Tackling Rough Sleeping in Northern Ireland: Key facts and figures

February 2019

This report outlines findings from the Rough Sleeper Street Counts carried out by the Housing Executive in partnership with a range of voluntary and statutory partners across November. In areas where a Rough Sleeper Street Count was not carried out, the Housing Executive along with our partners, sought to estimate the number of rough sleepers in order to provide a snapshot of rough sleeping numbers across Northern Ireland.

Background

The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for responding to homelessness in Northern Ireland and funds a range of services through voluntary sector partners to tackle the issue. In 2018/19 the Housing Executive allocated funding of £36.5m to homeless services which funded over 2,800 temporary units and a range of services.

Services that the Housing Executive offers or funds across Northern Ireland to tackle homelessness include:

- 1,586 hostel spaces funded by Supporting People. This includes:
  - The provision of 20 crash beds and a night time reception service in Belfast;
  - A wet hostel for up to 22 people;
  - 77 units of emergency accommodation;
- Approximately 1250 private-let properties;
- The provision of day-time and night-time street outreach services in Belfast;
- Three day centres that can provide support services for up to 175 vulnerable people;
- A total of 2,548 units of floating support across 29 services.

Rough sleeping is the most visible form of homelessness and evidence confirms that for those affected this in turn leads to a deterioration in mental and physical health, often linked to weather conditions, sleep deprivation, addiction, depression and anxiety and poor access to general health and social care services.

We work closely on a daily basis with outreach services to move people from the street into appropriate temporary accommodation. It is important to note that previous street counts have identified that not all rough sleepers are without
accommodation and this emphasises the need for the Housing Executive to work with our partner agencies to help individuals who are rough sleeping avail of the range of accommodation that is available.

As part of our statutory duty to homeless households we provided a total of 3,024 placements in temporary accommodation during 2017/18.

**Rough Sleeper Street Counts**

The Housing Executive and partner organisations recently completed rough sleeper street counts in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry. The methodology for the street counts is broadly similar to the process followed by Local Authorities in England and Wales and therefore consistent with data submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. During the street count rough sleepers were identified using the definition below:

*People sleeping, about to bed down (sitting on/in or standing next to their bedding) or actually bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments). People in buildings or other places, not designed for habitation (such as stairwells, barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations or ‘bashes’).*

The Housing Executive works collaboratively with others in the sector to ensure it meets its statutory obligations to homeless households including due regard to emergency and temporary housing and have subsequently increased the number of bedspaces over the winter period.

Further detail on the three street counts is provided below:

- **Belfast Street Count**

  The Belfast Rough Sleeper Street Count took place between 2am and 5am on Tuesday 6th November and was coordinated by the Housing Executive and the Welcome Organisation. The street count involved six teams comprising of volunteers from The Welcome Organisation, Housing Executive, Depaul, Belfast Trust, Salvation Army, Hosford House, Queens Quarter Housing, and PSNI. During the Belfast Street Count a total of 16 rough sleepers were identified. All individuals identified during the Belfast street count were known to the street outreach service provided by The Welcome Organisation.

- **Derry/Londonderry Street Count**

  The Derry/Londonderry Rough Sleeper Street Count took place between 2am and 4am on Tuesday 20th November and was coordinated by the Housing Executive and First Housing Aid and Support Services. The street count involved two teams of volunteers from the Housing Executive and First Housing Aid and Support Services. During the Derry/Londonderry Street Count a total of 13 rough sleepers were identified.
At the time of the street count the Housing Executive was part of a multi-agency group that is seeking to address issues around street activity, including rough sleeping in Derry/Londonderry. This group comprised of representatives from the Housing Executive, Derry/Londonderry City Centre Initiative, Derry City & Strabane District Council, PSNI, De Paul Ireland, NWMF, First Housing and Damian House.

- Newry Street Count

The Newry Rough Sleeper Street Count took place between 2am and 4:30am on Thursday 29th November and was coordinated by the Housing Executive and The Welcome Organisation. The street count involved three teams of volunteers from the Housing Executive, The Welcome Organisation, Simon Community Northern Ireland and the PSNI. During the Newry Street Count a total of 5 rough sleepers were identified. It should be noted that the Housing Executive and voluntary organisations have offered those individuals identified during the Newry street count a range of services.

**Rough Sleeper Street Estimates**

In areas where the need for a street count was not identified we used an estimate to identify the number of rough sleepers using consultation with our local partners. To gather data in areas where a street count is not taking place we contacted local partners, including the PSNI, asking for the Housing Executive to be notified of any rough sleepers on the night of Wednesday 28th November. As with the rough sleeper street counts this is again consistent with the approach taking in neighbouring jurisdictions.

It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the estimate is to assess the numbers of people rough sleeping on the typical night chosen, rather than a larger sample of street activity, hidden homelessness or people using homelessness services. This means that, for example, a person who sometimes sleeps rough but sometimes has accommodation/shelter will not be included in the estimate unless there is evidence that they did sleep rough on that night. In previous years we have not provided any estimates of rough sleepers beyond those identified during the street counts in the larger cities and the purpose of this exercise is to provide a snapshot of rough sleeping activity in smaller settlements/rural areas.

As a result of the rough sleeper estimates we received nil returns in the majority of areas. We were however advised that there were four rough sleepers in the Coleraine area and we are seeking to engage with these individuals to provide the appropriate support and assistance.
Summary

In total the recent street counts and estimates identified a total of 38 rough sleepers across Northern Ireland. In 2017/18 there were two street counts carried out in Belfast and Newry which identified a total of 8 rough sleepers. While there has been a substantial increase in the number of rough sleepers recorded the Housing Executive would emphasise that this is the first time that Northern Ireland wide data on rough sleepers has been provided.

Furthermore, the use of a methodology that is consistent with England and Wales enables a comparison to be made with neighbouring jurisdictions. When a direct comparison is made numbers of rough sleepers in Northern Ireland are substantially lower than the most recent figures provided where it was recorded that there were 4,677 rough sleepers in England and 188 in Wales. Scotland records rough sleepers using a different methodology. (Please note the figures in this relate to street counts carried out in England in November 2018 while the figures for Wales reflect a November 2017 total as these are the most recent figures available at the time of publication)

The Housing Executive had previously carried out a Street Needs Audit over a twelve week period in 2016. Many of the people identified in street activity by the Street Needs Audit were characterised by chaotic lifestyles and poor health and well-being, they often proved difficult to engage with and resistant to offers of assistance. These entrenched individuals were more likely to require an emergency services response than to try to access crisis beds or other services. The majority of individuals encountered during the recent street counts have exhibited similar patterns of behaviour.

It is clear from the street counts that these individuals face many challenges and that they require intense packages of support alongside access to accommodation. All the statutory and voluntary agencies involved in dealing with homelessness across Northern Ireland are committed to continue to work together to ensure support is coordinated and improved.

The Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 noted a definition of chronic homelessness as ‘a group of individuals with very pronounced and complex support needs who found it difficult to exit from homelessness.’ The majority, if not all of those 38 individuals encountered during the recent street counts/estimates are chronically homeless. In March 2018 the Housing Executive committed to the development of a Chronic Homelessness Action Plan, which will include actions for those who are rough sleeping across Northern Ireland. The Chronic Homelessness Action Plan will be published for public consultation in May 2019.