

The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2016

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Executive Summary

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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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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.

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.

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

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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Homelessness ends here