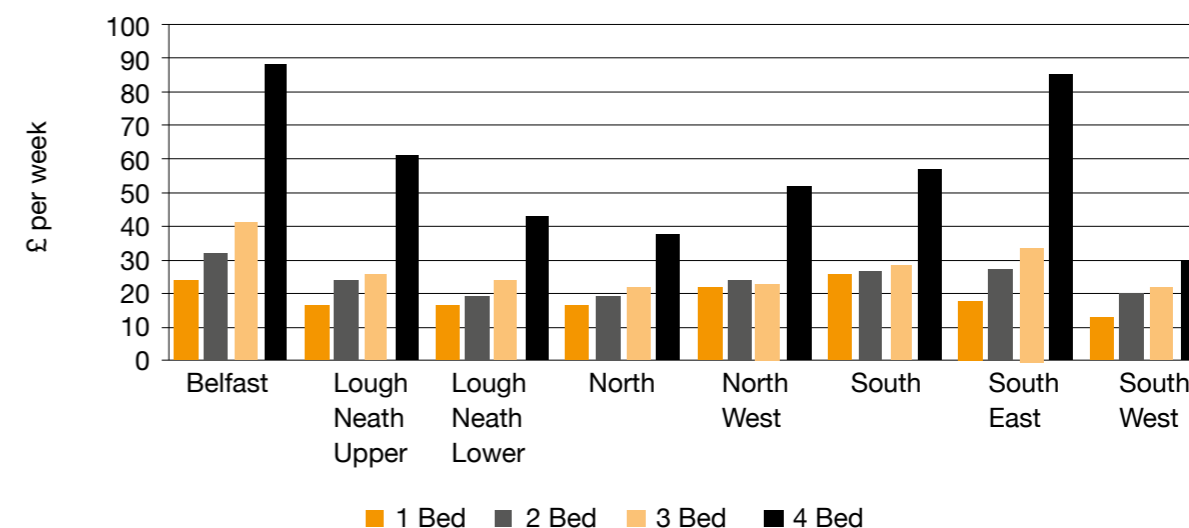
and reforms introduced by the Westminster government for the rest of Great Britain. However under the terms of a 'concordat', in most respects it was until recently the practice for the Northern Ireland government to more or less automatically follow the policies operated elsewhere in the UK.¹²⁶

There have been, however, occasional exceptions, and notably Housing Benefit payments for the PRS are still being paid directly to private landlords, rather than being more typically paid to tenants, as is now the case in the rest of the UK.

It follows from this that the Northern Ireland government is not automatically obliged to introduce the swathe of welfare reforms now being introduced across Great Britain. If, however, it wishes to diverge from those policies then it needs to meet any consequential costs, as the financial support automatically provided by the Westminster government for welfare policies is based on the costs of the policies as they are applied in Great Britain.¹²⁷

In this context, Northern Ireland has introduced, or is due to introduce, most of the welfare reforms now underway in Great Britain, but with significant exceptions, including the 'Bedroom Tax' – officially known as the 'Spare Room Subsidy Limits' – and the Benefit Cap. The hiatus between the UK and Northern Ireland governments over this and other welfare reform issues has now, at least for the next few years, been resolved and the outcome is discussed below. But initially we consider the impact of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) reforms which were introduced from 2011 onwards on the same basis as is the rest of the UK.

Figure 3.2 Difference between LHA rates and average rents for similar areas



Sources: LHA rates are for 2016/17. Private rents are for local authority areas in the second half of 2015

Local Housing Allowances

Reforms to the LHA regime in Northern Ireland were introduced on the same basis, and timetable, as for the rest of the UK. From April 2011, maximum LHA rates have been based on an assessment of 30th percentile level rents in each market rental area, rather than the median level that previously applied. From the same date, the four-bedroom rate became the maximum available, with the abolition of higher rates for larger dwellings.

From January 2012, the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) applied for young single people was extended to apply to those aged from 25 to 34, and more generally the lower LHA rates introduced in April 2011 began to be applied to existing claimants. After April 2013, all LHA rates were uprated only in line with inflation (as measured by the Consumer Price Index),

where that is below the level of 30th percentile rents in each area.¹²⁸ In the following two years, the LHA rates were only uprated by 1 per cent, and from this year they are to be frozen for four years. In a few cases this year, they have actually been reduced because the 30th percentile private rents have fallen below the previous years LHA rate.¹²⁹ However, in overall terms the freezing of LHA rates has seen them slip further below average private rents, with the Northern Ireland Private Rental Index showing an increase of just over 5 per cent between the beginning of 2013 and the end of 2015.¹³⁰

Figure 3.2 shows the difference between the current LHA rates and private rents for the second half of 2015. A little caution is needed in drawing conclusions from the figure as the private rent figures are for the local authority areas that most closely correspond with

¹²³ p.20 in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016 Briefing Paper*. Coventry: CIH.

¹²⁴ Northern Ireland Executive (2016) *Draft Programme for Government Framework, 2016-21*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive.

¹²⁵ Housing Rights NI (2016) *Response to the Consultation on a Draft Programme for Government Framework*. Housing Rights NI.

¹²⁶ DWP & DSD (2002) *Concordat between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Social Development Northern Ireland*. London: DWP.

¹²⁷ HM Treasury (2007) *Funding the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly: Statement of Funding Policy*. London: HM Treasury.

¹²⁸ DSD (2012) *Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland Newsletter Issue No 3*. Belfast: DSD.

¹²⁹ See http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/benefits/lha/current_lha_rates/calculate_2014_rates.htm

¹³⁰ NIHE, propertynews.com & Ulster University (2016) *Performance of the Private Rental Market in Northern Ireland*. http://www.nihe.gov.uk/performance_of_the_northern_ireland_private_rental_market_jan-june_2013_published_january_2014.pdf

the 'broad rental market areas' for which the LHA rates are set, but they are *not* for identical areas. It should also be noted that the private rent figures for four bedroom dwellings are actually for '4+' bedroom dwellings. Despite those caveats, the figure shows a marked gap between LHA rates and average rents, that are considerably larger than the difference between the median and 30th percentile based LHA rates introduced in April 2012.¹³¹

The one way in which the Northern Ireland government has diverged from the rest of the UK in respect of the LHA regime is that it continues to support direct payments to landlords as a matter of choice, rather than restricting them to very specific and limited circumstances.

While we were able to refer to some initial assessments of the potential impact of the LHA reforms in our 2013 report, there have not been any subsequent analyses, or administrative data series on private tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit, to provide an updated assessment of the impact of the LHA reforms in practice. We do know from data routinely published in England that there has been a particular issue restricting supply for younger single people that are only eligible for the SAR,¹³² which is considerably below the level of the one bedroom LHA rate (barely half the level in Belfast). Beyond that we can only refer to the views expressed by those surveyed for this report.

Most of those we interviewed felt that the effects of the LHA caps and SAR had been fairly limited to date, because of the relatively low private sector rent levels in Northern Ireland. Others, however, argued that there had been impacts on affordability that were not well publicised because the group most affected (younger people)

were not looked upon sympathetically by politicians and others:

"many of the changes have already come in in the private rented sector in relation to the caps and the shared room rents and I think people forget about that. We think we've not had any welfare reform. Actually we've had a huge amount of it. People are fixated on the Social Sector Size Criteria, and yes it's important and it's got lots of profile. It's got lots of profile because it matters to the housing providers, but people forget that actually we've had swingeing changes in the private rented sector and that's where most of the increase in [un]affordability is." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

There was also concern that these impacts were going to intensify over time, as the gap between average rents and LHA rates widened:

"it's such a different housing situation here... affordability is not such a problem on the whole... [but] in the private rented sector... we certainly [know] from bits and pieces of research and anecdotally that there are families, lone parent families, other people paying well over what the Housing Benefit allows them to pay. People are concerned that that problem will get worse if there is no regulation on [private] landlords which is unlikely." (Independent commentator, 2016)

The welfare reform mitigation deal

While there are concerns about other housing related welfare reform measures that have now begun to apply, either in full or on a phased basis, across Great Britain, they have not yet been introduced in Northern Ireland. After prolonged negotiations with the UK government a deal was struck under which

the Benefit Cap, the 'Bedroom Tax' (officially known as the Spare Room Subsidy) and other welfare reforms will be introduced in Northern Ireland, but with HM Treasury providing a substantial additional budget to enable the Northern Ireland government to fully mitigate the 'Bedroom Tax', and to substantially mitigate or modify at least some of the other welfare reforms.¹³³

The mitigation budget was set at £135 million in 2016/17, and at £150 million a year for the following three years. Following that deal, the NI Executive set up a working group under the leadership of Professor Eileen Evason to bring forward welfare mitigation proposals within that budget provision. The working group reported early in 2016 and recommended that, in addition to the full mitigation of the 'Bedroom Tax', there should also be a full mitigation of the Benefit Cap over the four years of the deal. It also made a number of other recommendations relating to Universal Credits, Personal Independence Payments, benefits sanctions and other welfare reforms.¹³⁴ The plans for each of these welfare reforms in the light of the mitigation provisions are discussed in turn below.

In broad terms, there appeared to be a 'holding of breath' amongst our key informants with regard to welfare reform and the mitigation package, in part because there seemed to be only limited understanding of the details:

"I'm very concerned that we [homelessness sector]...are not going to be abreast with the implementation programme... So this is a big, big concern for us because... this is like a juggernaut. The homelessness sector feel very much out of the loop... There is this disconnect

and I think that's of great concern." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

There was also acute concern about what would happen from 2020 onwards:

"In many ways we've been quite protected. My real concern is these mitigation funds and dispensation that was secured by our politicians. It's time limited and whilst I think it will help in the transition, the big question... 'What happens when that ends?'... As well as that, I'm not sure about the transition of it either. Will it run for X number of years and then stop? Or will there be money front loaded? I don't know." (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Another concern articulated was that, given the heavy emphasis on mitigation of the 'Bedroom Tax' and Benefit Cap, that young people would be less well protected:

"In [Evason's] mitigation paper there's really not much for young people. Particularly for those vulnerable groups of young people that could be vulnerable to homelessness." (Independent commentator, 2016)

Benefit Cap and 'Bedroom Tax'

The overall Benefit Cap was introduced in May 2016. Initially the cap is based on a maximum £500 per week for out of work working age households, other than for single people where the limit is £350 per week. It was estimated to have applied to some 570 claimants at the point of introduction.

Later in the year (October/November), it is set to be reduced to £385 and £258 per week respectively, mirroring the reductions in the level of the Benefit Cap also planned

¹³¹ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2014) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2013*. London: Crisis/JRF.
¹³² Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹³³ Northern Ireland Executive (2015) *A Fresh Start: the Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive.
¹³⁴ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

to be introduced in the rest of the UK. It is anticipated that some 2,440 households will be caught by the Benefit Cap when the lower levels are introduced.¹³⁵

However, the Benefit Cap will have no cash impact on claimants, as it is being wholly offset by supplementary payments funded from the mitigation budget. The supplementary payments are automatic and do not require a separate application by claimants. The real impact of the reductions in the level of the Benefit Caps is therefore to increase the call on the mitigations budget to cover the costs of the much larger number of supplementary payments.

The 'Bedroom Tax', which reduces Housing Benefit entitlement for working age households in the social rented sector that are deemed to be under-occupying against the specified 'size criteria' will be introduced in January 2017. This measure would have a much greater impact in Northern Ireland, impacting on an estimated 19,500 tenants in the NIHE stock, and some 7,000 in the housing association sector. As with the Benefit Cap the 'Bedroom Tax' deductions will be fully mitigated until March 2020, with mitigation payments being made to the landlord. By then it is estimated that those payments will account for some £91 million to be met out of the mitigation budget.

While there may be possible issues with the administration of the mitigation measures, clearly the primary concern is what will happen in 2020 when the mitigation budget provisions come to an end. As was also the case in the North of England,¹³⁶ the 'Bedroom Tax' was viewed as a particular problem in Northern Ireland because of the nature of the housing stock:

"There isn't really any alternative because there are very few small houses or flats... our stock is mostly family housing stock and that's been the pattern of how the Executive builds since the 1970s."
(Independent commentator, 2016)

"If you look at the mismatch of house size and household size and the availability of the smaller one bedroom, two bedroom stock there really is not the capacity and there is some acceptance that, even if you started building one bedrooms, it would take a number of years to get to that point. Not that I think that's realistically going to happen, but I think they've just kicked it down the road for another four years... any one bed social housing that was ever built was incredibly unpopular and ended up being difficult to let and void. So why would the housing authorities build more? Nobody built one bed properties."
(Voluntary sector key informant, 2016)

Universal Credit

The Universal Credit (UC) regime now being rolled out in Great Britain is planned to be introduced in Northern Ireland from September 2017 for new claimants, and from July 2018 for existing claimants. The UC regime will replace Working Tax Credits, Child Tax Credits, Housing Benefit, Income Support, and the income-related Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, with the Universal Credit. It will not however cover the rates element of the current Housing Benefit scheme in Northern Ireland, or the rate relief for home owners, in the same way that it does not apply to Council Tax Benefit (or its equivalent) in Great Britain.

These changes were advocated not only as simplifications, but also to improve work incentives and make the potential gains to households entering low-paid work more

transparent. Central to this is that, with a single unified benefit structure, there will be a single 'taper rate' through which help is withdrawn as earned incomes rise.

However, this is a complex and demanding administrative change, and as a result there has been significant slippage in the initial timetable for UC in Great Britain, and a number of critical reports on the management of the schemes introduction, including a highly critical report on the IT costs and management of this major project by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.¹³⁷

The administrative arrangements for UC in Northern Ireland will, however, differ in two important respects compared to the scheme being rolled out in England and Wales.¹³⁸ UC payments in Northern Ireland will be fortnightly rather than monthly, and the default arrangement is that the housing costs element within UC will be paid direct to the landlord. These alternative arrangements remove the landlord concerns about rent arrears, and claimant concerns about managing their low incomes over more extended periods, that are seen to be very problematic in England and Wales. However other concerns about the administration of the UC scheme remain, including the accessibility of the wholly online administrative regime for claimants that are not necessarily IT literate, and do not always have ready access to IT facilities.¹³⁹

There are also more concerns about the recent UK government welfare cuts that have significantly weakened the potential work incentives of the UC regime. UC 'work

allowances' were reduced in April 2016, and household allowances will be limited to support for two children for claims after April 2017, with the 'family element' also removed from tax credits and UC allowances for all new families after that date.¹⁴⁰ These cuts were strongly criticized by the Evason Working Group:

*"This development in policy does two things. First, it undermines the original justification for universal credit: making work pay. Secondly the distinction conventionally made between benefits for those not in work and tax credits for those who are is becoming increasingly irrelevant. As universal credit rolls out in Northern Ireland support for those on low wages will steadily decline and the work of the Institute for Fiscal Studies demonstrates that the planned increases in the minimum wage will be of very limited assistance in compensating for those losses."*¹⁴¹

In that context, the Evason Working Group recommended that in Northern Ireland the UC scheme should include additional 'cost of working allowances', funded at a cost of £105 million from the mitigation budget. Details of these allowances are not yet available, but as with the other mitigation measures discussed above, a major concern is what happens in 2020 when the mitigation arrangements expire.

Personal Independence Payments

Some of the welfare reform measures not specifically related to housing costs were also a particular cause for concern in Northern Ireland. In particular the shift from

¹³⁵ Department of Communities (2016) *Welfare Changes & Housing, Presentation The Clayton Hotel June 2016*. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/welfare-changes-presentation-to-housing-sector-june-2016.pptx>

¹³⁶ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹³⁷ House of Commons (2013) *Universal Credit: early progress, HC 619*, Committee of Public Accounts. London: The Stationery Office.

¹³⁸ Under the revised devolution settlement for the Scottish Government it is anticipated that Scotland will have similar UC administrative arrangements to those now planned for Northern Ireland.

¹³⁹ Tarr, A. & Finn, D. (2012) *Implementing Universal Credit: Will the reforms improve the service for users?* York: JRF.

¹⁴⁰ For an analysis of the impact of the UK government cuts to the UC regime see 'A decade of diminishing welfare' in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

¹⁴¹ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

Disability Living Allowances (DLA) to the new 'Personal Independence Payments' (PIP) for working age claimants, which is being introduced from June 2016. An earlier impact assessment showed how important this reform is in Northern Ireland, where just over one in ten of the population are in receipt of DLA; more than twice the average level across Great Britain. Several of our key informants commented that this high rate of DLA was, at least in part, a legacy of the Troubles, reflecting enduring impacts on the physical and mental health of those directly affected. It was also argued to be a product of: "a very strong welfare rights movement that has promoted benefit take-up really successfully" (Independent commentator, 2016).

Current working age DLA claimants will face new assessments, and a trial exercise led to an estimate that around 25 per cent of existing claimants will not qualify for the new benefit. Based on the numbers of working age DLA claimants at November 2012, this suggested that almost 30,000 would cease to receive any assistance based on their medical condition. A further 33 per cent were estimated to see a reduction in their award, with 19% unchanged, and 23 per cent to receive an enhanced award.¹⁴²

The Evason Working Group considered a number of concerns relating to the loss of entitlements resulting from the introduction of the PIP regime, and suggested a number of transitional measures to mitigate the impact of losses on claimants¹⁴³. The Northern Ireland Executive has now introduced a number of mitigation measures for existing

claimants, including a 75 per cent payment in respect of any loss of more than £10 a week where the claimant only qualifies for a lower rate of PIP.¹⁴⁴

This may reflect the acute political sensitivities around this particular aspect of welfare reform, as articulated by a couple of our key informants:

"I think some people were quite surprised in the mitigation document to see reference to victims of the conflict [in PIP/ DLA discussion] because that's been such a hugely contentious thing here, the whole "victims" thing has been hugely contentious. But still there has been a strong argument that you cannot apply this welfare reform to people in the same way who've had serious bomb injuries." (Independent commentator, 2016)

Benefit sanctions

Throughout the Homelessness Monitor series, concerns have been growing about the disproportionate impact of the intensified benefit sanction regime on vulnerable homeless people,¹⁴⁵ notwithstanding discretionary 'easement' powers introduced in 2014 to temporarily exempt claimants sleeping rough or in supported accommodation.¹⁴⁶ A 2015 study¹⁴⁷ of over 1,000 users of homelessness services across England and Scotland found that, of those subject to benefit conditionality, 39 per cent had been sanctioned in the previous year, compared with 18 per cent of all Jobseekers' Allowance claimants in 2013/14. The higher risk of being sanctioned faced by homeless service users was found

to reflect "systemic and personal barriers to compliance"¹⁴⁸ (communication issues, support needs, lack of internet access or limited IT skills), rather than wilful non-compliance. One-fifth of the respondents who had been sanctioned reported that they had become homeless as a result, with 16 per cent reporting having slept rough as a consequence of being sanctioned.

The intensified sanctioning regime in Great Britain¹⁴⁹ has not yet impacted in Northern Ireland. Reflective of this, data requested through a Freedom of Information request indicates that the monthly sanctions rate in Northern Ireland was around 1 per cent in 2014/15, down from 1.5 per cent the previous year, and a fifth of the comparable rate in GB for the same period (4.7% in 2014/15).¹⁵⁰ However, reforms in this area are set to be introduced to Northern Ireland in 2017, immediately following the planned introduction of the Universal Credits regime,¹⁵¹ albeit with a number of departures from the GB arrangements. Thus the maximum sanction duration will be 18 months (half the 3 year maximum applicable in GB) and the legislation mandates monitoring of the operation of sanctions.¹⁵² The Evason report recommends additional safeguards for vulnerable people, including an independent helpline to assist claimants appeal sanctions or access hardship payments, and that decision makers should advise claimants of this helpline when applying a sanction.

By and large, sanctions did not appear to be a major concern of the key informants

we spoke to this year. Interviewees who commented on this aspect of Evason's work appeared reassured that those charged with imposing sanctions "are going to be much more comprehensive [than in GB] in regard to the assessment that they make of individuals. That they will take circumstances into consideration in regard to people who are in temporary accommodation" (Voluntary sector key informant, 2016). It will be important to monitor whether this is indeed the case as the new sanctioning regime beds in. There was some specific concern expressed, though, about the potential impact of a tightened sanctions regime on lone parents in Northern Ireland, in the context of relatively poor availability of childcare provision:

"there's beginning to be a lot more noise about childcare, a lot more lobbying. But for lone parents who will be faced with much tighter conditionality [under UC], it is a massive problem." (Independent commentator, 2016)

Social Fund

A new Discretionary Support Scheme (DSS) will replace the existing Social Fund in Northern Ireland from November 2016, following Westminster's devolution of responsibility for emergency welfare provision to local councils in England and the devolved nations. Like Wales¹⁵³ and Scotland,¹⁵⁴ but unlike in England (where emergency welfare provision has been fully localised and councils are not obliged to run Local Welfare Assistance scheme)¹⁵⁵ Northern Ireland has elected to maintain a national scheme, with the Northern Ireland Executive commenting

¹⁴² Analytical Services Unit, DSD (2013) *Northern Ireland Personal Independence Payment Information Booklet*. Belfast: DSD.

¹⁴³ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ Nidirect. (2016) *Personal Independence Payment*. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/personal-independence-payment>

¹⁴⁵ See <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

¹⁴⁶ Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L. & Reeve, K. (2015) *Homeless People's Experiences of Welfare Conditionality and Benefit Sanctions*. London: Crisis; Johnsen, S., Watts, B. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) *First Wave Findings: Homelessness. Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change*. <http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/WelCond-findings-homelessness-May16.pdf>

¹⁴⁷ Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L. & Reeve, K. (2015) *Homeless People's Experiences of Welfare Conditionality and Benefit Sanctions*. London: Crisis.

¹⁴⁸ p.15 in *ibid*.

¹⁴⁹ See Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2015) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2015*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹⁵⁰ Tinson, A. (2016) 'Benefit sanctions in Northern Ireland are low and should stay low', *New Policy Institute*, 8th April: <http://npi.org.uk/blog/social-security-and-welfare-reform/benefit-sanctions-northern-ireland-are-low-and-should-stay-low/#sthash.VpZDRvhE.dpuf><http://npi.org.uk/blog/social-security-and-welfare-reform/benefit-sanctions-northern-ireland-are-low-and-should-stay-low/>. For a full analysis of sanctions trends in Great Britain see Webster, D. (2016) *Briefing: The DWP's JSA/ESA Sanctions Statistics Release*, 18 May 2016.

¹⁵¹ See <http://www.lawcentreni.org/welfare-reform.html>

¹⁵² Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

¹⁵³ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2015) *The Homelessness Monitor: Wales 2015*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2015) *The Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2015*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹⁵⁵ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

“we want to maintain something that is sustainable, so that people will always have access to that emergency support”.¹⁵⁶

£16 million per year has been allocated from the Northern Ireland block grant to the DSS to provide interest-free loans and/or non-repayable grants, depending on capacity of the applicant to pay a loan back in reasonable time (if repayment would take over 52 weeks, or 78 weeks in exceptional circumstances, applicants may be eligible for a non-repayable grant).¹⁵⁷ Under current plans, all assistance will be in cash rather than in kind, though this may be revisited when the scheme is up and running. The new DSS will be extended to those in low paid work, rather than be limited to benefit claimants as is the case under the current Social Fund. The Evason working group have called for the new fund to make explicit provision for those facing financial difficulty as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit.¹⁵⁸

Further Housing Benefit reforms

Two further Housing Benefit reforms for Great Britain were announced in the 2015 Summer Budget and Autumn Statement. The first is that young childless people out of work (aged 18-21) will cease to be eligible for housing support in UC new claims from April 2017. The second is that from April 2018 the LHA rates will apply to limit Housing Benefit payments to new tenants (after April 2016). While there are particular concerns about the impact of those provisions on supported housing schemes, the scope of the provisions in relation to such schemes are themselves under review.¹⁵⁹

At this stage, however, it is not entirely clear

whether or when these measures will be introduced in Northern Ireland, or if they will be subject to any variation or mitigation provisions. They are, nonetheless, of very considerable concern in terms of their potential impact on young single people, and agencies providing support to that group. There are also wider implications in terms of their possible impact on future social rent policies in Northern Ireland.

The concerns about these possible reforms, and the uncertainty about how they might apply in Northern Ireland, were reflected in comments from our informants. We were told that:

“As I understand it, the plan is for the LHA cap to be [applied] within the supported housing sector... That’s been deferred for a year to await the outcome of the review that DWP and their colleagues in the local government department in GB are looking at. It’s hard to know what that might conclude. I suppose from the sector’s prospective, they would hope that it would conclude that the LHA cap won’t extend to the supportive housing sector... anecdotally... rent levels are sufficient that it [may not] have that great an impact. To be honest, I don’t think there’s been any real numbers crunched out.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

3.5 Key points

- While the content of the Homelessness Strategy for Northern 2012-2017 commanded general consensus, there was a great deal of disappointment amongst our key informants with regard to implementation, particularly the

perceived failure to achieve effective inter-departmental working to address the needs of homeless people with more complex needs. The Department of Health in particular came in for criticism over the lack of priority it was argued to give to homelessness.

- A new five year Homelessness Strategy is being prepared for Northern Ireland, and is likely to place a strong emphasis on the Housing Solutions model of homelessness prevention currently being rolled out across Northern Ireland, and on expanding Housing First-style provision for those with complex needs. Both developments have been warmly welcomed by many key stakeholders.
- The SP budget has been protected but frozen in Northern Ireland for a number of years, and there has been intense lobbying to have it increased. A recent SP review recommended moving away from accommodation-based models to more floating support provision, which seemed a less controversial proposition than when we conducted fieldwork in 2013. A new strategic commissioning approach will be piloted in an attempt to rationalise SP-funded provision and to achieve better value for money.
- There has been considerable controversy over rough sleeping, begging and street drinking in Belfast in recent months, with significant media attention ensuing after five people died on the streets in a matter of months. While steps have been taken to address perceived shortcomings in emergency homelessness provision, many stakeholders feel that the key service gaps lie in fact in the health domain, particularly with regard to drug and alcohol treatment facilities.
- There are growing concerns about the impacts of so-called ‘legal highs’ (New Psychoactive Substances) on young people and others living in homelessness accommodation in Northern Ireland, and the sector’s limited capacity to respond.
- Housing policy in Northern Ireland has now been the subject of a wide ranging review for some years, but progress in arriving at firm policies and their implementation is very slow.
- One central issue involves the future ownership and management of the NIHE housing stock. Decisions on that issue have now been further complicated by the potential reclassification of housing associations in Northern Ireland as public sector bodies. Meanwhile, there is a severe shortfall in the funds available to deal with major repairs and improvements to the NIHE stock.
- There has been a similar lack of progress with the review of social housing allocations, acknowledged to be an “extremely sensitive” issue in Northern Ireland because of its interlinkage with residential segregation along religious lines. The official consultation has long since been concluded, but no policy announcement has yet been made. It nonetheless seems likely that the review will ultimately lead to at least some downgrading in the priority given to statutory homelessness in allocations.
- The Northern Ireland Executive has introduced, or is due to introduce, most of the welfare reforms now underway in Great Britain, but with some notable exceptions or modifications. Following a prolonged impasse, an agreement was reached with the UK government to provide a funding package to enable Northern

¹⁵⁶ p.13 in Northern Ireland Assembly (2016) *Committee for Communities. Welfare Supplementary Payments: Departmental Officials*. <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-18252.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ Northern Ireland Assembly (2016) *Committee for Communities. Welfare Supplementary Payments: Departmental Officials*. <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-18252.pdf>

¹⁵⁸ Evason, E. (2016) *Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report January 2016*. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/welfare-reform-mitigations-working-group-report.pdf>

¹⁵⁹ For an analysis of the impact of the UK government cuts to the UC regime see ‘A decade of diminishing welfare’ in Wilcox, S., Perry, J., Stephens, M. & Williams, P. (2016) *UK Housing Review 2016*. Coventry: CIH.

Ireland to mitigate those welfare reforms, and implement them on a rather different timescale. Both the Benefit Cap and the 'Bedroom Tax' will be fully mitigated until 2020. There are, however, inevitable concerns about the position when the mitigation budget expires in 2020.

- Reforms to the LHA regime in Northern Ireland were introduced on the same basis as for the rest of the UK, but there is little hard evidence on its impact thus far. Lower rents means that the effects of the LHA restrictions are unlikely to have been as substantial as in England, but a growing gap between LHA rates and average rents may compound these impacts over time. Some key informants feel that the impact of the SAR on younger people under 35 has already been greater than is generally recognised.
- The Universal Credit regime is planned to be introduced in Northern Ireland on a phased basis from September 2017. While there are concerns about the operation of the scheme, these have been eased by some important differences that will apply to the operation of the scheme in Northern Ireland. In particular the arrangements for fortnightly payments, direct payments of the housing costs element to landlords, and the provision of 'cost of working allowances' all remove concerns that apply to the scheme as it operates in Great Britain.
- The shift from DLA to the new PIP for working age claimants, from June 2016, raises particular concerns in Northern Ireland, where just over one in ten of the population are in receipt of DLA; more than twice the average level across Great Britain. The impact will, however, be limited to a degree for existing claimants as a result of mitigation measures applied by the Northern Ireland Executive.

4. Homelessness incidence and trends

4.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the nature, scale and trajectory of homelessness in Northern Ireland, drawing mainly on statutory homelessness statistics, as published by the NIHE, and on the UK-wide Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Survey, UKHLS). In addition, in the first substantive part of the chapter, recently collected information on rough sleeping is reviewed.

Our statistical analysis in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 is restricted by the relative paucity of officially published data on homelessness in Northern Ireland. Unlike in England, for example, there is no regular rough sleeping data published in Northern Ireland. Similarly, in contrast to England and, especially, Scotland, Northern Ireland's statutory homelessness statistics are limited in their extent. For example, there is no published breakdown of how rehousing duty is discharged in relation to 'Full Duty' cases. Similarly, there are as yet no statistics on homelessness prevention activity, though we understand that this may change in the future (see Chapter 3).

4.2 Rough sleeping

There is no routinely undertaken survey of rough sleeping across Northern Ireland. From its monitoring activity focused specifically on central Belfast, NIHE believes that rough sleeper numbers in that area have remained 'in single figures'. Recently, however, a growing incidence of rough sleeping in Belfast city centre has been perceived. Growing public disquiet has also arisen from a succession of five street deaths in the city (see Chapter 3). In early 2016 three

such deaths were reported within four weeks.¹⁶⁰

Already in 2015, rising concern on rough sleeping had prompted NIHE to commission a 'street needs audit' of Belfast city centre (see also Chapter 3). Undertaken over 12 weeks in late 2015, this aimed to quantify street drinking and rough sleeping. In planning this assignment, there was "*recognition of the distinction between actual homelessness, episodic rough sleeping and public intoxication*".¹⁶¹ Through nightly fieldwork (10pm-8am) over the period, this enumerated 361 individuals engaged in 'street activities' – i.e. drinking, begging or sleeping. However, actual rough sleeper numbers counted on any given night were much lower, ranging from zero to 19, and averaging six. The exercise also identified seven individuals classed as 'entrenched rough sleepers', as well as another 35 people engaged in 'street activities' more than once a week and therefore referred for case management support.¹⁶²

Beyond the above, however, there are no published data on rough sleeping in Northern Ireland from which homelessness trends over time might be tracked.

4.3 Incidence of statutory homelessness

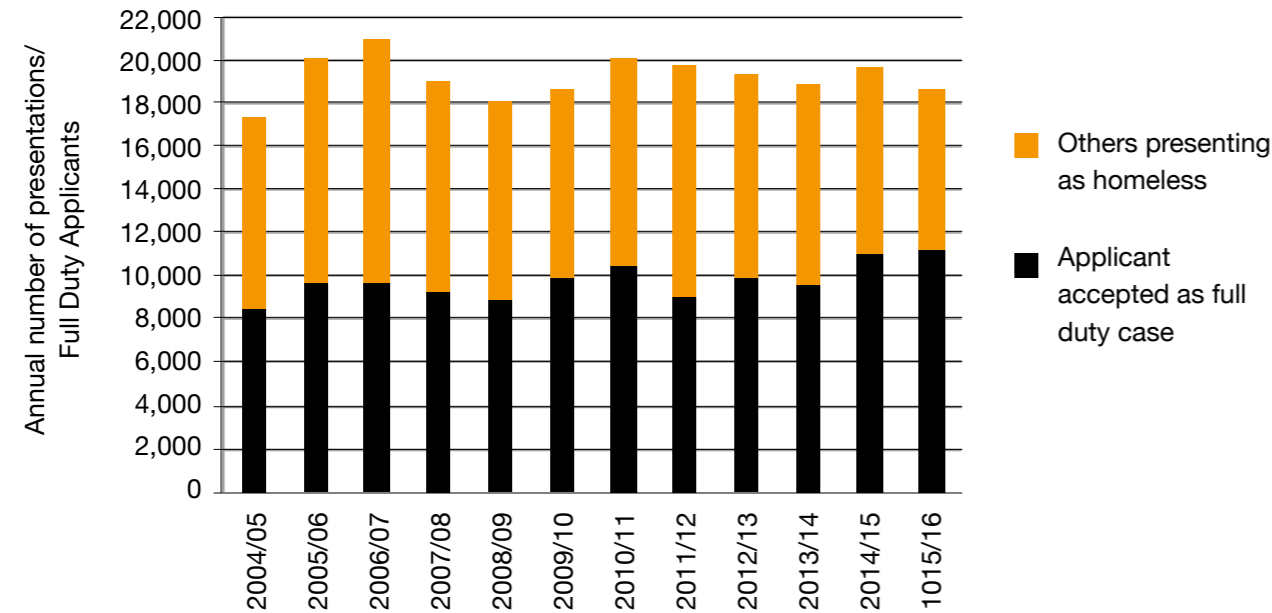
In 2015/16, some 18,600 households presented as homeless in Northern Ireland. Of these, well over half – some 11,200 – were judged as 'Full Duty Applicants (FDA)' (equivalent to 'acceptance as unintentionally homeless and in priority need in England). As shown in Figure 4.1, homelessness presentations have remained at fairly stable

¹⁶⁰ Archer, B. (2016) 'Latest death of homeless man in Belfast prompts emergency summit', *The Irish News*, 26th February: <http://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2016/02/26/news/latest-death-of-homeless-man-in-belfast-prompts-emergency-summit-431453/>

¹⁶¹ p.7 in NIHE (2016) *Belfast Street Needs Audit*. Belfast: NIHE.

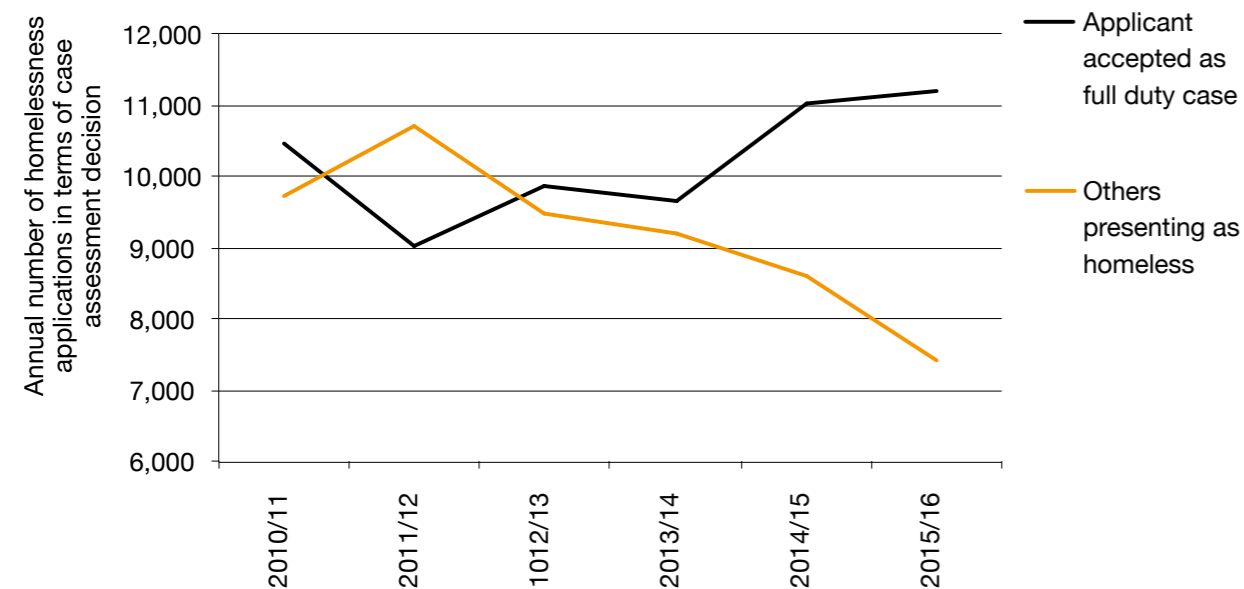
¹⁶² NIHE (2016) *Belfast Street Needs Audit*. Belfast: NIHE.

Figure 4.1 Northern Ireland statutory homelessness presentations 2004/05-2015/16



Source: Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014/15; Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016

Figure 4.2 Northern Ireland statutory homelessness applications 2010/11-2015/16: breakdown by case assessment outcome



Source: Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014/15; Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016. Note: Caution should be applied in comparing 2011/12 FDA statistics with those for other years – see text.

levels throughout the past decade. While peaking at over 20,000 in 2006/07, they have remained at above 18,000 in every subsequent year.

Over recent years, however, there has been something of an upward trend in the number of FDAs. The recorded 2015/16 number of applications fulfilling the statutory criteria as a FDA was over 2,000 (24%) higher than the published figure for 2011/12. However, the Northern Ireland Department for Communities cautions that administrative issues affecting 2011/12 data collection mean that the FDA figure for that year is not fully comparable with FDA numbers recorded for other years. For these purposes, therefore, it may be more meaningful to treat 2012/13 as our ‘base year’ for the purpose of assessing recent trends. Over the subsequent three years FDA numbers rose by 13 per cent.

Especially given the relatively consistent year on year trend, it would seem that the growing FDA cohort indicates rising underlying homelessness demand driven by housing market and/or socio-economic factors, perhaps reflecting some of the affordability-related concerns discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Meanwhile, as also shown in Figure 4.1, other officially recorded applications (those not resulting in a FDA decision) have fallen back sharply in recent times. On the face of it, this might reflect a reduction in the underlying incidence of ‘non-statutory homelessness’. Perhaps a more likely explanation is that administrative practices have changed such that some of those seeking assistance with housing problems – and who might, in earlier times, have been recorded as a ‘presentation’ – are now being assisted informally and therefore un-counted within these statistics. This latter phenomenon has been an important factor influencing the

recorded statutory homelessness statistics for England over the past few years, and was directly associated with the implementation of the Housing Options model of homelessness prevention that is only now being introduced in Northern Ireland under the terminology of Housing Solutions (see Chapter 3). However, one of our key informants suggested that, though Housing Solutions was still only at pilot stage in Northern Ireland, it might already be affecting these statutory trends:

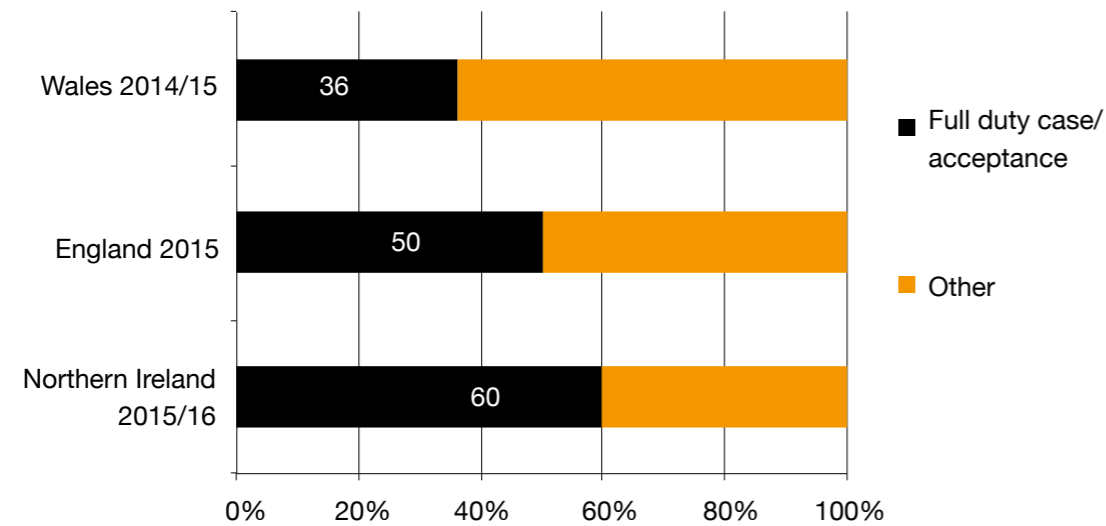
“If you’re [doing] Housing Options, even though it’s only operating on a quarter of it, if it peels off... your straightforward cases that you can prevent are – you’re still going to be left with your hard-core, complex individuals who are likely to meet the thresholds for FDA. ...anecdotally, what you hear from front line staff [is] the increasingly complex nature of people coming through our doors, and therefore the likelihood, particularly in singles, to hit priority need.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2015)

A corollary of the above trends is that, over the past few years Northern Ireland’s statutory homelessness ‘acceptance rate’ (ratio of FDAs to all applications) has risen significantly – from 46% to 60% between 2011/12 and 2015/16 (or from 51% in 2012/13). As shown in Figure 4.3, Northern Ireland’s 2015/16 ‘acceptance rate’ is substantially higher than approximately comparable figures for England and for Wales (albeit that the Welsh figure is likely to have been affected by local authorities’ ‘gearing up’ for a major change in the statutory homelessness arrangements in Wales ushered in by the Housing (Wales) Act 2014).¹⁶³

Proportionate to total population, as shown in Figure 4.4, statutory homeless numbers in Northern Ireland are much higher than in England and Wales and somewhat higher than in Scotland. In part, this reflects the

163 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2015) *The Homelessness Monitor: Wales 2015*. London: Crisis/JRF.

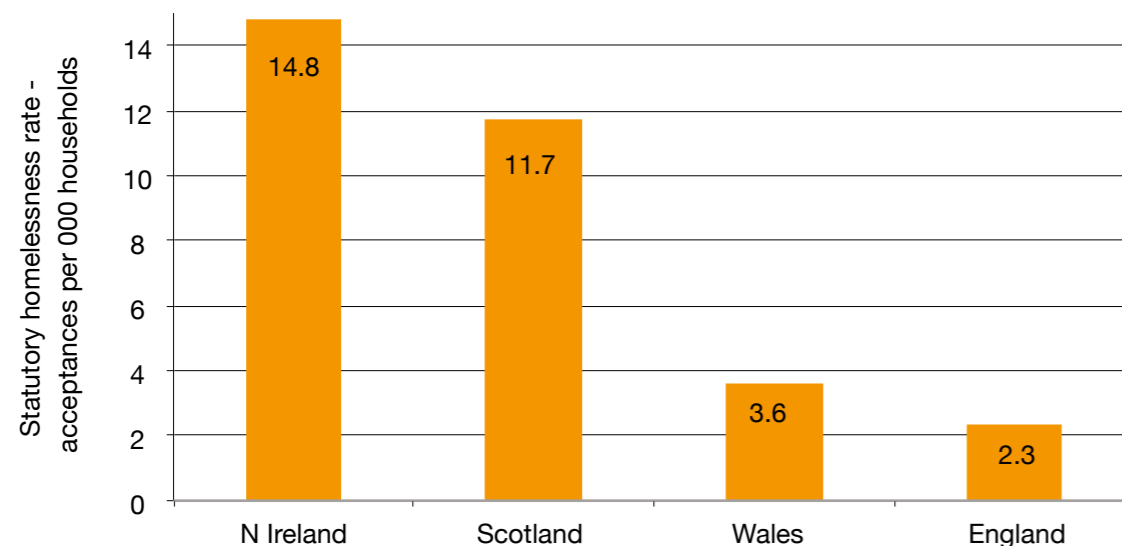
Figure 4.3 Breakdown of homelessness presentation/assessment decisions*



Percentage of all recorded statutory homelessness applications/decisions

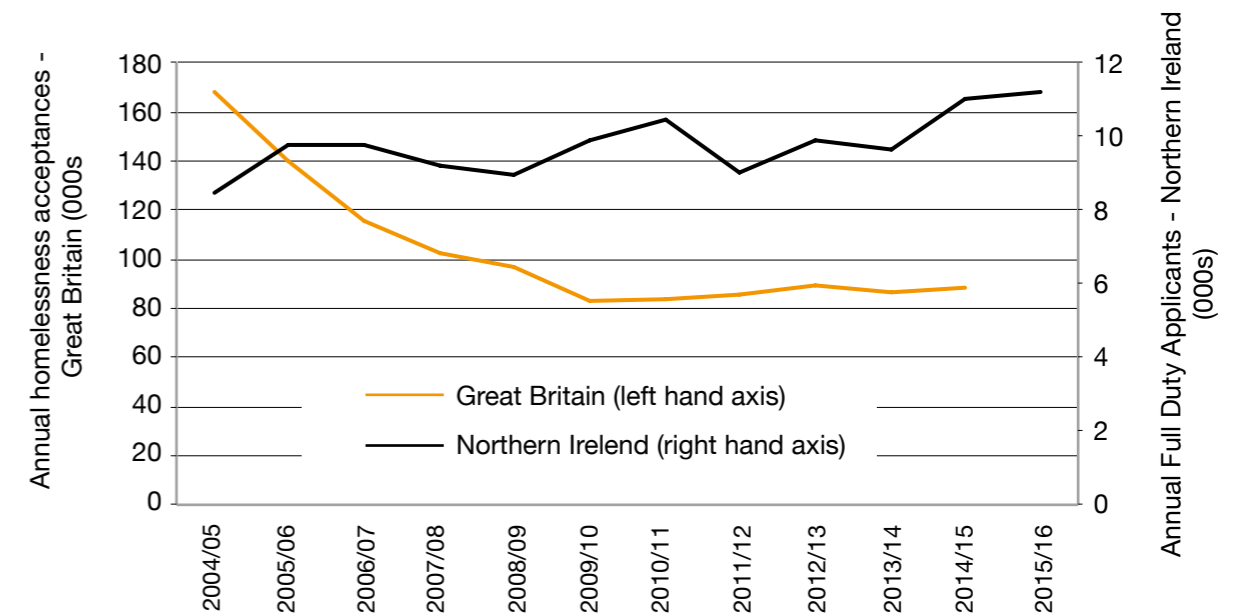
Sources: DCLG, Welsh Government, NI Housing Executive. Notes: 1. Figures for Wales pre-date 2015/16 change in homelessness legislation (local authority prevention duty obligation). 2. Scotland not included since the 2012 removal of the priority need/non-priority distinction means the Scottish legal framework is too different in this respect.

Figure 4.4 Statutory homelessness rates across the UK, 2015/16



Sources: DCLG, Scottish Government, Welsh Government, NI Housing Executive. Note: Homelessness data for Northern Ireland=2015/16; Scotland and Wales=2014/15; England=2015

Figure 4.5 Statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland compared with Great Britain



Sources: UK Housing Review; Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014/15; Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016

fact that, while GB-wide acceptances fell substantially in the mid-2000s (especially in England), as a result of the introduction of Housing Options/Solutions, they remained largely stable in Northern Ireland – see Figure 4.5. We might therefore expect to see Northern Ireland start to move closer to the wider GB rate as Housing Options is rolled out across the country (see Chapter 3). However, another contributory factor is local administrative traditions on the treatment of certain categories of applicant, as discussed below.

Statutory homelessness causes

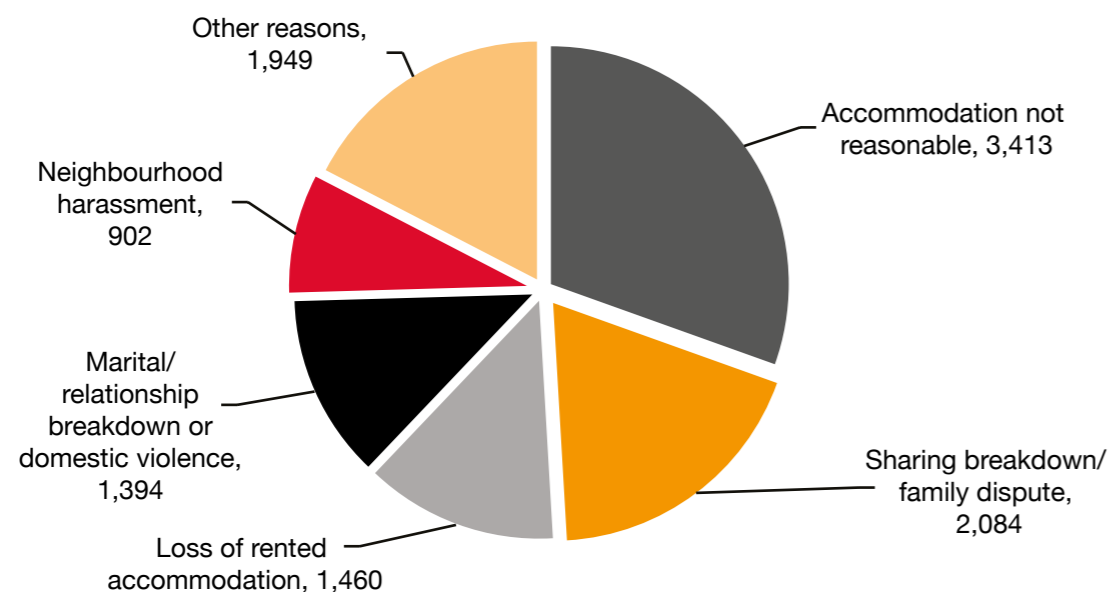
As shown in Figure 4.6, the largest ‘reason for homelessness’ category among FDAs was ‘accommodation not reasonable’, which made up 30 per cent of all such cases in 2015/16. Although the classification used here is unique to Northern Ireland and

cannot be directly compared with other UK jurisdictions, it is understood that this category relates mainly to older people subject to rehousing having been judged no longer able to maintain a family home.¹⁶⁴

The NIHE administrative choice to process applications of this kind via the homelessness legislation rather than through the ‘normal’ allocations system significantly contributes to the relatively high recorded incidence of statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland as compared with other UK jurisdictions (see Figure 4.4). It also helps to explain the strikingly high proportion of social housing allocations accounted for by statutory homeless cases in Northern Ireland. In 2014/15, lettings to homeless households made up 76 per cent of all NIHE lettings to new tenants, as compared with 38 per cent of all social lets in Scotland, and only 23 per

164 NIHE (2012) Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017. Belfast: NIHE.

Figure 4.6 Full duty applicants 2015/16: breakdown by reason for application



Source: Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016

cent of all local authority lets to new tenants in England.¹⁶⁵ As discussed in Chapter 3, it is anticipated that this pattern of lettings will change significantly when the much delayed review of social housing allocations is finally implemented.

Trend over time analysis highlights ‘accommodation not reasonable’ as the ‘reason for homelessness’ category exhibiting the largest increase over recent years. Between 2012/13 and 2015/16 this cohort increased from 2,556 to 3,413. As shown in Figure 4.7, this equated to a rise of 33 per cent. If this category were excluded from the FDA total, the recorded increase since 2012/13 would have been 6 per cent – rather than the 13 per cent rise shown by the inclusive total (see above). The peculiarity of this particular reason for acceptance as

statutory homeless was commented upon by one key informant:

“we’re the only part of the UK where if you’re a home owner – mostly older people who can’t access the top floor of your house – you make a statutory homelessness application... It’s kind of a nonsense really... Yes, and those people need support, but it’s a different kind of support.” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

‘Neighbourhood harassment’ also rose notably in percentage terms over the past four years although, as shown in Figure 4.6, this is a substantially smaller component of the overall total. Institutional discharge numbers exhibited the third highest percentage increase, but this category is numerically much smaller again – totalling

293 in 2015/16 (included within the ‘other reasons’ category in Figure 4.6).

For the purposes of this research, loss of rented housing and mortgage default are of particular interest as reasons for homelessness since they may quite readily be associated with economic and housing market change (see Chapter 2). While the former increased modestly in the three years to 2015/16, the 12 per cent increase recorded in Figure 4.7 is slight by comparison with recent homelessness trends in England. There, homelessness resulting from termination of private sector assured shorthold tenancies rose by 250 per cent in the five years to 2014/15. Mortgage default accounts for a small and diminishing proportion of the Northern Ireland FDA cohort, having fallen by over 50 per cent in the three years to 2015/16 – see Figure 4.7. In that year, such cases amounted to only 1 per cent of the FDA total (and is included within the ‘other reasons’ category in Figure 4.6). While there are concerns that this may partly reflect a legal

hiatus in possession actions (see Chapter 2), based on experiences elsewhere in the UK we would anticipate that mortgage default is likely to remain a minor cause of statutory homelessness even if repossession rates rise.

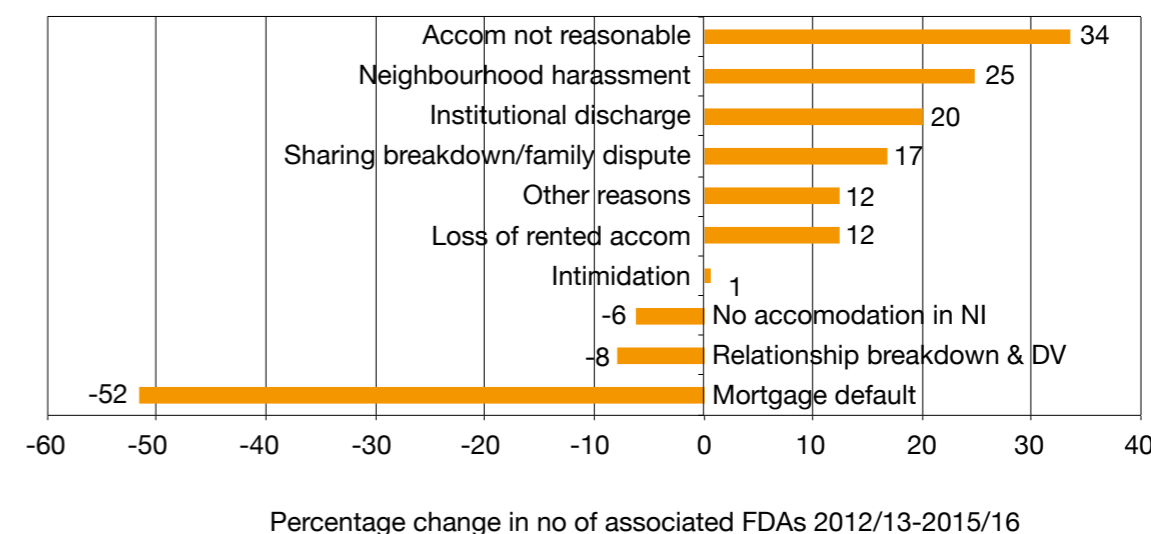
Statutory homelessness profile

Single person (non-elderly) households form the largest single component of the FDA total – see Figure 4.8. Family households account for little more than a third (35%), with elderly people constituting just over a quarter (27%). However, relating the cohorts of all presenters and FDAs, it is striking that while 82% of presenting elderly households are deemed FDAs, the equivalent proportion of other single people is 49%.

Use of temporary accommodation

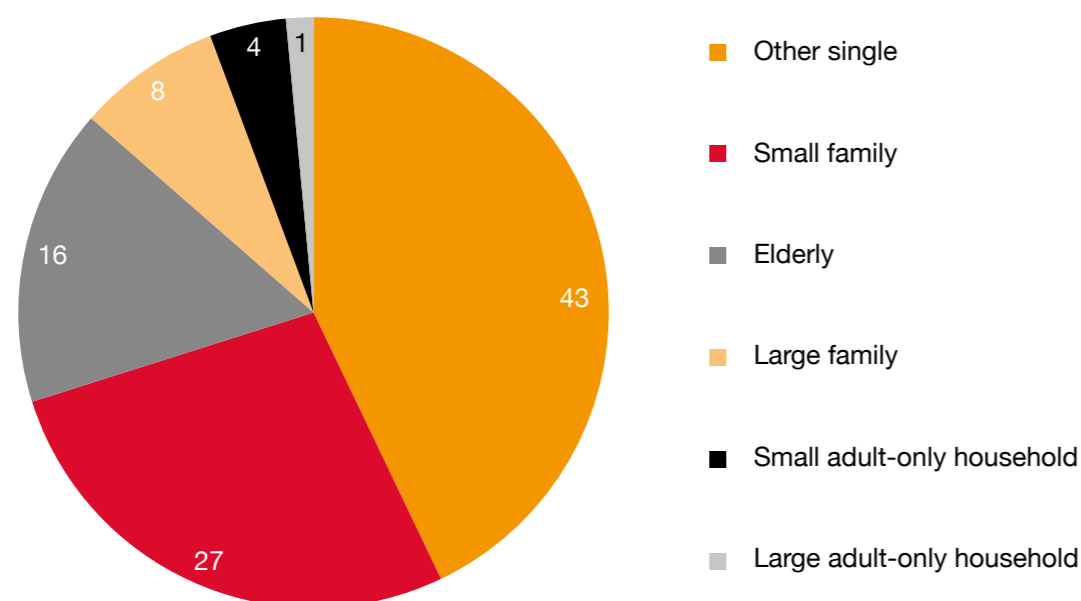
The use of temporary accommodation (TA) has been fairly steady over recent years in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that, in enumerating the throughput of placements during the cited financial years, the presentation in Figure 4.9 differs from

Figure 4.7 Full duty applicants in Northern Ireland: per cent change in numbers associated with specific reasons, 2012/13-2015/16



Sources: Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2014/15; Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016.

Figure 4.8 Full duty applicants 2015/16: breakdown by household type



Source: Northern Ireland Quarterly Housing Bulletin; Jan-Mar 2016

the more conventional 'stock' measure of TA placements in Great Britain – i.e. the number outstanding on a given date.

Statistics on TA length of stay are not published, but it was reported in interviews that the average length of stay had plateaued at 36 or 37 weeks in recent years, having been as high as 46 weeks in 2012. However, this varied considerably between different types of TA, with the longest stays tending to be in private sector self contained accommodation. It was reportedly sometimes difficult to persuade those living in this form of TA to move on and it was hoped that the roll-out of Housing Solutions would assist with shortening stays in this accommodation:

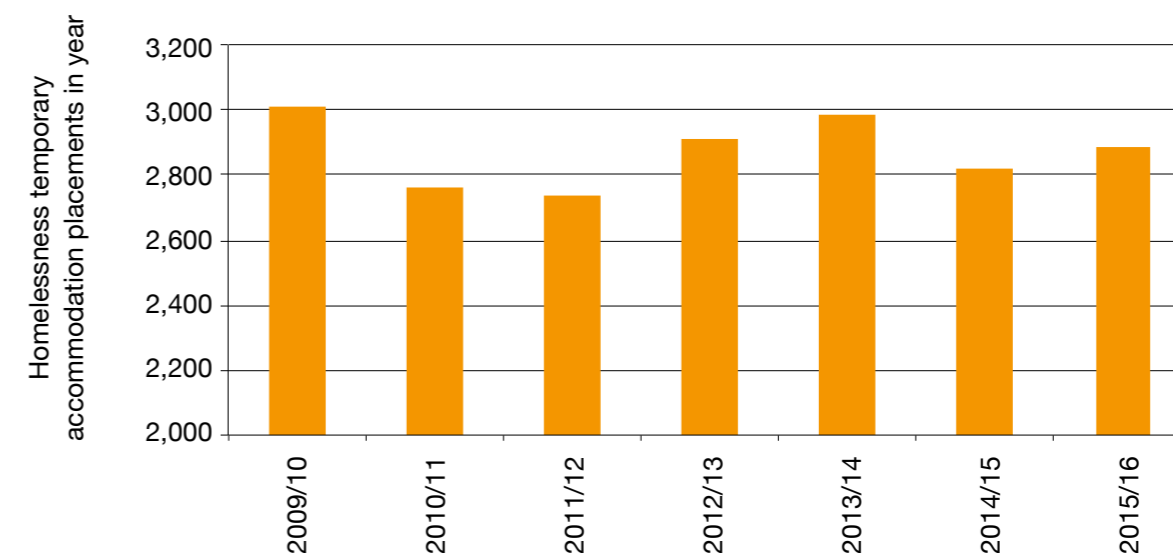
“we’re going to [look at] those people that are in temporary accommodation and

trying to agree housing solutions to move them on through. At it’s extreme, I think there’s around 35 that have been there five years plus in temporary accommodation. They tend to be in a single let, which is a good condition private house. Their rent’s being paid for them. Even with the LHA, their top-ups being paid out of [the] homeless budget as a statutory duty, and they’re waiting on the social house next to their mum. Now, you try and persuade them after seven/eight years to move... We’ll see where those conversations, those housing options interviews, bring us...” (Statutory sector key informant, 2016)

4.4 Hidden homelessness

People may be in a similar housing situation to those who apply to housing authorities as

Figure 4.9 Homelessness temporary accommodation placements 2009/10-2015/16



Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

homeless, that is, lacking their own secure, separate accommodation, without formally applying or registering with NIHE. Such people are sometimes referred to as 'hidden homeless' (see Chapter 1). A number of large-scale/household surveys enable us to measure some particular categories of potential hidden homelessness: *concealed households*; households who are *sharing* accommodation; and *overcrowded* households.

It is important to emphasise that not everyone living in the situations discussed in this section will actually be homeless, but these phenomena are indicative of the kinds of housing pressures that may be associated with hidden homelessness.

Concealed households

Concealed households are family units or single adults living within other households, who may be regarded as potential separate households that may wish to form given appropriate opportunity. The UK-wide Labour Force Survey (LFS) asks questions about the composition of the household which enable the presence of 'additional family/single units' to be identified.¹⁶⁶ In addition we can refer to Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Survey, UKHLS) as an alternative source. In this Northern Ireland Monitor, we combine estimates from the two surveys to increase the robustness of our findings.

¹⁶⁶ These surveys only approximate to the ideal definition of 'concealed households', as they do not necessarily distinguish those who would currently prefer to remain living with others from those who would really prefer to live separately. Moreover, they may not fully capture all concealed households reliably. For example people staying temporarily and informally with others may not be recorded in household surveys (like EHS) nor respond to individual surveys (like LFS).

In 2014/15 there were about 164,000 households (21% of all households in Northern Ireland) which contained additional family or single person units based on the combination of the two surveys. Of these, 6,400 (0.8%) were cases of couples or lone parent families living with other households, while 52,000 (6.7%) were cases of other one person units (i.e. excluding never married children of main householder) and 111,000 (14.4%) were cases of non-dependent adult children living in the parental household, as shown in Figure 4.10.

Compared with UK as a whole, Northern Ireland has *more* nondependent children living in the parental households (14.4% vs 11.7%), a rather lower proportion of other single concealed potential households (6.7% vs 7.4%), and *fewer* concealed couple and

lone parent family units (0.8% vs. 1.7%). Because the former effect outweighs the latter, Northern Ireland has slightly more potential concealed households than the UK as a whole (21.2% vs 19.7%).

Compared with the situation two-three years earlier, as reported in the previous Northern Ireland Monitor,¹⁶⁷ there has been a small fall of 1.6 percentage points in the total share of households containing concealed potential household units. This fall is accounted for by falls in the shares with other singles (-2.7% points) and couples/lone parents (-1.5% points), while being partially offset by increases in the households with non-dependent children (+2.2% points). These changes are similar in direction to those in the UK, but larger in magnitude. The rise in the already large group of households with

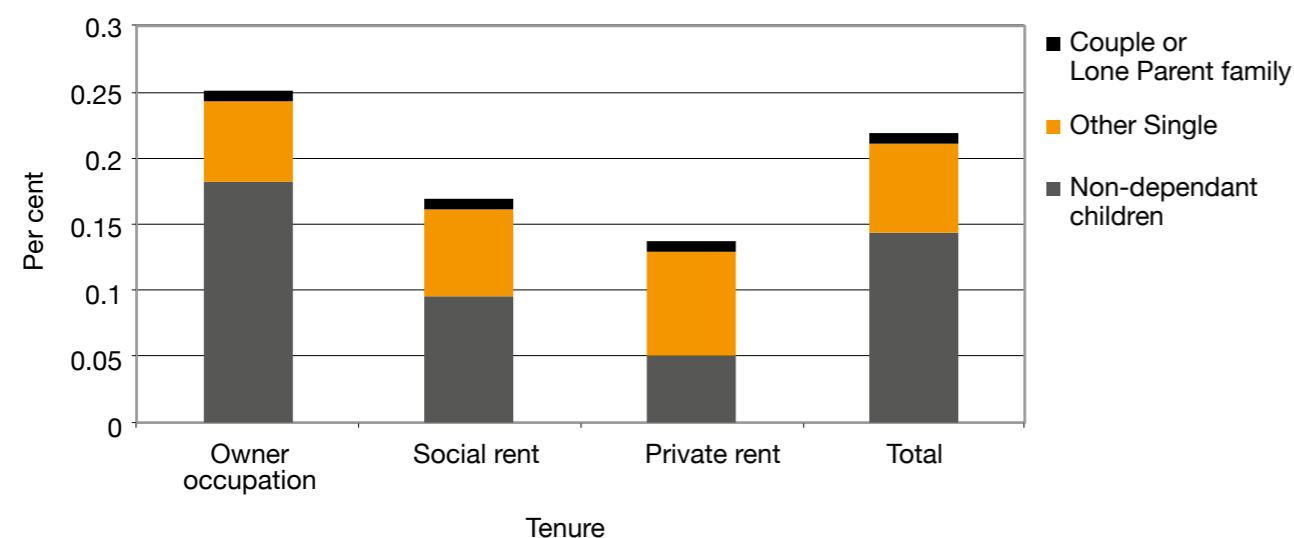
non-dependent children living in the parental home reflects a nationwide trend of delayed household formation, home-buying or home-making by younger adults across the UK, as a consequence of the financial crisis, the associated mortgage famine, and recession (see Chapter 2).

Figure 4.10 also highlights tenure differences. Concealed couple or lone parent family units are rare across all tenures. ‘Other single’ units are still somewhat more prevalent in private renting, but no longer so common in the social rented sector. The association with private renting is more expected because this includes students and young people living in flatshares. The proportions with non-dependent children are higher in owner occupation and below average in social renting. It is possible that the patterns in social renting reflect young people living with other adults to whom they are related, but not as direct offspring.

We can make an estimate of the number of separate households which might form from this set of potential households by applying

two adjustment factors. First, we allow for the presence of multiple concealed individuals in some households, using data from UKHLS. Second, we allow for the likelihood that many of these individual potential household units do not want or expect to move in the immediate future to form a separate household. We do not have full survey data on this propensity from Northern Ireland, but results from a special question in the English Housing Survey (EHS) suggest that the proportion of the two single concealed household groups (non-dependent children and other) who really want to live separately is about 50 per cent, over a run of years. Within UKHLS, there is a question about intention to move (‘if you could choose, would you stay here in your present home, or would you prefer to move somewhere else?’), but this wording focuses on the home and location, rather than directly addressing the issue of leaving the household. This tends to indicate a lower proportion wanting to move; in about 39 per cent of households with concealed single adults across UK, there is at least one who prefers to move. This ratio appears to be lower in Northern Ireland,

Figure 4.10 Households containing concealed potential households by tenure, Northern Ireland 2013-15



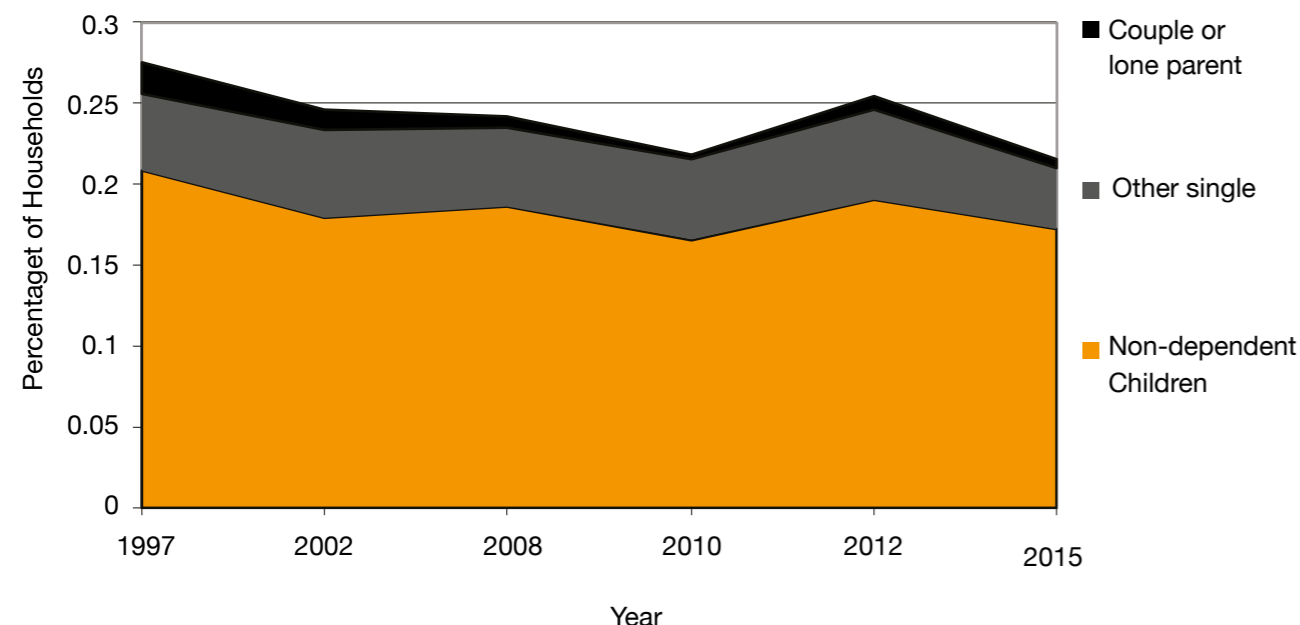
Source: Average of Labour Force Survey 2015Q4 & 2016Q1 and Understanding Society 2013/14

Table 4.1 Concealed potential households by household type and poverty, Northern Ireland 2013

	Non-dependant children	Other single	Couple or lone parent family	Any concealed
Household Type				
Family	10.1%	6.8%	2.3%	17.3%
Working age	24.9%	14.6%	1.1%	39.1%
Older	0	7.4%	0.0%	7.4%
Poverty				
Low income	6.0%	9.0%	1.2%	15.7%
Material deprived	11.9%	16.5%	1.5%	28.4%
All	11.5%	9.7%	1.0%	21.1%

Note: ‘low income’ means below 60% of median equivalised income after housing costs; ‘material deprived’ means lacking three or more essentials because can’t afford it, one year previously.

Figure 4.11 Concealed potential households in Northern Ireland, 1997-2015



Source: Labour Force Survey

at 26 per cent. Given that there is some uncertainty about this factor, we suggest that the number of separate adults currently concealed in Northern Ireland but preferring to live separately would lie in the range from 76,000 to 136,000 (equivalent overall to between 10% and 18% of all households in Northern Ireland), reflecting the range of estimates of proportions who would want to move. In practice some of these would form partnerships and some might still choose to share with their peer group, so the total 'need' of extra housing units associated with this number would be somewhat less.

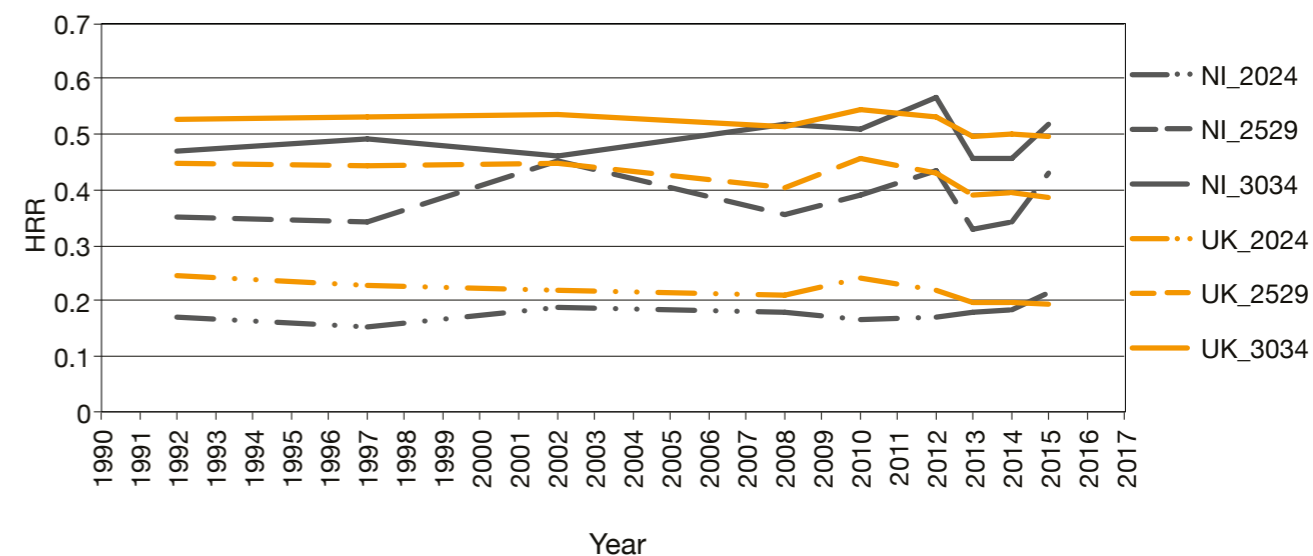
The surveys (particularly Understanding Society) enable us to draw a profile of the households where concealed potential households are living. Table 4.1 presents

the incidence rates for the different kind of concealed potential households, firstly across three main household types, and secondly in terms of two different indicators of poverty.

Concealed households are much more prevalent in working age households without dependent children, and this is particularly true for 'non-dependent children'. Concealed couple/lone parent family units are more common in households where the basic unit is a family with children, whereas the other types of concealed household are somewhat less common in these households. Concealed households are much less commonly found in elderly households, although 7 per cent of older households have some other single person(s) living with them.

Whereas data for England show associations

Figure 4.12 Household representative rates by selected age groups in Northern Ireland and UK, 1992-2015



Source: Labour Force Survey

with poor neighbourhoods and poor households, in Northern Ireland the relationships with poverty are less apparent. Households with low equivalent income after housing costs are not more likely to have concealed households living with them. Materially deprived households are somewhat more likely to contain concealed other singles or couples/lone parent families. For some people, living together in larger family or sharing groups may be a way of fending off poverty, and this may be more prevalent in Northern Ireland.

The LFS allows trends in concealed households to be tracked back to 1997, as shown in Figure 4.11. It appears that concealed households were static or declining during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. In Northern Ireland, the incidence of concealed household appears to have risen between 2010 and 2012, perhaps as a result of the financial crisis and recession, but then to have fallen back by 2015.

Another indirect indicator of concealed households is (reduced) household formation. The propensity of individuals within given age groups to form ('head') separate households is a conventional way of measuring household formation. Figure 4.12 illustrates rates for younger adults for Northern Ireland against UK. The rates for these younger adult age groups were typically lower in Northern Ireland than in the UK in the 1990s. Over this period there have been some fluctuations, particularly around 2008 and 2013, but there is clearly a general tendency for Northern Ireland to catch up and begin to exceed UK. UK rates are lower in 2015 than in 1992, whereas Northern Ireland rates are higher. This is probably indicative of both an easier general housing market and economic improvement following the peace agreement; equally, the recent fluctuations could reflect the very dramatic fluctuations in the housing market in Ireland (North and South) in the late 2000s. The upward blip in 2012 may reflect the increased availability of private rental lettings (see Chapter 2).

Households sharing accommodation

‘Sharing households’ are those households who live together in the same dwelling but who do not share either a living room or regular meals together. Sharing is similar to concealed households, in that it may indicate an arrangement people make when there is not enough affordable separate accommodation. For example, some ‘flatsharers’ will be recorded as concealed households, and some will be recorded as sharing households, depending on the room sizes and descriptions.

According to the LFS, 1.7 per cent of households in UK shared in 2012 (based on average of first and last quarter; see Table 4.2), while the rate for Northern Ireland was marginally higher at just under 2.0per cent. However, in 2015 sharing appeared to have risen markedly in Northern Ireland, to 4.4 per cent, while also rising somewhat across UK as a whole. In both years, most sharers were sharing with at least four other households.

Sharing has seen a long-term decline across the UK, which may reflect improving housing availability, but also probably changes in the PRS and its regulation. However, the indicator for sharing appears to be rather

inconsistent over time for the different countries of the UK, including Northern Ireland, which suggests that definitional nuances, and how they are applied in survey fieldwork, may be an issue. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, we have to conclude that the evidence suggests a marked rise in sharing over the last three years in Northern Ireland, which now appears to stand at a higher level than in the UK as a whole.

Sharing was most common for single person households (9.0%), but was also found amongst lone parents (6%) and small families. Sharing is concentrated in both private and social renting (6-9%), but is not unknown in the owner occupier sector (0.8%). The high rate in social renting, mainly people sharing with four or more other households, suggests that perhaps some hostel or intermediate move-on accommodation is being classified in this way.

Overcrowding

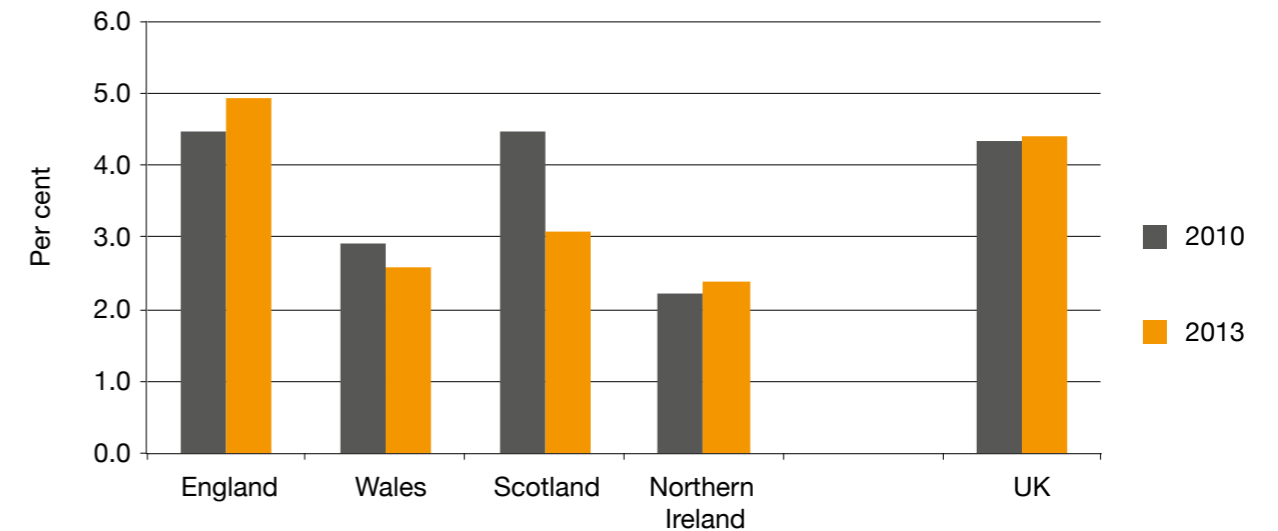
Overcrowding is another form of housing need which may be considered as part of the wider phenomenon of potential hidden homelessness. Overcrowding has increased somewhat in England in recent years,

Table 4.2 Sharing measures for Northern Ireland and UK, 2012

Definition	Any Share	Any Share	Share 4+	Share 4+
Year	2012	2015	2012	2015
Northern Ireland	1.95%	4.43%	1.48%	4.09%
UK	1.66%	1.90%	0.92%	1.21%

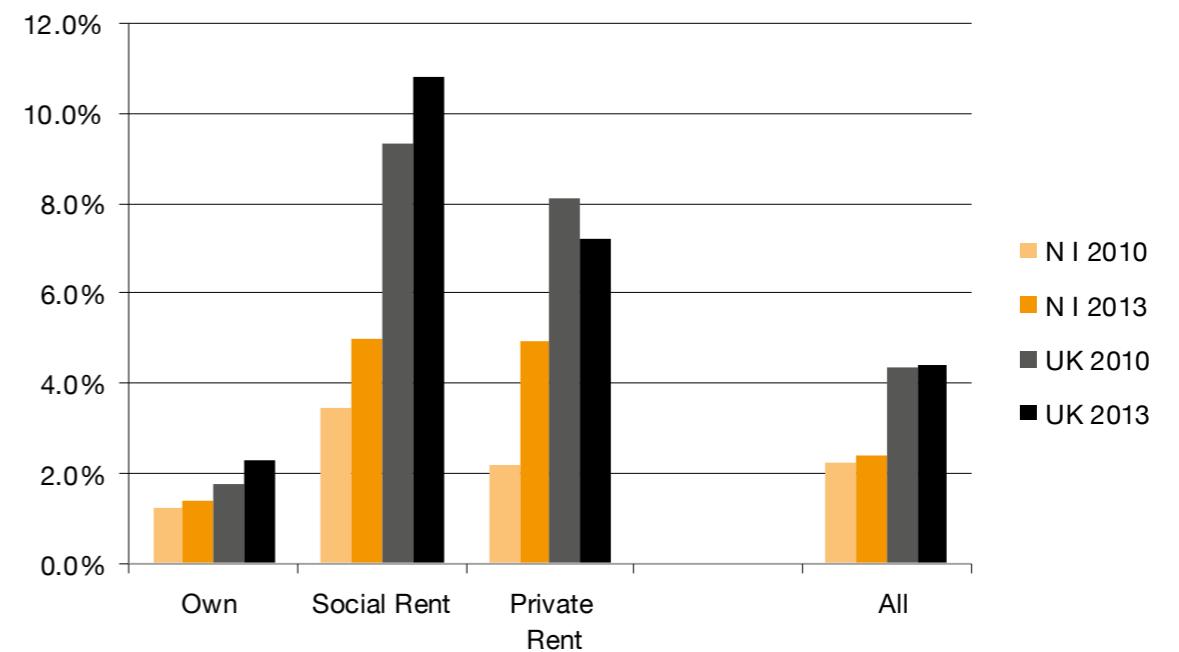
Source: Labour Force Survey, averages of 2012Q1 and Q4 and 2015Q4 and 2016Q1

Figure 4.13 Households overcrowded by country 2010 and 2013



Source: Authors' analysis of Understanding Society (UKHLS), Waves 2 and 5

Figure 4.14 Overcrowding by tenure: Northern Ireland and UK 2010 and 2013



particularly in London.¹⁶⁸ For Northern Ireland, the only available data source is UKHLS. While it is possible to estimate overcrowding from this, attempting to replicate the ‘bedroom standard’ measure used elsewhere, it is not in practice possible to exactly replicate the measure used in the EHS. The resulting measure is rather higher than that quoted for England based on EHS. Nevertheless, it does allow comparison across the four UK countries, as in Figure 4.13.

The results indicate that crowding is less common in Northern Ireland than in the other UK countries, particularly England. The proportion of households with insufficient bedrooms against the standard is 2.4 per cent in Northern Ireland, affecting about 16,000 households. Between 2010 and 2013 overcrowding increased significantly in England, with a marginal increase in Northern Ireland, but reductions in Wales and Scotland.

Crowding is more common in social renting (5.0%) and private renting (4.9%) and lower in owner occupation (1.4%) – see Figure 4.14. Private renting especially, but also social renting, have seen increases in overcrowding between 2010 and 2013.

In Northern Ireland, crowding is more prevalent for working age households without children than it is for families with children, a different situation from that in the UK as a whole where more families are affected. In all UK countries older households have very low rates of crowding. The association of crowding with low income found across the UK is less apparent in Northern Ireland, although there is some association with

households suffering three or more material deprivations. In Northern Ireland, as in the UK as a whole, crowding is more common for households who have relatively low income or suffer from multiple material deprivations.

Housing Stress Indicator

In the Northern Ireland Executive ‘programme for government framework’ currently out for consultation there is an ‘indicator’ (8) to ‘improve the supply of suitable housing’, with an associated ‘measure’ of ‘the number of households in housing stress’.¹⁶⁹ This measure is simply the number of households on the NIHE waiting list with needs above a threshold level. The overall number on the waiting list has increased significantly, by 45 per cent over the decade to 2013/14. Data from the same source is one input to the assessment of need for affordable housing referred to in section 2.5 above. While it would be expected that this measure would include many of the households identified in this section, with problems such as overcrowding or sharing, it should be remembered that housing waiting lists are an imperfect measure of housing needs,¹⁷⁰ although having one national agency responsible for maintaining a list or register (as in Northern Ireland) can help to overcome some limitations. As seen in the previous section this indicator has been criticised by voluntary sector agencies. Housing Rights have criticised both the limited emphasis on housing in this document and the logic and scope of the indicator proposed.¹⁷¹ They suggest a broader approach entailing indicators of housing quality/condition, homelessness prevention, affordability and housing inequalities, although these are not specified in detail.

4.5 Key points

- A recent street audit indicates that rates of rough sleeping remain relatively low in Belfast, but there has been significant concern over a perceived increase in begging and street drinking in city centre, and controversy over a series of deaths on the streets.
 - In 2015/16 some 18,600 households presented as homeless in Northern Ireland, of whom 60 per cent – 11,200 – were judged as FDAs. This represents a rise of 13% since 2012/13.
 - Rates of statutory homelessness acceptances are higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK, reflecting in part the fact that acceptances have fallen significantly elsewhere since 2004 (especially in England) as a result of the implementation of the Housing Options model. It is therefore to be expected that rates will also fall in Northern Ireland as Housing Solutions is rolled out.
 - Another contributory factor is local administrative traditions on the treatment of certain categories of applicant, in particular older people subject to rehousing having been judged no longer able to maintain a family home, who are treated as statutory homeless in Northern Ireland but generally accommodated via mainstream allocation processes elsewhere in the UK. This may change as both homelessness discharge and social allocation policies are reviewed.
 - Northern Ireland has more non-dependent children living in the parental home, but rather less of other types of concealed potential households than the rest of the UK. There has been a small overall fall in the number of concealed potential households since 2010,
- perhaps associated with the recovery from recession, but the number of non-dependent children living at home has continued to increase.
- We estimate that between 76,000 and 136,000 adults are currently living as concealed households in Northern Ireland but would prefer to live independently.
 - Over the longer term, younger adults in Northern Ireland have slightly increased their propensity to head separate households, relative to the UK-wide pattern where there has been a decline. This is probably indicative of easier housing market affordability conditions than elsewhere in UK, particularly England.
 - Households sharing accommodation appear to have increased markedly in Northern Ireland, since 2010, after a longer history of decline. This may, however, reflect definitional changes or new forms of provision, particularly in the social sector.
 - Overcrowding is less common in Northern Ireland than across the UK as a whole, and it has not increased significantly since 2010, unlike the situation in England, although increases are apparent in private renting. Crowding is less associated with families than with other working age households in Northern Ireland.
 - There is an urgent need for better statistical monitoring data on homelessness trends in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that the roll-out of Housing Solutions and associated IT improvements will facilitate this.

¹⁶⁸ Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016*. London: Crisis/JRF.

¹⁶⁹ Northern Ireland Executive (2016) *Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016*. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/draft-pfg-framework-2016-21.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Para 2.29 in Bramley, G., Pawson, H., White, M., Watkins, D. & Pleace, N. (2010) *Estimating Housing Need*. London: DCLG.

¹⁷¹ Housing Rights (2016) *Response to the Consultation on a Draft Programme for Government Framework*. <http://www.housingrights.org.uk/news/policy/housing-rights-responds-draft-programme-government-framework>

5. Conclusions

The overriding impression one forms in studying homelessness and related policy developments in Northern Ireland is that of stasis combined with frantic activity – “*running on the spot*” as one of our key informants characterised it. To a large extent this results from the wider political situation in Northern Ireland, and in particular to the coalition of partners with very different ideological and religious bases in the Northern Ireland Executive, such that the largest parties (DUP and Sinn Féin) have a ‘mutual veto’ on all major policy decisions. In these circumstances it can be very difficult to deliver policy change on sensitive issues, such as the future of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and social housing allocations, even when detailed review work has been undertaken.

Likewise with issues which are ‘political’ at a more micro-level, such as commissioning procedures for funded services, or discharge protocols under the homelessness legislation, change is often slow in coming in Northern Ireland. All the more remarkable, then, is the enthusiasm with which the Housing Solutions and Support model seems to have been embraced since the 2013 edition of the Northern Ireland Monitor. While some notes of caution were expressed, especially with regard to the monitoring of outcomes and the interaction with the statutory homelessness safety net, there was an overwhelming sense of optimism from across both the statutory and voluntary sectors that Housing Solutions was going to deliver a major step change in the quality and appropriateness of service available to homeless people in Northern Ireland. Similarly striking was the positive feedback we heard about the piloting of the Housing First model in Northern Ireland. More generally, anxieties about moving

away from congregate provision to more floating support-based models seemed to have eased by 2016, albeit that they had not disappeared. Here it is important to note that Northern Ireland enjoys an advantageous position with regard to Supporting People funding compared with England in particular, with its budget frozen rather than cut in recent years. But the ‘National Living Wage’, amongst other factors, means that homelessness services still report being under pressure, and there has been a cross-sectoral lobbying campaign to see an uplift of 10 per cent in the Supporting People budget.

One very encouraging development since our last visit was a reportedly much improved relationship between the Department for Social Development and the homelessness sector, albeit that there were mixed views on whether its relocation into the much larger Department for Communities was likely to have positive or negative implications for housing and homelessness. While we also heard encouraging reports about the commitment of the criminal justice sector to addressing homelessness in Northern Ireland, the consistency and ferocity of the criticism levelled at the Department of Health was striking. In particular, the lack of adequate detoxification facilities for those with serious substance misuse problems was identified as a key service gap, with requirements that clients are ‘clean’ and engaged with community support for a specified period before entering the service viewed as unhelpful. The widespread sense of the health sector failing to ‘pull its weight’ in addressing homelessness was lent greater urgency by controversy over five high profile street deaths in Belfast over the past year, with the deceased all reported to have serious substance misuse and/or mental

health problems. As elsewhere in the UK, there are also growing concerns about the severely adverse impact of the use of New Psychoactive Substances, so-called ‘legal highs’, and the threat that they pose to the safety and well-being of both homeless people and the staff working with them.

One seeming constant on homelessness in Northern Ireland is very poor data availability, which hampers both efforts to track trends over time and comparisons with Great Britain. Some of our key informants took the view that this relative paucity of published data was a deliberate policy position, reflecting official “*over sensitivity*” about data release. The opportunity presented by the roll-out of Housing Solutions, together with the associated improved IT platform, should be seized to not only enhance data collection, but also its availability for analysis.

At a wider, more structural level, Northern Ireland enjoys both advantages and disadvantages as compared with Great Britain. The Northern Irish economy lags behind that of the rest of the UK, and its recovery from the recession has been slower. Both wage levels and rates of economic activity are lower than in the other UK countries. On the other hand, however, housing supply is not under the acute pressure seen in London and the south of England, albeit that there are high demand hotspots and complications arising from residential segregation along religious lines, particularly in sensitive areas such as North Belfast. The number of new social lets has declined in Northern Ireland in recent years, meaning that homelessness services find it increasingly difficult to rehouse their clients, particularly single and young people, with only limited success reported thus far in accessing the (greatly expanded) private rented sector. While even the revised lower

new build targets for social housing are broadly in line with independent estimates, completions (but not starts) fell below target levels in 2015/16. The future ownership and management of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock is a key structural issue that remains unresolved, with potential decisions on this now further complicated by the potential reclassification of housing associations in Northern Ireland as public sector bodies.

Important aspects of Great Britain welfare reform have already been introduced in Northern Ireland, including restrictions on Local Housing Allowance levels and the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate to single under 35s. But the less pressured housing market context means that these benefit restrictions do not appear to have had the dramatic impact seen on homelessness in England, so far at least. In particular, there is little sign as yet of the sharp upward trend in homelessness associated with the termination of private tenancies that now dominates the statutory statistics in England. This also perhaps reflects the fact that, unlike in Great Britain, direct payment to private landlords was retained after the Local Housing Allowance regime was introduced in Northern Ireland.

After a protracted impasse, Northern Ireland now stands on the brink of introducing most of the remaining core elements of welfare reform already implemented in Great Britain. However, this process will be considerably eased by a mitigation package described by some of our key informants as the “*envy*” of the rest of the UK. Following proposals developed by an official working group chaired by Professor Eileen Evason, there will be full mitigation of the ‘Bedroom Tax’ and Benefit Cap in Northern Ireland till 2020, and important modifications in the operation of

Universal Credit and the associated benefit sanctions regime. However, anxieties remain about the time-limited nature of the mitigation funding package, and some took the view that welfare reform remained a “juggernaut” about to hit Northern Ireland. One specific area of concern in Northern Ireland is the shift from Disability Living Allowance, claimed by one-in-ten of the working age population, to Personal Independence Payments. While some transitional protections for existing claimants have been provided following the Evason Working Group proposals, there will still be reduced levels of support for many claimants in the future. There is also uncertainty over the Northern Ireland policy position on those aspects of welfare reform not yet introduced in UK, such as the extension of Local Housing Allowance restrictions to social and supported housing and the removal of Housing Benefit entitlement from most 18-21 year olds.

There are thus a host of critical themes to track in monitoring homelessness developments in Northern Ireland in the coming few years. 2016 represents a critical turning point, with the new five-year Homelessness Strategy being prepared at the time of writing, alongside the early stages of implementation of the new Supporting People strategy. It will be particularly salient to monitor the part played by Housing Solutions, Housing First, and revised commissioning processes in the development and delivery of this Strategy, and whether ambitions to achieve a higher level of interdepartmental ‘buy-in’, particularly from the health sector, are met. Given the controversy they are likely to arouse, it will be fascinating to see what if anything comes from suggestions of moves towards a more ‘assertive’ form of street outreach in Belfast, with the possibility raised of elements of enforcement being introduced into policies to tackle begging

and other street activities. Overshadowing all of this, of course, is the potentially serious economic, political and social implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland. This makes it more important than ever to shine a light on the impacts on its most vulnerable citizens, including homeless people.

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About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help homeless people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

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