

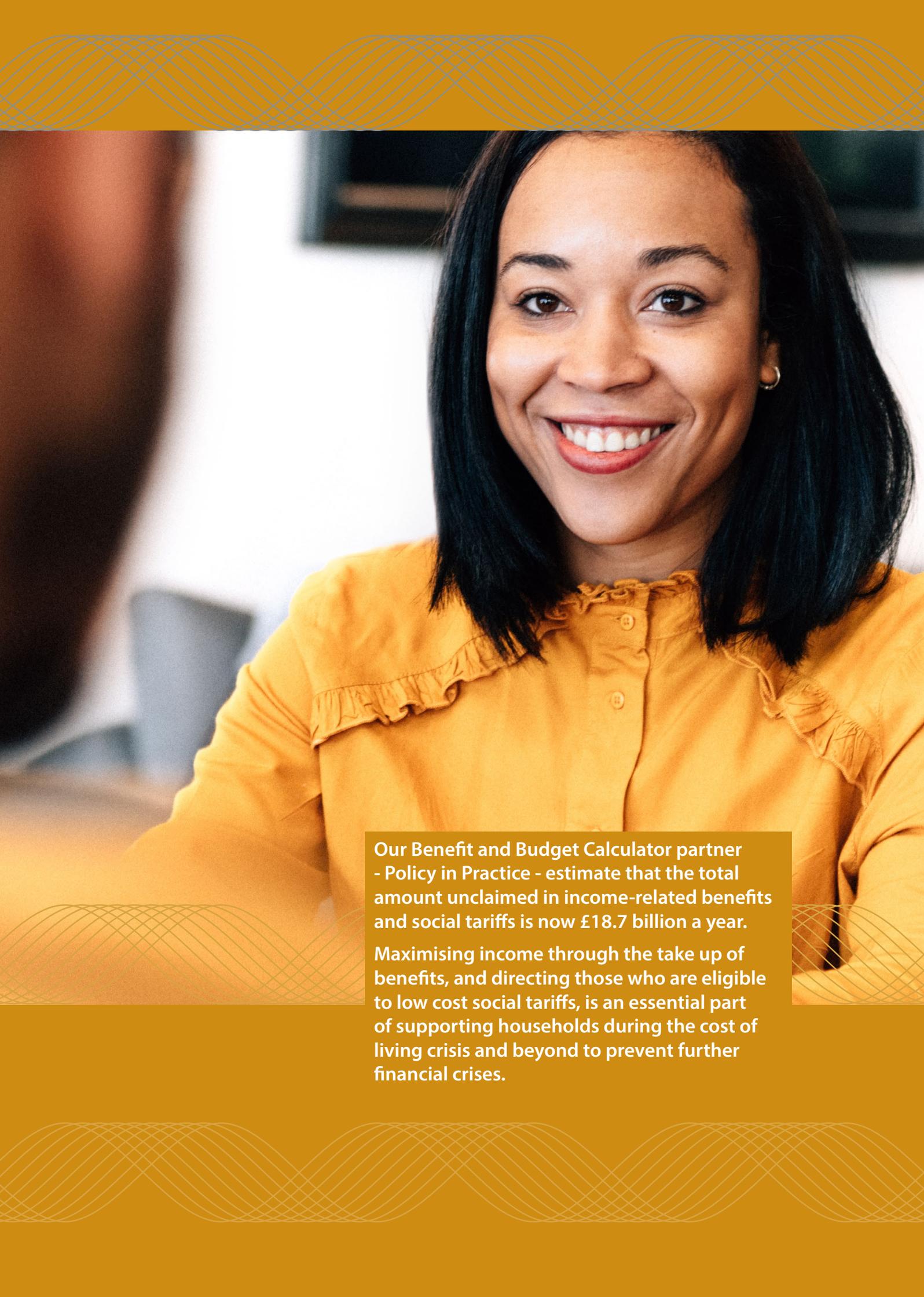


**Housing**  
Executive

# **Financial Inclusion Strategy**

2023-28





Our Benefit and Budget Calculator partner - Policy in Practice - estimate that the total amount unclaimed in income-related benefits and social tariffs is now £18.7 billion a year. Maximising income through the take up of benefits, and directing those who are eligible to low cost social tariffs, is an essential part of supporting households during the cost of living crisis and beyond to prevent further financial crises.

# Executive Summary

## The need for a Financial Inclusion Strategy

The cost of financial exclusion is high for both those affected and wider society; it impacts on general wellbeing and is closely related to poverty and social exclusion. Financial exclusion, particularly in terms of debt and over-indebtedness, can have a negative impact on mental health and can disrupt families. It makes living on a low income more expensive, unstable and stressful than it otherwise would be, and can act as a barrier to personal and economic development.

Empowering our tenants and housing customers to improve their own financial situation means they are better able to cope financially and are at less risk of losing their home. In turn, this helps us to: reduce the volume of void properties; sustain our neighbourhoods; develop more cohesive communities; and reduce/prevent homelessness.

## Background

Our Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-19 was developed to help tenants and housing customers access the right financial help, support, and services needed in order to manage their money better. Our previous strategy sought to develop new ways to prepare for the future whilst taking account of the financial challenges emerging due to the implementation of welfare reform.

The 2016-19 Financial Inclusion Strategy was established concurrently with the Rental Income Maximisation strategy; many of the goals of the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-19 were delivered through the associated action plan. In 2019, we extended both strategies for a further three years in order to continue delivering our aims. Shortly thereafter, the Northern Ireland social, economic, and political context changed substantially.

The 2023-28 Financial Inclusion Strategy comes at a critical time for everyone who engages with the Housing Executive as Northern Ireland adjusts to a 'new normal' following the peak of a worldwide pandemic whilst facing an acute cost of living crisis.

## The vision of this strategy

At the Housing Executive, we believe everyone, irrespective of their background or means, should be able to live in an affordable, sustainable, and decent home that is appropriate to their needs, in a safe, attractive, and climate-resilient place. This vision drives us in everything we do and is underpinned by our values and behaviours; to make a difference through fairness, passion, and expertise.

In support of this, the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-28 seeks to address the needs of our most vulnerable, complex, and financially challenged tenants and housing customers. Our vision is to empower our tenants and customers to become more financially resilient and in so doing, continue to reduce the volume of void properties; sustain our neighbourhoods; develop more cohesive communities; and reduce/prevent homelessness.

## The aim of this strategy

The Financial Inclusion Strategy consolidates the many ways in which the Housing Executive will deliver this vision, guided by an overarching aim to embed financial inclusion into as many customer-focused services as possible in order to promote financial resilience and achieve long and happy housing tenure appropriate to the needs of the individual.

The delivery of our vision is supported by a dynamic framework, underpinned by four key objectives: maximise income; promote financial flexibility; open doors to better finances; and communication and information.

## How have we helped tenants so far?

A pension age tenant struggling for three years to pay rent from state pension after their Housing Benefit claim closed due to non-dependent charges.

Financial Inclusion team identified the charge had been applied at the incorrect rate as the non-dependent is in receipt of PIP.

Challenged this with the Housing Benefit team who agreed and the HB claim was reinstated and backdated resulting in an underpayment of £6,450 for the tenant.

In order to deliver our objectives, the 2023-2028 Financial Inclusion Strategy Action Plans will be divided into three key elements, each of which defines the way services are planned, approached, and delivered for individual objectives: Prevention, Priority, and Potential.

The framework is designed to adapt to known, anticipated, and unexpected financial inclusion challenges which lie ahead, and guides the development and implementation of policies and procedures which support delivery of our yearly action plans. Over the next five years we will focus on the delivery of our objectives, high level outcomes, and actions which are detailed throughout this document.

## How will it be delivered?

The objectives and actions within this strategy are supported by the development of yearly action plans. The year one action plan has been developed in consultation with key internal and external stakeholders.

The Financial Inclusion Strategy is principally an internal document as financial inclusion is not a statutory function. The actions of the Financial Inclusion strategy will be delivered primarily by the Financial Inclusion Team, relevant policy teams, frontline Housing Executive staff, and through wider partnerships with agencies such as Advice NI, Make the Call, and others.

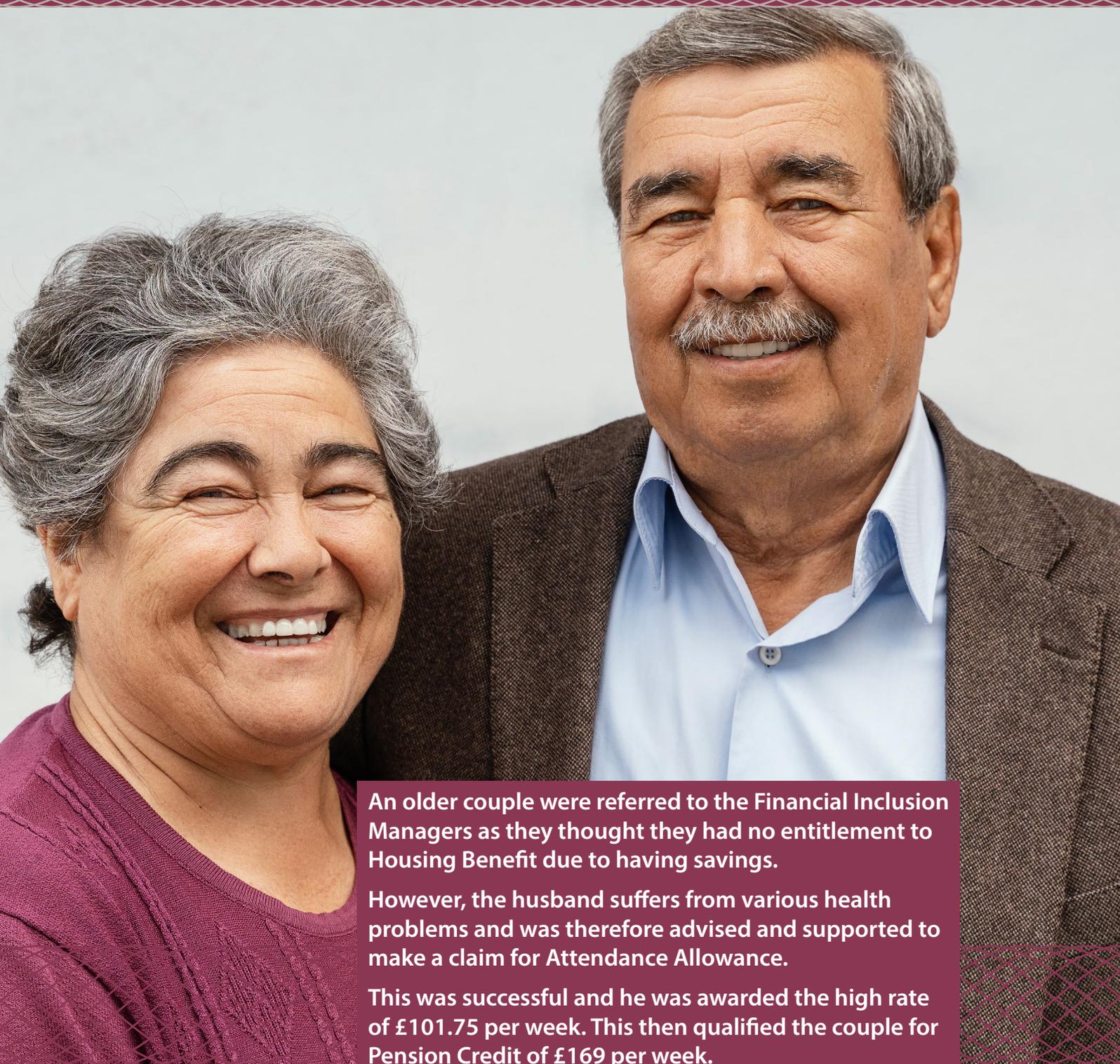
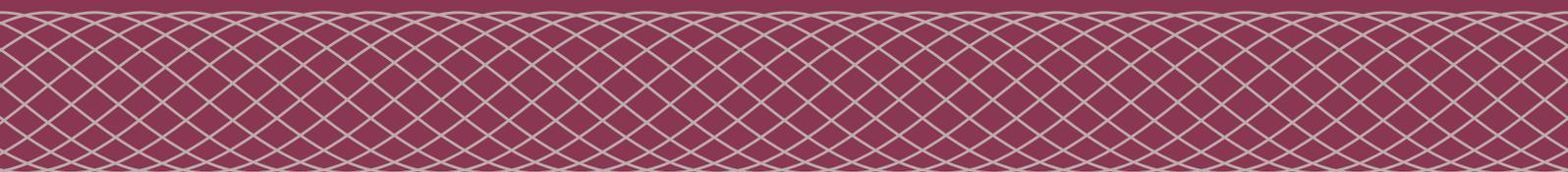
## Key Changes from the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-19

The 2023-28 Financial Inclusion Strategy has been conceived through a process of pre-draft consultation with a number of internal and

external stakeholders including: team leaders and frontline staff across housing services; regional, area, and assistant area managers; a range of policy leads; and members of the Welfare Reform/Financial Inclusion working group - which includes representatives from the Housing Community Network.

In reflecting the views of our partners regarding the delivery of Financial Inclusion services, there have been a number of key changes from our previous strategy. These include:

- A reduction in the number of objectives, from five to four; and a narrowing of focus. The new objectives reflect four principal areas which work in tandem to identify and break down barriers to financial inclusion. More focused 2023-28 objectives allow for the implementation of specific and realistic financial inclusion interventions which are deliverable within the remit of the teams tasked with delivering them.
- The development of a new action plan for every year of the strategy so as to accommodate change as and when change is necessary. This flexibility is further embedded through the incorporation of three elements (Prevention, Priority, and Potential) in the action plan delivery structure. Each yearly action plan will be developed through a process which will include a review of the previous year's actions and consultation with key internal and external stakeholders.
- A commitment to expand and add to the current available methods of measuring and reporting the impact of the strategy. This will be delivered on an ongoing basis over five years as the action plans associated with the strategy continue to develop.



**An older couple were referred to the Financial Inclusion Managers as they thought they had no entitlement to Housing Benefit due to having savings.**

**However, the husband suffers from various health problems and was therefore advised and supported to make a claim for Attendance Allowance.**

**This was successful and he was awarded the high rate of £101.75 per week. This then qualified the couple for Pension Credit of £169 per week.**

**Entitlement to pension credit passports the couple to full housing benefit of £85.81 per week. In total, the couple are now better off by £18,512 per year.**



# Introduction

The 2023-28 Financial Inclusion Strategy has been conceived through a process of pre-draft consultation with a number of internal and external stakeholders including: team leaders and frontline staff across housing services; regional, area, and assistant area managers; a range of policy leads; and members of the Welfare Reform/Financial Inclusion working group - which includes representatives from the Housing Community Network. The final document has been shared with these key stakeholders who have provided invaluable feedback; we'd like to thank them for their input.

In 2019, we extended our previous Financial Inclusion Strategy until 2022 in order to further deliver on our aims and objectives. Since then, the Northern Ireland social, economic, and political context has changed substantially. In January 2020, the UK officially exited the European Union. Shortly thereafter, the onset of a global pandemic altered many of our working practices and changed the way we were able to interact with and support our tenants and other customers during the remaining lifetime of the strategy. The pandemic also significantly shifted the way many of our tenants and other customers are able to live their lives. The legacy of the pandemic for housing and homelessness, and the organisations that support those affected, is only beginning to reveal itself but will be felt for many years to come.

As Northern Ireland adjusts to a 'new normal' following the height of the pandemic, we have entered a period of sustained economic downturn resulting in an acute cost of living crisis. This is evidenced by rapidly increasing foodbank use, high levels of deprivation and poverty, rising fuel poverty, growing indebtedness, and continuing difficulty for those navigating a reformed welfare system. Amongst this extraordinary upheaval, a targeted Financial Inclusion Strategy with a wide-ranging approach is more vital than ever; our action plan has been developed in this context.

## What is Financial Inclusion?

*Financial exclusion is "a process whereby a person... lacks or is denied access to affordable, appropriate and fair financial products and services. Addressing financial exclusion is not merely about service provision; it also includes capacity building and structural change"*

A person is financially included if they have the ability, the will, and the means to access financial help, support, and mainstream services appropriate to them, when needed, to promote participation in the society to which they belong. Being financially included builds financial resilience - the ability to cope financially when faced with a sudden fall in income or unavoidable rise in expenditure.

Barriers to financial inclusion include:

- Lack of financial education
- Low Income
- Digital Exclusion
- No access to affordable credit
- Debt Problems
- Lack of Savings
- Lack of insurance
- Lack of access to mainstream banking
- Geography
- Social Exclusion

Financial Inclusion is best defined in relation to the impact of financial exclusion; without intervention, financial exclusion can result in social exclusion, poverty, and inequality. Financial exclusion creates problems in a variety of ways:

**Low income and exclusion from affordable credit** leaves those who need money with no option but to use high-interest forms of credit (e.g. payday loans, buy-now-pay-later, doorstep, and illegal lenders). This creates problematic debt and further financially excludes people.

**A lack of insurance and savings** makes households vulnerable to financial crises due to unexpected events such as job loss, pregnancy, illness, bereavement, burglary, and climate catastrophe such as flooding. A lack of savings can also contribute to poverty in old age and promote the use of high-cost credit in the event of smaller unexpected costs (such as a washing machine breakdown).

**Not having a bank account**, or only having an account with no direct debit facility (e.g. Post Office accounts) excludes people from this method of paying bills. Most utility suppliers charge more for using other methods of payment such as pre-payment meters, PayPoint, or cash. Lack of access to banking further excludes people from digital services and payment by card - which proliferated during the pandemic. Many employers will only pay wages directly into a bank account which might deter or exclude people from certain jobs due to inability to access a suitable service.

Increasingly, **geography** is impacting upon people's ability to become or remain financially included as bank branches close removing access to cash, and broadband penetration and speeds lag behind the rest of the UK. Lack of access to cash or the internet can leave people stranded in remote locations and further socially exclude them.

**Social exclusion** is as much a cause of financial exclusion as it is a consequence. This is a particular problem for socially excluded groups including those living on a low income, single parent families, vulnerable minority groups, refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, non-home owners (such as those in social and private rented accommodation), non-utility bill holders' (such as people who use a 'pay-as-you-go' keypad meter for gas/electricity), people who are unemployed, those in receipt of social welfare benefits, homeless people, rural residents, and younger/older people.

Overall, financial exclusion, particularly in terms of debt and over-indebtedness, has a negative impact on mental health and disrupts families, which may lead to family breakdown. It makes living on a low income more expensive, unstable, and stressful than it otherwise would be, and can act as a barrier to personal and economic development.

## What are the benefits of financial inclusion?

Empowering tenants and housing customers to increase their financial resilience will mean they are better able to cope financially and are less at risk of losing their home. In turn, this helps us achieve our aims to sustain long and happy Housing Executive tenancies, create stable neighbourhoods, develop more cohesive communities, and prevent homelessness. Promoting increased financial resilience means people can:

- Feel confident and make the right financial decisions;
- Access suitable bank accounts;
- Borrow at a reasonable cost when necessary;
- Access insurance to protect family and home;
- Set aside savings for emergencies;
- Access high quality money and benefits information for free and from reputable services;
- Avoid food and fuel poverty;
- Sustain a flourishing tenure of choice;
- Make more informed life choices.

In turn, this has a positive impact on a person's health and wellbeing, on their mental health, their relationships, their personal development and independence, and can open up new opportunities.

The Housing Executive also benefits from the positive impact of financial inclusion as it can reduce the time and associated costs of: maintenance repairs; recovering arrears; serving notices, arranging court action and evictions; change of tenancy repairs; processing homelessness applications; storing furniture; and providing temporary accommodation.

## Why is financial inclusion important for the Housing Executive?

Research conducted by the National Housing Federation indicates tenants in social housing are disproportionately affected by financial exclusion, making up around 60% of all financially excluded people.

Our vision for the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-28 is to see our tenants (and indeed all of our housing customers) become more financially resilient. Our aim is to embed financial inclusion into as many customer-focused services as possible to promote long and happy tenure appropriate to the needs of the individual and prevent homelessness.

## Where are we now (tenants)?

### Financial Inclusion

The Housing Executive's 2020 Continuous Tenants Omnibus Survey (CTOS) evidences that despite the key activities of our previous strategy - outlined on page 19 - there is more work to do to help our tenants improve their financial resilience. Many of our tenants continue to face barriers to financial inclusion, for example:

2016	2022
Just over 20% of tenants did not have access to a current or savings account with a bank, or to a building society account.	Just over 10% of tenants still do not have access to a current or savings account with a bank, or to a building society account.
Almost 40% of tenants did not have access to a debit or credit card.	Almost 19% of tenants still do not have a debit or credit card.
Around 50% of tenants reported an annual household income of less than £10,400 –below the very low income threshold.	20% of tenants still report an annual household income of less than £10,400.
Over 70% of tenants did not have home contents insurance - a widely recognised indicator of financial exclusion.	Around 70% of tenants still do not have home contents insurance.
77% of tenants were fully or partially dependent upon Housing Benefit to pay their rent - an indicator of those susceptible to financial exclusion.	Approximately 78% of tenants are now either fully or partially dependent upon a Housing Costs Benefit to pay their rent

## How are tenants managing?

In the 2021 CTOS, we started asking how our tenants are managing financially:

<b>41.2%</b>	said they were struggling to keep up with payments from time to time, or were behind on some or all financial commitments;
<b>16.4%</b>	said they lack confidence in their financial situation;
<b>12.6%</b>	had experienced a decrease in income over the previous 12 months;
<b>11.5%</b>	were asking friends or family for financial help;
<b>17.3%</b>	had avoided putting their heating on, even when cold.

It is notable that tenants were already reporting financial difficulties prior to the onset of the cost of living crisis.

## Rent Arrears

Whilst rent arrears are not the only sign of financial distress, it is important to acknowledge they may act as a warning and highlight underlying financial or personal problems in a household. As such, rent arrears have been, and will remain, a consistent trigger for financial inclusion interventions.

In December 2022, 30% (23,700) of our tenants had some form of rent arrears, compared to around a 25% (21,500) in 2016. This is broken down as follows:

2016		2022	
No. of Tenants	Arrears	No. of Tenants	Arrears
40% (approx 8,400)	less than £99	33% (approx 7,917)	less than £99
26% (approx 5,600)	£100 - £299	26% (approx 6,255)	£100 - £299
12% (approx 3,000)	£300 - £499	12% (approx 2,841)	£300 - £499
11% (approx 2,400)	£500 - £999	12% (approx 2,891)	£500 - £999
11% (approx 2,400)	more than £1,000	16% (approx 3,824)	more than £1,000

Notably, the number of tenants struggling to pay their rent has risen since the writing of our last Financial Inclusion Strategy. This can largely be attributed to three unprecedented 'income shocks' experienced by our tenants over the period in question: Welfare Reform (specifically the splitting of Rent housing cost benefits and Rates housing cost benefits), a sharp rise in the cost of living, and to a lesser extent, COVID-19 and the resulting employment disruption.

Particularly in the case of Welfare Reform, the splitting of Rent and Rates into two separate benefits has impacted rent arrears for some tenants. Universal Credit covers the rent element of Housing Costs, but this is also how a claimant accesses benefits more widely. Therefore, Housing Costs are much more readily applied for. However, Rate Rebate now requires a separate account and a separate application process; many tenants simply do not apply. Of those that do, many who would previously have had entitlement to help with rates under Housing Benefit find they do not under the new system due to income from employment, or else they might only have a partial entitlement.

During the 2021/2022 financial year, up to £123,000 worth of overall arrears could be attributed to Universal Credit claimants with no entitlement to Rate Rebate, and £72,000 to those in receipt of Universal Credit Housing Costs who had not made a claim for Rate Rebate. It is imperative this issue is addressed over the lifetime of the strategy.

However, we also know from our external debt advice partner, Advice NI, that only around 20% of Housing Executive tenants who engage with them have rent arrears. The majority of Housing Executive tenants who use this service do so due to other money related issues and debts (e.g. personal loans, benefit overpayments, payday loans, credit cards, catalogue shopping, mobile phone contracts, etc.). Whilst rent arrears are an important indicator of financial exclusion, they are not the sole indicator.

The information above provides our baseline at the onset of the 2023-28 Financial Inclusion Strategy and should be read in conjunction with the 2022 Financial Inclusion evaluation. It also underscores the necessity of using multiple approaches to resolve issues presented by financial exclusion, including both reactive and proactive contact triggers. Utilising a range of methodologies will ensure we reach tenants who do not come to our attention via an arrears recommendation, particularly those in vulnerable groups - such as under 35s and pensioners. Progress evidenced via CTOS also emphasises the wider benefits of financial inclusion for our tenants beyond keeping a roof over their head through rental income maximisation.

## How have we helped tenants so far?

Pension aged couple with no entitlement to Housing Benefit due to income, advised to apply for PIP.

This was awarded and generated an entitlement to Pension Credit, and therefore full Housing Benefit.

Couple is now better off by £15,600 per year. Backdated Housing Benefit reduced arrear on the rent account.

## Wider Financial Inclusion

Whilst the 2016-19 Financial Inclusion Strategy emerged as a Landlord Services Strategy which primarily addressed the needs of our tenants, many of the actions continue to positively impact other Housing Executive customers too. Financial Inclusion Managers receive referrals from across the organisation and can assist leaseholders, customers contacting the Energy Advice Line, Housing Executive staff, and others.

Further to this, under the Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy 2022-27: Ending Homelessness Together, the Financial Inclusion team expanded to accommodate a number of new staff who now provide financial inclusion services to housing customers. The Housing Solutions Financial Inclusion team meet Objective One of the Homelessness Strategy by prioritising homelessness prevention through the provision of financial advice and assistance to customers who are presenting homeless due to financial hardship, or who are otherwise experiencing financial exclusion. The team are also able to work with other housing customers not at risk of homelessness to ensure they are tenancy ready, to maximise their income, to boost financial resilience in general, to facilitate access to other support provided by referral partners, and to promote access to better finances.

## Where are we now (housing customers)?

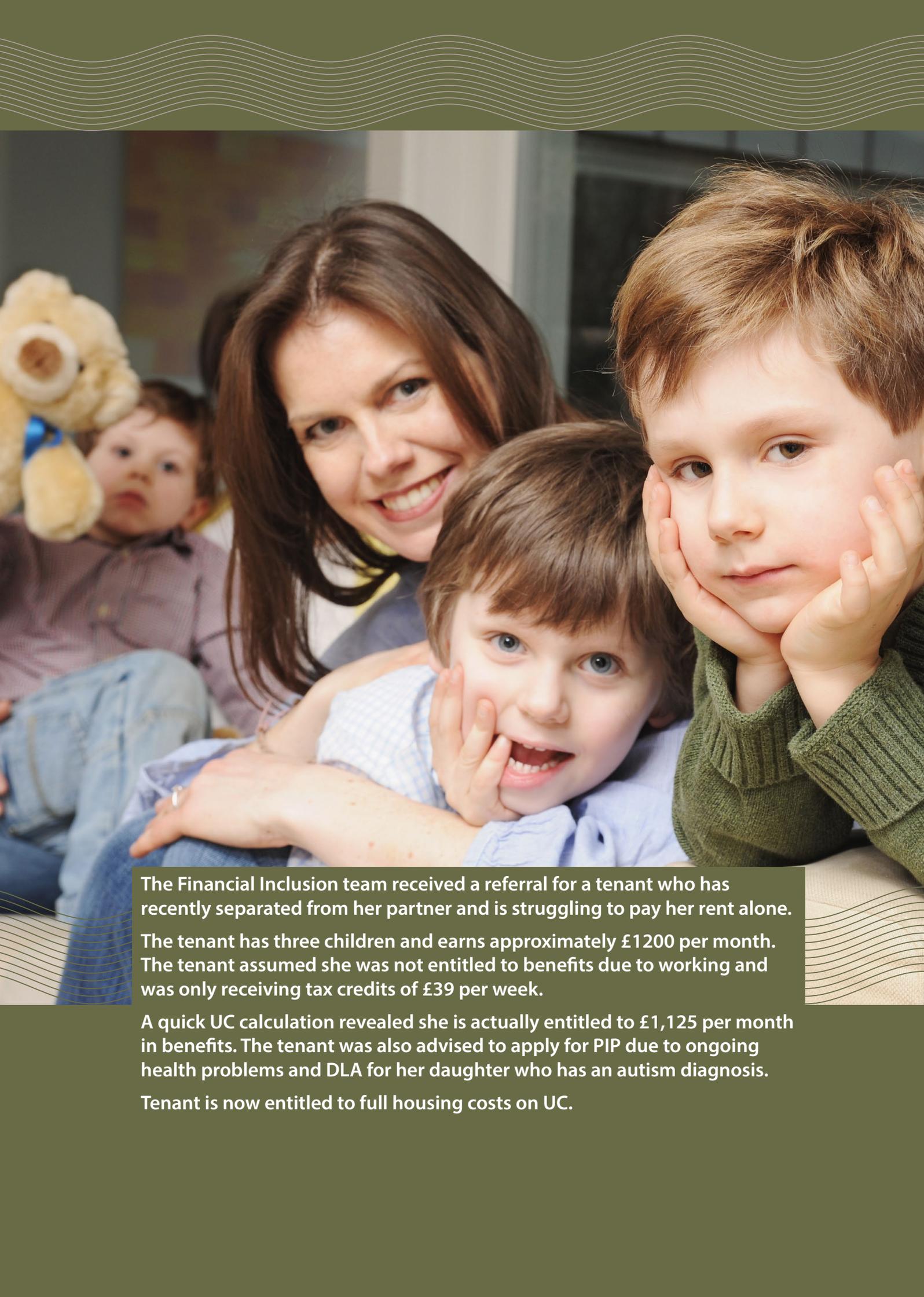
Those presenting as homeless on grounds in which financial difficulty is a primary factor represent the cohort of homeless presenters that are most at risk of financial hardship, and therefore most in need of support and assistance from Housing Solutions staff and Financial Inclusion Managers.

This includes presenters whose accommodation is deemed to be unreasonable due to financial hardship, loss of private rented accommodation due to affordability issues, and those dealing with mortgage arrears. In 2022/23 the number of presenters in this group was 509. This represents a baseline for the strategy.

## Our Ambition

The 2023-28 Financial Inclusion Strategy builds upon the actions of the previous strategy to deliver our vision - to see all tenants and housing customers become financially resilient. Our aim is to embed financial inclusion into as many customer-focused services as possible in order to promote long and happy tenure appropriate to the needs of the individual and in so doing, prevent homelessness.

The Financial Inclusion Strategy is principally an internal document as financial inclusion is not a statutory function. The actions of the Financial Inclusion strategy will be delivered by the Financial Inclusion Team, relevant policy teams, frontline Housing Executive staff, and through wider partnerships with agencies such as Advice NI, Make the Call, and others.



The Financial Inclusion team received a referral for a tenant who has recently separated from her partner and is struggling to pay her rent alone.

The tenant has three children and earns approximately £1200 per month. The tenant assumed she was not entitled to benefits due to working and was only receiving tax credits of £39 per week.

A quick UC calculation revealed she is actually entitled to £1,125 per month in benefits. The tenant was also advised to apply for PIP due to ongoing health problems and DLA for her daughter who has an autism diagnosis.

Tenant is now entitled to full housing costs on UC.

# Background

## Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-28

### Strategic Context

This Financial Inclusion Strategy (2023-28) is aligned with the Housing Executive's broader corporate vision which seeks to ensure everyone is able to live in an affordable, sustainable and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe, attractive, and climate-resilient place.

Promoting financial inclusion facilitates successful, economically included tenants and housing customers, which in turn protects their properties and the places they live. A focus on financial inclusion, through energy related cost reduction for example, ultimately helps to protect the climate.

Because supporting our tenants and housing customers - and ensuring they can sustain successful tenure appropriate to their needs - is at the heart of who we are and what we do as a social landlord and the organisation with the statutory duty for homelessness in Northern Ireland, there is significant interplay between this Housing Services divisional strategy and other divisional and organisational strategies, and much opportunity for collaborative and creative working to meet shared objectives.

Strategies which should be considered in tandem with this strategy include:

- Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment Strategy
- Homelessness Strategy 2022-27
- Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2027)
- Supporting People Three Year Strategic Plan and COVID-19 Recovery Plan 2022-2025

### Socio-Economic Context

People living in social housing are particularly vulnerable within the context of the current socio-economic situation in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) 2019/20 annual poverty report showed around 45% of

all social housing tenants were already living in poverty prior to the pandemic and this number has since increased as inflation rises rapidly.

In order to account for factors which impact the financial resilience of our tenants, both known and yet to be known, this strategy is a living document with the flexibility to respond to challenges as they arise over its lifetime.

We know from current and projected trends, through our research projects and horizon scanning, there are many challenges - current and future - facing our tenants. As those living in social housing are also at greatest risk of financial exclusion - it is estimated social housing tenants make up around 60% of all financially excluded people - the current socio-economic situation represents a recipe for crisis and is therefore addressed in detail below.

### Income Status

Tenants in social housing are disproportionately likely to live on a low or no income. A high proportion of people living in social housing are reliant on welfare benefits. As noted previously, the Housing Executive's Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey 2021 (CTOS 2021) revealed 78.5% of our tenants are unemployed or otherwise economically inactive.

The remaining proportion are working full-time or part-time. Although paid employment reduces the risk of poverty, in-work poverty has risen from 9.9% of workers in 1997/98 to 12.7% in 2022. Around 56% of people in poverty are part of a working family.

In 2022, Northern Ireland's lowest-earning households have seen their discretionary income decrease by 46.1% compared to 2021, meaning many now have less than £25 per week to spend after bills and living expenses.

Between 2017 and 2020, 45% of people in Northern Ireland were living in a family where savings are less than £250, meaning 45% of people in Northern Ireland would be unable to cover the cost of a household emergency. This is echoed in our CTOS 2021 findings where just

32.4% of tenants said they would be able to afford an unexpected £200 bill.

It is also the case that many of those who are employed and also not in receipt of benefits are unaware of the services available to help them. It is therefore crucial to ensure financial inclusion services are not only targeted at those who are known to be out of work.

## Cost of Living Crisis: Fuel Poverty

The financial situation faced by many living in social housing has been significantly worsened by the onset of the 'Cost of Living Crisis' in 2022. Driven by rapidly increasing fuel prices, UK inflation peaked at an 11.1% increase over the 12 months to October 2022 (as tracked by the Consumer Price Index (CPI)), pushing the prices of everyday products beyond the means of many people.<sup>1</sup> Although the inflation rate has since eased a little (10.7% in the 12 months to November 2022), price rises associated with inflation are often 'baked into the system' long after inflation abates. Furthermore, inflation is expected to remain high for the next two years; the Bank of England expects inflation will not reach its 2% target until the third quarter of 2024.

As noted, overall inflation is being driven by the rising cost of fuel, with prices increasing by 22.2% in the year to October 2022. In Northern Ireland, a household is in fuel poverty if it needs to spend more than 10 per cent of its income on energy costs. It is expected that 72% of all households in Northern Ireland will be living in fuel poverty by January 2023, many of which will be low/no income households. It is therefore fair to assume the overall proportion of social housing tenants living in fuel poverty will be higher than 72%. Indeed, CTOS 2021 reveals that 28% of tenants were struggling to keep their home adequately warm before prices even began to rise and 17.3% of respondents avoided turning on the heating even when the house is cold.

Ofgem data from late October 2022 estimates 8% of UK households are already in debt to electricity providers. However, a Resident Voice Index survey taken across the UK throughout September 2022, highlights that 24% of social housing tenants were reporting arrears owed to

an energy provider at the time of the survey; a significantly higher proportion than amongst the general population.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly worrying in the context of the Northern Ireland energy market where many of our tenants have keypad meters and/or oil fired central heating. Keypad meters prevent arrears from building, but as they require payment in advance in order to operate, they increase the risk of those who are struggling financially going without heat or electricity (or both), or using other forms of credit to pay for same.

Similarly, whilst the price of home heating oil decreases as the volume purchased is increased, oil fired heating requires an upfront outlay of sometimes hundreds of pounds which many low/no income households are simply unable to afford. The combination of upfront payment for energy provision and financial exclusion is a red flag for increased debt to high cost credit providers. JRF's 2022 COL tracker shows 21% of low income households - defined as those earning under £25,000 annual income per household - have already taken to borrowing or have used a credit card to pay bills during the COL crisis and this is forecast to worsen.

## Cost of Living Crisis: Debt

In June 2022, JRF reported that low-income families (defined as those earning under £25,000 annual income per household) were behind on payments by an average of £1,600. About 7 million households reported already missing out on essentials like heating, toiletries, or showers because they couldn't afford it, or else didn't have enough money for food over the previous month.

UK wide October reporting by Resident Voice Index<sup>3</sup> shows 68% of social housing tenants are now worried about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses all or most of the time, and over half (53%) have used credit or buy-now-pay-later services to cover their monthly household essential needs (38% had used these services often). Worryingly, a higher proportion (9 in 10) of under 35s are currently using - or considering using - buy-now-pay-later services or credit to pay for essential household costs.

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1. As the cost of basics is rising, inflation for low-income groups is estimated to be closer to an average of 11.9% as opposed to the national average of 11.1%. For those in social homes, this figure is 12.2%.

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2. It is also worth highlighting this RVI survey was carried out prior to energy increases in October 2022.  
3. The Resident Voice Index™ is a long-term project to gather anonymised survey responses from people living in social housing in the UK.

This is likely to impact younger households far into the future, creating 'financial scarring' and exacerbating financial exclusion for this group across their lifetime. JRFs 2022 COL tracker shows 25% of low income households—defined as those earning under £25,000 annual income per household - have a high cost credit loan taken out to pay bills, 22% have reduced or stopped pension contributions, and 22% have reduced or stopped insurance payments.

Informal lending is also increasing as people struggle with the Cost of Living. According to the Centre for Social Justice, the most common reason people use informal lenders - such as loan sharks - is to cover everyday living costs. This is echoed in the findings of the June 2022 JRF report which estimates over two million households across the UK are in debt to high interest lenders like loan sharks or doorstep lenders.

Whilst debt to friends and family represents the third most prevalent source of debt for social housing tenants (behind credit card and energy bill arrears), unofficial means of borrowing, such as loan sharks and doorstep lenders are included in the top ten sources of debt for social housing tenants, and indicate a hidden debt crisis which will put households under further pressure. Only 0.7% of Housing Executive tenants claim to have borrowed money from a payday lender in 2021 (CTOS), but this is known to be an under-reported category due to the associated stigma.

Whilst informal lending has significant risks which are difficult to quantify, the level of social housing tenants in debt to credit card providers (41%), finance deals, buy-now-pay-later lenders (both 18%), and overdrafts (15%) is also likely to become increasingly untenable as interest rates continue to rise; the bank of England raised interest rates to 3.5% in December 2022.

Those with financial dependents consistently fare the worse across all measures of debt. They are the most worried, the least able to manage their debt, the least able to cope with an unexpected expense and sadly, the least likely to feel they could go to somebody in their neighbourhood for advice about the cost of living. Those with dependents are also more likely to have energy arrears than those without, and should therefore feature heavily in financial inclusion services. However, it is also worth noting some people are reluctant to borrow money. Therefore, no debt is not necessarily an indicator of no financial issues and help must be targeted accordingly.

## Cost of Living Crisis: Food Poverty

The rising cost of living has had a particularly acute impact on the cost of food. According to the ONS, annual food inflation hit 16.5% in November. This is the highest rate for 45 years, and up from 16.4% in October.

Whilst there has been a rapid rise in food poverty attributable to the cost of living crisis, food insecurity has been an issue for a sustained period of time. In 2021, the Trussell Trust handed out over 2 million food parcels across the UK. However, this figure has risen substantially in Northern Ireland in 2022, and is currently higher than at the peak of the pandemic.

The Trussell Trust provided 31,687 emergency food parcels in NI between 1 April and 30 September 2022. As compared to 25,328 food parcels for the same period in 2021, and 17,981 in 2020. However, the Trussell Trust are not the only foodbank available. These figures are therefore a snapshot of a larger picture of food insecurity. Many community groups have developed 'community fridges' or 'larders' to fill the gaps left between low income and the rising price of food.

Further to this, food insecurity stores problems for the future. Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently reported hospitalisation linked to being hungry has risen drastically in the past decade, with admissions primarily linked to malnutrition rising by 77% between 2009-10 and 2019-20. CTOS 2021 reveals 12.4% of Housing Executive tenants already cutting back on food shopping in the preceding 12 months. This figure is likely to be substantially worse in the CTOS 2022 survey.

## Welfare Reforms and 'Move to UC'

Our previous strategy came at a time when the impact of Welfare Reform measures on benefit claimants were just beginning to emerge. We have since carried out three substantial research projects to help us better understand the Customer Journey experienced by those tenants claiming Universal Credit and to help shape policy and process as required. We have worked hard over the period of the last strategy to integrate new benefit related systems into the Housing Executive, to alter them based on feedback, and to support tenants through the transition.

March 2022 saw the Northern Ireland Executive pass legislation to indefinitely continue mitigation

payments for those subject to Social Sector Size Criteria and the Benefit Cap (subject to review in 2025). The same legislation also closed loopholes which made it possible to lose or lower mitigation payments. This means NI residents continue to be protected from the worst impacts of Welfare Reforms. Following this, in November 2022, the UK government announced benefits will be updated by 10.1% in April 2023. These are all welcome changes to the system. However, benefits are now at a 40 year low in real terms and many of those in receipt of benefits are trapped in poverty. Those that need them, continue to require support.

Figures from October 2022, show 19,000 Housing Executive tenants are actively in receipt of part- or full housing cost payments from Universal Credit. It is estimated that approximately 45,000 tenants will be in receipt of UC by the completion of the next roll-out phase, 'Move to UC' (sometimes referred to as Managed Migration).

At present, it is unclear when the movement of legacy benefit cases to Universal Credit will officially begin in Northern Ireland; we are currently expecting this to be April 2023. The UK government's aim remains to complete the movement of the majority of cases by December 2024, but in November 2022 they announced a delay to the managed migration of those cases in receipt of income-related Employment and Support Allowance (with the exception of those receiving Child Tax Credit) until 2028.

In all cases, the 'managed move' will see claimants receive a letter prompting them to make a UC application within three months. It is clear from both our Universal Credit research, and from our experience of UC since September 2017, tenants will require intensive support through this process in order to remain free of arrears and other related debts. It also remains the case that around a quarter of all UC claimants will be worse off under the new system and will require sign-posting to outside agencies who can provide assistance.

## Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion remains a contributing factor to financial exclusion. The digital divide is created by both a lack of skills to use technology and a lack of access to the internet, but it's also linked to the ability to pay for it. Communities who live on a low income or social security benefits may be unable to afford access.

A lack of computer skills and/or the inability to access the internet can exclude people from a

range of opportunities, for example, job searches and shopping around online for the best deals on essential expenses such as car insurance, and cheaper electricity tariffs. It is also the case that many goods and services are now advertised online through social media platforms and lack of access to the internet can further isolate those who need the help.

Universal Credit applications are accessed and managed almost exclusively via an online portal causing significant problems for those who are not computer literate and/or do not have internet access at home. Recent UC research indicates 24% of Housing Executive tenants claiming UC cited 'problems using the computer' as the reason they struggled to make the application, and 48% needed help to complete their application. Only 93% stated they have access to the internet at home; of these, the majority access the internet via mobile phone. This is reflected in recent reporting on broadband in Northern Ireland which found Northern Ireland still has lower broadband penetration and speeds than the rest of the UK, as well as rural areas with no mobile signal at all.

Tackling digital exclusion is a fundamental facet of enabling financial inclusion.

## Mental health

Mental health is shaped by the social, economic, and physical environments in which people live. Inequalities in society are associated with an increased risk of mental ill health and poverty is central to this.

People living in poverty can face constant, high levels of stress, overcrowded or unsafe housing, fear of crime, and comparatively poor physical health. Poverty is clearly linked with a number of mental health problems, including schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. Poverty can be both a cause and a consequence of mental ill health.

In the UK, children from the poorest 20% of households are four times as likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 as those from the wealthiest 20%, and suicide rates are two to three times higher in the most deprived neighbourhoods compared to the most affluent.

As living standards decrease year on year, the mental health impacts of financial exclusion are becoming increasingly apparent, evidenced by the range of services our tenants require. Tackling financial exclusion as early as possible can help to mitigate negative mental health impacts.



A Mixed Age Couple (one over and one under state pension age who therefore have to claim two separate types of benefits) were referred to Financial Inclusion as the UC claim had been cancelled.

The team reviewed the UC claim and noted some elements had not been included. They assisted the tenant to go back and update their circumstances with UC and payment was backdated to the start of the claim.

The tenant is £8,029 better off per year, and received a backdated payment of £9,854.

# Key Activities

## Key Activities of Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-22

Our Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-22 was developed to help tenants and housing customers access the right financial help, support, and services needed in order to manage their money better. Our previous strategy sought to develop new ways to prepare for the future whilst taking account of the financial challenges emerging due to the implementation of welfare reform. Some of the key activities from the 2016-22 strategy are highlighted below. These have provided a solid foundation for our 2023-28 action plan.

### Welfare Benefits

Throughout the lifetime of the strategy, various welfare reforms, including the introduction of Universal Credit, rolled out across Northern Ireland. These were the most significant changes to the welfare system since its inception and posed significant risk to both the organisation and our tenants.

Over the lifetime of the 2016-22 strategy we successfully established the Welfare Benefits Unit as an outcome of the Welfare Reform Project team. In partnership with the Income Collection Policy team, this unit used a combination of test and learn, information provision, and training to develop multiple new policies and procedures to empower Housing Executive staff in providing comprehensive support and sign-posting for tenants to help them with welfare changes.

The Welfare Benefits Unit has also continued to work closely with key stakeholders such as Land and Property Services, the Department for Communities, and Department for Work and Pensions to advocate for system changes which have helped our tenants.

As a result our tenants continue to be fully supported as they transition to a changed benefit system by knowledgeable Housing Executive staff, in ways which suit them. These frontline

staff experiences will be invaluable as we encounter the next stage of roll-out, 'Move to UC', over the course of the new strategy.

### The Financial Inclusion Team

A core component of the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-22 saw us establish the Housing Executive's Financial Inclusion team. The Financial Inclusion team comprises seven Financial Inclusion managers (four in Landlord Services, and three in Housing Solutions), and three Deputy Financial Inclusion Managers. The Landlord Services team assist tenants in a number of ways, including:

1. Performing benefit checks to ensure a tenant's full entitlement is being received;
2. Advising on new benefit claims;
3. Resolving complex benefit problems and advocating for tenants in the claim process where necessary;
4. Liaising with external parties on behalf of the tenants;
5. Providing basic debt advice and referrals to specialist debt services where required;
6. Assisting tenants to access to other forms of support;
7. Providing a holistic, 'one stop', approach to financial inclusion where all services can be accessed in one place;
8. Providing advice and training to frontline staff;
9. Developing overarching strategic initiatives.

Tenants can self-refer to the Financial Inclusion Team via a Patch Manger or Income Collection staff, or else the service will be suggested to them at either specific trigger points, or during a Making Your Money Work assessment. Referrals also come from staff engaged with other projects such as the Oil Buying Network, the Energy Advice Line, and the Housing Community Network, or from other departments within the Housing Executive, such as the Housing Benefit team. Financial inclusion services are also available to Housing Executive staff.

## How have we helped tenants so far?

Tenant incorrectly advised no benefit entitlement by external advice provider. Financial Inclusion team identified underlying entitlement to Pension Credit which generated an entitlement to full Housing Benefit.

The team helped the tenant apply for both, and also carers allowance, leaving the tenant better off by £10,197 per year.

Since 2020, the Financial Inclusion team have received a combined average of 205 tenant referrals per month across all three Regions of the Housing Executive. Of these, 75-80% of tenants referred meaningfully engage with the service. This has resulted in the identification of over £2 million in extra income for Housing Executive tenants since September 2021; an average of £745 per tenant who engages. There are case studies documenting the work of the Financial Inclusion team throughout this document.

### Making Your Money Work Service

Over the lifetime of the strategy, the Making Your Money Work Service replaced Financial Capability Assessments. Making Your Money Work is designed to improve the financial welfare of tenants through the provision of advice and assistance at multiple contact points of the tenant journey with the Housing Executive. The Making Your Money Work Service offers tenants the opportunity to avail of a thorough benefit check, budgeting advice, and tailored sign-posting.

The Making Your Money Work Service will be fully embedded into frontline service over the course of the new strategy and outcomes will be closely monitored. The service is designed to be built upon/edited as required as we move forward. Potential additions include Energy Advice provision, bank account access/information, advice regarding broadband and TV packages, and employment opportunity signposting where appropriate.

### Benefit and Budgeting Calculator

In early 2021, we procured a Northern Ireland-specific Benefit and Budgeting Calculator and rolled out training and licenses for circa 600 frontline staff and their team leaders. We also provided a customer-facing calculator, accessible through the Housing Executive website.

The Benefit and Budgeting Calculator assists frontline staff to empower tenants through the provision of detailed, effective budgeting advice. It also facilitates tenants in maximising their income through greater understanding of their benefit entitlement. The calculator is embedded in the day-to-day role of Patch Managers and Income Collection staff, and is a valuable addition to frontline staff toolkits allowing staff to navigate a complex benefit system more easily.

Under the remit of the new strategy we will be working with the developers to make changes to the calculator, tailoring it to the needs of Housing Executive staff.

### Advice NI & Make the Call

Housing providers are sometimes referred to as anchor organisations as they're often the main point of contact within a community. As such, partnership working and well-informed sign-posting are vital in providing effective advice and assistance.

Throughout the lifetime of the previous strategy we continued to strengthen our relationships with Advice NI and Make the Call in order to provide tenants with direct access to specialist debt and independent benefits advice. This included streamlining referral processes, trialling co-location of services, publicity campaigns, and information sharing. Throughout the new strategy this work to connect our services more closely will continue.



**The Financial Inclusion team proactively contacted a pension age tenant to offer a benefit check.**

**The tenant lives alone and prior to contact was paying full rent and rates from their state pension of £181 per week, widow benefit of £90 per month and Attendance Allowance of £92.60 per week.**

**Following a benefit check, the tenant was found to be entitled to pension credit of £64.71 per week and consequently, housing benefit of £56.72 per week.**

**The Financial Inclusion team helped the tenant to apply for both. This tenant's income has now increased by £6,314.36 per year.**

# Objectives of the Strategy

At the Housing Executive, we believe everyone, irrespective of their background or means, should be able to live in an affordable, sustainable, and decent home that is appropriate to their needs, in a safe, attractive, and climate-resilient place. This vision drives us in everything we do, and is underpinned by our values and behaviours; to make a difference through fairness, passion, and expertise

In support of this, the vision of the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-28 is to see all tenants and housing customers become financially resilient. Our aim is to embed financial inclusion into as many customer-focused services as possible in order to promote long and happy tenure appropriate to the needs of the individual, and prevent homelessness.

Access to financial services is one part of achieving financial inclusion: building capacity to use financial services effectively and empowering people to do so are also vital. This strategy takes a holistic approach to empowering the financial resilience of our tenants and housing customers, and supporting those in crisis where necessary.

<b>Vision</b>	All tenants and housing customers are financially resilient.
<b>Aim</b>	Financial inclusion is embedded into as many customer-focused services as possible.
<b>Objectives</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Maximise income</li><li>2. Promote financial flexibility</li><li>3. Open doors to better finances</li><li>4. Communication and information</li></ol>

In order to achieve our objectives, the 2023-2028 Financial Inclusion Strategy Action Plan is divided into three key elements, each of which defines the way services are planned, approached, and delivered for individual objectives.

The first element is 'Prevention' which will guide the identification and implementation of tools to help prevent financial exclusion or crisis from the moment a person engages with the Housing Executive, and onward throughout the rest of their journey.

The second is 'Priority'. This element will be used to identify and deploy interventions which address immediate, day-to-day, urgent financial inclusion needs in order to prevent uncontrolled rent arrears, homelessness, debt, tenancy failure, food and fuel poverty, and negative mental health impacts.

The third element, 'Potential' will shape the use of research and horizon scanning to ensure we are aware in advance of emerging needs and themes on the ground. This will guide both policy direction, and our responses to socio-economic influences and behaviours which indicate potential financial hardship; thus shaping a targeted and proactive response, feeding into Prevention and Priority interventions.

## Objective One - Maximise Income

Under this objective we aim to:

- Maximise benefit income
- Provide targeted money advice
- Signpost employment opportunities where appropriate
- Work in partnership to deliver crisis support

In practice, this will look like:

**Prevention** We will provide all tenants and housing customers with the opportunity to maximise their income through the benefits system and provide signposting to employment/training opportunities where appropriate. We will ensure all staff are fully equipped with the knowledge they need to signpost effectively.

**Priority** We will identify risk factors (triggers) for financial exclusion, and address these where possible - both responsively and proactively, and provide access to crisis support where appropriate (for example, Discretionary grants, SVP, referral to 3rd sector for voucher/cash support, etc.)

**Potential** We will identify and contact households who are known to be under-claiming and proactively work with them to make claims where appropriate and necessary. We will also continue our programme of UC research and monitor the implementation of 'managed migration' across GB in order to bring in appropriate support for tenants as they go through this transition in Northern Ireland. We will review and develop workforce training and upskill staff to embed financial inclusion into as many customer-focused services as possible. We will continue to strengthen existing partnerships, and build new ones to widen the availability of money maximising opportunities for all.

## Objective Two - Promote Financial Flexibility

Under this objective we aim to:

- Encourage a culture of budgeting and saving
- Encourage a culture of rent prioritisation
- Work closely with stakeholders and partners to develop and deliver services/ facilitate access to financial products

In practice, this will look like:

**Prevention** We will provide all tenants and housing customers with the opportunity to avail of day-to-day budgeting advice through our financial inclusion services in order to promote financial wellbeing. We will provide advice and assistance regarding access to financial products and services, and work in partnership with the finance industry representatives via the advice sector, where appropriate, to facilitate access to financial products and services such as affordable insurance, basic bank accounts, and affordable credit.

**Priority** We will work with stakeholders to provide targeted and specialist debt advice where needed. Through pilots, we will work to find new ways of communicating with disengaged tenants who have high rent arrears to improve all round financial resilience. We will identify or create initiatives which provide targeted support for unplanned events and facilitate one-stop access to crisis services.

**Potential** This will include the development of, and participation in, pilots investigating new/accessible products and services, as well as developing our use of data to identify vulnerabilities to create a targeted approach. We will work towards re-joining or re-starting a forum of social housing Financial Inclusion staff across NI to share best practice examples.

## Objective Three - Open Doors to Better Finances

Under this objective we aim to:

- Increase knowledge of 'introductory' financial products to bridge the gap between inclusion and exclusion.
- Increase awareness of illegal money lending/the impact of high-risk borrowing and help people to access safer alternatives.
- Promote digital inclusion

In practice, this will look like:

**Prevention** We will ensure tenants and housing customers are referred as early as possible to the Financial Inclusion team based on a range of triggers. Frontline staff will have access to updated and relevant information about products and services in their local area. We will provide housing customers and tenants with relevant information at the application stage, offer of tenancy stage, and during the sign-up process.

**Priority** Working in partnership with external stakeholders, we will enable access to effective support in a crisis, followed by long-term planning/solutions. We will promote no and low cost access to digital skills & the internet at such times as the need arises.

**Potential** We will develop systems of predictive analysis to identify those in need of extra support (for example, not paying by Direct Debit might indicate lack of access to basic banking). We will work to create more awareness of the impact of illegal money lending and participate in pilots to promote access to alternatives. This will also involve a process of service mapping in order to identify and fill gaps in provision.

## Objective Four - Communication and Information

Under this objective we aim to:

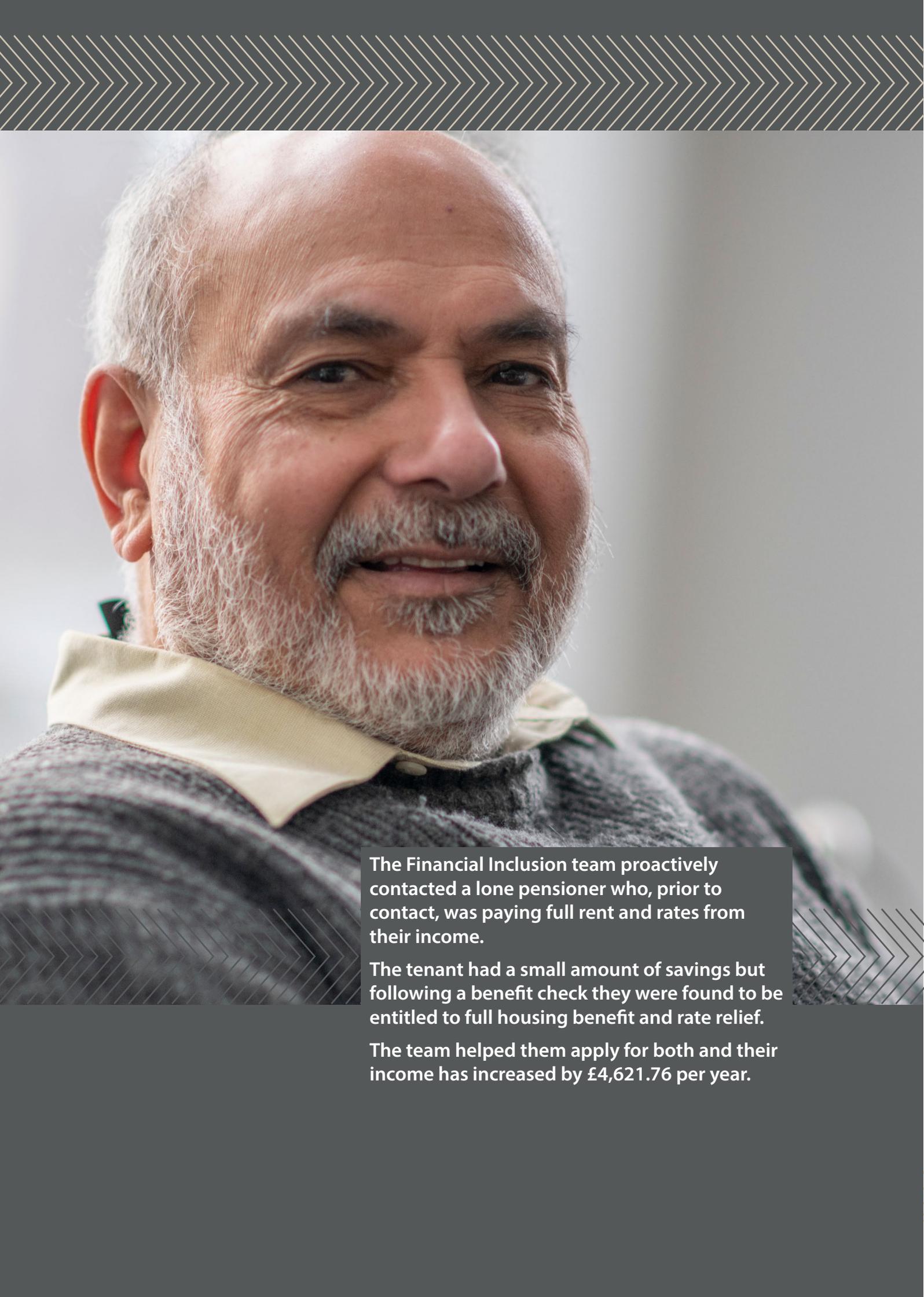
- Empower tenants and housing customers to manage their own finances through access to good quality financial information, support, and debt advice.

In practice, this will look like:

**Prevention** We will provide targeted financial management information at critical junctures in the Housing Executive tenant journey to set tenants up to succeed. We will run specific information campaigns to highlight available services via text, email, portal communication, social media, letters, magazines, leaflets, and other methods of communication. We will work to establish community based service delivery so tenants and housing customers are able to access multiple types of advice and assistance in one visit. We will work to minimise impact of fuel poverty for low income/vulnerable households by providing high quality information about switching fuel suppliers, moving to direct debit, and how to save energy in the home. We will also work in partnership to increase the availability of information about access to food at a range of costs which support various levels of income.

**Priority** We will proactively utilise multiple modes of communication to target vulnerable groups which highlight relevant services available to them as needed. We will provide information about access to emergency support provided by external organisations for households experiencing fuel poverty. As an anchor organisation, co-ordinating stakeholders to ensure we can refer tenants or customers in crisis to as many services as they need in one interaction is a key aim of the strategy.

**Potential** We will work with external stakeholders to find innovative ways of reaching those who are reluctant to address their financial situation. We will facilitate an open, continuous dialogue with our Housing Community Network to ensure action plans meet the needs of the communities we serve. We will map key services to ensure both frontline staff have access to up to date information when signposting customers. We will work to proactively identify households at risk of fuel poverty and promote a targeted response at these households via the Housing Executive Energy Advice team. We will track the development of food poverty networks and seek access for tenants to projects such as social supermarkets by establishing referral pathways.



The Financial Inclusion team proactively contacted a lone pensioner who, prior to contact, was paying full rent and rates from their income.

The tenant had a small amount of savings but following a benefit check they were found to be entitled to full housing benefit and rate relief.

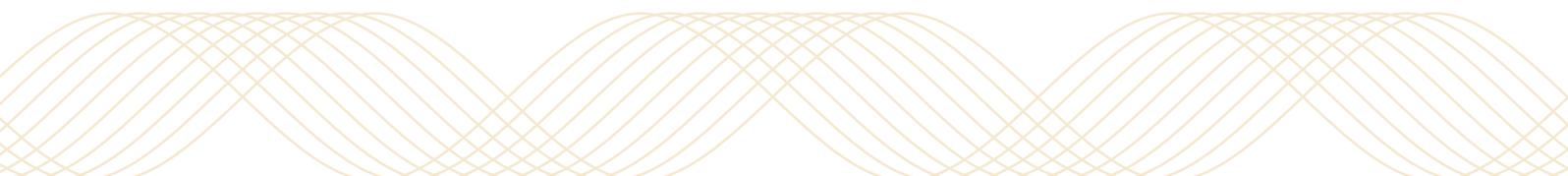
The team helped them apply for both and their income has increased by £4,621.76 per year.

# Delivering the strategy

Our objectives will be delivered using a series of actions, policies and procedures, some of which are carried over from the previous strategy and subject to further development. We will also work to explore, develop, and implement new actions which support the delivery of our objectives using the Prevention, Priority, Potential framework outlined prior to provide for a dynamic and responsive strategy.

The way in which any action will be developed and enacted will be dictated by the element under which it falls. For example, any actions falling into the 'Priority' element will be developed and implemented with immediacy, whilst those falling under 'Potential' will be longer projects, spanning multiple years of the strategy. Those falling under 'Prevention' will fall between the two - many preventative tools should be delivered with urgency and might also appear consistently as an action year on year, where others may take multiple years to progress and implement.

Year One actions are outlined at Appendix One.





A mother was considering adding her son to her tenancy after the death of her partner. She wanted to understand if this would impact upon her benefits.

A Financial Inclusion Manager reviewed both claims and established that adding the son to the tenancy would not impact on his mother's benefit claim.

However, whilst reviewing the son's claim, the Financial Inclusion Manager noticed a disability premium had been missed off his award.

The son contacted ESA who added the premium but refused to back date this appropriately. The Financial Inclusion Manager assisted the son to challenge this decision, but ESA still refused.

Finally, the Financial Inclusion Manager liaised directly with a manager within ESA who reviewed the case. The son is now better off by £69.40 per week and received a backdated payment of £12,400.

# What does success look like?

## Measuring Strategy Delivery

The success of the strategy will be monitored by measuring the outputs and outcomes resulting from the implementation of our action plan. At the outset of the strategy, reporting will be completed monthly and captured by officers keying the appropriate codes to rent accounts and the Tenancy Sustainment tab.

During the lifetime of the strategy available methods of measuring and reporting the impact of the strategy will be added to, and the above will be expanded upon as the action plans associated with the strategy continue to develop. Below is a non-exhaustive list of tools which will be utilised to deliver the aims and objectives of the strategy and might inform reporting going forward.

Tools	Outputs	Outcomes
Making Your Money Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of Making Your Money Work services engaged</li> <li>Reduction in the number of cases where rent arrears are increasing for those who engage</li> <li>Number of external referrals for goods and services (such as furniture providers, food banks, floating support, etc.)</li> <li>Number of affordable repayment arrangements made as a result of a Benefit and Budgeting Calculation</li> <li>Number of halted evictions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maximise income</li> <li>Promote financial flexibility</li> <li>Mitigate the impact of food and fuel poverty, where possible</li> <li>Open doors to better finances via information delivered</li> <li>Tenancies sustained</li> </ul>
Financial Inclusion Team (Landlord Services)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of referrals engaged</li> <li>Amount of extra benefit income identified where this has not already been maximised</li> <li>Number of applications for external grants (such as contingency funding, charitable funds, discretionary housing payment, other discretionary support)</li> <li>Reduction in the number of cases where rent arrears are increasing for those who engage</li> <li>Number of affordable repayment arrangements made</li> <li>Number of halted evictions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maximise income</li> <li>Promote financial flexibility</li> <li>Address food and fuel poverty</li> <li>Open doors to better finances via information delivered</li> <li>Tenancies sustained</li> </ul>

Tools	Outputs	Outcomes
Financial Inclusion Team (Housing Solutions)	Number of referrals engaged Amount of extra income identified Number of applications for external grants (such as contingency funding, charitable funds, discretionary housing payment, other discretionary support)	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Address food and fuel poverty Open doors to better finances via information delivered
Benefit and Budget Calculator	Number of benefit and budget calculations performed Reduction in the number of cases where rent arrears are increasing for those who engage Number of affordable repayment arrangements made	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances
Proactive contact projects (currently pensions, ESA, home insurance, rates)	Number of proactive contacts engaged Amount of extra income identified Number of onward referrals to specialist outside agencies (such as Advice NI, Age UK, etc.) Number of customers assisted to complete complex financial application forms (where possible and appropriate)	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Address food and fuel poverty Open doors to better finances Tenancies sustained
Move to UC Planning/ Implementation	Number of proactive contacts engaged Number of tenants referred to Financial Inclusion team for detailed support Number of customers assisted to complete complex financial application forms (where possible and appropriate) Number of onward referrals to specialist outside agencies (such as Advice NI, Age UK, etc.)	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances via information delivered
Energy Advice/ Assistance	Inclusion of energy comparison information routinely in sign-up materials Number of tenants proactively contacted regarding Oil Buying Networks Number of referrals to Energy Advice Service Energy help through Sustainment Fund	Address food and fuel poverty
Service Mapping	Provision and maintenance of map	Open doors to better finances via information delivered
Community based service delivery	Number of community based service delivery exercises carried out	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances via information delivered
Advice NI/MTC partnerships	Number of referrals to these services Promotion of services	Maximise income Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances via information delivered

Tools	Outputs	Outcomes
Other partnership developments	Number of partnerships developed	Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances via information delivered Tenancies sustained
Bank Accts	Number of tenants who have a bank account and debit card	Promote financial flexibility Open doors to better finances

## Funding Strategy Delivery

At present, the majority of actions under the Financial Inclusion Strategy are funded by an existing salary budget. Throughout the course of Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-22, other sources of funding - such as the Tenancy Sustainment fund and Community Cohesion budget - were utilised in order to meet some of the objectives. The salary budget was also extended to recruit a further four Landlord Services Financial Inclusion team members. During this time, funding was also secured to recruit three Financial Inclusion Managers into Housing Solutions.

Delivering Financial Inclusion actions in pursuit of our objectives will benefit tenants, housing customers, their communities, and deliver wider economic benefits. As such, the Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-2028 Action Plan is a living document designed to respond dynamically to the evolving needs of our tenants and other customers, and may require funding beyond a salary baseline. In such cases, separate business cases will be developed.

## Monitoring Strategy Delivery

Delivery of the strategy will be driven and monitored via monthly meetings for key staff leading the implementation of the action plan, led by the Welfare Benefits Unit. We will keep progress moving forward by establishing an operational steering committee to meet on a quarterly basis.

We will report monthly to the PRG and annually against the action plan to the board. We will also report annually to the Central Housing Forum against the prior year's actions and invite CHF to help shape the development of the following year's action plan. We will provide space for continuous consultation on Financial Inclusion via the Housing Community Network's Welfare Reform/Financial Inclusion working group.

## How have we helped tenants so far?

Tenant contacted the Financial Inclusion team distressed due to receiving a letter prompting her to move to UC when her husband reached state pension age.

FI team identified the tenant eligible to make a claim for income based ESA instead which enabled her to remain on Housing Benefit.

The tenant is now better off by £800 per month and receives full Housing Benefit.



A tenant was referred to the Financial Inclusion team due to being in rent arrears.

The tenant was receiving tax credits but advised she could not pay her rent as it would only leave her around £300 a month to live on.

The Financial Inclusion Manager performed a benefit check and advised the tenant she would be better off by over £500 a month on Universal Credit--even after paying her rent.

The tenant was also referred for specialist debt advice from our partner, Advice NI.

# Appendix 1

Year One Action Plan						
No	Objective/Action	Addressed Under	Prevention	Priority	Potential	Tool(s)
	<b>Maximise Income</b>					
1	We will offer all applicants a benefit check when they apply for housing					HSST/B&B/FI Refs
2	We will offer all housing applicants who are struggling financially a Financial Inclusion referral					FI Refs
3	We will offer all new tenants a benefit check prior to sign-up					MYMW/B&B
4	We will ensure all tenants who have rent arrears are offered a benefit check					MYMW/B&B/FI Refs
5	We will offer all tenants and customers a Financial Inclusion referral based on a specific set of triggers					FI Refs
6	We will increase the percentage of new tenants making a claim for Rate Rebate					MYMW/B&B/Rates Project
7	We will establish a project to reduce the number of existing tenants who have not made a claim for Rate Rebate					Rates Project
8	We will establish a project to increase the number of pension age tenants receiving Housing Benefit					Pension Project
9	We will refer tenants for crisis financial support where appropriate					FI Team
10	We will use 'test and learn' and devise a plan to promote income maximisation for those subject to 'Move to UC'					FI Strategy & Research
11	We will work with external agencies to research how to sign-post employment opportunities effectively and sensitively					FI Strategy & Research
	<b>Promote Financial Flexibility</b>					
12	We will offer all new tenants a basic budget check-up prior to sign-up					MYMW/B&B
13	We will ensure all tenants who have rent arrears are offered a referral to the Financial Inclusion team					FI Refs
14	We will work with Advice NI to provide targeted debt advice to both tenants and customers					Advice NI Partnership
15	We will encourage all new tenants to take out home contents insurance					MYMW
16	We will use data to target tenants at risk of natural disaster and increase uptake of contents insurance amongst this cohort					MYMW/FI Team/ Insurance Project
17	We will participate in 3rd party projects where appropriate to promote accessible alternatives to illegal and high-cost lenders					External Stakeholder Relationships
	<b>Open Doors to Better Finances</b>					
18	We will work with the consumer council as part of the Responsible Lending Forum to understand money/access issues and to learn about new initiatives.					External Stakeholder Relationships
19	We will ensure frontline staff have access to updated and relevant information about products and services in their local area.					FI Strategy & Research/GIS
20	We will utilise pre-sign-up MYMW services to provide targeted information regarding access to basic bank accounting, debt help, affordable credit, etc.					MYMW/B&B/FI Strategy

## Year One Action Plan

No	Objective/Action	Addressed Under	Prevention	Priority	Potential	Tool(s)
21	We will utilise existing data to target those potentially in need of greater financial education and connect tenants/customers to relevant resources					FI Strategy & Research/FI Team
22	We will promote no and low cost access to digital skills and the internet.					FI Strategy & Research
23	We will work to create more awareness of the impact of illegal money lending and participate in pilots to promote access to alternatives.					FI Strategy & Research
<b>Communication and Information</b>						
24	We will map key services to ensure front line staff are equipped to make recommendations and/or tenants and customers can access relevant information in one place					FI Strategy & Research/GIS
25	We will create a Financial Inclusion Gateway Page					FI Strategy & Research
26	We will expand the available information on the customer facing MYMW webpage					FI Strategy & Research
27	We will pilot the co-location of key services either in NIHE offices, or in those of stakeholders to increase access to information					FI Strategy & Research/External Stakeholders
28	We will review the information given in sign-up packs to ensure basic financial information is available to all new tenants					FI Strategy & Research
29	We will review information available for HSST teams to hand out to ensure basic financial information is available to all customers					
30	We will utilise multiple methods of contact to target pensioners and highlight potential income they might be missing					Pension Project
31	We will utilise multiple methods of contact to target those who have not made a Rate Rebate claim					Rates Project
32	We will work with stakeholders to find innovative ways of reaching those who are reluctant to address their financial situation					Developing new External Stakeholder Relationships/FI Strategy & Research
33	We will proactively promote the services of the Financial Inclusion team via multiple modes of communication to tenants who require advice and assistance					FI strategy
34	We will proactively promote the services of Advice NI via multiple modes of communication to tenants who require advice and assistance					FI strategy
35	We will proactively promote the services of Make the Call via multiple modes of communication to tenants who require advice and assistance					FI strategy

## Year One Action Plan

No	Objective/Action	Addressed Under	Prevention	Priority	Potential	Tool(s)
36	We will facilitate an open, continuous dialogue with our Housing Community Network to ensure action plans meet the needs of the communities we serve.					FI strategy
37	We will refer tenants and customers to foodbanks where appropriate					FI Team
38	We will facilitate access to social supermarket projects where possible and appropriate					FI Team
39	We will participate in 3rd party projects where appropriate to better understand and utilise the network of food intervention available					FI Strategy & Research
40	We will map existing food projects to ensure front line staff can make recommendations and/or tenants and customers can access relevant information in one place					FI Strategy & Research/GIS
41	We will promote the services of the NIHE Energy Advice Line to tenants and customers					MYMW/Publicity Campaigning
42	We will identify those at greatest risk of fuel poverty and proactively promote the Oil Buying Network to households at greater risk of fuel poverty					Internal Stakeholder relationships/FI Strategy & Research
43	We will refer/facilitate access to emergency fuel providers where possible and appropriate					FI Team

# Housing Executive

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