

STRATEGIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR THE SUPPORTING PEOPLE PROGRAMME: A POLICY STATEMENT

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This paper sets out the policy position of the Department for Communities, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice on the approach to strategic needs assessment within the Supporting People programme. Its primary readership are the statutory partners involved in the programme but it is also relevant to others, including providers and service users, with a direct interest in the Supporting People programme.

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1. Purpose of this document

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to set out the policy framework for the strategic assessment of need within the Supporting People programme.
- 1.2 It establishes the principles that will underpin effective strategic needs assessment. It has been produced by the Department for Communities, which has policy responsibility for the Supporting People programme and has been agreed by the two other Departments with a policy interest in the programme: the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Justice (DoJ).
- 1.3 It is produced within the context of a Programme for Government which focuses on improving outcomes for citizens through greater collaborative working across Government.

2. Background

- 2.1 Supporting People is a complex and diverse programme which, since 2003, has provided housing support services to assist vulnerable people, primarily on low incomes, in Northern Ireland to live independently. The services eligible for Supporting People funding are defined in some detail in legislation¹ but can be broadly described as services which offer practical property and skills-based support that allow vulnerable individuals to live independently.
- 2.2 People can receive support in a hostel, in sheltered housing or in other types of supported housing accommodation. Housing support can also be provided to people in their own homes, whether privately rented, owner-occupied or social housing, through floating support services.
- 2.3 There are three main partners involved in commissioning services through the Supporting People programme: the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, who also administer the programme, Health and Social Care and the Probation

¹ Housing Support Services Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 (SR 172).
CO1/17/3590

Board for Northern Ireland. A number of the accommodation-based solutions, particularly for people with disabilities, for older people and for young homeless people, are jointly funded by Supporting People and Health and Social Care.

2.4 In November 2015, the Department for Social Development (now the Department for Communities) completed a review of the Supporting People programme. This made thirteen recommendations.² In many ways, recommendation 1 is the lynchpin around which many of the other recommendations coalesce. It proposed the introduction of “a new strategic, intelligence-led approach to needs assessment across all client groups, which takes proper account of demographic trends and other social factors to identify current and future patterns of need.”

3. Role of needs assessment

3.1 Assessing need as robustly as possible is at the heart of good strategic planning and service delivery. The Supporting People Review views strategic needs assessment as fulfilling four key roles within the Supporting People programme:

- as a way of identifying priorities for future commissioning of services (recommendation 10);
- supporting effective decommissioning of services which are no longer strategically relevant (recommendation 4);
- supporting a revised approach to outcomes measurement (recommendation 3); and
- ensuring that services meet need and deliver value for money.

3.2 At its most basic, strategic needs assessment is about having a range of good quality evidence that demonstrates:

- **who** needs housing support services;
- **what** type of services are needed;

² Department for Social Development, “Supporting People Review: Final Report” (November 2015)
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- **where** those services are required;

now and in the future.

- 3.3 Housing support services are about more than the Supporting People programme and the term provides a “generic description for support services whose primary aim is to facilitate people’s ability to identify, obtain or adapt housing that is suitable for their needs, or to sustain their ability to live independently in their own home.”
- 3.4 This definition is drawn from a report, “The Supporting People Programme in Northern Ireland: a Methodology and Structures for Strategic Needs Assessment,” produced for the Housing Executive in March 2016³, which recommends its use in strategic needs assessment. In so doing, it makes an important point that people’s needs do not sit neatly within organisational or programme boundaries and it would be impractical to attempt to assess strategic needs for Supporting People services in isolation.
- 3.5 While the main purpose of the strategic needs assessment supported by this policy statement is to determine the strategic need for services commissioned through the Supporting People programme, the process is also likely to identify needs for other services, such as housing adaptations or social care-focused services.
- 3.6 Those needs which are identified for other services will be shared with relevant Departments and agencies to assist the development of policies, programmes and service planning.
- 3.7 It is anticipated that the key information from the strategic needs assessment will also be made publicly available. There are limited private sector supported housing options at present and this information may encourage potential private

³ John Palmer, Emeritus Professor Chris Paris and Salma Ahmed, in association with Mark Goldup, “The Supporting People Programme in Northern Ireland: a Methodology and Structures for Strategic Needs Assessment,” (NIHE, March 2016).

sector providers to develop new solutions complementary to the Supporting People programme.

4. Data collection and sharing

- 4.1 Effective strategic needs assessment will rely on the availability of good quality data.
- 4.2 The report by John Palmer et al on strategic needs assessment has reviewed the available data sources and proposed a methodology.⁴ This report identifies that the statutory agencies involved in commissioning services through Supporting People hold significant amounts of data which could be used to develop an effective strategic needs assessment and recommends “the adoption of a single Data Sharing Protocol to which statutory bodies and other agencies closely involved in the provision and analysis of data for planning purposes should be co-signatories.”
- 4.3 It is the agreed policy position of the Department for Communities, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice that those bodies whose policy objectives and budgets are supported by Supporting People monies – namely the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), the Health and Social Care Trusts and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) – should co-operate with the Housing Executive in the early provision and sharing of data to support strategic needs assessment.
- 4.4 It will be difficult to commission new services or retain existing services where needs assessment is weak and it is, therefore, in the interests of partner agencies to work collaboratively.

⁴ John Palmer, Emeritus Professor Chris Paris and Salma Ahmed, in association with Mark Goldup, “The Supporting People Programme in Northern Ireland: a Methodology and Structures for Strategic Needs Assessment,” (NIHE, March 2016).

5. **Methodology**

5.1 While the detailed methodology for the strategic needs assessment will be determined by NIHE, based on the proposal outlined in the John Palmer et al report and following discussion with partner organisations, the three Departments expect that it will follow the guiding principles set out below.

Guiding principles

- i. It will be rooted in demographic analysis informed by administrative data to determine the prevalence or incidence of particular conditions or circumstances. As far as possible, this will be done at sub-regional geographies as well as for Northern Ireland as a whole.
- ii. Partner agencies – namely, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board and Health and Social Care Trusts will:
 - work collaboratively on the needs assessment process;
 - share data to inform the needs assessment (and agree appropriate protocols to support the sharing of such information); and
 - collaborate to further develop data collection tools in support of continuous improvement in needs assessment.
- iii. Existing good practice, including in Northern Ireland, will be used to inform the development of a good quality strategic needs assessment process based on the best data available. The report by John Palmer et al on strategic needs assessment identified the current needs assessment process for vulnerable young people aged 16-24 as particularly strong and that for offenders and people at risk of offending as offering significant early potential.
- iv. Strategic needs assessment will be seen as a living tool, subject to continuous improvement and, once developed, refreshed at least once every three years.

- v. The product of the needs assessment will be used to inform the strategic planning and delivery of Supporting People and allied services.

5.2 The Departments recognise the challenges in producing a sound needs assessment and that an incremental approach to development will have to be adopted. However, given the importance of effective needs assessment to the Supporting People programme (and its potential use in other programmes), it is essential that early progress is made. It is anticipated that the first needs assessment will be completed through the following steps:

- i. an interim draft needs assessment completed by September 2017;
- ii. a functional needs assessment completed by December 2017; and
- iii. the first full needs assessment by December 2018.

6. Next steps

6.1 This policy statement comes into immediate effect and the three Departments expect the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board and the five Health and Social Care Trusts to follow it as they collaboratively develop a strategic needs assessment for the Supporting People programme under the leadership of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

6.2 It is important that early progress is made on needs assessment as a means of helping set a robust, clear and needs-driven approach to funding and future service delivery within the Supporting People programme.