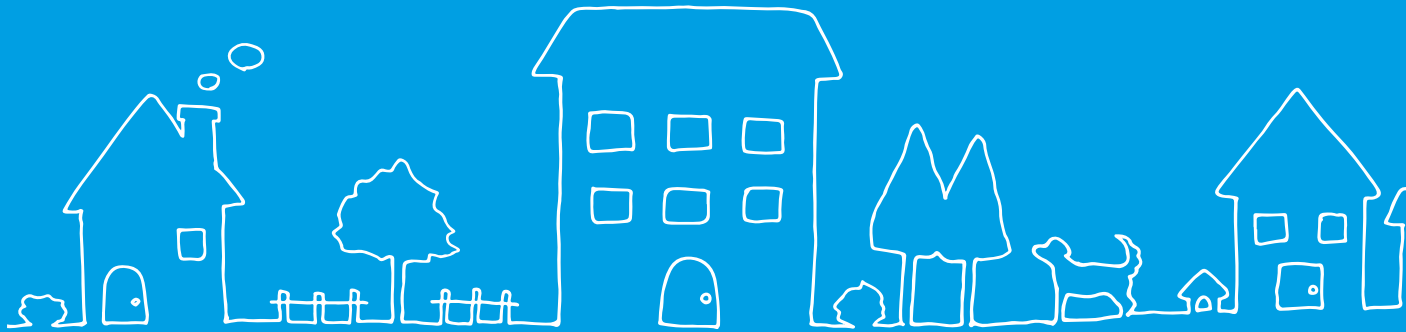


Ending Homelessness Together

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Homelessness Strategy **2022-27**



YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ACTION PLAN

2024 - 2027

Housing
Executive

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Foreword

In the context of an unprecedented demand for homelessness services we recognise the significant benefits that addressing homelessness from an early stage of life can have. We are delighted to publish our Youth Homelessness Action Plan which aims to provide a coordinated response to ensure we address the challenges posed by youth homelessness with a focus on prevention, support and permanent housing solutions. Addressing homelessness and housing need amongst young people and families with children is a distinct priority for the Housing Executive, and as an organisation we are wholly committed to achieving better outcomes for these cohorts.

The Housing Executive values the continued engagement with the sector and is fully committed to continue to work collaboratively with key stakeholders to enable us to work together to improve the outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland.

The initial concept and framework for actions for the Youth Homelessness Action Plan have been strongly influenced by the following work-streams:

- Recommendations proposed by the Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People in their esteemed report 'A Place to Call Home'.
- Recommendations from the Review of Jointly Commissioned Supported Accommodation Report.
- Recommendations made by the Youth Homelessness Research report (2021), produced by Fiona Boyle, as commissioned by the Housing Executive.
- Recommendations from The Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services Report (2023).

These reports have helped to provide a greater understanding on the issues that lead young people into homelessness, the support that is required and in identifying areas for improvement. Additionally, they have all contributed to improving our understanding of the following key issues:

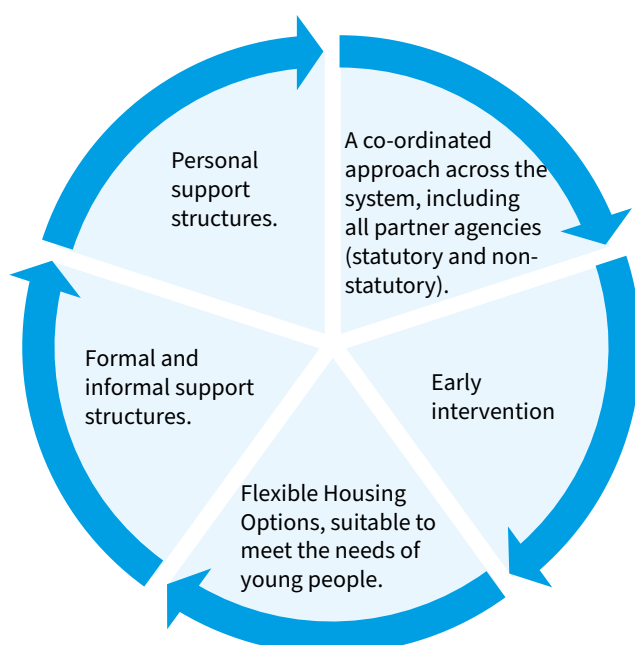
- Trends, causes and nature of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland.
- Range and effectiveness of prevention initiatives aimed at young people.
- Challenges in the delivery of services to young people experiencing homelessness.

The Youth Homelessness Research report identifies three groups of 'young homeless', which will be central to the Action Plan. Owing to age changes throughout their personal journeys, there can be interchanges between the groupings, for instance when a young person initially presents at 17 years old, and then on reaching their 18th birthday.

1. Young people who have been part of the care system prior to reaching 16 years of age, and then become homeless at a later point.
2. Young people aged 16/17 years, not known to Social Services or who do not have care experience in their background, and present as homeless.
3. Young people aged 18-25 years, who present to the Housing Executive as homeless.

The Action Plan is targeted to those young people within these categories, who are particularly at risk of becoming homeless and are disproportionately represented in the homeless population in Northern Ireland.

The Action Plan sets out an overarching framework to improve the outcomes of individuals who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. To effectively prioritise homelessness prevention and to provide clear pathways out of homelessness for young people there must be:



While we are delighted to present a bespoke set of actions for young people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness we acknowledge this is merely the beginning of this journey to prevent homelessness for young people in Northern Ireland. Work has already commenced in several areas pertinent to this Action Plan, as we recognise the distinct challenges facing young people and families with children in relation to housing and homelessness.

Our vision in addressing homelessness in Northern Ireland is Ending Homelessness Together and there is no client group for which this is more important as young people are at risk of falling in to gaps as they transition between services and most importantly, if we are to address homelessness in the long-term by supporting young people we can help avoid the journey into chronic homelessness and all the associated difficulties and challenges it brings. We look forward to working with our partners in delivering the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Nicole Lappin
Chair

Grainia Long
Chief Executive

Introduction

Supporting the delivery of our Homelessness Strategy 2022-27

In accordance with the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 the Housing Executive has a statutory duty to publish a new homelessness strategy at least every five years. The Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 was published in March 2022 and this action plan supports the delivery of the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 in delivering a bespoke set of actions that will support young people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Development of this action plan:

We have developed this action plan with consideration to the various legislative and policy developments that have taken place over recent years, including recent research referenced in the foreword of this document and particularly the NICCY report which has been extremely beneficial in representing the views of those with lived experience.

We are also mindful of the various forums on which we engage in collaborating to support young people. This day to day delivery of work to support young people has been complemented by targeted engagement with a range of organisations who work directly with young people within the homelessness system and we look forward to building on this engagement in the delivery of this action plan alongside seeking to establish new partnerships in order to maximise the impact of our work.

The vision of this action plan

In supporting the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 the vision of 'Ending Homelessness Together' reflects a continued need for the Housing Executive to work with our partners across the sector to address the varied and complex factors that lead to homelessness, with collaboration between organisations and transition between services being key challenges for young people. Whilst it is apparent that all young people may be vulnerable during different stages as they transition to adulthood. The Action Plan recognises that certain cohorts of young people are particularly at risk of homelessness and are disproportionately represented in the young homeless population.

The aim of this action plan:

The action plan will also consider the various ways in which the Housing Executive can deliver our overarching vision with the aim that:

‘Wherever possible homelessness should be prevented, if homelessness cannot be prevented it should be rare, brief and non-recurring’.

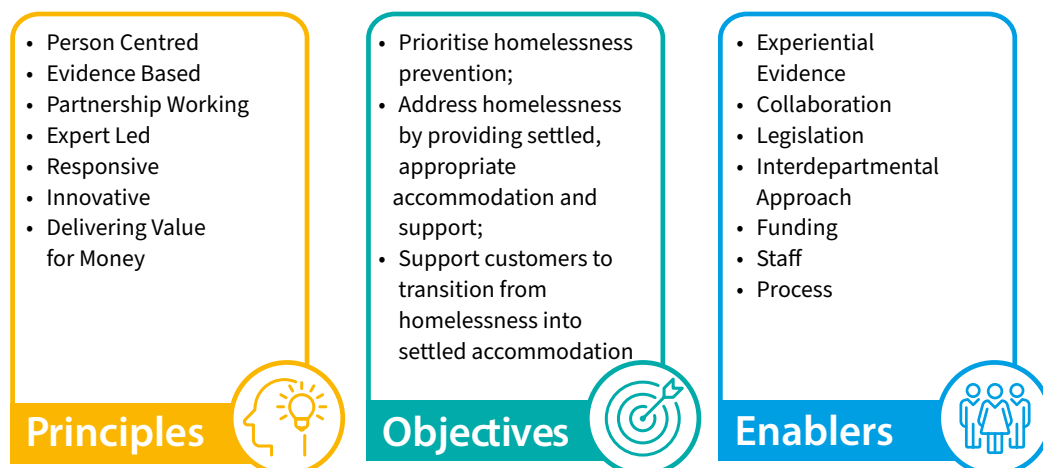
The delivery of our vision and aim is supported by the principles, objectives and enablers in the diagram overleaf and outlined in the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27. While this action plan will support the delivery of a range of actions specific to young people the action plan itself will be supported by the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 in the delivery of wider actions relevant to the principles and enablers listed below.

How will it be delivered?

The governance section at the conclusion of this action plan provides further details on how the Housing Executive will report on the delivery of this action plan. As part of this the Housing Executive will report on progress in the delivery of the this in annual progress reports which are developed as part of the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27.

Funding of this action plan

The Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 outlines funding considerations in respect of any strategic priorities required for its delivery and the Youth Homelessness Action Plan will be subject to the same considerations. While the Housing Executive will seek to deliver the majority of actions in this Action Plan using existing resources, there are however a number of actions for which additional resources will be required and where this is applicable the Housing Executive will work with the Department for Communities in respect of homelessness funding projections and develop business cases where appropriate. Such funding projections will be considered as part of the overall Homelessness Strategy 2022-27.



Lived Experience

This action plan is cognisant of the commitments made in the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 with regards to considering the views of those who have lived experience of homelessness. At the time of publication, the Housing Executive is working with partners in the development of a Lived Experience Programme and this action plan will support the delivery of that programme with specific consideration to those who have experienced youth homelessness. Furthermore, we will engage with key stakeholders to identify additional means by which we can promote lived experience in the delivery of this action plan.

Strategic Context

This action plan has been developed to reflect the development of legislation over recent years with much of this legislation recognising the collaboration that is required from organisations such as the Housing Executive and Health and Social Care Trusts alongside a wide range of organisations in the statutory and voluntary sectors. The legislative context that has guided the development of this action plan highlights the need for collaborative working to minimise the risk associated with children and young people falling into any gaps as they transition between services.

Housing (NI) Order 1988

This order places a duty on the Housing Executive to secure accommodation for homeless people or those threatened with homelessness within a 28-day period and defined as being in 'priority need'.

Children's Order (NI) 1995

This sets out a clear and consistent set of principles designed with the common aim of promoting the welfare of children in both private and public law cases in Northern Ireland.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002

This Act provides a legal framework for Leaving and After Care Services. Its purpose is to improve the life chances of young people who are looked after by Health Trusts as they make the transition to independent living.

The Housing (NI) Order 2003

The Housing (NI) Order 2003 implemented further changes to the definition of homelessness and the provisions regarding becoming intentionally homeless and introduced an additional requirement for the Housing Executive to assess an applicant's eligibility for housing assistance in Northern Ireland.

Children and Young People Strategy (NI) 2020-2030

This Strategy recognises that childhood experiences of trauma can increase a child's vulnerability to poorer outcomes in social well-being, educational attainment, employment, and physical and mental health. The Strategy focuses on support, help, and early interventions to prevent a young person becoming homeless.

The Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015

The aim of the Act is to improve co-operation amongst Departments and Agencies and places a duty on Children's Authorities, as defined by the Act, to co-operate where appropriate as they deliver services aimed at improving the well-being of children and young people.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

All children and young people have a range of rights under the UNCRC. This is an international human rights treaty which has been signed by the UK Government.

Northern Ireland Homelessness Strategy 2022-2027

In 2010 a legislative duty was placed on the Housing Executive to formulate and publish a strategy for homelessness. An extensive range of other agencies consider and take into account our homelessness strategy when planning their own functions. The Northern Ireland Homelessness Strategy 2022-27: 'Ending Homelessness Together', which was approved by Board in February 2022 and published in March 2023, provides strategic direction for addressing homelessness in Northern Ireland. It supports a multi-agency approach to tackling homelessness and recognises the importance of local service delivery and partnership working. The strategy highlights that our young people have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and have an increased need for accommodation and support.

Department of Health and Department of Education Strategy 'A Life Deserved: "CARING" FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND' (2020)

This aims to support actions which impact positively on the lives and outcomes of the children and young people. This Strategy also closely aligns to the Youth Homelessness Action Plan as it proposed a review and expansion of the continuum of housing options available to young people experiencing homelessness, and ensure services are designed flexibly to meet their changing needs.

Review of Jointly Commissioned Supported Accommodation projects for young people (2023)

Currently there are 21 jointly commissioned supported accommodation projects operating across the five Trusts (this is inclusive of 5 supported lodging schemes).

The joint review was specifically for the 16 jointly funded supported accommodation projects, however, the review considered the relevance and ongoing need for the projects within the overall continuum of support for young people, homeless presenters and care leavers.

Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People, 'A Place to Call Home'

The report aims to address three groups of people and highlights the lived experience of these groups facing homelessness and housing insecurity:

- Families with children.
- Young people (aged 18-21) who has a disability or who have been looked after.
- Families seeking asylum.

A key aim of the report was to inform recommendations to government where NICCY believed obligations were not being met under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The report has 15 recommendations in total, include specific areas of priority for the Housing Executive to consider.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland, Professor Ray Jones (June 2023)

The Review reflects on the considerable strengths within Northern Ireland and its communities. The Report highlighted the unique challenges encountered by families in Northern Ireland owing to the impact of poverty, legacy issues from the Troubles and the impact of the sensitive political climate here. The Review proposes a total of 53 recommendations to improve services for children and young people in Northern Ireland,

Further Context

Northern Ireland is currently experiencing a homelessness crisis, with annual placements of homeless households in temporary accommodation having increased by 289% between 2018/19 and 2022/23. Additionally, there is unprecedented Waiting List demands for permanent accommodation.

Unfortunately, the pandemic led to a drastic increase in demand for temporary accommodation, as individuals' and family accommodation arrangements broke down for several reasons. Based on current pressures, such demand is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels anytime soon. Instead, the additional pressures of significantly reduced private rental market, increased competitiveness for private rental tenancies, increased private rental charges and the current cost of living crisis, has meant that such pressures may become more prevalent.

There has been an overall increase in demand for temporary accommodation across all regions. When young people present to the Housing Executive we recognise the importance of placing young people in suitable and appropriate accommodation, to be able to support them to develop independent living skills and achieve positive outcomes which will enable them to move on to independent living and seeks to prevent repeat homelessness.

It is worth noting that there is no official definition or measurement of the scale of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland. It is apparent that Youth Homelessness has become a more prominent issue in recent years, as young people encounter difficulties in accessing affordable, safe and secure housing in Northern Ireland. Notably, hidden homelessness amongst young people is on the rise here, in addition to other jurisdictions, with young people residing temporarily, sofa surfing with other family members or friends.

There are several factors associated with the increase in demand for temporary accommodation from young people in Northern Ireland, including, but not exclusive to the following reasons:

- Limited access to the Private Rented Sector owing to expensive rental charges and difficult selection procedures in the PRS (application process, deposits, guarantors, references etc.)
- Reduction in allocations of social housing associated to supply of available suitable homes in the social housing sector.

- Limited availability of suitable move on options for young people leaving care.
- Other issues specific to Northern Ireland are also relevant, in respect of segregated communities, and the negative impact of paramilitaries on young people in Northern Ireland.

Additional distinctive circumstances are prevalent for young people here. Sadly, the conflict or 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland left residual consequences for all residents, as the aftermath of a conflicted society, post-1998 Good Friday Agreement continues to effect society here. The impact is evident not only in the wider economic position, but also on a more personalised level. Trauma caused by the conflict continues to adversely affect not only those who lived through this dark period of Northern Ireland's history, but also the young people who experience the aftermath of 'The Troubles', through trans-generational trauma.

All of these issues combined have contributed to more challenging events in the lives of young people and have a significant impact on them when faced with homelessness.

Undoubtedly, all forms of homelessness for all vulnerable households are becoming increasingly difficult to address, there is a continuous rise in the demand for suitable, affordable and accessible homes. Gray and Hamilton (2022) in the findings of their report on Hidden Homelessness observe that all forms of homelessness can directly impact mortality and morbidity rates, with 'increased likelihood of contact with the Criminal Justice system, and a myriad of other physical, psychological, and social impacts' for those concerned.

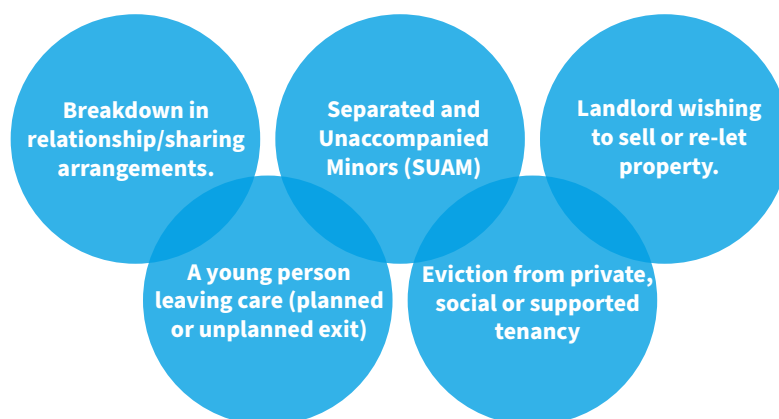
Associated to the demands in homelessness presentations, there has been a significant increase in demand for temporary accommodation. We recognise the importance of placing young people in appropriate services to support them to develop independent living skills and achieve positive outcomes which will enable them to move on to independent living and address cycles of repeat homelessness.

It has also been widely acknowledged that homelessness is not only a housing issue, as highlighted in the 2017 NIAO Report; "For some households, provision of a home does not fully address their homelessness and other support needs. In such cases, homelessness may be linked to mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependencies, street lifestyles and institutional experiences, including prison and the care system" (NIAO, 2017: 46) The Youth Homelessness Action Plan aims to provide a coordinated response to improve the lives of young people who are at risk of and are facing homelessness in Northern Ireland.

Understanding the Causes of Youth Homelessness

It has been established that young people have distinct experiences with homelessness that differ from other adult experiences and access through homelessness services. Ross-Brown and Leavey (2021) observed that "Homelessness for... young adults have been the result of a complex interaction between the individual and structural level factors at play with the conditions of their existence...". Research conducted by Boyle on behalf of the Housing Executive (2021) provides the main reason for youth homelessness in Northern Ireland was family difficulties and breakdown in sharing arrangements, with changes in family structures and circumstances being identified as a specific trigger or causal factor.

Youth Homelessness in Northern Ireland can be largely attributed to the following:



Boyle (2021) reports there are several other causes of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland, including:

| | | | | |
|---|---|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Adverse Childhood Experiences/Trauma | Generational | Mental Health | Relationship Breakdown | Substance Misuse/Addictions |
| Limited Support Networks | Lack of engagement with Services | Poverty & Deprivation | Links to learning Disability & ASD | Lack of suitable accommodation |

Additionally, there are other mitigating factors, unique to Northern Ireland, that have a strong bearing on a young person's route into homelessness:

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Paramilitary related influences/coercive control | Trans-generational Experiences/Impact of the Conflict/'The Troubles' in NI. | Negative interactions with Criminal Justice System from young age |
|---|--|--|

Research conducted by O'Neill et al (2015) provides that in post-Agreement Northern Ireland young men living particularly in working class areas are significantly impacted by 'conflict-legacy issues', which includes involvement in and threats from paramilitary organisations, and interface violence. In some instances, young people may encounter threats from paramilitary organisations, and are asked to leave areas, these young people are also at risk of exploitation. McAlister et al (2018) indicate that there is evidence to suggest that the most vulnerable and marginalised young people are at the highest risk of exploitation and violence from paramilitaries.

Key Trends

Information provided by Centrepont indicates that in 2022-23, just under 136k Young People presented to Councils in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for homelessness assistance. That equates to 372 per day and a new young person facing the threat of homelessness every four minutes. (The Big Issue, 15 Jan 2024)

The data which is provided below details the number of homelessness presentations and acceptances for single young people over the last five years. The tables also detail the number of homeless presentations from young people who left care services or have care experience in their recent background, specifically related to a detailed data capture completed. It is worth noting that in Northern Ireland, young women with dependent children who are deemed to be statutorily homeless tend to be recorded as a single parent household, and subsequently are not always included in the data in relation to youth homelessness.

To provide some context to the data, there has been a notable increases in overall homelessness presentations in the past year. In a recent Department for Communities housing bulletin, the figures indicate that from October 2022 to September 2023, 16,264 households presented as homeless. This compared to 15,581 households in the same period 2021-2022. Recent data published by the Department for Communities indicates that for the period January – March 2024, 4533 households presented as homeless, this is an increase of 4.1% on the same quarter in 2023. Waiting List figures provided for March 2024 demonstrate that there are 47,312 households currently awaiting an allocation of permanent accommodation. 35,464 households are deemed to be in housing stress, with a total of 29,394 households awarded Full Duty Applicant status. Supply continues to outweigh demand significantly. Many young people are likely to be among the hidden homeless population in Northern Ireland, owing to a reluctance to present to the Housing Executive. Ross et al (2018) found that young care leavers, young people from lone parent households, unemployed young people and LGBTQIA+ young people were the which were cohorts overrepresented within the homeless cohort in Northern Ireland.

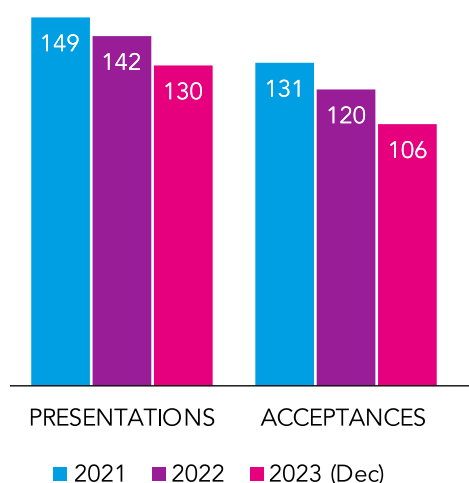
Data 2019 – 2024 Young People (Presentations and Acceptances)

| House-hold Type | Single Males Presentations | | Single Male Acceptances | | Single Females Presentations | | Single Female Acceptances | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------|
| | 16-17 yrs | 18-25 yrs | 16-17 yrs | 18-25 yrs | 16-17 yrs | 18-25 yrs | 16-17 yrs | 18-25 yrs |
| 2019/20 | 68 | 1,322 | 32 | 666 | 90 | 1,195 | 44 | 776 |
| 2020/21 | 50 | 1,457 | 17 | 594 | 84 | 1,285 | 36 | 781 |
| 2021/22 | 46 | 1,233 | 17 | 559 | 50 | 1,133 | 21 | 706 |
| 2022/23 | 39 | 1,042 | 17 | 464 | 42 | 1,063 | 26 | 697 |
| 2023/24 | 37 | 1,188 | 15 | 626 | 35 | 1028 | 16 | 674 |

Data capture: Young People Leaving Care

Unlike other cohorts of vulnerable customers, the numbers of young people leaving care can be more measurable and predictable, i.e. the young people who will be exiting care each year, are known by the Health and Social Care Trusts who will have responsibility for their care until their 18th Birthday.

A detailed data capture for 2021, 2022, and 2023 (up to December 2023) indicates that over the past 3 years; approximately 421 young people presented as homeless having left care services or having had care experience in their recent background, over the period of this particular detailed data capture. 357 of these young people were accepted as statutorily homeless from 2021 – 2023 (December).



Hidden Homelessness

Not all individuals experiencing homelessness are visible through official statistics. An important aspect of youth homelessness is that young people are more likely to be part of the “hidden homeless” population. The Housing Executive provides the following definition in respect of ‘hidden’ homelessness.

“Hidden homelessness includes people living in a range of circumstances, for example, households that may be staying with friends or sharing with family because they have no accommodation of their own. Those households may be unknown to the Housing Executive.” (NIHE, 2017a: 7)

In Northern Ireland, data is collated of presentations and acceptances according to age and household type. It is difficult to fully establish data relating to youth homelessness given the likelihood of higher numbers of hidden homelessness in Northern Ireland. Official statistics recorded do not include numbers of young people staying with friends or family on a temporary basis, or those who are residing in unsafe, precarious, or overcrowded

accommodation. There is uncertainty in respect to the real scale of youth homelessness and those on the edge of homelessness.

Whilst the figures have remained consistent in relation to youth homelessness in Northern Ireland, it is apparent that many young people may not present to the Housing Executive as they may not be deemed to be in 'priority need', meaning no statutory duty would be owed to them. Young people who are eligible, unintentionally homeless, and in priority need are owed a duty by the Housing Executive to help them secure accommodation.

A research report published in 2022 by the Simon Community NI in partnership with the University of Ulster highlights that young people are particularly vulnerable to 'hidden homelessness' owing to the negative effects of welfare reform on their age-group, the experiences of breakdown in relationships within the family home, and many would resort to sofa surfing with friends/family. Often young people are less likely to engage with statutory agencies, or to seek advice from professionals, and may prefer to ask friends, which can lead to misinformation in relation to their rights and entitlements. There are different household groups that are more likely to be among the 'hidden homeless' population in Northern Ireland. As highlighted in the report produced by the Simon Community (2022) the following groups are particularly vulnerable to 'hidden' homelessness:

- Care leavers – It has been acknowledged that this group of young people are at particular risk of becoming 'hidden' in homelessness. The report highlights that many children and young people experience 'hidden' homelessness throughout their lives in care, as they may have a roof over their head, but often, sadly, this is not necessarily a home.
- Domestic Abuse victims – Victims of domestic abuse are often forced to leave their own home to escape from abuse being experienced. They often rely on staying with family/friends on a temporary basis and have been known to adopt a more 'transient lifestyle' to avoid being found by the perpetrator.
- Ex prisoners – Research has found that ex-prisoners required tailored support packages on release from prison to help support them with reintegration into society, in addition to support with mental health and addiction issues.
- Members of the LGBTQ+ community – Individuals from this group may experience 'hidden' homelessness after 'coming out' to family and friends, which can lead to isolation and breakdown in relationships at home. Research by the Simon Community indicates that many individuals from the LGBTQ+ group are often worried about negative attitudes and perceptions, and this can discourage them from seeking assistance.

Trans-generational impact of the conflict on young people

The legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland has contributed to significant mental health problems. Post-traumatic stress, societal post-conflict issues and wider economic factors continue to impact attitudes and living standards today. An NI Audit Office report published in May 2023 noted that Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of mental health problems in the UK, approximately 25% higher than in England. Other generational factors linked to poverty, deprivation and trauma are also associated with the effect homelessness has on our young people.

Research conducted by O'Neill et al (2015) provides that in post-Agreement Northern Ireland young men living particularly in working class areas are significantly impacted by 'conflict-legacy issues', which includes involvement in and threats from paramilitary organisations, and interface violence. In some instances, young people may encounter threats from paramilitary organisations, and are asked to leave areas, these young people are also at risk of exploitation. McAlister et al (2018) also note that the most vulnerable and marginalised young people are at the highest risk of exploitation and violence from the on-going paramilitary presence in Northern Ireland, with young working-class men identified as being most significantly impacted by 'conflict-legacy issues.' (O'Neill et al (2015))

McAlister et al (2021) identify links between conflict legacy and higher rates of young people and children entering the care system due to parental distress, domestic abuse and 'self-soothing behaviours' (e.g. substance abuse and misuse) because of the conflict/'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Consequently, many young people experience instability in their lives from a young age. The importance of a place to call home that is safe and secure is paramount.

Poverty

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland (2023) highlighted the prevalence of poverty here and the negative effects it continues to have on children and families in Northern Ireland. The impact of the 'Cost of Living' crisis continues to have a detrimental impact to children and young people in Northern Ireland. It has been reported that poverty amongst children and young people is notably higher in Northern Ireland. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report that poverty is highest among children with approximately one in four children in Northern Ireland living in poverty (24%). (Poverty in Northern Ireland Report, March 2022) Young people are also impacted negatively due to lower minimum wage rates and reduced welfare benefit entitlements for their age group, which continues to have a detrimental impact on their lives.

Young People Leaving Care

A key priority area being progressed in this Action Plan is to address the gaps within the system in Northern Ireland when a young person transitions from care services to adulthood and is often faced with presenting as homeless to the Housing Executive. We believe that positive change can be achieved in the prevention of homelessness and to improve overall outcomes for young people leaving care in Northern Ireland. Research suggests that there is a clear link between young people leaving the care system, wider family conflict and homelessness. (Boyle, 2021, & Fitzpatrick, 2000)

Smart and Alderson report that young people leaving care are 'more likely to have a conviction, become a teenage parent, be socially excluded, and have mental health problems. There is an evidence base that indicates this cohort of young people are less likely to achieve academically in school, or to continue to higher/third education, or enter stable employment and are also more likely to experience homelessness than their non-looked after peers. (Smart & Alderson, 2020) Additionally, care experienced young people, and young homeless people are often further disadvantaged due to the following:

- A range of complex additional needs, including mental health, self-harm, experience of adverse childhood experiences and low self-esteem.
- Inability to recognise the benefits of engaging with support services.
- Lack of resources to provide services tailored to meet the needs of young people.
- Associated challenges in referring young people to specialist support services. (Boyle, 2021)

The Housing Executive have been working in partnership with Homewards NI in exploring housing pathways and services for young people leaving care in Northern Ireland. We believe that a cross-departmental approach is needed to meet the growing needs of young people leaving care, and we have been working closely with colleagues across the statutory sector with regard to meeting our objectives as part of this Action Plan. In recognition of the specific challenges around youth homelessness, and the Housing Executive's belief that we can make a significant impact on the wider cohort of youth homelessness and particularly those from a care experienced background, this area of work is also reiterating our commitment to the implementation of Objective 2 of the Homelessness Strategy. Objective 2 aims to 'Address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support', in addition to the associated actions incorporated into the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Undoubtedly, there are competing priorities for all vulnerable groups that are homeless. However, with this cohort who are leaving care services, there is a palpable gap in service provision to effectively prevent homelessness and to reduce vulnerable young people from this cohort from experiencing continuous cycles of homelessness.

The focus on creating viable move on accommodation options for young people leaving care within this Action Plan, as a means of preventing homelessness for this cohort is significant, as we believe it can be achieved with effective joined up working and investment, which overall will aid this objective. In Northern Ireland, each Health and Social Care Trust have the information available to demonstrate how many young people will be leaving care

services in their respective areas every year. Typically, Pathway Plans are completed within 3 months of the young person's 16th birthday, and this is reviewed regularly. Therefore, if information is shared at an earlier stage in respect to young people leaving care who may be at risk of homelessness, this will allow the Housing Executive to plan accordingly for these young people and would contribute to a reduction of homelessness for this cohort.

The provision of suitable accommodation that is affordable, safe and secure is central to young people having a positive transition from care services.

Children and Young People in Care are a very important group with a range of needs that can only be sufficiently met through multi-agency co-ordination. They are a finite group, however the data illustrates that they are increasing in size. The number of children in care is currently at its highest levels since the introduction of the Children's (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. A Department of Health commissioned report by NISRA provides considerable detail on the profile of care leavers in Northern Ireland, and this should shape policy and practice responses.

In comparison with their peers, young people in care and those at the point of leaving care are faced with a number of challenges. They are more likely to underachieve or dis-engage from education and employment, suffer more emotional and mental health problems, are more likely to be exploited, and are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Despite the challenges they face, many care-experienced children and young people do really well. Additionally, this cohort of young people are more prone to experiencing financial hardship as they do not have the 'bank of mum and dad' to support them. The Housing Executive, as part of the 'corporate family' accept our responsibility to provide more support, care and opportunities for young people leaving care to enable them to achieve better outcomes. However, this cannot be done in silo, wider society along with the duties of other agencies (health, education, and justice) and the private sector are paramount to achieving success for our young people leaving care.

Dwyer et al refer to the links between conflict legacy and higher rates of young people and children entering the care system due to parental distress, domestic abuse and 'self-soothing behaviours' (e.g. substance abuse and misuse) because of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Having a safe and stable home is well recognised as one of the most important factors in helping those who have grown up in the care system on their journey to independence. However young people leaving care face a multitude of challenges when transitioning into independent living.

Currently, in Northern Ireland, many young people leaving care present to the Housing Executive as they approach the 'cliff-edge' when they are nearing their 18th Birthday. They are assessed and pointed, according to Housing Selection Scheme Rules, without the provision of any priority status in relation to their care experience background. Too often, young people leave care aged 18 without a home, or a plan for the future and the support they need to achieve their ambitions. For many young people in this cohort, they enter homelessness services with low/medium level housing points resulting in decreased prospects for an allocation of a permanent social home.

In addition, access to the private rental sector can pose more obstacles for a young person leaving care due to limited access to deposits, low affordability, no options for guarantors and landlord reliance on credit reference checks. Young people leaving care are exempt from the shared accommodation rates until the age of 25 years, this was increased from 22 years in 2021. Although, generally given the housing market, the affordability of properties for this cohort are often of a significantly lower standard, poorly maintained, and more expensive to heat.

Costs associated with setting up a home and limited financial education can also cause difficulties for this cohort of young people to access current bank and savings accounts which often leads them to resort to high-cost credit or doorstep lenders which can often be linked with paramilitary connections within communities. The increased vulnerabilities, isolation and loneliness of this cohort can often mean that they are subject to exploitation and coercive control. Life opportunities can often be limited by disrupted education pathways, restricting these young people to reliance on social welfare or in some instances low paid employment prospects which allow them to meet their daily living costs.

A key priority of this Action Plan is to address the gaps within the system in Northern Ireland when a young person transitions from care services to adulthood and is faced with the risk of homelessness. Availability of accommodation, with support, and a range of education and employment opportunities is crucial.

Young people aspire to live in safe, and secure homes, suitable to meet their needs. The provision of a home helps young people to follow their goals, attain educational qualifications, seek employment and live meaningful lives in communities. Young people leaving care, who have been classified as 'Looked After Children' are a particular focus of the Housing Executive as they represent a small, but extremely vulnerable group of individuals within the youth homelessness cohort. The Housing Executive is committed to working collaboratively with our partners achieve better outcomes for young people leaving care services in Northern Ireland.

It is worth stating that homelessness is not only simply connected to housing alone, the provision of housing without any support and preparation for living independently will not contribute to a healthy transition into adulthood for most young people who are facing homelessness. It is for these reasons, that the implementation of a Youth Homelessness Action Plan is timely and of significance in addressing the needs of Young People, and Families with children experiencing homelessness in Northern Ireland.

The Housing Executive is seeking to address homelessness by fully understanding our customers' needs, and meeting both their accommodation and support needs. It is essential that we continue to work collaboratively with our partners in the statutory and voluntary sectors to provide positive outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland.

Actions

The Youth Homelessness Action Plan has 18 Actions, there is a huge significance attached to the number 18, given the impact and ‘cliff-edge’ in terms of homelessness on young people when reaching 18 years of age.

| Action | Description | Delivery |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Action 1 | The introduction of dedicated Housing Advisors and Team Leaders in all Areas to be established to take a lead, in relation to young people presentations in their area. The aim is to make sure there is consistency in the provision of service for young people to ensure they receive the appropriate support and assistance as required. This will also include working closely in partnership with the relevant HSCT, shaping the service around the needs of the young person. | Year 1 |
| Action 2 | Review of Regional Good Practice Guidance, ‘Meeting the Accommodation and Support Needs of 16-21 year olds’. This action will also consider Recommendation 5 of the JCSCA Report. The pathway framework should ensure effective practice and interventions, timely responses to young people to prevent homelessness, where possible. This will seek to introduce a more seamless pathway to accommodation and support, with improved outcomes for young people. | Year 1 |
| Action 3 | The development of additional operational guidance for Housing Executive staff to assist with practical implementation of the Regional Good Practice Guidance between the Housing Executive and HSCT’s when assessing young people aged 16/17 years, when assisting young people aged 18-21 years, and those from a care experienced background. | Year 1 |
| Action 4 | The introduction of accessible advice and information for young people about homelessness and housing, what their housing and accommodation rights are, in addition to options available to them in consultation with young people. This information will be added to the Housing Executive’s website and include details of useful contacts who may offer free independent advice and advocacy to assist them. | Year 1 |
| Action 5 | <p>The delivery of additional training and information sessions tailored to understanding the needs of young people presenting to the Housing Executive for housing and homelessness assistance. To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The commissioning of bespoke training in relation to 16/17 year olds, to include the interpretation and application of Article 21 of the Children’s Order, as delivered by the Children’s Law Centre for dedicated Young People’s Advisers to support staff in the delivery of their role. • Information/Training sessions for staff in relation to young people aged 16/17, and 18-21 years. • Joint training/workshops with colleagues in the Health and Social Care Trusts, Probation and Youth Justice Agency etc. | Year 1 (subject to additional funding for training) |

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|------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Action 6 | Introduction of psychologically/Trauma Informed Practitioner training when working with young people experiencing homelessness. This action will align with Mental Health Awareness Training that is due to commence towards the end of 2024. | Years 1-2 |
| Action 7 | To collaborate with key stakeholders and young people to identify and address problems associated with mental health/well-being and the associated impact this has on youth homelessness. | Year 1-3 |
| Action 8 | <p>To increase targeted Youth Homelessness Prevention awareness and activities to minimise homelessness for young people.</p> <p>To include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction of homelessness awareness information sessions in secondary schools. This will include engagement with organisations dedicated to young people. • The introduction of ‘one stop shop’ multi agency workshops in locations across all regions. • The use of mediation (promotion of existing mediation services) to aid with reunification and return to the young person’s family home, when possible. • Referrals to family therapy, counselling and psychological intervention services. • Referrals to Housing Rights Service ‘Young People’s’ Advice and mediation provision. • Referrals to the Children’s Law Centre for free independent legal advice and advocacy support. | Year 1-3 |
| Action 9 | To expand the Shared Tenancies model across all regions, this action will include a review of the existing pilot, taking into account any learning outcomes from the current pilot in the Belfast area. | Years 1–3 (Subject to funding) |
| Action 10 | Explore the upscaling of Housing First for Youth to other areas. | Years 1–3 (Subject to funding) |
| Action 11 | <p>To develop and implement new procedures to conduct early accommodation needs assessments for young people leaving care, with agreed outcomes as part of their Pathway Plan to facilitate better planning and earlier engagement with a young person prior to their formal presentation to the Housing Executive for assistance.</p> <p>(Transitional arrangements from leaving care/supported accommodation to more independent living with a permanent social tenancy- (e.g. pre-assessment prior to turning 18 so plans can be put in place for alternative accommodation before application is activated)</p> | Years 1-2 |

| | | |
|------------------|--|-------------|
| Action 12 | Delivery of innovative housing solutions for young people leaving care as a move on option to prevent homelessness to include support, tailored to meet the individual needs of the young person. | Years 1-3 |
| Action 13 | To complete examination into the development of a new Rule (e.g. Rule 84a) to facilitate allocations of permanent accommodation for young people leaving care with specific criteria to prevent homelessness for this cohort of customers. | Years 1-2 |
| Action 14 | The development of close partnerships with key stakeholders (to include but not limited to statutory sector partners, and other key stakeholders such as Housing Associations, Health and Social Care Trusts, Supporting People, Homewards NI, community/voluntary sector providers, Department of Health, and others to explore opportunities for support to include stakeholders from the private sector) to provide more housing options for young people leaving care as part of the Pathway Planning process. | Years 1-3 |
| Action 15 | Assist young people exiting custody at pre-release stage and those who have engaged with the criminal justice system to access suitable accommodation by exploring the full range of housing options and support applicable to them. (Note: being mindful of their age and associated duties owed by respective Trusts and NIHE) | Years 1-3 |
| Action 16 | To consider any temporary accommodation arrangements specific to young people (e.g. Foyers) and any amendments required in respect of pathways and access points for such arrangements. | Years 1 - 3 |
| Action 17 | To implement measures to provide more practical support and enhance life skills in preparation for independent living. To include initiatives such as preparation for independent living- the introduction of more practical support/workshops should be made available to young people. The objective is to enhance life skills such as budgeting, managing bills, setting up bank accounts, support in preparation for independent living for life skills such as budgeting, accessing benefits and support available, cooking, nutritional and healthy meals advice etc.) | Year 1 |
| Action 18 | LGBTQIA+ Young People – Develop improved systems and procedures for Data Collection to gain a greater understanding of the trends, applications and acceptances to enable the Housing Executive to consider the provision of accommodation suitable to meet the needs of this cohort of young people. | Years 1 - 3 |

Governance

In order to ensure the vision of Ending Homelessness Together is at the heart of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, and in order to ensure there is appropriate transparency and accountability in delivering this action plan the Housing Executive will provide a variety of means by which key partners can guide the delivery of this action plan. The diagram below outlines the key strands which will guide the governance of this action plan.



We will report quarterly to a Steering Group which will have responsibility for monitoring the delivery of the Action Plan. This quarterly reporting to an internal group will be supported by an annual update to the Central Homelessness Forum which plays a key role in ensuring the delivery of the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27.

The development of this action plan has been guided by initial engagement with a range of key stakeholders that engage directly with young people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. The Housing Executive, with the agreement of these partners, have agreed to engage every six months to review progress on the action plan and to identify any emerging issues which should be addressed.

As part of the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 the Housing Executive has committed to publishing an Annual Progress Report and the Annual Progress Report from Year 3 onwards will include a specific chapter that updates on the Youth Homelessness Action Plan. The Annual Progress Report will also provide an update on any amended or additional actions as the Housing Executive has committed to reviewing actions based on engagement with the Action Plan Steering Group, the Central Homelessness Forum and the six monthly engagement with key stakeholders. The Housing Executive is committed to engaging with as many stakeholders as possible in the delivery of this action plan and if you are from an organisation which wishes to explore how we can engage with you please email homelessness.strategy@nihe.gov.uk

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