



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Report on Homelessness in Northern Ireland

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Report: NIA 144/22-27 Public Accounts Committee

Contents

Powers and Membership	3
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report	5
Executive Summary	6
Summary of Recommendations	12
Introduction	15
Background	15
The true cost of homelessness is misunderstood and insufficiently measured	17
Homelessness prevention has not been sufficiently prioritised	18
Oversight and governance arrangements are cluttered and hinder outcomes monitoring	22
The Housing Executive must reduce its reliance on high-cost temporary accommodation	24
Inadequate social housing supply will likely lead to increased homelessness in the future	26
Links to Appendices	29
Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings.....	29
Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence.....	29
Appendix 3: Correspondence	29
Appendix 4: Committee for Communities Report on Homelessness and the Supporting People Programme.....	29
Appendix 5: Other Documents	29
Appendix 6: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee.....	29

Powers and Membership

Powers

The Public Accounts Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Standing Orders under Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the statutory function of the Public Accounts Committee to consider the accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.

The Public Accounts Committee is appointed under Assembly Standing Order No. 56 of the Standing Orders for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the power to send for persons, papers and records and to report from time to time. Neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)⁴
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
- Mr Tom Buchanan MLA
- Mr Jon Burrows MLA^{1,2,3,6}
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Mr Stephen Dunne MLA⁵
- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA

¹With effect from 5 March 2024 Mr John Stewart replaced Mr Robbie Butler

²With effect from 21 October 2024 Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr John Stewart

³With effect from 31 July 2025 Mr Colin Crawford resigned

⁴With effect from 16 September 2025 Ms Diane Forsythe replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee as Deputy Chairperson

⁵With effect from 23 September 2025 Mr Stephen Dunne replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee

⁶With effect from 6 October 2025 Mr Jon Burrows replaced Mr Colin Crawford

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

The Department	Department for Communities
FDA	Full Duty Applicant
HSSG	Homelessness Strategy Steering Group
IDHAP	Interdepartmental Homelessness Action Plan
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO or Audit Office	Northern Ireland Audit Office
UK	United Kingdom
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 13 November 2025 and 27 November 2025 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report “Homelessness in Northern Ireland”. The main witnesses were:

13 November 2025

- **Colum Boyle**, Department for Communities;
- **Paul Price**, Department for Communities;
- **Grainia Long**, Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- **Catherine McFarland**, Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.

27 November 2025

- **David Carroll**, Depaul;
 - **Nicola McCrudden**, Homeless Connect;
 - **Mark Baillie**, Homeless Connect;
 - **Jim Dennison**, Simon Community;
 - **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
 - **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.
2. The Committee also sought written evidence from Homeless Connect and Housing Rights, as well as requesting subsequent written clarification from both the Department and the Housing Executive on a number of matters raised during its initial oral evidence session.

Background

3. Homelessness is a complex issue which goes beyond the absence of a physical home. Its impacts extend across the Programme for Government, with direct implications for health, justice, education, welfare and employment.

Experiencing homelessness has an impact on a wide range of outcomes. In particular there is evidence of long-term consequences for health and education.

4. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the Housing Executive) is the body tasked with responding to homelessness and publishes a Homelessness Strategy every five years. The Department for Communities (the Department) develops homelessness and housing policy for Northern Ireland. The Department provides the Housing Executive with funding for homelessness services and social housing new builds which are mainly completed by housing associations.
5. The Housing Executive has faced a period of unprecedented demand for homelessness services and support. A lack of suitable permanent housing solutions means an increasing number of homeless households remain on the social housing waiting list for years, with subsequent demand for, and length of stay in, temporary accommodation soaring in recent years.
6. As demand has risen, costs to the public purse have been significant, with the Housing Executive spending £75 million tackling homelessness in 2024-25, with £40 million spent on temporary accommodation, of which almost £17 million was spent on hotels and B&Bs. There are also costs borne by other sectors including health, justice and education.
7. There are considerable issues with the supply of social and affordable housing options and a lack of funding for long-term prevention measures. Until these key issues are resolved, value for money cannot be demonstrated in homelessness services, and the serious pressures on these services are likely to continue.

Official reporting on homelessness should be more people-focused

8. Official figures show that at March 2025 there were almost 32,000 homeless households on the Housing Executive's social housing waiting list. This represents an increase of over 10,000 households in the last five years. While these numbers are significant and rising, the Committee heard that the real impact of homelessness on individuals is not fully reflected in official statistics

and the actual number of homeless individuals is likely to be much higher than reported. The Committee believes that the focus on households, rather than individuals, means that the human element of homelessness is at risk of being overlooked. The Committee calls for a move to more transparent data that focuses on individuals.

9. Witnesses from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) advised that the true financial cost of homelessness is also not known as its impact crosses many departments and has not been accurately measured. The VCS sector holds comprehensive data that could be used to assist departments to collaborate and ascertain the true scale of homelessness and identify better ways of working together to combat homelessness.

Homelessness prevention must be prioritised as a key part of strategic delivery

10. The Homelessness Strategy has three key pillars: prioritising homelessness prevention, addressing homelessness by providing suitable housing and support services and supporting transition from homelessness into long-term housing. Officials told the Committee that the Strategy was sound and contained good characteristics, but that its delivery had been impacted by many external factors, including Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis and the growing numbers of those with leave to remain in Northern Ireland. VCS witnesses disagreed, telling the Committee that the current homelessness crisis stems from long-term underinvestment in both prevention and social housing.
11. As a result of these external factors, strategic delivery has focused on providing support at the detriment of prevention and long-term housing solutions. Despite the rising numbers of those with homelessness status, significant increases in temporary accommodation costs and reduced prevention efforts, the Department and the Housing Executive told the Committee that there is no evidence that the Strategy has failed.
12. The first objective of the Homelessness Strategy is to 'prioritise homelessness prevention through the provision of the right support at the right time with an aim to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place'. The Committee is very concerned that, despite being a key pillar of the Strategy, homelessness

prevention has been consistently underfunded, short-term and reactive in nature. This had led to a lack of strategic planning and made it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention approaches.

13. Officials attributed the lack of strategic prevention entirely to funding constraints, given the increasing need for and costs of temporary accommodation. They told the Committee that a strategic shift towards prevention is needed, but the Committee is concerned that details on how this might be delivered were scarce, aside from repeated calls for significant additional funding.
14. VCS witnesses and subsequent written evidence provided to the Committee highlighted the absence of a statutory duty to prevent homelessness in Northern Ireland which they consider has contributed to the de-prioritisation of this key strategic objective. They contended that legislative duty to prevent homelessness would result in more funding being made available and could result in more cross-sector collaboration.
15. The Committee believes that the prioritisation of treatment, such as temporary accommodation, over the cure, which is investment in prevention, is both short-sighted and has ultimately led to increasing homelessness in Northern Ireland.

Governance, oversight arrangements and outcomes monitoring need improved

16. The Committee heard clear evidence that the governance and oversight arrangements for the Homelessness Strategy are “cluttered” and “confused” and urgently need to be refreshed and improved. VCS witnesses argued that the lack of alignment between the Homelessness Strategy and other key strategies for housing and temporary accommodation creates duplication, complexity and hinders outcomes monitoring. The Committee calls for a single strategic vision for homelessness to be developed and agreed.
17. The Committee notes that cross departmental working is improving but the absence of a duty to collaborate means key statutory bodies are not compelled to contribute to the delivery of key homelessness actions. The Committee also heard about a lack of senior representation on the Homelessness Strategy

Steering Group (HSSG) which is believed to be hindering progress. A lack of independence was also cited by the VCS as a key concern.

Reliance on costly temporary accommodation must be reduced

18. The overall cost of temporary accommodation has risen from £7.6 million in 2018-19 to over £40 million in 2024-25, with the Housing Executive relying on “non-standard” accommodation, mainly hotels and B&Bs. The Committee is alarmed by the rising costs of temporary accommodation, and the impact long stays may have on outcomes for individuals and families. Lengthy stays in temporary accommodation risk poor health, education, and justice outcomes.
19. The Committee heard that the Housing Executive has plans for the purchase of 600 temporary accommodation units, to ease its reliance on hotels and B&Bs. However, we were surprised that officials could not provide more detail on timescales and locations for these properties when pressed. The Committee urges the Housing Executive to solidify its plans to reduce reliance on hotels and B&Bs.

Increasing social housing supply is critical to reducing homelessness

20. The Committee considers that the key to tackling homelessness is an adequate supply of social and affordable housing. The Committee acknowledges that supply of new social housing has been constrained by a lack of available funding. However, it was struck by the language used by officials and within the Housing Supply Strategy, which refers to the Department’s “ambition” to deliver 33,000 new social homes, rather than targets which are achievable, enforceable goals.
21. Evidence reviewed by the Committee demonstrates that the targets and ambition for new social housing fall considerably below the projected social housing need identified by the Housing Executive’s own Commissioning Prospectus. The Committee heard that social housing build will have to ramp up significantly in the final years of the 15-year Housing Supply Strategy to meet its ambition but was not furnished with plans as to how this might be achieved. The

Committee is therefore concerned that shortfalls in new social housing delivery are storing up significant problems for the future.

22. The Committee also believes that more efficient use of void housing stock; schemes such as co-ownership; and amendments to the Housing Executive's Right to Buy scheme could provide some assistance but more needs to be done to promote and drive these schemes forward.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department should make more meaningful, people focused data on homelessness publicly available. Within six months of this report, the Department should ensure that published homelessness data includes the number of individuals as well as the number of households affected.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Department should work with the Housing Executive to explore options for strengthening homelessness prevention through the introduction of a statutory duty and bring forward proposals to the Minister within 12 months. In doing so, the Department should review and assess the impact of similar statutory duties in other jurisdictions, including those where the threat of homelessness duty afforded to households extends to at least 56-days.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Department and the Housing Executive put in place systems to capture data on prevention initiatives across both statutory and VCS service providers they fund within 12 months. Systems must support long-term outcomes monitoring and reporting, which should commence before the end of the 2026-27 financial year.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that, by 30 June 2026, the Housing Executive completes an assessment of the pilot projects delivered with additional strategic prevention funding in 2025-26. The Department and Housing Executive should then work with VCS organisations in 2026-27 to develop plans for long-term investment in relevant prevention projects.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Department and Housing Executive agree a single vision for prevention, and a range of measures and indicators for assessing long term outcomes within 12 months of this report. In developing these measures, the Department should consult with VCS partners and those with lived experience of homelessness.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Department conducts a review of the existing homelessness structures, oversight groups and action plans within six months of this report, with a view to streamlining these and ensuring that membership is appropriate and that actions, targets and implementation dates are aligned.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department and the Housing Executive conduct a strategic review of the HSSG within six months of this report, to include appropriate levels of membership and roles and responsibilities.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that within six months, the Housing Executive publishes details of its plans to purchase the 600 homes designated for temporary accommodation. These plans should include:

- Timing of purchases;**
- Identification of specific locations, properties or sites;**
- Breakdown of type of property to be purchased, i.e. number of single lets, family homes, and so on; and**
- Estimates of costs and timescales to make properties habitable.**

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Department develops a more transparent system of reporting on social housing new builds within 12 months of this report which captures the difference between the Housing Supply Strategy ambition, the level of need identified by the Commissioning Prospectus, and the number of new starts which can be delivered by the Department each year. Reporting should clearly outline both annual and cumulative shortfalls across the lifetime of the Strategy, as well as proposals to address shortfalls in later years.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Department conducts a value for money assessment of the Right to Buy Scheme, with a view to presenting the Minister with a range of options within 12 months of this report for adapting or amending the Scheme.

Introduction

23. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 13 November 2025 and 27 November 2025 to consider the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report “Homelessness in Northern Ireland”. The main witnesses were:

13 November 2025

- **Colum Boyle**, Department for Communities;
- **Paul Price**, Department for Communities;
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- **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.

27 November 2025

- **David Carroll**, Depaul;
 - **Nicola McCrudden**, Homeless Connect;
 - **Mark Baillie**, Homeless Connect;
 - **Jim Dennison**, Simon Community;
 - **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
 - **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.
24. The Committee also sought written evidence from Housing Rights and Homeless Connect as well as requesting subsequent written clarification on a number of matters from the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in respect of several issues raised during its oral evidence session.

Background

25. The Committee believes that access to a safe, secure, affordable place to live is a fundamental human right. A stable home is essential to supporting good health, educational outcomes and family life. The Committee also recognises that homelessness is a complex and multi-faceted issue which goes beyond the

absence of a physical home. Its impacts extend across the Programme for Government, with direct implications for health, justice, education, welfare and employment.

26. The Housing Executive has faced a prolonged period of unprecedented demand for homelessness services. Whilst the number of homelessness presentations (around 16,000 to 17,000 per year) and acceptances (around 10,000 to 11,500 per year) have been relatively stable, a lack of suitable permanent housing solutions means an increasing number of homeless households remain on the social housing waiting list for years, with subsequent demand for and length of stay in, temporary accommodation soaring.
27. The social housing waiting list is now at its highest ever level reaching almost 50,000 households in September 2025. This includes 32,600 with Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status, meaning they are legally homeless, and the Housing Executive must provide temporary accommodation and work towards securing permanent accommodation. This is an increase of around 2,000 on the previous year and over 16,000 since 2016-17. Allocations of social housing are simply not keeping pace with this increase in demand.
28. In this context, costs to the public purse are significant and rising. Homelessness expenditure includes temporary accommodation costs, Supporting People housing support services, and a small amount on prevention measures. Whilst the Housing Executive spent over £75 million tackling homelessness in 2023-24, there are also costs borne by other sectors including health, justice, and education.
29. The Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy contains three overarching objectives: prioritise homelessness prevention; address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support; and support customers to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation. The Audit Office report demonstrated that there has been very limited progress towards achieving these strategic objectives, with significant shortcomings in efforts to prioritise prevention.

The true cost of homelessness is misunderstood and insufficiently measured

30. The Housing Executive's published data on homelessness focuses on the number of households presenting and being accepted as homeless, to whom the Housing Executive owes a legal duty also known as FDAs. As at the end of September 2025, there were more than 32,600 FDA households in Northern Ireland. Whilst the number of homeless presentations each year has decreased slightly since 2016-17, the number of households granted FDA status each year has remained relatively consistent and the social housing waiting list has continued to grow.
31. The Committee is concerned that statutory organisations' focus on presentations rather than homeless individuals is potentially masking the true scale of homelessness in Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive provided data showing that at the end of March 2025, there were more than 61,000 homeless individuals in Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive confirmed that there are groups not captured through existing reporting mechanisms and therefore less visible to homelessness services. Without knowing the number of individuals actually experiencing homelessness, the Committee is not convinced that officials and the public fully understand the true impact of homelessness, including how it affects health, education and other outcomes.
32. The Housing Executive also highlighted the reduction in homeless presentations as a sign of its success in tackling homelessness. However, VCS witnesses provided compelling evidence that overall FDA numbers are a better indicator, and these are growing. The Committee considers that the real focus should be on homeless people who are going into the system and getting stuck, with no permanent move on accommodation options available. This is driving demand for temporary accommodation and its associated costs. Therefore, publicly available data on homelessness and social housing should be more transparent about the number of individuals affected and those who have FDA status.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Department should make more meaningful, people focused data on homelessness publicly available. Within six months of this report, the Department should ensure that published homelessness data includes the number of individuals as well as the number of households affected.

Homelessness prevention has not been sufficiently prioritised

33. The Homelessness Strategy has three core objectives:
- Prioritise homelessness prevention.
 - Address homelessness by providing settled, appropriate accommodation and support.
 - Support customer to transition from homelessness into settled accommodation.

Despite being the first objective of the Strategy, and its potential for long-term harm reduction and costs savings, the Audit Office report states that prioritisation of prevention has been limited in its success.

34. Officials told the Committee that despite the increase of homeless households on the social housing waiting list, the soaring demand for temporary accommodation, and the reduced focus on prevention in recent years, there is no evidence that the Strategy has failed. Rather, due to a series of “shocks” including Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis and an increase in those with leave to remain, the Housing Executive told the Committee it had to shift its emphasis from all three strategic pillars to just one - providing support, in the main through temporary accommodation.
35. Both the Department and the Housing Executive’s evidence focused on the last five years, and the “shocks” to the system noted above, saying that no strategy would have equipped them to deal with the post-Covid period. However, witnesses from the voluntary and community sector provided evidence that the

current homelessness crisis has been much longer in the making and stems from a sustained lack of investment in prevention and social housing supply.

36. The Committee also heard evidence that the absence of a statutory duty to prevent homelessness means that the prevention pillar of the Strategy is not placed on an equal footing with the support pillar. Without a statutory duty, the Housing Executive has prioritised support services, as it has a legal duty to provide accommodation. The lack of statutory prevention duty also means that there has been no ring-fenced funding for homelessness prevention.
37. The Committee received written evidence from VCS groups criticising the Department's role in this area, particularly that it had not brought forward proposals for a prevention duty. Additionally, the Audit Office report states that while every Homelessness action plan to date has included an action for the Housing Executive to liaise with the Department to identify and advocate for potential legislative arrangements, 'including considering the benefits of additional duties such as co-operation and prevention', no progress has been made in this area. The Committee considers that the Department should renew its work with the Housing Executive to develop options and proposals for establishing a statutory prevention duty.
38. The Committee supports calls for a clear strategic shift towards prevention. However, this must be supported by a robust system of outcomes monitoring and longitudinal assessment. The Audit Office report highlighted a lack of outcomes monitoring on prevention, with baselines having been established very recently. Officials told the Committee that while they had been measuring outcomes, they accepted the need to sharpen outcomes reporting and make actions "SMART-er". They also referred to the need for "greater simplicity and crispness...and greater longitudinal tracking, and it must be brought right back to the individual..." The Committee welcomes these comments and believes that more robust data collection and outcomes monitoring would allow the Housing Executive and partner agencies to properly assess the impact of their services and the value for money that they deliver. This would enhance decision making about which projects to progress where funding is limited.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Department should work with the Housing Executive to explore options for strengthening homelessness prevention through the introduction of a statutory duty and bring forward proposals to the Minister within 12 months. In doing so, the Department should review and assess the impact of similar statutory duties in other jurisdictions, including those where the threat of homelessness duty afforded to households extends to at least 56-days.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Department and the Housing Executive put in place systems to capture data on prevention initiatives across both statutory and VCS service providers they fund within 12 months. Systems must support long-term outcomes monitoring and reporting, which should commence before the end of the 2026-27 financial year.

Homelessness prevention has been underfunded, short-term and reactive in nature

39. Since 2020, less than 10 per cent of the Housing Executive's annual spending on homelessness has been on prevention initiatives and projects. In 2023-24, the Housing Executive spent £4.5 million on community and strategic prevention, representing just six per cent of its homelessness expenditure. Officials attributed this entirely to a lack of available funding, given the need to resource frontline, statutory services such as temporary accommodation. The Committee is concerned that, despite being one of the three key pillars of the Homelessness Strategy and its potential to for long-term harm reduction and cost savings, prevention has received such little funding.
40. During the evidence session, Housing Executive officials claimed to have saved the public purse £13.8 million in the past three years from steps taken to control spending on temporary accommodation but were unable to provide evidence as to how these costs savings have been used elsewhere. The Committee is

disappointed that none of this was reinvested into prevention work, and therefore not solving the root problem.

41. We also note the lack of consistency in the small amounts of strategic prevention funding that have been made available. Rather, there have been a series of short-term and reactive funding cycles which have made it hard to build a foundation and assess what works. The Committee believes that this approach provides poor value for money and poorer outcomes for individuals. Expert witnesses were clear in their evidence to the Committee: prevention takes time – time to plan, time to learn what works, time to involve those with lived experience.
42. The way in which prevention funding has been operating does not facilitate long-term planning and outcomes monitoring. VCS witnesses told the Committee that there had been “big swings” in the Homelessness Prevention Fund, for example in 2024-25 there was no funding available. However, successful projects require long-term funding and support as it takes time to embed changes. VCS witnesses acknowledged that defining prevention is a challenge but provided examples such as the tenancy deposit scheme and floating support centres within communities as having clear metrics which demonstrate their impact. The Committee therefore believes that a single vision for prevention, with agreed success measures and criteria is urgently needed. The VCS and those with lived experience should be involved in shaping this vision and planning long-term prevention projects and support.
43. The £2.7 million of ring-fenced prevention funding announced by the Minister in August 2025 is welcomed by the Committee. However, this funding had to be used by March 2026 and there was no commitment that it would be recurrent, therefore it provided limited scope to take a longer-term approach to prevention. The Committee was also surprised to hear that VCS organisations were given very limited time to prepare their applications for prevention funding in 2025-26, however these may be used as “pilot projects” for long-term prevention measures going forward. The Committee is concerned that there is a risk that these projects were developed so quickly and that they may not provide a sound basis for committing significant amounts of public money going forward. It is important therefore, that a robust assessment of these “pilot projects” is

carried out before more funding commitments are made. The Committee urges the Housing Executive to ensure this is prioritised, to avoid any prolonged uncertainty for service providers.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that, by 30 June 2026, the Housing Executive completes an assessment of the pilot projects delivered with additional strategic prevention funding in 2025-26. The Department and Housing Executive should then work with VCS organisations in 2026-27 to develop plans for long-term investment in relevant prevention projects.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Department and Housing Executive agree a single vision for prevention, and a range of measures and indicators for assessing long term outcomes within 12 months of this report. In developing these measures, the Department should consult with VCS partners and those with lived experience of homelessness.

Oversight and governance arrangements are cluttered and hinder outcomes monitoring

44. The Audit Office reported that governance arrangements are complex and onerous with duplication between oversight groups. During our evidence session with representatives from the VCS, we heard criticism of the Homelessness Strategy Steering Group (HSSG) specifically. The HSSG is the main strategic oversight group for the Homelessness Strategy. It is chaired by the Department and is also responsible for monitoring and reporting on the Interdepartmental Homelessness Action Plan (IDHAP) which focuses on non-accommodation services. The Committee heard a range of criticisms about the current governance arrangements, including that HSSG attendees from statutory bodies are often not sufficiently senior so they have limited decision-making authority, and this slows progress.
45. VCS witnesses provided additional evidence contrasting the approach with that in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, where the relevant Government

minister chairs the equivalent governance group, and in Wales where the group is independently chaired. Housing Rights told us that either approach would be a “significant improvement in the current situation” where a senior official from the Department chairs the oversight group for the delivery of its own action plan. Witnesses told us it is difficult to hold departmental officials to account in a situation where they are holding the position of Chair of the oversight group.

46. VCS witnesses cited an extensive list of strategies, plans and oversight groups for homelessness, with different timelines, priorities and action plans. VCS witnesses told the Committee that the main Homelessness Strategy is not closely aligned with other key strategies, including those focused on housing, temporary accommodation, and cross-departmental working. The Committee believes that multiple overlapping strategies have created unnecessary complexity and hindered outcomes tracking and there is a clear need to review and improve governance arrangements.
47. Officials conceded that the governance and oversight space is “too cluttered”. They told us that there are too many groups looking at aspects which overlap and there needs to greater simplicity and crispness. Decluttering the governance space will require a renewed commitment to collaboration between the Department and other key departmental partners, particularly Health, Education and Justice. The Committee was encouraged to hear that cross departmental working is improving but the absence of a duty to collaborate means key statutory bodies are not compelled to contribute to delivery. However, whilst officials felt actions taken by the Housing Executive had saved money in other departments such as Health and Justice, little robust evidence was provided to support this.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Department conducts a review of the existing homelessness structures, oversight groups and action plans within six months of this report, with a view to streamlining these and ensuring that membership is appropriate and that actions, targets and implementation dates are aligned.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Department and the Housing Executive conduct a strategic review of the HSSG within six months of this report, to include appropriate levels of membership and roles and responsibilities.

The Housing Executive must reduce its reliance on high-cost temporary accommodation

48. The Housing Executive has a duty to provide temporary accommodation where it is required for FDAs who are waiting for an offer of social housing. It also has a duty to provide temporary accommodation to those who are believed to be homeless and in priority need while it completes the statutory homelessness assessment. The Housing Executive uses a range of temporary accommodation options including private single lets, hostels and 'non-standard' units, usually within hotels and B&Bs.
49. The Committee is alarmed by the increasing numbers of people living in temporary accommodation. Between April 2020 and April 2025, the number of households placed in temporary accommodation has more than doubled, to over 5,000. While most placements are in private single lets, around ten per cent of households are initially placed in hotels and B&Bs before being moved on to other temporary accommodation such as private single lets. The Audit Office reports that the proportionate increase of placements in hotels and B&Bs is by far the most significant, with nightly placements increasing from just 20 in 2017 to over 400 in 2024.
50. Officials told us that the average stay in temporary accommodation is now over 600 days, or almost two years, and that households may be placed in several different properties during that time. The Committee is deeply concerned about the impact of long stays and multiple placements in temporary accommodation on individuals and families. This will clearly have an impact on individuals' wellbeing and outcomes. Witnesses from the voluntary and community sector told the Committee that long stays in temporary accommodation are storing up problems for the future in health, education and justice outcomes.

51. Spending on temporary accommodation has increased significantly to address rising demand. Gross expenditure on temporary accommodation reached over £40 million in 2024-25, representing over half of all Housing Executive spending on homelessness. The Committee is particularly concerned about the disproportionate costs of hotels and B&Bs. Despite representing around 10 per cent of placements in temporary accommodation, hotels and B&Bs account for almost a third of the total cost of temporary accommodation. The Committee also heard evidence that this type of accommodation is up to seven times more expensive than single let accommodation.
52. The Committee acknowledges that the Housing Executive has made progress in reducing the unit costs of hotels and B&Bs and heard evidence that these have reduced by 11 per cent between 2023-24 and 2025-26. However, the overall cost of temporary accommodation reached over £40 million in 2024-25, up from £34.4 million in the prior year. The Audit Office report states that current reliance on and level of spending on commercial hotels and B&Bs does not represent value for money and is not financially sustainable. Further, it concludes that the Housing Executive is unable to demonstrate value for money in its use of hotels and B&Bs for temporary accommodation. The Committee urges the Housing Executive to continue its efforts to reduce these costs, with a focus on reducing its reliance on non-standard accommodation, in the main hotels and B&Bs.
53. During the first evidence session, the Housing Executive referred to the acquisition of 600 properties over a three-year period as one way to reduce its exposure to high-cost temporary accommodation, particularly hotels and B&Bs. However, when the Committee requested more detailed plans for this project, it was not satisfied with what the Housing Executive provided. A list of vague considerations was provided, rather than detailed plans in terms of locations and properties identified. This lack of urgency is a concern for the Committee, particularly given the rising costs of hotels and B&Bs and the impact of long stays in this type of accommodation on individuals.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that within six months the Housing Executive publishes details of its plans to purchase the 600 homes designated for temporary accommodation. These plans should include:

- **Timing of purchases;**
- **Identification of specific locations, properties or sites;**
- **Breakdown of type of property to be purchased, i.e. number of single lets, family homes, and so on; and**
- **Estimates of costs and timescales to make properties habitable.**

Inadequate social housing supply will likely lead to increased homelessness in the future

54. The Committee considers that the provision of an adequate supply of social housing is the key to tackling homelessness in the long term. The growing numbers of households on the social housing waiting list, despite a decline in homeless presentations, provides clear evidence of the impact of a lack of permanent housing supply.
55. The Chief Executive of the Housing Executive stated that the “cure” to homelessness is “social housing at scale, relentlessly, for 15 years”, yet the Committee also heard evidence that current levels of investment and building are not going to deliver anywhere near the level of projected need. The Housing Executive has projected a need for almost 25,000 social houses over the period 2023-28, and the Department’s Housing Supply strategy sets an ambition to deliver 33,000 social homes by 2039. However, the Housing Executive’s Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) targets for new social housing are much lower, at around 2,000 to 2,300 new houses per year. Actual delivery to date has been even lower, with 1,500 new starts in 2023-24 and 1,504 in 2024-25. The SHDP targets and delivery are based on available funding, and it is clear to the Committee that the anticipated pace of development will not be sufficient to meet demand. Therefore, the Committee concludes that no cure for homelessness is in sight.

56. Departmental officials told the Committee that they are confident that the “right” Housing Supply Strategy is in place, but the challenge is in delivering it. The Committee was struck by the language used by officials. They told us that the numbers in the Strategy are an ambition rather than a target, and an ambition that will not be met at the current rate of delivery. If the trajectory remains the same, the Department told the Committee it will need to build around 3,200¹ social homes in the last year of the current mandate to achieve the Programme for Government target of 5,850 new build social homes. Officials admitted that this will be extremely challenging.
57. The Committee is concerned by the evidence it heard that social housing build will have to ramp up considerably in final years of the Housing Supply Strategy to 2039. This could be interpreted as simply deferring the issue and leaving the problem for someone else. We are also concerned that, in the absence of sufficient social housing supply, the number of homeless people on the social housing waiting list will continue to grow, prolonging the need for temporary accommodation and its associated impacts on costs and outcomes.
58. A small proportion of the Housing Executive’s social housing stock continues to be lost to the Right to Buy Scheme. Officials told us that in a typical year, the Housing Executive will sell almost 400 homes, and that this has a material effect on supply. In the context that around 1,600 new social homes are completed each year, this means that around a quarter are immediately netted off by sales.
59. Additionally, under the current arrangements, the Housing Executive does not retain the proceeds from the sale of its housing stock. Witnesses told us this means there is less money available to invest and improve tenants’ homes. In its evidence, the Housing Executive also outlined the wider financial implications of the Scheme. Under Right to Buy, homes are sold at a discount,

¹ Since the Department provided its evidence, the SHDP target for 2025–26 has been revised upward by 750, bringing the total to 1,750 new starts. If this revised target is fully achieved, a combined total of 3,254 new social homes will be started across 2024–25 and 2025–26. This would leave approximately 2,600 new build social home starts required in the final year of the current mandate to meet the Programme for Government target of 5,850 new build social homes.

which the Committee heard amounted to £8.3 million in 2023-24. The Housing Executive told us this reduces its asset base and future borrowing capacity to fund new homes, in addition to the loss of those homes and rental income over a 30-to-45-year business plan. Departmental officials told the Committee that whilst the Right to Buy scheme remains in place, there are things that could be done to amend it which might result in fewer properties being lost, however details on this were scarce. The Committee considers that the Department should further develop such options and proposals and assess their potential impact.

60. Finally, the Committee also heard that schemes such as co-ownership and bringing vacant homes back into use may provide some assistance, but more needs done to promote and drive these schemes forward. The Committee urges the Department to ensure that these schemes are more widely promoted to the public.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Department develops a more transparent system of reporting on social housing new builds within 12 months of this report which captures the difference between the Housing Supply Strategy ambition, the level of need identified by the Commissioning Prospectus, and the number of new starts which can be delivered by the Department each year. Reporting should clearly outline both annual and cumulative shortfalls across the lifetime of the Strategy, as well as proposals to address shortfalls in later years.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Department conducts a value for money assessment of the Right to Buy Scheme, with a view to presenting the Minister with a range of options within 12 months of this report for adapting or amending the Scheme.

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

[View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report](#)

Appendix 3: Correspondence

[View correspondence issued and received related to the report](#)

Appendix 4: Committee for Communities Report on Homelessness and the Supporting People Programme

[View report](#)

Appendix 5: Other Documents

[View other documents related to the report](#)

Appendix 6: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- **Mr Colum Boyle**, Department for Communities;
- **Mr Paul Price**, Department for Communities;
- **Ms Grainia Long**, Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- **Ms Catherine McFarland**, Northern Ireland Housing Executive;
- **Mr David Carroll**, Depaul;
- **Ms Nicola McCrudden**, Homeless Connect;
- **Mr Mark Baillie**, Homeless Connect;
- **Mr Jim Dennison**, Simon Community;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and

- **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance.

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