

<p>Draft Programme for Government Consultation Response July 2016</p>

Who we are

Simon Community NI is a charitable organisation which **provides emergency accommodation, advice and community support for people who are homeless or those who are at risk of becoming homeless.**

Simon Community NI was established in 1971 and is the leading homelessness charity in Northern Ireland.

What we do

The vision of Simon Community NI is that homelessness is ended in Northern Ireland.

Mission: We exist to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to achieve a meaningful and independent place in their community

To this end Simon Community NI delivers a wide range of services including:

- Accommodation facilities for single individuals (384 single bed spaces)
- Services for families (24 family units)
- Services for young people
- Community Support Services
- Alcohol and Drug Misuse Services
- Homelessness Prevention Services
- Free-phone Advice Service
- Creche facilities through Partnership arrangements
- Support for people who have no access to public funds
- Client Participation

Simon Community NI has 22 Accommodation Services throughout Northern Ireland.

Homelessness in Northern Ireland

Homelessness in Northern Ireland is a growing problem, and there are many reasons why people find themselves homeless. It is important to understand that there is no one single causation factor, and by this measure, there is no single solution.

Proportionately, Northern Ireland has the highest levels of homelessness in the UK. We have rising levels of bad debt, repossession and eviction, and the impact of Welfare Reform is predicted to push many people closer to homelessness. Some of the reasons people find themselves homeless include:

- Family breakdown and marital dispute
- Addiction;
- Ill mental health;
- Bereavement;
- Debt;
- Poor life choices;
- Shortage of affordable housing.

Nearly 20,000 households – not people – presented as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive last year. There are no figures on how many people are affected. 39,000 people are on the Social Housing Waiting List. Roughly the same number contacted the Simon Community NI Freephone helpline last year for help and support.

We have a significant problem with youth homelessness – around 50% of our clients are under the age of 25. As a consequence, Northern Ireland is staring at a generational homeless problem that, without the right set of interventions, will see people fall in and out of homelessness for the rest of their lives.

People are at risk of, and are actually, dying here because of their homelessness. Five of those deaths were reported in the media in November 2015-March 2016. Many other people who are homeless and accommodated by charities and support agencies on a temporary basis, die each year. However, these deaths largely go unnoticed.

Draft Programme for Government Framework: Overview Commentary

Ending homelessness requires a cross departmental approach, which can transcend the bureaucracy and limitations of individual government departments. It is for this reason that Simon Community NI supports the outcomes-based approach. The Draft Programme for Government Framework should, in theory and if sufficiently supported, lend itself more effectively to engaging in the multiple and varied factors which contribute to homelessness.

However, we would emphasise the difficulty of fully engaging with this process with the necessary details that will follow with the publication of the Department Action Plans.

Whilst we understand the change in how government will set out their plans for this mandate and beyond, the rest of the document does not offer any information on how the draft framework will facilitate meaningful actions to achieve the stated outcomes.

A key concern for Simon Community NI is that the draft framework does not compel collaborative cross-departmental working, or offer any detail on how this can be achieved without significant legislative change and additional resource.

Whilst we welcome the appointment of Senior Responsible Officers to oversee the delivery of each outcome, who we are advised will be afforded much more freedom than departmental officials have traditionally been granted, the lack of legislative underpinning which could confer or remove certain duties and responsibilities on public bodies or otherwise, remains a concern.

We are concerned at this for the reason that the draft framework makes no mention of new or changed responsibilities for delivery agencies, in spite of the completely changed context in which they are expected to operate. We believe it is essential that in order for a truly collaborative outcomes-based approach to work, those who will be delivering this on the ground should be enabled to do so, which may require additional resource and legislative change in some instances. The lack of reference to any of these issues is, in our opinion, a fundamental issue in understanding how this vision document can be delivered on the ground.

Simon Community NI is also concerned that the Measures contained in the draft framework will not provide any real or specific challenge to stretch government departments to be creative, innovative or deliver on anything more than legislative requirements.

With a lack of targets contained in the Measures, there is a real concern at what and who determines what the barometer for success is. We believe that more detail on the ambition of the Indicator and accompanying Measures should have been supplied in this draft framework to enable respondents to meaningfully engage with the consultation process to ensure that government's vision is suitably ambitious, and understands where each sector is in terms of working towards respective outcomes; ending homelessness in the case of Simon Community NI.

Critically, the document does not deem homelessness to be an important issue. There is no specific reference to the word 'homelessness' in the whole document. The only associated mention of the subject is a fleeting reference as part of a housing issue.

Commentary on Outcomes

Simon Community NI wishes to express in the strongest terms the need for the inclusion of an outcome which relates to the right of every citizen to a safe and secure home. Given that the draft framework is premised around the delivery of improving wellbeing for all, we are shocked that there is no outcome which relates to this fundamental right, and would urge that an outcome which reflects this is included in the final document.

A recent report by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated, "The Committee is concerned about the significant rise in homelessness in the State party, particularly in England and Northern Ireland, affecting mostly single persons, families with children, victims of domestic violence, persons with disabilities and asylum seekers." Therefore, Simon Community NI believes it is incumbent upon the new government to prioritise ending homelessness by including an outcome in the Programme for Government which will ensure that sufficient resource and measures are put in place to allow this to happen; government should not attempt to shoehorn the issue into another outcome as this will not suffice.

We support the inclusion of other peripheral outcomes which will go some way to supporting the delivery of homelessness, but again emphasise that these on their own will not end homelessness or address housing issues. There must be a clearly stated commitment articulated in the final Programme for Government, and nothing short of this will be acceptable to Simon Community NI.

Proposal: Simon Community NI is calling on government to include the following Outcome within the Draft Programme Government:

"We have safe and secure homes for everyone."

Commentary on Indicators

Simon Community NI believe that there should be explicit reference to homelessness contained within the Indicators, and would further add that the current housing Indicator will do nothing to end homelessness.

The present Indicator, which states that government will “Improve the supply of suitable housing” fails to do anything in relation to homelessness as it assumes that homelessness is about bricks and mortar, and lack of supply. Whilst this is the case in some instances, it does not reflect the complex nature of homelessness in Northern Ireland today.

It is our view that the failure to include a specific Indicator on homelessness is a fundamental weakness in the draft framework, and will mean that the issue will continue to get worse. It will not be remedied by any of the other existing Indicators, and we would further argue that in terms of a priority, it should undoubtedly take precedence over some of those currently stated in the document.

Proposal: Simon Community NI is urging government in the strongest terms to include the following Indicator:

“Reduce homelessness year on year with the ultimate goal of ending it.”

We would further advise government to review the current housing Indicator as it seems out of step with the ethos of a document which purports to put improving wellbeing at the centre of government priorities. Whilst it may be one of a suite of Measures that could be included in ending homelessness, it seems out of step with the rest of the document.

Commentary on Measures

At present, the extent of homelessness in Northern Ireland is unknown due to the unknown number of people living in “hidden homelessness”, which includes people (and families) staying with friends, in B&Bs, in their cars and sleeping rough. Without any real metric or baseline study to ascertain the extent of homelessness in Northern Ireland, it is very difficult to measure any improvements in the current situation.

The current metric relating to housing, which is “the number of households in housing stress”, is flawed as it narrowly defines the Measurement to those on the Housing Waiting List, when we know through our extensive work on the ground as Northern Ireland’s largest homeless charity, this does not reflect the reality of those who have housing problems.

We would also add that like in the case of the housing Indicator in the document, it does not reflect the need to improve wellbeing across the board, by assuming that housing issues relate only to those captured within the Northern Ireland Housing

Executive's data. This denies measurement of those who are outside the system, such as those who are homeless or even those living in poor quality privately rented accommodation.

As data is not currently available regarding of the number of people who are homeless, and the fact that the Outcome should ensure that "we all have a good quality home", it is essential that a baseline is established out with the limited data on homelessness that is currently available. This should include a Northern Ireland-wide study on the extent of homelessness to capture a snapshot of the current status quo, and provide a baseline upon which the Executive should measure progress on an annual basis.

Proposal: Simon Community NI believe that a baseline study of the extent of homeless should be conducted and reviewed annually to measure progress against the proposed Indicator to "reduce homelessness".

We therefore propose the following wording for an additional measurement:

"The number of people and families who are homeless and/or on the housing waiting list."

We would further suggest that the current Measure, which quantifies the extent of housing stress, is insufficient to measure anything more than a narrowly defined section of society who are on a Housing Waiting List, and would add that it should either be removed altogether or changed.

Strategic Recommendations

The new Programme for Government should:

1. Contain a longer term commitment to ending homelessness in Northern Ireland, clearly referenced in an additional indicator.
2. Have explicit and measurable targets set to end homelessness by 2021 with the right preventions, responses and solutions.
3. Instruct the development and delivery of a properly resourced, time-bound inter-departmental government strategy with the clear priority to end homelessness.
4. Create a new role of a Homeless 'Champion' with authority to operate cross-departmentally.

Simon Community NI believe that it is possible to end homelessness here. It requires political commitment, a properly thought out and resourced strategy and the will to make it succeed. We are keen to work with government to make that happen.
