

trends in acceptances, a pattern that has not been replicated in Northern Ireland because a preventative focus has only recently emerged¹⁴⁹.

The Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017

Prevention

The move towards homelessness prevention has happened faster, with more immediate effects, in England, Scotland and Wales than has been the case for Northern Ireland. It is important to note, as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that the *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017* and 2014 reprioritisation deadlines that have not yet been reached. The goal of the Strategy was also to bring prevention to the forefront of service delivery, not to deliver set reductions in acceptances or presentations to the statutory system by a certain point.

A Housing Options led approach is in the process of being rolled out over the course of 2016/17 and appears to be on course to be delivered. There is clear progress towards achieving this goal, which is broadly welcomed by the homelessness sector and other agencies. Nevertheless, the process of introducing prevention appears to have taken significantly more time than was the case in England, Scotland or Wales. The intention to “provide a more strategic approach to prevention of homelessness” was expressed in the preceding homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland¹⁵⁰.

Levels of homelessness, as noted in Chapter 2, appear broadly static in terms of presentations, but there have been recent increases in the number of Full Duty Applicants. The test of the existing Strategy and the imminent replacement Strategy will be if the falls in acceptances, reported in the other statutory systems, start to be replicated in Northern Ireland. Reductions should also be seen, over time, in use of services for single homeless people. Rough sleeping levels appear to be low and should remain so, there should be no escalation and evidence of reductions in long-term and recurrent rough sleeping.

Internationally, there are two key lessons from effective homelessness strategies:

- Targeting of preventative services has met with mixed levels of success¹⁵¹. This is because some of the characteristics associated with specific forms of homelessness, such as long-term and recurrent homelessness being associated with mental health problems and drug/alcohol use, can arise before but also *after*

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter 2 and Fitzpatrick, S. *et al* (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2016* London: Crisis.

¹⁵⁰ Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2002) *The Homelessness Strategy* Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

¹⁵¹ Greer, A.L., Shinn, M., Kwon, J. and Zuiderveen, S. (2016) Targeting Services to Individuals Most Likely to Enter Shelter: Evaluating the Efficiency of Homelessness Prevention. *Social Service Review*, 90(1), pp.130-155.

homelessness has occurred. Equally, people with characteristics such as mental health problems, that are associated with homelessness, do not all become homeless.

- Effective homelessness prevention provides a universally accessible service that has the capacity to rapidly triage, referring people with support needs to more intensive services while providing advice and assistance to those who only require a relatively small amount of help¹⁵².

Affordable Housing

As discussed in Chapter 3, Northern Ireland does face pressures in relation to the supply of affordable, adequate housing and some specific issues related to segregation. Northern Ireland is unlikely to be in a position where development of new social housing on any scale is feasible and the private rented sector and owner occupation will remain relatively expensive for lower income groups.

A key lesson from other homelessness strategies is the importance of affordable, adequate housing in delivering homelessness prevention and in reducing homelessness. Interagency coordination can be enhanced, preventative systems put into place and new, innovative models of service delivery developed, but any homelessness strategy ultimately fails or succeeds by whether or not sufficient housing can be found. This is a structural challenge, a housing policy challenge that extends into every dimension of housing need, moving beyond homelessness. The specific concerns about housing supply in relation to the Strategy are:

- Housing that is unaffordable and/or which offers insufficient security of tenure can act as a driver of homelessness in and of itself. As has been noted elsewhere, the associations between the end of private rented sector tenancies and statutory homelessness seen in England has not been replicated in Northern Ireland, but this is in a context in which the welfare reforms have not been fully implemented¹⁵³.
- Sustainment of exits from homelessness can be adversely influenced by housing supply problems. Tenancies may not be sustained if the right housing is not available or support services may have to engage at a higher level for a longer period of time to make unsuitable housing work. Finland experimented with congregate models of Housing First, which did not use individual apartments or houses, and while successes were achieved, intensive staffing was necessary¹⁵⁴.

¹⁵² Pleace, N., Culhane, D.P., Granfelt, R. and Knutagård, M. (2015). *The Finnish Homelessness Strategy: An International Review*. Helsinki: Ministry of the Environment.

¹⁵³ See Fitzpatrick, S. et al (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2016* London: Crisis.

¹⁵⁴ Pleace, N.; Knutagård, M.; Culhane, D.P. and Granfelt, R. (2016) 'The Strategic Response to Homelessness in Finland: Exploring Innovation and Coordination within a National Plan to Reduce and Prevent Homelessness' in S.

- Homelessness exists in multiple forms, some of which are associated with income poverty relative to housing costs. In contexts where housing supply is unaffordable to lower income people, including those in paid work, homelessness can increase in part due to economic reasons. American research reports a considerable working homeless population, in full time and part time paid work, who cannot afford housing¹⁵⁵.

Maximising affordable housing supply will in practice mean working to ensure minimum standards, affordability and security of tenure with private landlords and other agencies prepared to help meet wider housing need. Cross subsidy arrangements have been used in London, including mixed development sites where full 'market value' housing is sold or rented, to subsidise lower cost home ownership, or social rented housing¹⁵⁶.

Rough Sleeping and Long-Term Homelessness

The extent of rough sleeping in Northern Ireland may be greater than the street count methodology used in Belfast indicates, because there are significant methodological limitations to this approach (see Chapter 4). However, while rough sleeping may be higher, the numbers are not great. The key concerns are:

- To ensure that highly vulnerable individuals are not in situations where a lack of interagency coordination or other logistical problems causes sustained and recurrent experience of rough sleeping. Deaths on the streets have occurred and there has been a sustained effort to improve service responses, but this relates to wider service coordination alongside ensuring existing services for people sleeping rough are in place and properly supported.
- There is clear evidence that Housing First can deliver a sustainable exit from homelessness for a majority of homeless people with high and complex needs. Housing First is a key element within an effective response to long-term homelessness and rough sleeping. The pilot service has recently been evaluated¹⁵⁷. The international evidence base shows that close fidelity to the core philosophy of Housing First and avoiding 'dilution' of the model, is crucial to effectiveness¹⁵⁸. Other models, which again are based on evidence-based practice, such as Critical Time

Gaetz (eds) *Exploring Effective Systems Responses to Homelessness* Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

¹⁵⁵ It has been estimated that up to 44% of the US homeless population is in employment (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009) <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/employment.html>

¹⁵⁶ Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2008) *Residents' views of new forms of high-density affordable living* Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing.

¹⁵⁷ Boyle, F and Palmer, J with Ahmed, S (2016) *The Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Housing First Support Service piloted by Depaul in Belfast, funded by Supporting People: An SROI evaluation*.

¹⁵⁸ Pleace, N. (2016) *Housing First Guide Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA <http://housingfirstguide.eu>

Intervention, may also be effective in reducing rough sleeping and long-term homelessness¹⁵⁹.

- With the planned introductions to Housing Benefit in relation to supported housing, which will eligible reduce rents to LHA (Local Housing Allowance) average levels as at 2019/20, the future financial viability of some single-site supported congregate and communal housing is uncertain¹⁶⁰. Funding constraints may also be important in terms of meeting the capital costs of new single-site supported housing. This change to financing, combined with the evidence pointing in favour of floating support services, may need to result in changes to how rough sleeping is responded to in Northern Ireland, in the medium term. However, the need for emergency accommodation and for highly supportive housing needs to be recognised, Housing First and housing-led services are a key element within, but not the sole component of, an effective homelessness strategy¹⁶¹.

Improving Services for Vulnerable Homeless People

The points raised in relation to rough sleeping and long-term homelessness also apply in respect of improving services for vulnerable homeless people. Here, the key concerns are as follows:

- Clearly, the development of Regional Forums, the Common Assessment Framework and the Common Access Point, within the context of the strategic shift towards a Housing Options model is a major step forward in enhancing services for vulnerable homeless people. The direction of travel towards enhanced interagency working to prevent and reduce homelessness is clear and while the process is not complete, the positive intent behind the design and delivery of the Strategy is evident.
- At present, there is evidence that interagency coordination is not always at the level required to deliver an effective response for all homeless people with support needs. This applies to both the prevention and reduction of homelessness. Core components of what should be packages of care are not always in place. It is important to note that while roll-out of the Housing Options approach is not yet complete, positive results from the Housing Solutions and Support Teams were being reported.
- The international evidence highlights the importance of using evidence-led policies and service models to ensure the needs of vulnerable homeless people and

¹⁵⁹ Benjaminsen, L., 2013. Policy review up-date: Results from the Housing First based Danish homelessness strategy. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 7(2).

¹⁶⁰ <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06080>

¹⁶¹ Pleace, N. and Bretherton, J. (2013) The Case for Housing First in the European Union: A Critical Evaluation of Concerns about Effectiveness *European Journal of Homelessness* 7.2, 21-41.

potentially homeless people are met. As noted in relation to rough sleeping, it is important that these services have fidelity to the principles and operational characteristics that made them effective, i.e. they are not ‘watered down’ to reduce expenditure. The wider points about the relative effectiveness and financial viability of congregate and communal single site supported housing also need to be considered here. Again, it is important to note that emergency accommodation and some forms of supported housing are required in a homelessness strategy, an entirely ‘housing-led’/Housing First based strategy is unlikely to be viable¹⁶².

The 38 Actions and the Reprioritisation

While the four core objectives for the Strategy and the wider goals for 2020 are clear, the position in relation to the 38 Actions is more mixed. The relationships between the Actions and the wider strategy was variable, while some of the Actions and the key goals identified for the re-prioritisation were specifically relatable to wider targets, the scope and extent of Actions could be variable. Some Actions related to following policy established prior to the Strategy, some were very specific, while others effectively called for strategic and systemic change. The level of strategic importance attached to different Actions was also not consistent. There were, in contrast to the very simple and direct set of goals set by successful strategies in Finland or the US, a large number of Actions.

The Actions and the key priorities established by the reprioritisation in 2014 were interdependent, with the successful delivery of many being linked to the successful roll-out of the Housing Options led element of the Strategy. Several were linked to the Common Assessment Framework and Central Access Point. There is clear progress towards a preventative framework and experimentation with the evidenced-based Housing First model, with progress in relation to the 38 Actions and the key aims of the reprioritisation being interlinked with the speed and success with which these changes have been implemented.

Many changes are on the horizon, ranging from Brexit to the welfare reforms, which will influence how the Strategy can be implemented. Preparing for these changes will be a key challenge for the next Strategy.

¹⁶² Ibid.

Recommendations

The next Homelessness Strategy was being developed through a consultative process as this evaluation report was being assembled. Some recommendations stem from the lessons learned from the current Strategy, both in terms of successes and limitations, others relate to experience with other successful homelessness strategies.

- The direction of travel, towards enhanced homelessness prevention and the further development of coordinated service responses and use of evidence-based service models should be viewed very positively. The goals of the *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017* are supported by the results of the approaches to homelessness used in Wales, Scotland and England and by the international evidence.
- The Actions and Key Priorities, within a broader framework of objectives and a strategic plan to end rough sleeping and long-term homelessness by 2020, are more complex than those found in other successful homelessness strategies. Some of this is because goals are broken down into several components, i.e. many of the 38 Actions should be delivered as a Housing Options led approach is rolled out across Northern Ireland. Simpler and more specific targets, which might include the following sorts of specific outcomes, should be considered to give the next Strategy a clearer focus:
 - Reducing homelessness acceptances by a set percentage, which might be established by looking at the reductions achieved in Wales, Scotland and England.
 - Evidence of reductions in single homelessness due to prevention. Again, targets can be set in relation to the use of services, both in terms of the statutory system and in terms of services for single homeless people.
 - Evidence that rough sleeping, particularly long-term and recurrent rough sleeping and also long-term homelessness is being reduced.
 - Continual, shared, data collection to monitor service activity and outcomes, employing unique identifiers (to be processed within Data Protection laws) to allow monitoring of levels of long-term and recurrent homelessness and, with consent, the use of data to identify individuals who may require specific support services. Examples of systems include CHAIN in London¹⁶³, the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS) in the Republic of

¹⁶³ <http://www.mungos.org/chain>

Ireland¹⁶⁴ and the Danish surveys and administrative data collection from homelessness services¹⁶⁵.

- Data collection on the extent of concealed and hidden homelessness. This might, for example, be conducted in cooperation with housing advice services. Gender, youth and family homelessness are specific concerns here. Once the extent can be more carefully estimated, goals can be set in relation to reducing hidden homelessness.
- Successful strategies in other contexts have had a clear leadership structure and placed considerable emphasis on interagency working. In the US, there is a dedicated structure involving all of Federal Government, in Finland, municipalities and service providers were asked to sign up to the strategies, creating a baseline of consent and minimum guarantees in working towards a shared goal. Establishing a single body with responsibility and sufficient authority for the implementation of the next Strategy may be beneficial¹⁶⁶. Consultation and joint working with the homelessness sector is essential to this process.
- There has been clear progress since the 2014 Reprioritisation and during 2016, as the Housing Options has begun to be rolled out. Northern Ireland has, however, not introduced homelessness prevention at the same rates, or as yet with the same impacts, as have been achieved in England, Scotland and Wales. Ensuring momentum is important to building and maintaining a broad political consensus, i.e. there should be clear goals which are clearly timetabled. The importance of not over-complicating the next Strategy with multiple, interrelated targets and what are effectively sub-targets is, again, important to note.
- Change can seem threatening. As prevention becomes more widespread and the use of Housing First and other service models begins to take place, some existing services may come under pressure, in terms of changes to demand. Wider changes, specifically the welfare reforms and Brexit, may reduce spending on homelessness services, which combined with the introduction of new approaches, again Housing First is an example, may reduce or change the nature of funding for existing homelessness services. Working collaboratively towards new ways of preventing and reducing homelessness, bringing the homelessness sector fully on board, was crucial to success in Finland. Ultimately, effective delivery of a new homelessness strategy must be a collaborative and collective effort.

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/pass>

¹⁶⁵ Benjaminsen, L. (2015) Homelessness in a Scandinavian welfare state: The risk of shelter use in the Danish adult population *Urban Studies*, DOI: 0042098015587818.

¹⁶⁶ This was also suggested by several respondents.

