

**Department for Communities
Departmental Response
to Recommendations in the Northern
Ireland Audit Office's Report:
Homelessness in Northern Ireland**

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly
by Department for Communities**

13 March 2018



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Glossary of Abbreviations

CMS	Customer Management System
DfC	Department for Communities
DoH	Department of Health
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
ToR	Terms of Reference

**DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO NORTHERN IRELAND
AUDIT OFFICE (NIAO) RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE NIAO'S REPORT OF 21 NOVEMBER 2017
ON "HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND"**

Department for Communities

Homelessness in Northern Ireland

Introduction

The responses within this Departmental Response have been made at official level. Where specific recommendations relate to issues of policy these will require Ministerial decisions.

NIAO Recommendation 1

NIHE needs to be more innovative in its analysis, interpretation and presentation of the homelessness data it collects. We recommend that, to fully understand the causes of homelessness, NIHE:

- **carries out research to determine why the level of statutory homeless acceptances in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than in other UK jurisdictions;**
- **analyses the reasons for variations in acceptances across its regions; and**
- **analyses the data relating to the accommodation not reasonable category.**

The Department for Communities (DfC) accepts this recommendation.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has commenced the introduction of a Housing Solutions and Support approach akin to Housing Options in place in Great Britain. As part of the introduction of Housing Solutions and Support, NIHE has developed a new IT system – the Customer Management System (CMS) in order to improve the management of the data it collects. This will lead to improvements in the analysis, capture and reporting of data capturing key data on prevention of homelessness, temporary accommodation, access to longer-term housing options and sustainable solutions.

Based on its improved homelessness data NIHE will direct its research towards a fuller understanding of the causes of homelessness. A broader research programme on homelessness in the NIHE research programme for 2018-19 will include projects that:

- carry out research to determine why the level of statutory homeless acceptances in Northern Ireland are significantly higher than other jurisdictions in the UK;
- analyse the reasons for variations in acceptances across its regional districts; and
- analyse the data relating to the accommodation not reasonable category.

As stated above, the new Housing Solutions and Support approach will be implemented across all NIHE Area Offices by April 2018 for new customers and will be fully operational by June 2018. Data will therefore be recorded in the CMS in respect of new customers from April 2018. With regards to existing customers who are currently on the social housing waiting list, they will be afforded the same Housing Solutions Service as part of the annual renewal process throughout the 2018-19 year and will be integrated onto the CMS throughout 2018-19. Therefore a comprehensive data set will be available from 2019-2020 onwards. In addition, the outcomes of the research programme will be published in 2019-20.

NIAO Recommendation 2

We recommend that NIHE establishes:

- **clear objectives that capture key high level expected outcomes; and**
- **SMART key performance indicators to measure overall success.**

This should be part of their strategic planning process in all business areas.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

The Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 identifies homelessness outcomes and indicators, which are aligned with the draft Programme for Government. The Strategy contains five outcome-focussed objectives and a framework of monitoring and evaluation has been constructed around these objectives. The Strategy is also supported by annual implementation plans.

NIHE will include SMART objectives within the implementation plans from Year 2 of the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 which will be agreed by 1st April 2018.

As part of the business planning process for 2018-19, NIHE will consider and put in place clear objectives and SMART key performance indicators across all business areas.

NIAO Recommendation 3

We recommend that NIHE systematically evaluates performance in dealing with homelessness against its strategic objectives and regularly reports progress to the Board and other key stakeholders.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

On an annual basis NIHE will systematically evaluate performance and progress against the objectives of the Strategy in line with the availability of data sets and include this in its reporting arrangements to the NIHE Board. The NIHE Board will also be provided with quarterly reports charting progress which will cumulate in the more detailed report on an annual basis

In addition, the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 commits to the publication of an annual report. NIHE will also continue to update its key stakeholder groups (Homelessness Strategy Steering Group, Central Homelessness Forum, Local Area Groups and Service User Forum) in relation to progress against strategic objectives. In addition, governance and oversight arrangements are in place to ensure that DfC is kept updated on progress against the Strategy on a monthly basis.

NIAO Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Department and NIHE develop a system that captures data on intervention outcomes of its partner agencies and feeds this into the new customer management information system to help target resources appropriately.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

NIHE currently makes available grant funding to a range of partner agencies and, accordingly, has reviewed arrangements for the 'Funding of Outside Agencies'. As a result NIHE will be including additional reporting requirements of its partners in their contracts for funding. As part of these, NIHE will introduce intervention outcome reporting for those projects availing of the 'Funding of Outside Agencies' budget in 2018-19 with a view to full reporting of data the following year.

Information already collected routinely, together with any new information, will be analysed quarterly to match need and demand with the right services to help target resources. NIHE will investigate the need and benefit of capturing any further information through the CMS system following the full implementation of Housing Solutions and Support.

NIAO Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Department expands the number of data sets collected and statistical information published on homelessness in Northern Ireland.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

A working group comprising departmental housing officials, statisticians and NIHE officers has been established. This will review and consider the data sets currently available with a view to extending the data sets during 2018-

19. The aim will be to determine the extent of additional data collection, collation and analysis in order to provide robust and comprehensive data sets in 2019-20. DfC Analytical Services Unit will investigate the expansion of the number of existing datasets by drafting an initial list of desirable information for departmental and NIHE consideration on availability and suitability.

NIAO Recommendation 6

We recommend that an annual report is submitted to the NIHE Board which presents a summary of expenditure and benchmarked cost data demonstrating that accommodation-based services provide value for money.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

As referred to in recommendation 3, in addition to more detailed quarterly reports, an annual report will be submitted to the NIHE Board in June of each year to provide an update on progress on the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22. NIHE will revise the level of detailed information it collects and analyses in respect of the use of accommodation-based homeless services. This will include benchmarking of cost data on the various services used across Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, against accommodation-based service costs in other part of the UK, to demonstrate that these services are providing best value. The NIHE Board will also be provided with detailed financial reports on expenditure on accommodation-based homeless services, and NIHE will regularly brief other key stakeholders beginning in 2018.

NIAO Recommendation 7

We recommend that the framework for addressing homelessness is developed in an integrated way with an emphasis on outcomes rather than existing departmental structures. This may lead to a widening of the scope of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

A DfC led Inter-Departmental Homelessness action plan was published on 27th November 2017. The plan was developed to complement the NIHE's Homelessness Strategy and focuses on addressing gaps in services that have the most impact or have the potential to more positively impact on the lives and life chances of people who are either homeless or most at risk of homelessness. The plan was developed in an integrated way with other government departments (including the Departments of Health, Justice, Infrastructure and Education), statutory partners, homelessness service providers and service users. The first iteration of the action plan contains nine tangible actions which have been identified as priorities for NI departments and their statutory partners. The result of actions from the first year of the Homelessness Strategy will be used to inform future planning. Work has commenced on planning of Year 2 actions.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group, which includes cross-Government and cross-sectoral representation, are under review with the aim of enhancing roles and responsibilities, improving reporting arrangements and to increase challenge functions. The revised ToR will be ratified at the next meeting, scheduled for 1st March 2018.

NIAO Recommendation 8

We recommend that an in-depth cross departmental review is jointly commissioned to identify and quantify health-related support needs for homelessness service providers and homeless households across Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health (DoH) and DfC accept this recommendation.

DoH and DfC will review the outcomes of existing work streams, such as the work recently commissioned by the Chief Medical Officer in DoH, to determine possible service models that will increase access to primary health care and other health and social care services for people who are homeless. DoH and DfC will review and analyse the findings of existing research in order to identify gaps and actions required to progress work against this recommendation. This will inform the need to commission any further review.

The review to identify future action will be completed by September 2018 with a view to fulfilling the recommendation by March 2019.

NIAO Recommendation 9

We recommend that NIHE, in partnership with other service providers, develops improved systems for regularly monitoring and measuring the extent of rough sleeping throughout Northern Ireland to determine if action currently being taken is adequate.

DfC accepts this recommendation.

NIHE will take forward in 2018-19 reviews of the Belfast and Derry City Rough Sleeper strategies, and will scope the opportunity to extend the existing street counts beyond Belfast. Matching data gathered through monitoring of rough sleeping will help strategically direct resources and develop appropriate systems within NIHE. This will complement systems in its partner organisations and will help shape outreach and accommodation services provided and to ensure their adequacy. Local Area Groups established under the Homelessness Strategy will assist in terms of the provision of interventions where rough sleeping occur.