
Ending Homelessness Together in Northern Ireland: A Unique Challenge

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- **Abstract_** *The new Northern Ireland (NI) Homelessness Strategy Ending Homelessness Together represents a welcome fresh start on homelessness in NI given the challenges associated with implementing the previous strategy. This paper reviews the new strategic document, placing it in the context of recent trends in homelessness. A key focus is on the continuities and discontinuities between NI and the rest of the UK. The introduction and roll-out of the Housing Solutions and Support model will finally bring NI closer in line with the heavily prevention-focused approaches pursued for some time now in England, Wales and Scotland, where striking an effective balance between prevention and ensuring that people's entitlements under homelessness legislation are met has proved an ongoing challenge. The new strategy's emphasis on better addressing hidden homelessness is, by contrast, unprecedented and highly ambitious in the UK context, while its failure to fully endorse the Housing First model for the 'complex needs' group it targets is likely to be a disappointment for the sector. Several contextual factors will be key in influencing the implementation and impacts of the new strategy, not least that it will be implemented at a time of gridlock and immense uncertainty in Northern Irish politics and at the same time as the introduction of the UK Government's welfare reform programme, which has driven increases in homelessness in England.*
- **Keywords_** *homelessness strategy; policy change; prevention; welfare reform; Northern Ireland*

Introduction

Northern Ireland is unusual in a UK context in having had a rolling sequence of national homelessness strategies in place since 2002. Though Wales published a ten-year homelessness plan in 2009 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009), no such strategies are in place in England and Scotland, albeit that there have been recent calls for them to be developed (Shelter Scotland, 2016; House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2016). Despite Northern Ireland's apparent advantage in this regard, levels of official homelessness increased significantly during the period of the last homelessness strategy (2012-17), and population rates of recorded homelessness are higher in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. This review¹ of the *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-22: Ending Homelessness Together* begins by exploring trends in homelessness over the last decade or so, and explaining why these contrast sharply with those seen elsewhere in the UK. After a brief review of the focus and implementation of the previous strategy, the core components of the new strategy are considered, including: prevention; accommodation and support; chronic homelessness; and oversight, delivery and monitoring. Particular emphasis is given throughout to the parallels and divergences with broader UK homelessness policy and practice.

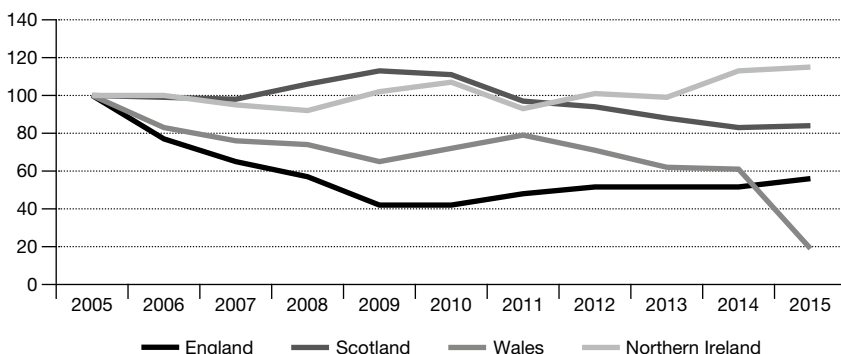
The Westminster government-led welfare reform programme well underway in England, Scotland and Wales, but only now being implemented in Northern Ireland, is identified as a key context in which the strategy's likelihood of 'ending homelessness together' must be understood. Also important is the unique social, political and policy context that pertains in Northern Ireland, notably: historical legacies heightening the sensitivity of housing policy reform; the political impasse that has left the jurisdiction without a functioning executive since January 2017; the particularly consequential likely impacts of the UK's exit from the European Union in Northern Ireland; and the recent 'confidence and supply' deal reached between May's Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Westminster to secure a parliamentary majority in exchange for gains for Northern Ireland.

¹ Parts of this review draw on analysis previously published in Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2016) and Wilcox *et al.* (2017).

Homelessness in Northern Ireland in a UK context

In the UK, there are legal duties placed on local authorities to rehouse certain 'priority need' homeless households, mainly families with children but also vulnerable adults.² Those accepted as owed the 'full rehousing duty' are described as statutorily homeless. Levels of statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland increased rapidly in the early 2000s, and have remained at historically high levels of between 18 and 20 thousand presentations to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) since 2005/6. The number of applicants owed the main rehousing duty under homelessness legislation stood at 11 200 in 2015/16, a 13% increase on 2012/13 levels. These homelessness trends are in stark contrast to those seen elsewhere in the UK (see Figure 1). Furthermore, rates of statutory homelessness acceptances are considerably higher than in other UK nations at almost 15 per 1 000 of the population, compared to 11.7 in Scotland, 3.6 in Wales and 2.3 in England (see Figure 2). Reflective of this, 80% of annual NIHE (the main social housing provider) lets are allocated to households owed a duty under the homelessness legislation,³ a proportion very much higher than is seen in England (around 20%) and Wales (18%), or even in Scotland (37%) where the priority need criterion that limits access to the main rehousing duty has been abolished.⁴

Figure 1: Homeless acceptances in the UK 2002-2015

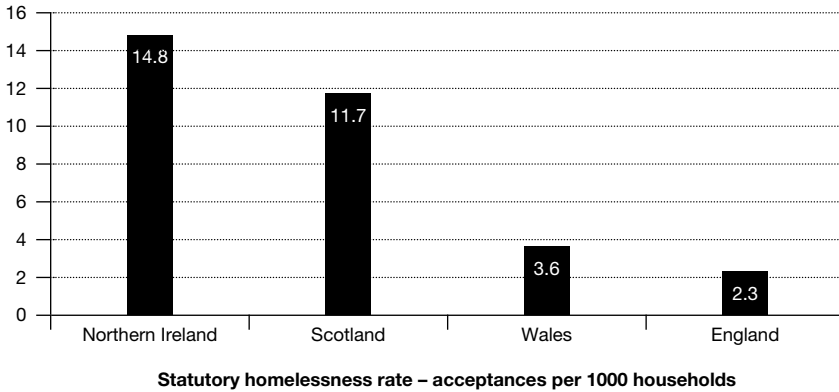


Source: UK Housing Review 2017

² In Scotland, the 'priority need' category was fully phased out in 2012, meaning that virtually all homeless households are now owed the full rehousing duty.

³ Table 105 in UK Housing Review, 2017 Compendium <http://www.ukhousingreview.org.uk/ukhr17/compendium.html>

⁴ Tables 98b, 99, 103 and 204 in UK Housing Review, 2017 Compendium <http://www.ukhousingreview.org.uk/ukhr17/compendium.html>

Figure 2: Statutory homeless rates across the UK, 2015

Source: UK Housing Review 2017

Every UK nation except Northern Ireland has seen significant drops in statutory homelessness as a result of the introduction of a preventative ‘Housing Options’ approach (see Figure 1). These falls were most dramatic in England where a proactively preventative model was first adopted (in 2003). Since 2010, however, the combined impact of housing market pressures and the UK Government-led welfare reform programme (involving severe and ongoing cutbacks in benefits, particularly housing allowances, largely concentrated on working age households) have reversed these trends. Official homelessness now stands at 44% above 2009/10 levels, with other measures of homelessness showing the same pattern (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017). In Scotland, gentler falls in homelessness associated with a less aggressive and later adoption of preventative approaches in 2011 have slowed in recent years, likely as a result of the diminishing returns of prevention efforts in the context of the impacts of Westminster-led welfare reforms (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2015). In Wales, reductions in homelessness associated with the preventative ‘Housing Options’ approach have rapidly accelerated following the introduction of a radically revised legal framework introducing new ‘prevention and relief’ duties on local authorities (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017b).

The uniquely high and stable levels of homelessness seen in Northern Ireland reflect several factors. First, certain groups in housing need in Northern Ireland (namely, older people whose housing is no longer suitable for their needs) have historically been rehoused via the statutory homelessness route, as opposed to the rest of the UK where they are rehoused via mainstream social housing allocations. Second, while homelessness in England was falling as a result of preventative measures in the 2000s, it was rising fast in Northern Ireland linked to affordability pressures associated with a housing market boom underway north and south of

the border with the Republic of Ireland. Third, levels of homelessness have remained high in the absence of the firm shift to preventative responses to homelessness seen in every other UK nation. Significant shifts in several of these and other areas are now underway or expected imminently.

Reforms to social housing allocations policy have been expected for some time. Progress has been slow, in part due to the extreme sensitivity surrounding this issue relating to the segregation of housing stock along religious lines and the challenges this poses for developing fair allocation policies. If taken forward, proposed reforms – including a reduction in the number of ‘reasonable offers’ to which statutory homeless households are entitled and changes to how older people whose accommodation is no longer suitable are dealt with – could result in a fall in statutory homelessness, as well as in the proportion of social housing lets allocated to homeless households (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016).

Of huge potential import regarding anticipated trends in homelessness is the implementation of the UK-led welfare reform agenda in Northern Ireland over the lifetime of the new homelessness strategy. Reforms limiting the level of housing allowance to which low income households are entitled were introduced in 2008 and 2011 on the same timetable in Northern Ireland as the rest of UK, and have already led to substantial gaps between ‘Local Housing Allowance’ levels and actual rents paid by recipients, a major concern across the UK, including Northern Ireland (see Beatty *et al.* 2012; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). Subsequent UK government-led welfare reforms have been highly controversial in Northern Ireland, however, leading to prolonged gridlock during attempts to pass relevant legislation in Stormont, Northern Ireland’s devolved legislature. As such, the majority of this welfare reform programme is only now being introduced, much behind the timetable in England, Scotland and Wales and with some significant exceptions and modifications (Evason, 2016) described by sector key informants as the ‘envy’ of the rest of the UK (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016).

Under the agreed approach, some elements of the reform programme (the overall benefit cap and controversial ‘Bedroom Tax’)⁵ will be fully mitigated until 2020. Other elements (the introduction of Universal Credit, a single benefit replacing existing social security benefit, including housing allowances) will be phased in on a later timetable than seen elsewhere in the UK, with the final reform slightly softened compared to the wider UK policy. For example, claimants in Northern Ireland will benefit from fortnightly payments (rather than the monthly payments that will apply elsewhere) and out of work claimants who fail to adhere to work-

⁵ The overall Benefit Cap limits the total amount of benefit any out of work household can receive. The so called ‘Bedroom Tax’ limits the level of housing allowance payable to social tenants deemed to be under-occupying their home (see Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016).

related conditions will face a maximum sanction length of 18 months, compared to 3 years in the rest of the UK. The manner in which more recently announced cuts to young people and social tenant's entitlements to housing support (both associated with major homelessness-related concerns among local authorities and homelessness experts) will apply in Northern Ireland is not yet clear (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016), though relevant here is the expectation that the DUP's strengthened negotiating hand post the 2017 UK election will bolster Northern Irish leaders' ability to secure further concessions.

The delayed timetable and modifications to the welfare reform programme in Northern Ireland are highly significant for homelessness given very strong links between these welfare cuts and rising levels of homelessness, particularly in England (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017a). Also relevant is that the Supporting People budget (which provides support to vulnerable individuals including those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness) in Northern Ireland has been frozen at 2008 levels. Though an increase in this budget has been the focus of intense lobbying (Spurr, 2016), the status quo leaves Northern Ireland in a more advantageous position than England, where such budgets have been cut by 67% (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017a). Nevertheless, those in the Northern Ireland homelessness sector remain greatly concerned about the homelessness impacts of the welfare reform programme. Some have voiced concerns that there is insufficient understanding of the likely homelessness impacts of these changes (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016).

Homelessness Strategies in Northern Ireland

Though Northern Ireland's first homelessness strategy was published in 2002, it was in 2010 that legislation introduced a statutory duty on the Housing Executive to produce such a strategy (every five years) and a requirement on a wide range of public bodies to take these strategies into account in the exercise of their own functions. The 2012-17 strategy (NIHE, 2012) thus sets the immediate context for this review of the new strategy released in May 2017. The 2012-17 strategy identified as its vision to ensure that "long-term homelessness and rough sleeping is eliminated across Northern Ireland by 2020" (p.7). It aimed to do so via four strategic objectives: placing homelessness prevention at the forefront of service delivery; reducing the duration of homelessness (time spent in temporary accommodation); removing the need to sleep rough; and improving services to vulnerable homeless households.

This substantive focus commanded a great deal of support from those in the sector (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2014; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; NIHE, 2017). There has however been considerable disappointment about the implementation of the strategy. An independent evaluation found that the majority (32 of 38) of actions specified within it

had been completed by 2016, but also that “Gaps remained in service provision and progress in delivering the Strategy had not always been rapid”, including in relation to the strategy’s core aim of developing preventative services (Boyle and Pleace, 2017, p.5). This conclusion regarding the limits of the strategy’s achievements is echoed – though more strongly – in the perspectives of key informants interviewed for the independent *Homelessness Monitor* (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016), who identified two key issues that curtailed its effective implementation: first, substantial internal changes and staff turnover in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive following a wide ranging review of its functions (Department for Social Development (DSD), 2012), and second, a failure to achieve effective inter-departmental buy-in and coordination, despite this being a core priority of the strategy.

With this as its backdrop, the new 2017-22 homelessness strategy orients around an overarching vision of ‘ending homelessness together’ – both less specific and more ambitious than the vision of the former strategy. This formulation combines the now fashionable, but also conceptually slippery focus on ‘ending homelessness’ (O’Sullivan, 2016), with explicit acknowledgement that progress requires the action of a number of key players across the statutory and voluntary sectors, not just the Northern Ireland Housing Executive which has statutory responsibility for homelessness. In pursuit of this vision, the strategy identifies five objectives:

1. To prioritise homelessness prevention.
2. To secure sustainable accommodation and appropriate support solutions for homeless households.
3. To further understand and address the complexities of chronic homelessness across Northern Ireland.
4. To ensure the right mechanisms are in place to oversee and deliver this strategy.
5. To measure and monitor existing and emerging need to inform the ongoing development of appropriate services.

These objectives are to be achieved via a series of specific short (year 1), medium (year 2/3) and long-term (year 4/5) actions. Notwithstanding the political gridlock that has left Northern Ireland without a functioning executive from January 2017 to the time of writing (September 2017), the strategy explicitly seeks to compliment the 2016 draft Programme for Government’s ‘outcomes-based approach’ and, specifically, outcome 8 in this framework – that “we care for others and we help those in need” (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016, p. 31). In so doing the strategy pursues three outcomes – ‘we have support that prevents us from becoming homeless’, ‘we live in suitable homes’, and ‘we have the support we require to

access and/or sustain a home' – to be measured via four indicators: homelessness presentations; average length of stay in temporary accommodation; 'full duty applicant' duties discharged; and levels of repeat homelessness.

The new strategy appears to also benefit from the widespread sector support that surrounded the substantive content of the previous strategy. According to the Housing Executive, over 90% of respondents to the consultation on the draft strategy endorsed its vision and objectives (NIHE, 2017). The primary challenge will be overcoming the implementation issues that vexed the previous strategy's progress. With this in mind, the next sections discuss the specifics of the strategy under four themes mirroring its objectives – prevention; accommodation and support; chronic homelessness; and oversight, delivery and monitoring.

Prevention

The centrepiece of the new strategy is its focus on prevention and the roll out of the long anticipated 'Housing Solutions and Support' approach. This will involve a re-orientation of frontline staff, who will be trained to take a problem solving and holistic approach to assessing and addressing the needs of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, with appropriate advice on realistic housing options provided rapidly at the first point of contact, and with case managers 'sticking with' more complex cases until their homelessness is resolved and support in place to meet their wider needs (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). In 2016, the Housing Solutions and Support model was piloted in three areas, and is being rolled out to the rest of Northern Ireland during 2017. Complementing this move is a commitment in the new strategy to 'identify pre-crisis "homeless indicators"' (p.26) – on which there is an already substantial evidence base (Bramley *et al.*, 2015; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2015; Watts *et al.*, 2015) that those implementing this action can immediately employ – and commission training for relevant frontline workers to use those triggers to inform prevention work.

In addition, and uniquely in a UK context, the strategy commits to the development of an "effective communication strategy to ensure that households approaching crisis can access the right support quickly" (p. 26). This is framed as an explicit attempt to "reduce instances of hidden homelessness" (p.7), a problem foregrounded within the strategy. Recognition of the issue at this level, and such a clear commitment to proactively address it, marks Northern Ireland out from its UK counterparts and is laudable given the highly damaging experiences that can be associated with hidden homelessness (Reeve, 2004), in particular for young people (McCoy and Hug, 2016). This approach to addressing hidden homelessness may

therefore provide a model for other UK nations to consider. That being said, this element of the strategy is very ambitious given the potential for it to increase demand for services just as the impacts of welfare reform begin to be felt.

The overall move towards a prevention-focused response to homelessness brings Northern Ireland closer to approaches already adopted elsewhere in the UK. The Housing Solutions and Support model specifically takes inspiration from the Scottish variant of homelessness prevention (Mahaffy, 2013), a 'lighter touch' and more cautious approach than that seen in England in the early 2000s. There was not an appetite to pursue the more 'aggressive' (Wilcox *et al.*, 2010) approach to prevention seen in England, likely in light of associated concerns that in some cases prevention amounted to 'gatekeeping' (i.e. the illegal practice of not allowing homeless households to access their statutory entitlements under homelessness legislation) (Pawson, 2007). Scotland has not escaped the tension between effective and appropriate prevention and gatekeeping, however. A Scottish Housing Regulator inquiry identified over-zealous prevention practice in some local authorities (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2014), which appears to have reinforced the more cautious application of preventative measures (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2015). This in turn has led to calls for Scotland to be more assertive in its homelessness prevention work (Watts, 2017).

These tensions underline the very difficult balance to be struck between the effective pursuit of non-statutory prevention efforts of the kind now being rolled out in Northern Ireland and ensuring that people's entitlements under homelessness legislation are met (see Pawson, 2007; Dobie *et al.*, 2014). This balancing act in part prompted recent and radical legislative change in both Wales (via the Housing (Wales) Act 2014) and England (via the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017), which have brought prevention work inside the statutory homelessness system by introducing duties on local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent and relieve homelessness (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017a; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2017b). In Northern Ireland, where (unlike in Scotland) the priority need test still operates, there may be a strong incentive for Housing Solutions and Support teams to focus their non-statutory prevention efforts on 'priority need' households who will be owed the full rehousing duty if preventative interventions fail. This leaves Northern Ireland as the only UK jurisdiction still offering single 'non priority' homeless households limited help.

Accommodation and Support

The core actions identified in pursuit of the strategic objective to 'secure sustainable accommodation and appropriate support solutions for homeless households' are a review of temporary accommodation and a continuation of efforts to use the private rented sector to assist homeless households.

The commitment to review current temporary accommodation provision, and – linked to the Supporting People review published in 2015 (DSD, 2015) – develop a temporary accommodation provision strategy on that basis is a welcome, albeit onerous, aspect of the strategy for several reasons. First, there has been concern in the Northern Irish homelessness sector about a failure to link the review and design of Supporting People programmes to homelessness strategies (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). Second, the damaging impacts of poor quality temporary accommodation (for instance, Bed and Breakfast accommodation and large-scale hostel-like provision) on vulnerable homeless people in relation to negative peer effects, violence and abuse in such contexts, as well as benefit traps and employment disincentives associated with rent levels etc. is now well understood (Johnsen and Watts, 2014; Watts *et al.*, 2015; Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2016). Alternative 'housing-led' and non-institutional approaches are now accruing an increasingly impressive evidence base (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2010; Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2016). This review of temporary accommodation thus gives policy-makers in Northern Ireland an opportunity to engage with this evidence base and the full range of alternative forms of temporary accommodation available, with the Supporting People strategy's emphasis on moving towards floating-support provision (as opposed to accommodation-based models) a positive foundation on which to build. The development of the Temporary Accommodation Provision Strategy is anticipated to happen in the last year of the current strategy (2021/22). These long timescales may reflect that a significant change in the kinds of services commissioned, and how these are commissioned (i.e. via competitive tendering) is likely to be sensitive and controversial, despite having been on the cards for some time already (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2014; DSD, 2015; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016; NIHE, 2017).

The homelessness strategy's emphasis on continuing to focus on the private rented sector (PRS) as a resolution to homelessness goes with the grain of both existing practice in Northern Ireland (where a payment by results PRS access scheme was established in 2014, see Chartered Institute of Housing *et al.*, 2011) and elsewhere in the UK, where there has been a focus on using the private rented sector as a preventative measure (helping those at risk of homelessness access or maintain PRS accommodation before becoming homeless) and a resolution to homelessness (Clarke and Monk, 2013; Reeve *et al.*, 2016). Pursuit of this agenda is all the more essential in Northern Ireland given its lower proportion of social housing

stock than elsewhere in the UK (Wilcox *et al.*, 2017); the declining number of social sector lettings available to new tenants annually; the very high proportion of these lets that go to homeless households; and the fact that the tenure is less prone to levels of spatial religious segregation than social housing in Northern Ireland (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). As elsewhere in the UK, Northern Ireland's PRS has grown exceedingly fast in recent years, quadrupling in size in the last 14 years (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). There are, nevertheless, some concerns about the capacity of the PRS to play an expanded role in homelessness in light of the prevalence of small-scale reluctant landlords and the consequential fragility of supply (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016) and welfare reform measures that may reduce the willingness of private landlords to house those who are homeless (Reeve *et al.*, 2016).

The actions concerning accommodation and support identified in the homelessness strategy and described in this section are fairly narrow. This must be understood in the context of the strategy's focus on accommodation-related issues only, and the complimentary work being led by the Department for Communities on an inter-departmental homelessness action plan. This will focus on *non*-accommodation services required to meet the strategy's aims and will be developed via co-production with key partners. As no substantive work on this action plan is yet in the public domain, it cannot be included in this review, but its contents will be fundamental to achieving the aim of 'ending homelessness together'.

Chronic Homelessness

Chronic homelessness and rough sleeping are a sensitive issue in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the multiple street deaths in Belfast during winter 2015/16 (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016), albeit that a street needs audit conducted during summer 2015 identified low levels of rough sleeping in the city (NIHE, 2016). It is therefore fitting that better understanding and addressing chronic homelessness is a core objective of the strategy. The actions associated with this objective are to review and implement Rough Sleeper Strategies in Northern Ireland's two major cities; to identify need outside of these urban areas and devise an action plan to address them; and to ensure appropriate housing models for this group.

The rather open nature of this third action is likely to be a disappointment for those in the sector who were hoping for an explicit endorsement and 'mainstreaming' of the Housing First model in the new strategy (Housing First offers rough sleepers with complex needs immediate access to mainstream housing and the supports to maintain it, see Padgett, Henwood and Tsemberis, 2016). While the body of the strategy does record an intention to develop this approach (p.23), the commitments to action are very muted, extending only to examining "the potential for other Housing

Led Pathway Models for chronic homeless clients (subject to available funding)” (p.27). This is in contrast to the enthusiasm for and apparent momentum around Housing First articulated by sector key informants quoted in the 2016 Homelessness Monitor, who described a ‘big push’ around Housing First and voiced strong support and optimism regarding the Depaul Housing First pilot underway in Belfast at the time (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). The evaluation of this pilot has since been published, demonstrating (in line with a now overwhelming body of international evidence) high tenancy sustainment rates and good value for money (Boyle *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, the limited strategy commitments in this area – and some notes of caution from sector key informants in the Homelessness Monitor – indicate that financial considerations are likely to have been the central factor preventing a more enthusiastic commitment to expanding Housing First provision as part of the homelessness strategy. This change of tack puts Northern Ireland at odds with recent developments in England where, for instance, several major political parties included commitments to Housing First in their manifestos for the June 2017 Westminster election.

Oversight, Delivery and Monitoring

The new strategy includes a strong focus on delivery mechanisms, data gathering, monitoring, review and evaluation processes, likely reflecting both the outcomes-framework adopted in the draft Programme for Government, and a recognition of the implementation challenges that vexed the previous strategy, in particular concerning cross-departmental and inter-agency working. An inter-departmental, multi-agency Homelessness Strategy Steering Group will be “tasked with ensuring the strategic delivery of the Strategy... [and] will ensure strategic direction and accountability... is shared across all relevant agencies” (p.24). The Group will be chaired by the Department for Communities, the successor (established in May 2016) to the Department for Social Development (responsible for progressing and monitoring the previous strategy, see NIHE, 2012), but incorporating a wider range of functions, including around employment, enterprise and local government.

The broader remit of the newly formed Department brings together a number of “critically aligned functions” relevant to homelessness that may help to foster a more joined-up approach (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016, pp.32-33). In addition, the size of the Department may bring positive benefits as regards departmental funding. Further still, the ambitious focus on data collection, impact monitoring, reviews and evaluation processes within the strategy will, if taken forward and sufficiently resourced, offer a clear route to identifying implementation issues early and provide considerable intelligence regarding whether interventions are working, as well as shedding more light than existing data allows on the profile and number of people experiencing homelessness in Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, the large size of the newly established Department for Communities may mean that homelessness struggles for profile and funding in the context of this wide portfolio, in particular given that it is this department that will shoulder the burden of managing the implementation and impacts of the welfare reform programme. Furthermore, one of the key failures of inter-agency working effecting the previous strategy concerned the lack of commitment from the Department of Health on homelessness, with very important impacts in relation to access to detoxification facilities for those with serious substance misuse problems (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2016). It is not clear that the new delivery arrangements are any better placed to ensure a change in this regard, and there are no specific commitments in the main strategy in this area. Lastly, though there is a strong and welcome emphasis on data, monitoring, evaluation and review processes in the strategy, the specifics of this are not clear. Moreover, of the four overarching indicators identified – homelessness presentations; average length of stay in temporary accommodation; ‘full duty applicant’ duties discharged; levels of repeat homelessness (p.17) – the baseline position is provided for only the first two of these. Getting these monitoring systems right, and establishing a clear baseline position against which to judge progress, will be crucial to establishing an effective incentive structure to support delivery of the strategy.

Successful implementation of the strategy will also depend in substantial part on the buy-in and will of the yet to be formed Northern Ireland Executive, and specifically, Minister for Communities, and on the implications of a new government for the future of the Housing Executive, the recent history of which has been tumultuous and disrupted. Continuation of the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland, or a return to direct rule by Westminster, are likely to considerably constrain progress on the homelessness strategy, as well as in other policy areas.

Conclusions

Given the challenges associated with implementing the previous strategy, *Ending Homelessness Together* represents a welcome fresh start on homelessness in Northern Ireland. The focus on homelessness prevention serves to catch Northern Ireland up with developments that have paid dividends and reduced levels of homelessness elsewhere in the UK. The impacts of prevention however, particularly in England, have sometimes been controversial (Pawson, 2007) and a key challenge will be ensuring that the Housing Solutions and Support model is effective at genuinely preventing homelessness, rather than merely making it harder for homeless households to access their entitlements under the homelessness legislation. As the last UK nation to adopt the model, there are lessons to be learnt on how this balance can be struck: in England and Wales, difficulties striking this balance

have ultimately led to legal reform and the integration of prevention work with local authorities' other statutory duties on homelessness. In Scotland, this challenge has curtailed the assertiveness of prevention efforts.

In other ways, the new strategy stands out from developments seen elsewhere in the UK. First, the focus on hidden homelessness – and a communication strategy to address it – is a distinct and ambitious approach in the UK context. This reflects evidence of relatively high rates of hidden homelessness in Northern Ireland, and the willingness to address this directly is to be applauded. Whether this generates increased demand for support, and how that is addressed in the context of limited resources and the impacts of welfare cuts, will be an important question going forward. Second, the strategy appears to represent a reining in (apparently due to concerns over cost) of previous enthusiasm for Housing First as a mainstream solution to chronic homelessness. This is to be lamented, given the very strong evidence base on the effectiveness of the model, including in Belfast specifically, and the controversy surrounding street deaths in Belfast. It also stands in contrast to the direction of travel now underway in England.

The key question raised by this review of the new strategy is whether it can be implemented effectively. Apparent sector buy-in to the substantive content of the strategy will no doubt help in this regard, as will the built-in focus on oversight and delivery arrangements and monitoring and evaluation. The broader context faced by the Housing Executive and Department for Communities, however, is extremely challenging: implementation of the strategy will run alongside the extension of most aspects of the UK-wide welfare reform programme to Northern Ireland, the considerable negative impacts of which on homelessness are now very clear, especially in England. This challenge will need to be navigated in the wider context of uncertainty around Brexit – and its complex and particular implications in Northern Ireland given its shared border with the Republic of Ireland – together with a domestic political crisis that has left Northern Ireland without a functioning executive for most of 2017, albeit with some Northern Irish political leaders now being in a highly privileged position to negotiate with the UK Government. The evolution of these unique political factors is likely to have significant implications for the homelessness strategy one way or another, in relation to the finances available to pursue its objectives, the buy-in and will of the Minister for Communities and wider executive, and the next chapter in the story of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's fortunes. There is a considerable task ahead therefore in ensuring that the new homelessness strategy achieves real positive impacts for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Northern Ireland.

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