

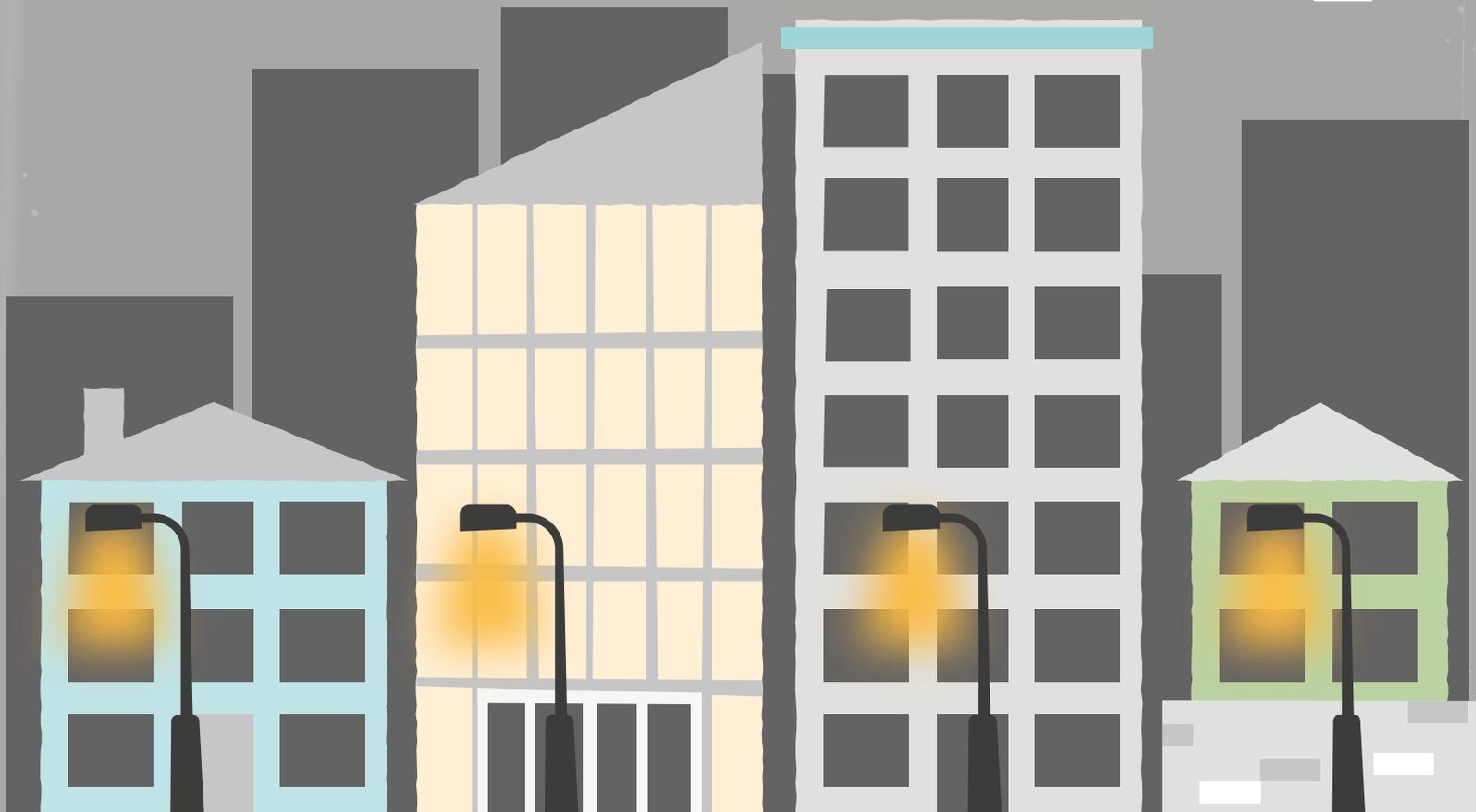


Together
we will end
homelessness

The homelessness monitor: Northern Ireland 2020

Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, Glen Bramley, Jenny Wood, Mark Stephens, Joe Frey and Lynne McMordie. Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) and The Urban Institute, Heriot-Watt University, City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales, & UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE).

January 2020
Executive summary



The homelessness monitor

The homelessness monitor is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments across the United Kingdom. Separate reports are produced for each of the UK countries.

This update report provides our account of how homelessness stands in Northern Ireland in 2020, or as close to 2020 as data availability allows. It also highlights emerging trends and forecasts some of the likely future changes, identifying the developments likely to have the most significant impacts on homelessness.

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About Crisis UK

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We help people directly out of homelessness, and campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.

About the authors

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Disclaimer: All views and any errors contained in this report are the responsibility of the authors. The views expressed should not be assumed to be those of Crisis, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or of any of the key informants who assisted with this work.

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Foreword

We all share a responsibility for ensuring everyone can access a safe and decent home. The combination of high rents, the benefits freeze, and a lack of housing options are locking families in Northern Ireland in poverty, living in temporary accommodation or facing destitution. This cannot be right.

Drawing on statistical analysis and in-depth interviews with key informants, this year's Northern Ireland Monitor identifies several pressure points of the housing and homelessness problem. The reduction in lettings by social landlords is a key reason for the increased pressure on the private rented sector. There is also growing gap between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and rents and only 12 per cent of broad rental market areas in Northern Ireland have more than a fifth of properties available to let at below the LHA rate.

This accumulation of housing issues means that temporary accommodation placements in Northern Ireland are at a decade-long high at 3,000 households. Whilst the recent power sharing deal commits to extending the mitigation package, it is a temporary solution that will not cover all aspects of welfare reform. The multi-year budget and spending plan that the newly formed government are considering must consider LHA and welfare mitigation.

The Homelessness Monitor Northern Ireland 2020 has been published at a moment of change as the Assembly and Executive returns after a three year hiatus to take responsibility for driving key social and economic policies and programmes, and the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union becomes clearer. Whilst currently uncertain, the impact on homelessness, if any, will need to be considered as part of any discussion about tackling and ending homelessness.

There is a role for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Westminster to play. The UK Government must use the next Budget to ease the pressure on households struggling with high rents. The Executive must deliver on outcomes agreed in the *New Decade New Approach Deal*.

Homelessness is not inevitable. With the right policies and investment, ending homelessness or preventing it happening in the first place is truly within our capabilities. We simply can't avoid the evidence any more, this report is a crucial reference point to guide action in Northern Ireland and make homelessness a thing of the past.



Jon Sparkes
Chief Executive, Crisis



Claire Ainsley
Executive Director at JRF

Executive summary

Key points

The Homelessness Monitor series is a longitudinal study providing an independent analysis of the homelessness impacts of recent economic and policy developments in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom.¹ This updated report provides an account of how homelessness stands in Northern Ireland in 2020, or as close to 2020 as data availability allows.

Key points to emerge from our latest analysis are as follows.

- Housing, homelessness and welfare policy development in Northern Ireland has been severely hampered since January 2017 following the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly. At the same time, the potentially serious economic, political and social implications for Northern Ireland of a disorderly Brexit are casting a long shadow over all areas of public policy.
- The number of rough sleepers across Northern Ireland was estimated to be 38 in November 2018. Of these, 16 were in Belfast – up from only five a year earlier. Enumerated rough sleeping in Northern Ireland nonetheless remains relatively small in scale compared with other UK jurisdictions. However, independent sources of evidence suggest that the overall scale of rough sleeping may be substantially greater than indicated by these official street counts, affecting closer to 250 people on an average night.
- In 2018/19 some 18,200 households were logged as homelessness presentations in Northern Ireland, of which more than two thirds – 12,500 – were judged as “Full Duty Applicant” cases. The total number of homelessness presentations has been virtually static over the past few years, but Full Duty Applicant cases have been steadily rising, increasing by 26% since 2009/10.
- The Northern Ireland Housing Executive practice of processing rehousing applications of people affected by ill health and occupying unsuitable housing via the homelessness legislation rather than through the “normal” allocations system significantly contributes to the historically high recorded incidence of statutory homelessness

¹ Parallel Homelessness Monitors are being published for England, Scotland and Wales. All of the UK Homelessness Monitor reports are available from <http://www.crisis.org.uk/pages/homelessnessmonitor.html>

in Northern Ireland as compared with other UK jurisdictions.

- It also helps to explain the strikingly high proportion of social housing allocations accounted for by statutory homeless cases in Northern Ireland. In 2017/18 lettings to homeless households accounted for no less than 88% of all Housing Executive lettings to new tenants, as compared with 39% of all social lets to new tenants in Scotland, and only 21% of all local authority lets to new tenants in England.
- The overall scale of annual temporary accommodation placements has oscillated within a fairly narrow band over recent years in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the figure for 2017/18 was the highest of the decade, at just over 3,000.
- Non-self-contained forms of accommodation including bed and breakfast and hostels accounted for more than half of the 1,629 total temporary accommodation placements made in the first and second quarters of financial year 2018/19. While private single lets account for the bulk of placements at a point in time, more than a quarter of households in temporary accommodation as at 10 January 2019 were living in non-self-contained premises.
- The number of concealed potential households who would want or expect to live separately is estimated at between 70,000 and 112,000: 9-15% of all households in Northern Ireland. These numbers have been relatively stable since 2015, and the proportion of adult children living with parents remains higher than in the rest of the UK.
- Overcrowding in Northern Ireland appears to be static or slightly increasing, with a strong increase in crowding in private renting, leading to Northern Ireland now showing

higher rates than Scotland and Wales. The proportion of households with insufficient bedrooms against the standard is 3.1% in Northern Ireland, affecting about 24,000 households.

- The roll-out of Housing Solutions and Support across Northern Ireland has generally been welcomed, with the associated enhanced data capture also felt to be an encouraging development. While the content of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022 commanded general consensus, concerns remain with regard to implementation. The shift from a "rough sleeping" to a "Chronic Homelessness Action Plan" under the auspices of the Strategy received an enthusiastic reception.
- The Department for Communities-led Inter-departmental Action Plan, intended to complement the Homelessness Strategy with a focus on "non-accommodation" elements, was generally welcomed, especially with regards to the enhanced engagement of health services that it appears to have helped precipitate. However, some of the actions around education, for example, were felt to be somewhat misdirected.
- The Supporting People budget has been protected but frozen in Northern Ireland for a number of years, meaning that there has been a year-on-year reduction in value, putting pressure on some voluntary sector providers. While the continuation of its ring-fenced status is viewed as a major victory for the homelessness sector, this is currently out to consultation.
- Lettings by social landlords have been on a downward trajectory for some time, whilst the number of applicants in housing stress has risen. This suggests that the supply of social rented housing is one of the main pressure points in the Northern Irish housing system, and this is

further evidenced by the frequency with which private tenants cite the length of social landlord waiting lists as a reason for opting for private renting.

- Attempts to increase the supply of social and affordable housing have been hampered by the absence of an agreed policy on Developer Contributions in Northern Ireland, although local government intend to use the Local Development Plans process to introduce local planning policies.
- Moreover, a temporary "derogation" that postpones both the Office of National Statistics' decision to reclassify Northern Ireland's housing associations as public bodies, and the severe budgetary implications of this, is due to end in March 2020. An Office of National Statistics decision to reverse this reclassification decision is dependent on legislation being passed that will deregulate housing associations. It will also legislate for the ending of the Statutory House Sales Scheme (the Northern Ireland equivalent of Right to Buy). The Northern Ireland Office has now committed to passing this legislation through Westminster as soon as possible.
- There is an ongoing shortfall in funding for the Housing Executive. It is estimated that an additional £1bn is required over a ten-year period to undertake necessary repairs and improvements to the stock, without which there is the danger that a proportion of the stock will have to be "decommissioned" for health and safety reasons.
- The Welfare Reform "mitigation" package introduced in stages in 2016 and 2017 has succeeded in protecting many low-income households, especially social sector

tenants, from significant reductions in their benefits. However, this protection is due to come to an end in March 2020.

- The private rented sector has grown enormously over the past 20 years and is now a similar size to the social rented sector in Northern Ireland. Its growth has moderated in recent years. There is little evidence of "no fault" evictions rising to anything like the extent that has occurred in England in recent years, and the loss of rented accommodation is cited as a reason for homelessness acceptances in only a relatively modest proportion of total Full Duty Applicant cases (13%), albeit that this category has exhibited a large proportionate increase over the past decade.
- Unlike tenants in the social sector, there has been no mitigation package to protect private sector tenants against the impact of the growing gap between Local Housing Allowance and contractual rents. Recent research demonstrates that in only 5 out of the 40 broad rental market areas-property type combinations are 20% or more of the properties available to let at below the Local Housing Allowance rate, a rate which should reflect the 30th percentile.

Trends in homelessness

Rough sleeping

There has been a perceived rise in rough sleeping in Northern Ireland in recent years. This perception is partly related to a visible increase in "street activity" including street begging and street drinking.² Nevertheless, given the lack of any historical series it is difficult to judge whether rough sleeping in Northern Ireland is, in fact, changing in scale in any sustained way.

² NIAO (2017) *Homelessness in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office. Available at: https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/sites/niao/files/media-files/Homelessness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report_0.pdf.

Drawing on street count data for Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry, as well as estimates for other areas, Northern Ireland Housing Executive put the November 2018 number of rough sleepers across the jurisdiction at 38.³ Of these, 16 were in Belfast – up from only five a year earlier. Nonetheless, enumerated rough sleeping in Northern Ireland remains relatively small in scale compared with other parts of the UK and with the Republic of Ireland.

However, as elsewhere in the UK, independent sources of evidence suggest that the overall scale of rough sleeping in Northern Ireland is substantially greater than indicated by official street counts. Based on 2012 survey data (UK-wide Poverty and Social Exclusion study) it can be inferred that the typical nightly number of rough sleepers in Northern Ireland was then around 250. Similarly, emergency service user data collated in the 2017 Joseph Rowntree Foundation “Destitution in the UK” study,⁴ generated a “grossed up” snapshot estimate of rough sleeping in Northern Ireland of 250.

Statutory homelessness

In 2018/19 some 18,200 households were logged by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homelessness presentations. Of these, more than two thirds – 12,500 – were judged as “Full Duty Applicant” cases. The total number of homelessness presentations has been virtually static over the past few years, while Full Duty Applicant cases have been steadily rising. Thus, the latter have increased by 26% since 2009/10, whereas total

logged presentations in 2018/19 were 2% lower than in the 2009/10 base year.

Proportionate to total population, statutory homeless numbers in Northern Ireland have historically run at much higher rates than in England and Wales and somewhat higher than in Scotland.⁵ In part, this reflects the fact that, while homelessness acceptances in England and Wales fell substantially in the mid-2000s (especially in England), as a result of the introduction of Housing Options, they remained largely stable in Northern Ireland.

However, another contributory factor is the statistical treatment of certain categories of applicant, and in particular those who are accepted as homeless on grounds that their “accommodation is not reasonable”. This was the largest single “reason for homelessness” category among 2018/19 FDA cases (at 32%). Moreover, between 2009/10 and 2018/19 this cohort grew from 2,490 to 3,674 – a rise of 59%. This classification is unique to Northern Ireland and, as indicated by Northern Ireland Housing Executive, may involve issues of “affordability, property unfitness levels, unsuitability for the needs of the household, severe overcrowding etc”.⁶ More than 80% of these applicants were deemed as Full Duty Applicant cases because their accommodation is not reasonable in relation to their disability or health (including mental health) condition.

It seems, therefore, that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s interpretation of the homelessness legislation to process rehousing

applications of people affected by ill health and occupying unsuitable housing via this route rather than through the “normal” allocations system (i.e. as waiting list applicants) significantly contributes to the historically high recorded incidence of statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland.⁷ It also helps to explain the strikingly high proportion of social housing allocations accounted for by statutory homeless cases in Northern Ireland. In 2017/18 lettings to homeless households accounted for no less than 88% of all Northern Ireland Housing Executive lettings to new tenants, as compared with 39% of all social lets to new tenants in Scotland, and only 21% of all local authority lets to new tenants in England.⁸ A recent increase in the figure for Northern Ireland (e.g. from 76% in 2014/15) has further accentuated a long-established contrast between Northern Ireland and other UK jurisdictions in this respect.

Single adults of working age accounted for exactly half of all presentations as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in 2018/19, and family households made up just under a third (32%). While “pensioner households” comprise only 13% of all presentations, recent years have seen a striking increase in this group, up by 22% between 2009/10 – 2018/19.

However, though pensioner household applications have risen fastest in percentage terms over this period, the growth in single adults aged 26-59 has been numerically larger. Younger

single applicants, by contrast, have diminished considerably. Not only have such applications declined by 30%, but the numerical reduction in younger adults over the period (1,225) has outweighed the combined increase in pensioners and adults aged 26-59 (1,030).

The overall scale of temporary accommodation placements has oscillated within a fairly narrow band over recent years in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the figure for 2017/18 – the latest year for which published data is currently available – was the highest of the decade, at just over 3,000.⁹ In a new statistical series, Northern Ireland Housing Executive reports a breakdown of temporary accommodation placements over a six-month period, according to the type of housing concerned. This shows that bed and breakfast, hostels and similar forms of non-self-contained accommodation accounted for more than half of the 1,629 total placements made in the first and second quarters of financial year 2018/19. Private single lets¹⁰ account for the bulk of placements at a point in time (reflecting the fact that such placements are, on average of longer duration). Even so, of the 2,065 placements as at ¹⁰ January 2019, some 586 – more than a quarter of the total – were living in non-self-contained premises. Within this cohort, almost half (45%) had been accommodated as such for more than six months, with a quarter (26%) resident in accommodation of this kind for more than a year.¹¹

3 NIHE (2019) *Tackling Rough Sleeping in Northern Ireland: Key facts and figures*, Online: Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getmedia/665fcdd6-146e-4389-8a3b-c3d5c8403f23/Tackling-rough-sleeping-in-NI-key-facts-figures.pdf.aspx>.

4 Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G., Sosenko, F., Blenkinsopp, J., Wood, J., Johnsen, S., Littlewood, M. and Watts, B. (2018) *Destitution in the UK 2018: Final Report*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2018>.

5 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. and Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2016*, London: Crisis.

6 NIHE (2017) *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022: Ending Homelessness Together*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=>

7 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2016*, London: CRISIS

8 Stephens, M., Perry, J., Williams, P. and Young, G. (2019) *UK Housing Review 2019*. Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing. Tables 97b, 103 and 104

9 It should be noted that, in enumerating the throughput of placements during the cited financial years, these statistics differ from the ‘stock’ measure of temporary accommodation placements in Great Britain – i.e. the number as at a given date.

10 These are defined by DfC as follows: “A single let is a private dwelling which is made available on a temporary basis to a homeless household while they are waiting for permanent rehousing. These dwellings are normally in the private rented sector”. NIHE (2019) *Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin April - September 2018*, Online: Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency, Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/ni-homelessness-bulletin-apr-sep-2018.PDF>.

11 NIHE (2019) *Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin April - September 2018*, Online: Department for Communities, Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency.

Hidden and wider homelessness risks

People may be in a similar housing situation to those who apply to housing authorities as homeless, that is, lacking their own secure, separate accommodation, without formally applying or registering with Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Such people are sometimes referred to as “hidden homeless”, although perhaps it would be more accurate to characterise some of these groups as people with unmet housing needs who are at risk of homelessness. A number of large-scale/household surveys enable us to measure some particular categories of potential hidden homelessness or wider risk of homelessness: *concealed households*; households who are *sharing* accommodation; and *overcrowded* households. It is important to emphasise that not everyone living in these situations will actually be homeless, but these phenomena are indicative of the kinds of housing pressures that may be associated with hidden homelessness or a risk of falling into homelessness.

The number of concealed potential households who may want or expect to live separately is estimated at between 70,000 and 112,000: 9-15% of all households in Northern Ireland. These numbers have been relatively stable since 2015, and the proportion of adult children living with parents remains higher than in the rest of the UK. The propensity of younger adults to head households has tended to rise in Northern Ireland in recent years, against falling trends in rest of UK. This is probably indicative of both an easier general housing market and economic improvement following the peace agreement. Equally, some recent fluctuations in rates of household formation could reflect the very dramatic “boom and bust” in the housing market in Ireland (North and South) in the late 2000s.

Northern Ireland appears to have seen an increase in sharing since 2012, to higher levels than the rest of UK, but the prevalence of larger groups sharing in the social rented sector suggests possible inconsistencies in recording of congregate supported accommodation.

Overcrowding was less common in Northern Ireland than in the other UK countries, particularly compared to England, in 2010. However, as rates in the other UK countries appear to have fallen, the rates in Northern Ireland were static to 2013 and then rose in 2016. The rate of overcrowding in Northern Ireland is now higher than in Wales or Scotland, but still lower than in England. The proportion of households with insufficient bedrooms against the standard is 3.1% in Northern Ireland, affecting about 24,000 households.

Overcrowding is more common in social renting (4.0%) and private renting (4.8%) and lower in owner occupation (2.3%). Private renting especially, but also social renting, and owner occupation, have all seen increases in overcrowding in Northern Ireland between 2010 and 2016.¹² In Northern Ireland, overcrowding is more prevalent for working age households without children than it is for families with children, a different situation from that in the UK as a whole where more families are affected.

Economic and policy impacts on homelessness

Northern Ireland experienced the deepest recession of any UK countries, and output recovered to pre-recession levels only in 2015. There has been some catching up with the rest of the UK more recently but within the context of economic low growth that is expected to continue, and the uncertainty surrounding Brexit. Economic growth is expected to be

lower throughout the UK as a result of Brexit, with the severity depending on the nature of the trading agreement reached with the EU.

The labour market in Northern Ireland remains weak. Although employment levels have risen above 70%, this is almost 5% below the UK average. More than one-quarter of 16-64 years olds are economically inactive, which is the highest level in the UK. Economic inactivity has risen since 2012, whereas it has fallen elsewhere in the UK. In real terms, earnings were no higher in 2018 than they were in 2008, although they have recovered from the low point in 2014.

House prices in Northern Ireland have risen since the depths of the recession but they are more than 60% lower than the peak in real terms. This has fed through into improvements in affordability with house price to earnings ratios falling from 10 in 2007 to 5 now. There have been revivals in mortgage lending especially among first time buyers, and there are more first-time buyer mortgages being granted now compared to 2007, but they are still a long way below the levels of 2001. People who already own their own homes are benefiting from improved affordability arising from very low interest rates with the result that arrears and possessions are at very low levels.

Low housing costs in Northern Ireland, relative to the rest of the UK, indicate a housing system under less pressure than in many other parts of the country. Northern Ireland has a similarly sized social rented sector to England and Wales, with 17% of households recorded as living in the sector in all three jurisdictions in 2017/18. However, lettings by social landlords have been on a downward trajectory for some time, whilst the number of applicants in housing stress has risen. This suggests that the supply of social rented housing is one of the main pressure points in the Northern

Irish housing system, and is further evidenced by the frequency with which private tenants cite the length of social landlord waiting lists as a reason for opting for private renting.

Attempts to increase the supply of social and affordable housing have been hampered by the absence of an agreed policy on Developer Contributions in Northern Ireland, although progress is now being made through affordable housing policies being created through the Local Development Planning process that would see a percentage of housing developed being affordable – 20% in all developments over 5 units is proposed in Belfast City Council. Moreover, a temporary “derogation” that postpones both the Office for National Statistics decision to reclassify Northern Ireland’s housing associations as public bodies and the severe budgetary implications of this is due to end in March 2020. An Office for National Statistics decision to reverse this reclassification decision has been linked to the ending of the Statutory House Sales Scheme (the Northern Ireland equivalent of Right to Buy), which cannot be forthcoming until the Northern Ireland Executive is up and running again or it is legislated for in Parliament. Attempts to make significant amendments to the historically sensitive allocations policy for social housing, especially around so-called “intimidation points”, have ground to a halt for the same reason. Also extremely worrying is the ongoing shortfall in funding for the Housing Executive. It is estimated that an additional £1bn is required over a ten-year period to undertake necessary repairs and improvements to the stock, without which there is the danger that a proportion of the stock will have to be “decommissioned” for health and safety reasons.

The Welfare Reform “mitigation” package introduced in stages in 2016 and 2017 has succeeded in protecting many low-income households,

¹² These trends appear to differ from those seen in the Rest of the UK, according to the available UK-wide data source (UKHLS).

especially social tenants, from significant reductions in their benefits to date, and is likely to have made a considerable contribution to keeping homelessness in Northern Ireland relatively stable, at least with respect to rough sleeping and temporary accommodation placements. However, this protection is due to come to an end in March 2020. The ending of protection from the Social Sector Size Criteria ("Bedroom Tax") for 34,000 tenants in the social sector poses a considerable risk that it will lead to rising arrears and ultimately to higher levels of homelessness, particularly in view of the mismatch between the social housing stock and bedroom requirements of smaller households as determined by the "Bedroom Tax". The option of using Discretionary Housing Payments is by no means an ideal way of addressing this issue, not least because of their budget-limited as well as discretionary nature.

The Work and Pensions and Northern Ireland Affairs Committees published their joint report on *Welfare policy in Northern Ireland*¹³ on 9 September 2019. The key recommendation was that the mitigation package should be extended for a further four years beyond March 2020 and that this would include the Social Sector Size Criteria ("Bedroom Tax") and benefit cap mitigations as well as disability-related mitigation payments and mitigation for 16-year olds transitioning from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments. Other recommendations include: making Discretionary Support Awards less restrictive (in particular, by removing a specific income ceiling); that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should make a statement to Parliament as soon as possible stating the Government's intention to pass legislation to extend the mitigation package in a Northern Ireland Budget

13 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2019) *Welfare policy in Northern Ireland*: House of Commons. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/northern-ireland-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/welfare-policy-in-northern-ireland-inquiry-17-19/>.

Act; undertaking an evaluation of split Universal Credit payments in Scotland to assess an appropriate model for Northern Ireland; halting the implementation of the UK-wide two-child limit on Universal Credit in Northern Ireland and reimbursing families already affected by this restriction. At the time of writing the Government response to these recommendations is awaited.

The private rented sector has grown enormously in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years and is now considerably larger than the social rented sector, albeit that its growth has moderated in recent years. Unlike tenants in the social sector, there has been no mitigation package to protect private sector tenants against the impact of the growing gap between Local Housing Allowance and contractual private rents. Recent research by Housing Rights provides a disaggregated analysis of the situation that shows in only 5 out of the 40 broad rental market area property-type combinations are 20% or more of the properties available to let at below the Local Housing Allowance rate, a rate which should reflect the 30th percentile. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of "no fault" evictions becoming a dominant cause of homelessness, with the loss of rented accommodation cited as a reason for homelessness acceptances in only a relatively modest proportion of total full duty applicant cases (13%), albeit that this category has exhibited a large proportionate increase over the past decade. This paints a very different picture to the massive expansion in the numbers made homeless by the ending of private tenancies witnessed in England since 2010, although the full roll-out of Universal Credit, and the fast approaching so-called "cliff edge", if and when the welfare reform mitigation package ends, may see that position change.

In 2017, the "Northern Ireland Housing Executive Homelessness Strategy 2017-22" was published,¹⁴ together with a "Housing Executive Led Action Plan".¹⁵ This Homelessness Strategy was informed by an independent evaluation of the previous (2012-2017) Strategy,¹⁶ and a 2017 report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, entitled "Homelessness in Northern Ireland". The Northern Ireland Audit Office called for stepped up action and co-ordination to meet Northern Ireland Housing Executive's targets for reducing homelessness, given rises in statutory homelessness over the period of the 2012-2017 strategy.¹⁷ Together with the Action Plan produced by the Ministers for Social Development, Health and Social Care, and Justice,¹⁸ triggered by rough sleeper deaths in Belfast, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report has been credited with strengthening the new Homelessness Strategy's focus on prevention and housing-led solutions.

The Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022 has five core themes:

1. To prioritise homelessness prevention.
2. To secure sustainable accommodation and appropriate support solutions for homeless households.
3. To further understand and address the complexities of chronic homelessness across Northern Ireland.

4. To ensure the right mechanisms are in place to oversee and deliver this strategy.

5. To measure and monitor existing and emerging need to inform the ongoing development of appropriate services.

Most of our key informants were fairly satisfied with the Strategy's content, and consistent with this, Northern Ireland Housing Executive reported that 90% of consultation responses on the draft Strategy endorsed its vision and objectives.¹⁹ Especially well-received was the prioritisation of prevention in the Strategy, linked to the roll out of Northern Ireland's Housing Options approach, known as Housing Solutions and Support, which was generally welcomed, albeit that aspects of its operationalisation were considered problematic by some stakeholders. Moreover, the broadening of focus from shift from a "rough sleeping" to a "Chronic Homelessness Action Plan", brought forward by Northern Ireland Housing Executive as part of Year Two of its Strategy, received an enthusiastic reception.²⁰ However, key informants echoed similar fears as in the 2016 Monitor around a potential implementation gap, exacerbated by a continued lack of new social housing supply (see above), Brexit-related anxieties, and suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive.

14 NIHE (2017) *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022: Ending Homelessness Together*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: [https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=.](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=)

15 Chapter 5 of NIHE (2017) *Ending Homelessness Together: Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

16 Summarised in NIHE (2017) *Ending Homelessness Together: Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

17 McMordie, L. and Watts, B. (2018) 'The Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on Homelessness: A Missed Opportunity', *European Journal of Homelessness*, 12(2), pp. 89-113.

18 Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. and Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: Northern Ireland 2016*, London: Crisis.

19 NIHE (2017) *Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-2022: Ending Homelessness Together*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: [https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=.](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=)

20 NIHE (2019) *Chronic Homelessness Action Plan*, Belfast/Online: Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Available at: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Supporting-Documents/RS-246-02-19-Chronic-Homelessness-Action-Plan-ACCE.aspx>.

An Inter-Departmental Action Plan 2017-18, published and led by Department for Communities, is intended to complement the new Northern Ireland Housing Executive Homelessness Strategy, by focusing on non-accommodation aspects of homelessness-related interventions.²¹ It sets out five priority areas: Health and wellbeing, including mental health and substance misuse; Education and awareness raising – children, young people, schools and providers; Support for those leaving places of care, including a range of institutions; Support for families, including those experiencing domestic violence; Employability, financial capability and access to benefits. A Year 1 report of the Action Plan for 2017-18,²² and a Year 2 Action Plan for 2019-2020, have now been published.²³ In the latter document it was acknowledged that a more outcome-focussed approach was required going forward.

This Inter-Departmental Action Plan stream of work was welcomed by key informants, especially the establishment of a pilot Homeless Healthcare Hub in Belfast, designed to provide outreach care to those who are sleeping rough or in hostel accommodation. However, not all key informants were persuaded by the focus of all of the actions in the Plan. For instance, a key action for Education is around developing a section of the Active Citizenship curriculum for school children that

encompasses issues linked with homelessness, but was criticised by some key informants as not being sharply focussed enough on those young people at highest risk.

As reported in the last Homelessness Monitor in 2016, Department for Communities led a Supporting People review published in November 2015²⁴ which recommended moving away from primarily accommodation-based provision to more floating support models. A new strategic commissioning approach was also intended to rationalise floating support and other Supporting People-funded services, with a focus on the achievement of better value for money via competitive selection. In September 2018, Department for Communities published an Action Plan for the Implementation of this Supporting People review.²⁵ There have been no cuts to the Supporting People budget in Northern Ireland on anything like the scale seen in England,²⁶ but funding levels have been static since 2008, with no inflation-related uplift, so in real terms there have been year-on-year reductions. On the other hand, the ring fence round Supporting People funding, now removed in both England and Scotland, currently remains in place in Northern Ireland, a fact welcomed by voluntary sector providers, though this is now under review.

Conclusion

This year's Homelessness Monitor, the last in the current series, was written at a moment of great uncertainty in Northern Ireland. Even more than the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland faces economic, social and political consequences arising from Brexit, with much depending on the success of the special arrangements envisaged. Coupled with the policy and legal stasis introduced by the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2017, it is remarkable that we are able to report on at least some positive developments on homelessness since the last Monitor in 2016, not least the roll-out of Housing Solutions and Support across the jurisdiction. However, the potential ending of the welfare reform mitigation package in March 2020 is clearly a very significant and urgent concern, and so too is the growing pressure on the (already modest) social housing supply in Northern Ireland. The potentially deleterious homelessness impacts of these twin developments are obvious and worrying.

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