



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Room 412  
Parliament Buildings  
BELFAST  
BT4 3XX

Email: [kevin.pelan@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:kevin.pelan@niassembly.gov.uk)

Tel: 028 9052 1864

Fax: 028 9052 1667

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Our Ref: CSD/022/2011/SK

Ms Margaret Sisk  
Department for Social Development  
Lighthouse Building  
1 Cromac Place  
Gasworks Business Park  
Ormeau Road  
Belfast BT7 2JB

Dear Margaret,

**Homelessness Strategy**

At its meeting of 24 November 2011, the Committee for Social Development received a briefing from the Department and Northern Ireland Housing Executive officials on the Homelessness Strategy.

While Members were broadly satisfied with the progress made so far in relation to the strategy, they expressed concerns which I have outlined below.

**Resources**

Members note that it is necessary to have the appropriate resources in order to implement the strategy. For example, members referred to the potential change in circumstances between devising a strategy and its actual implementation and the resource implications this may have. Members agreed that the time-lag between the production of the final strategy and its implementation should be kept to a minimum.

## **Welfare Reform**

Members highlighted the potential of the Welfare Reform Bill to exacerbate the level of homelessness and to therefore undermine the current homeless strategy. Members agreed that the strategy should be sufficiently flexible and resourced to meet any additional demand as a result of the Welfare Reform Bill, should it arise.

- **Analysis of Impact of Welfare Reform**

In relation to preparing for the impact of Welfare Reform Members welcomed the research that is being carried out to assess the potential impact of the Bill on the Homeless Strategy. The Committee would like to be kept informed of the progress of this research and to be briefed by the Department when it is completed.

## **Housing Benefit**

Members expressed concerns that with the reduction in housing benefit it is likely that there will be a greater demand for housing early in the New Year and that this potentially will increase homelessness. Members were of the view that this could potentially be the first test in having to deal with an increase in homelessness, yet it was not clear if there was a contingency plan to deal with this. For example, Members argued that most hostels and single lets are at full capacity in areas of high demand and could not accommodate any increase in demand.

Members therefore questioned what contingency plans were in place to deal with the potentially large increase in homelessness arising from these changes.

## **Use of the Housing Stock**

Members were concerned that there simply isn't the housing stock available to deal with the level of homelessness, not enough houses are being built, and much of the housing stock has been sold.

Members recommended better use of the existing housing stock as well as working with all aspects of the housing sector and as developing the Empty Homes Strategy.

## **The 'hidden' homeless**

Some Members expressed concerns with the level of 'hidden' homeless. Members questioned if any analysis has been undertaken to determine the number of young people who are not presenting themselves as homeless or did and could not be helped. Members also questioned how these people are being tracked.

Relating to this the Committee requested that those who fall just below the statutory definition of homeless be addressed in the strategy.

### **Risk Assessment**

Members raised this issue in the context of individuals awaiting sentencing or those on bail. In general however Members believe that risk assessment should be more comprehensive to ensure that vulnerable people are protected

The Committee also requested to receive a copy of the draft strategy, the implementation plan and the action list as soon as it is available.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Kevin Pelan**  
**Clerk, Committee for Social Development**