



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Report on Homelessness and the Supporting People Programme

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Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Communities is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with Paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department for Communities and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate enquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Communities.

Membership

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

- Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
- Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson)^{1,2}
- Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Maurice Bradley MLA
- Pam Cameron MLA³
- Mark Durkan MLA⁴
- Sian Mulholland MLA
- Maolíosa McHugh MLA

¹ Cathy Mason replaced Nicola Brogan on 24 November 2025

² Nicola Brogan replaced Ciara Ferguson on 3 February 2025

³ Pam Cameron replaced Brian Kingston on 23 September 2025

⁴ Mark Durkan replaced Daniel McCrossan on 8 September 2025

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

used in this Report

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
CRISPP	Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers
EBM	East Belfast Mission
ENICs	Employer National Insurance Contributions
FTC	Financial Transactions Capital
HSSG	Homelessness Strategy Steering Group
LAMA	Local Area Move-on Accommodation
NIFHA	Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NLW	National Living Wage
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
RaISe	Assembly Research and Information Service
SPPG	Supporting People Programme Group

Executive Summary

1. The Committee for Communities has maintained a strong focus on homelessness and housing-related support since its reconstitution in February 2024. Through evidence sessions, correspondence and research, the Committee has scrutinised the Department's response to the housing crisis. This report draws together the Committee's dedicated engagement work during Homelessness Awareness Week 2025, written evidence from stakeholders, and oral evidence from providers on 4 December 2025.
2. The evidence presented to the Committee is unambiguous: the homelessness sector is facing a "perfect storm" of rising demand, increased complexity of service user needs, and a funding model that is in danger of collapse in real terms.
3. The Committee also notes the scale of homelessness in Northern Ireland, which has intensified markedly over the past decade. As of September 2025, 62,314 people were officially recorded as homeless (i.e. with Full Duty Applicant status), equivalent to around one in every 31 people in Northern Ireland.
4. At the same time, demand pressures are evident in the continued reliance on temporary accommodation and the social housing waiting list, with 90,819 people waiting for a social home and significant numbers of children living in temporary accommodation. The Committee is particularly concerned that these trends point to a system that is increasingly weighted towards expensive crisis responses rather than earlier prevention.

5. The Committee's key findings include:

Financial Viability: The combined impact of the rise in National Living Wage and Employer National Insurance Contributions will cost the sector £5.5 million in 2025/26 alone. Without a budget uplift, critical services for young people and those with complex needs may become unviable and could close within the financial year.

Recruitment Crisis: Front-line support staff are currently paid as little as £12.66 per hour. Providers reported an inability to recruit, leaving vulnerable people without support.

Systemic Drivers: Some 66% of homeless hostel residents have experienced significant childhood trauma, and 21% have been in the care system.

Homelessness in Northern Ireland is fundamentally a health and trauma issue, yet it is funded almost exclusively as a housing issue.

Legislative Lag: Northern Ireland's legislative framework, specifically the 28-day "threatened with homelessness" window, is outdated compared to the 56-day preventative models adopted in Wales and England.

6. The Committee has set out five strategic recommendations, including the immediate agreement of a multi-year budget with inflationary uplifts, completion of a comprehensive review of homelessness legislation, and the establishment of a cross-departmental task force.

7. The full recommendations may be found in the relevant section of this report.

Introduction

8. Since its reconstitution in February 2024, the Committee for Communities has identified the crisis in housing supply and homelessness as a strategic priority. Through regular briefings and correspondence with Departmental officials, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the voluntary sector and other key stakeholders, Members have tracked the escalating pressures on the temporary accommodation budget and the social housing waiting list.
9. Throughout 2024 and 2025, the Committee expressed consistent concern that the Department for Communities is operating within a highly constrained budget environment. However, the Committee has repeatedly emphasised that the Supporting People Programme is a primary preventative measure.
10. In oral evidence, the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP) further emphasised the breadth of Supporting People provision, noting that the programme supports around 20,000 people annually across approximately 800 projects, delivered by 80 contracted providers and employing around 4,000 staff. Witnesses characterised Supporting People as an “invest to save” programme, in which the availability of effective housing-related support can avert escalation into crisis presentations and reduce pressure on other parts of the public sector. The Committee considers that the scale of this footprint reinforces the risks associated with a “flat cash” approach, particularly where providers are being required to absorb significant cost increases without an inflationary uplift.
11. Evidence provided to the Committee suggests that the scale of need now extends well beyond those immediately visible to statutory services. In addition

to those recorded as homeless, Simon Community's research on "hidden homelessness" estimates that a substantial further cohort may be experiencing homelessness while remaining outside statutory datasets. The Committee considers that this underlines the importance of designing policy and resource decisions around the full extent of housing insecurity, rather than relying solely on the cohort already presenting to the Housing Executive for assistance.

12. It has been the long-held view of Committee Members that failure to invest in this area inevitably leads to higher costs elsewhere in the public sector, particularly within the Education, Justice and Health systems. The "invest to save" principle has been central to the Committee's scrutiny of the Minister's Budget allocations over the past 18 months.
13. This report summarises a substantial body of evidence gathered by the Committee, culminating in its meeting of 4 December 2025 where Members heard directly from a range of service providers. It moves beyond high-level statistics to examine the ground-level reality for service providers who are struggling to keep their doors open. It sets out the Committee's collective view on the need for a cross-departmental strategy to tackle homelessness, the necessity of immediate financial stabilisation, and the requirement for legislative reform to prioritise prevention.

Context and Methodology

14. The Committee's engagement on this issue has been iterative. In early 2025, identifying a potential gap in the legislative framework, the Committee commissioned a research paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) entitled 'Homelessness: A comparison of legislative frameworks'. This paper provided the Committee with a comparative baseline regarding preventative duties in Great Britain.
15. Following this foundation of research, the Committee has engaged regularly with the Department and stakeholders, culminating in a dedicated meeting on 4 December 2025 to hear oral evidence from a range of stakeholders representing the housing and homeless sector. The purpose was to gain a holistic view of the current landscape, in part to inform the Committee's response to the Minister's upcoming budget planning for 2026-2029.
16. The Committee also notes that the oral evidence session formed part of Homelessness Awareness Week and was held at the Skainos Centre in East Belfast, followed by a visit to Hosford Community Homes. This approach was intended to support Members' understanding of the practical realities of homelessness and the role of community-based provision in prevention and sustainable move-on.
17. At that meeting, the Committee received oral evidence from three primary groups:
- **The Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP):** A joint body chaired by Homeless Connect and

NIFHA, representing the four thematic pillars of Disability, Homelessness, Older People, and Young People.

- **East Belfast Mission (EBM):** A very long-standing community service organisation whose representatives briefed the Committee on the "Hosford Community Homes" pilot and the potential of Community Led Housing.
- **The Simon Community:** Represented by researchers and advocates presenting their report '*Childhood Adversity and Homelessness in Northern Ireland: Breaking the Cycle*'.

18. Following the oral evidence sessions, and spurred by the testimony regarding potential service closures, the Committee took the step of writing to specific providers to ascertain the granular impact of the current "flat-cash" budget settlement.

19. The Committee subsequently received and considered correspondence from MACS Supporting Children and Young People and First Housing Aid & Support Services regarding the specific financial threats to their operations. This correspondence has been pivotal in shaping the recommendations within this report.

Analysis of Evidence: Key Themes

The Financial Stability of the Sector

20. The primary theme emerging from the engagement with CRISPP was the fragility of the current service model. Witnesses highlighted that while the Supporting People Programme received an above-inflation increase in 2024/25, this followed a decade in which funding had not kept pace with rising costs. Since 2013, the programme has seen an increase of approximately 13%, compared to cumulative inflation of at least 30%. The sector has effectively now exhausted its reserves.
21. Evidence provided to the Committee highlighted a convergence of pressures for Supporting People providers. Specifically, providers noted the impact of increases in Employer National Insurance Contributions (ENICs) and the rise in the National Living Wage (NLW).
22. The Committee notes that the Department for Communities has produced an estimate of the increase in cost for organisations funded through Supporting People. In an answer to an Assembly Question, it was outlined that these two factors alone will impose additional costs of £5.5 million in the 2025/26 financial year.
23. During oral evidence, witnesses explained why these costs cannot be absorbed through efficiency savings. CRISPP highlighted that approximately 80% of a provider's budget comprises staff costs. Consequently, there is no discretionary spend to cut; a refusal to fund the uplift in the National Living Wage and National Insurance contributions translates directly into a reduction

in headcount. Witnesses starkly warned that without this funding, responsible Boards of Trustees would have no option but to begin 'handing back the keys' for services that are no longer solvent.

24. Moreover, the additional cost figure does not account for general inflation, estimated at an additional 3%. Witnesses argued that, without a baseline uplift, providers are absorbing a significant real-terms cut and are effectively subsidising statutory services through charitable funds, a situation described as “unsustainable”.
25. In oral evidence, CRISPP advised that the Supporting People Programme's total budget for 2025/26 is £80.69m. The Committee notes that the final budget allocation for 2025/26 was confirmed in a recent response to a Written Assembly Question, and represents an increase of approximately 3-4% on the previous year, slightly above inflation. However, the Committee also notes that this increase does not compensate for the significant additional costs arising from increases in Employer National Insurance Contributions and the National Living Wage, and therefore cannot be used to uplift staff wages.
26. Witnesses stated that if the programme had broadly kept pace with inflation since 2013, the budget would now be at least around 30% higher, and they described this as a conservative estimate. Providers also highlighted the practical impact of late-year budget confirmation, with allocations not confirmed until well into Quarter 3 in some years, which restricts workforce planning and can drive short-term decisions. CRISPP asked the Committee to support early confirmation of budgets and the development of a multi-year budget for Supporting People, which the Housing Executive was expected to consider in draft form within weeks.

27. Following the oral session, the Committee sought specific data on the risk to service delivery. The response from First Housing Aid & Support Services (dated 16 December 2025) painted a stark picture of the recruitment environment. They noted that front-line staff currently earn £12.66 per hour, which is only £0.45 above the minimum wage.
28. The Committee notes that the consequences of recruitment and retention pressures are not abstract, but are already impacting day-to-day service delivery. In follow-up correspondence, First Housing advised that staffing pressures had required it to reduce staffing in Jefferson Court, a supported housing service for 16–25 year olds, and in Shepherds View, a supported accommodation project for young parents at risk of their children being taken into care. First Housing stated that this resulted in reduced night support cover, with one service moving from seven nights' cover to five nights per week. The Committee considers that such reductions increase risk for service users, including through safeguarding concerns, increased crisis presentations and the likelihood of repeat homelessness.
29. First Housing stated in its correspondence: "Three staff have left recently because the salary does not meet their household expenses. Three separate recruitment exercises have failed to produce an appointment."
30. The Committee acknowledges that these are skilled roles requiring resilience, trauma-informed training, and patience. Yet, they are remunerated at levels that make retention extremely difficult when compared against retail or hospitality sectors.

31. The impact of this is not theoretical. First Housing highlighted that their Floating Support Service in Enniskillen is now struggling to operate. This service was described by Supporting People officials as “critical” to the NI Housing Executive’s ability to manage the housing crisis in Fermanagh.
32. It is the Committee's assessment that if this service fails due to recruitment issues, the statutory burden on the Housing Executive will increase immediately, likely resulting in increased use of expensive bed and breakfast accommodation.
33. Similarly, MACS, a key provider for young people, provided evidence regarding its services. In correspondence dated 19 December 2025, it confirmed to the Committee that: "Two of our supported housing services in Newry and Downpatrick are currently running on an unviable financial model. Our other two supported housing services will become unsustainable in the longer term."
34. The Committee notes with concern that MACS and other providers have formally written to the Supporting People Programme Group (SPPG) to outline these risks. The evidence suggests that a tipping point will be reached whereby services will be "handed back" to the Department. This could result in the closure of supported accommodation units and an accompanying spike in youth homelessness.
35. Witnesses from CRISPP emphasised that their services are "invest to save" mechanisms. By supporting individuals to maintain tenancies, they prevent costly interventions by the PSNI, the NI Ambulance Service, and the acute hospital sector. The Committee agrees that the cost of failing to fund these services will exceed the cost of the requested uplift.

Systemic Drivers and Prevention

36. The Committee has long recognised that homelessness is rarely solely about a lack of a roof. The evidence received from the Simon Community provided a robust academic basis for this view, linking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to homelessness in later life. Its report, 'Breaking the Cycle', reveals that 66% of homeless hostel residents had experienced four or more ACEs, compared to just 18% of the general population. This disparity highlights a significant inequality in health outcomes.
37. The Committee considers that the evidence on childhood adversity strongly reinforces the case for earlier, joined-up intervention. Simon Community's research indicates that childhood adversity is almost universal among single adults living in homeless hostels, and argues that homelessness should be understood not only as a housing issue but also as a health and trauma issue. In that context, the Committee notes Simon Community's call for a statutory prevention duty that extends beyond the Housing Executive to other public agencies that are well placed to identify risk early, including health, education and justice. The Committee agrees that prevention is unlikely to be achieved through housing interventions alone and requires coordinated, cross-departmental delivery and resourcing.
38. This evidence challenges the perception of homelessness as solely a housing supply issue. Instead, it frames homelessness as also a health and social care issue, often rooted in childhood trauma, care experience, and educational exclusion.

39. The Committee noted the statistic that 21% of those in homeless hostels had been in care. This statistic points to a systemic failure in the transition from state care to independence, a matter the Committee has raised via correspondence with the Department of Health.
40. The Simon Community noted that nearly 74% of hostel residents have a diagnosed mental health condition. Despite this, the funding for these hostels comes almost exclusively from the Department for Communities. This reinforces the Committee's view that a cross-departmental response involving the Department of Health is overdue.
41. During the oral evidence sessions, it was brought to the Committee's attention that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) Strategic Needs Assessment was last undertaken in 2020. Witnesses argued, and the Committee agrees, that the landscape of homelessness has changed dramatically since 2020 due to the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and shifts in private rental availability.
42. The Committee considers that relying on pre-pandemic data constitutes an insufficient basis for strategic planning or the allocation of the Social Housing Development Programme. The Committee notes that the Housing Executive is currently in the preparatory stages of conducting a new Strategic Needs Assessment through the Supporting People Modernisation Programme. The Committee encourages its timely completion.

Legislative Frameworks

43. In preparation for the December engagement, the Committee reviewed the RaISe research paper on Homelessness Legislation (April 2025). This paper

highlighted that other jurisdictions have moved further towards prevention than Northern Ireland. For example, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 extended the definition of "threatened with homelessness" to 56 days. This allows local authorities to intervene earlier to save tenancies.

44. Currently, legislation in Northern Ireland places a duty on the Housing Executive to act only when a person is threatened with homelessness within 28 days.
45. The Committee further notes that legislative reform in other jurisdictions has generally been accompanied by a clearer statutory emphasis on prevention, and by mechanisms designed to encourage earlier engagement. In particular, the Committee notes that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in England introduced duties focused on prevention and "relief" stages and included a duty on specified public bodies to refer service users to local housing authorities.
46. The Committee considers that, while the extension of the "threatened with homelessness" period is an important component of reform, the wider lesson is the value of a prevention-led framework that supports earlier identification, referral and tailored assistance, alongside appropriate resourcing to ensure the intended preventative effect is realised.
47. The Simon Community and other witnesses explicitly recommended extending this window to "at least 60 days." This would align Northern Ireland with best practice in Wales and reforms in Scotland, providing the Housing Executive and support partners sufficient time to intervene and save a tenancy before the crisis point is reached.

48. The Committee has formed a view that shifting the statutory focus to prevention is the best way to address the ballooning temporary accommodation budget in the long term.

Innovation in Housing Supply

49. While the challenges are severe, the Committee also sought evidence on potential solutions. Members received a briefing from East Belfast Mission (EBM) on its "Hosford Community Homes" initiative.
50. This pilot project focuses on purchasing and refurbishing derelict properties to provide high-quality, energy-efficient homes for those at risk of homelessness. EBM presented its evaluation report, produced in collaboration with Commonweal Housing, which demonstrated that this model unlocks significant value.
51. An evaluation of East Belfast Mission's (EBM) 'You're Home' pilot, delivered with Commonweal Housing, reported that the pilot supported seven households into five homes. By September 2025, the evaluation stated that the pilot had helped secure £553,800 in additional funding to enable wider service provision and future community-led housing work. Witnesses described the model as aligning with the Local Area Move-on Accommodation (LAMA) scheme and emphasised that its wraparound support helped sustain tenancies. One participant in the evaluation described moving in as follows: "I couldn't explain the feeling the first day waking up. It was love."
52. The Committee notes that the evaluation evidence available to date suggests that the pilot has the potential to deliver both social value and value for money,

particularly where it prevents recurring homelessness and reduces reliance on temporary accommodation.

53. The Committee notes that the evaluation evidence suggests the pilot delivers exceptional value for money. The EBM and Commonweal Housing report calculated that for every £1 invested in the project, it generated £2.39 in social value. Furthermore, the model demonstrated that high-quality homes could be brought back into use for a total capital cost significantly lower than that of new-build social housing. EBM noted that they were able to purchase and refurbish properties for approximately £125,000 to an EPC 'A' standard. This offers a cost-effective alternative to new builds, while simultaneously removing blight from local communities.
54. Despite the success of the pilot, specific bureaucratic barriers prevent this model from scaling. The primary issue is access to capital. While Housing Associations have established routes to funding, smaller charities and community organisations struggle to access Financial Transactions Capital (FTC). Witnesses argued that a mechanism must be found to allow community organisations to access FTC or a similar mechanism to purchase what might currently be regarded as blight properties.
55. The Committee notes the need for a clear policy on Asset Transfer, allowing public sector liabilities (essentially derelict buildings) to become community assets. The Committee has also queried whether the Department's "Buy Back" policy could be adapted to assist such schemes in acquiring stock.

Committee Recommendations

56. Having considered the extensive written and oral evidence presented during its engagement, the Committee for Communities puts forward the following recommendations for consideration by the Minister for Communities.
57. In making the recommendations set out below, the Committee has had particular regard to (i) the evidence of service fragility within the Supporting People sector and the risks associated with further “flat cash” settlements; (ii) the clear link between trauma, health needs and homelessness pathways, and the case for earlier cross-departmental prevention; (iii) comparative evidence indicating that Northern Ireland’s prevention window is shorter than that in Wales and England; and (iv) the potential contribution of innovative supply measures, including community-led models and empty homes interventions, as part of a wider strategy to increase housing options and reduce repeat homelessness.

Recommendation 1: Sustainable Multi-Year Funding

58. The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities, in conjunction with the Department of Finance, agree a three-year budget settlement for the Supporting People Programme that includes an annual inflationary uplift. The evidence provided by MACS and First Housing demonstrates that the current “flat cash” position is unviable and may lead to service collapse in 2026.

Recommendation 2: Cross-Departmental Task Force

59. Recognising that 66% of homeless individuals have significant trauma and health needs, the Committee recommends that the Executive Office convenes a cross-departmental task force involving Health, Justice, Education, and Communities. This task force should be attended by senior officials of at least the rank of Deputy Secretary or equivalent and be independently chaired.
60. The Committee notes concerns raised by sector representatives regarding the current Homelessness Strategy Steering Group (HSSG), specifically that officials attending are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of their Departments, and that the Department for Communities' control of the agenda may limit the body's effectiveness. The task force should be mandated to pool budgets for complex needs support, specifically addressing the cliff edge faced by care leavers.
61. The Committee notes that pooled budget arrangements have already been successfully implemented in programmes such as Complex Lives and New Foundations, demonstrating that cross-departmental funding models can work in practice. The task force should also ensure meaningful involvement of people with lived experience of homelessness and frontline staff from the homelessness sector.

Recommendation 3: Community-Led Housing Strategy

62. The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities formally recognises community-led housing within its housing supply strategy.
Specifically, the Department should:

- Develop a mechanism for community organisations to access Financial Transactions Capital (FTC).
- Review the "Buy Back" policy to ensure it supports the acquisition of properties by community housing trusts.
- Create a streamlined Asset Transfer policy for derelict public buildings suitable for residential conversion.

Recommendation 4: Strategic Needs Assessment

63. The Committee recommends that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive prioritises and expedites the completion of a new Strategic Needs Assessment. The 2020 data is no longer fit for purpose, and a fresh baseline is required to accurately inform the allocation of resources.

Recommendation 5: Legislative Reform on Prevention

64. The Committee recommends that the Department for Communities conducts a comprehensive review of the homelessness legislation in Northern Ireland, to be completed by the end of this Assembly mandate. The purpose of this review should be to examine how the legislative framework can be reformed to encourage and enable homelessness prevention.

65. The Committee notes that similar reviews preceded the legislative reforms in England, Scotland and Wales, as outlined in the research paper commissioned by the Committee. While the Committee recognises that primary legislation is unlikely to be brought forward by the Department in this mandate, a comprehensive review would ensure that the groundwork is laid for legislative reform in the next mandate. At a minimum, such a review should consider extending the "threatened with homelessness" duty from 28 days to 56 days,

bringing Northern Ireland into line with the legislative frameworks in Wales and England.

Conclusion

66. The evidence provided to the Committee paints a picture of a sector at a crossroads. The homelessness sector in Northern Ireland is facing a perfect storm of rising demand, increased complexity of need, and falling real-terms resources.

67. The testimony from providers regarding the inability to recruit staff at current wage levels is a warning that the Assembly and Executive at large cannot ignore. If these services fail, the human cost to vulnerable individuals will be catastrophic, and the financial cost to the Department of Health and the Department of Justice will far exceed the cost of stabilising the Supporting People budget.

68. However, the Committee also heard messages of hope and innovation. The Community-Led Housing model and the clear roadmap provided by the Simon Community's research show that solutions exist. These solutions require a shift from reactive spending on temporary accommodation to proactive investment in prevention and support.

69. The Committee calls on the Minister for Communities and the wider Executive to adopt the recommendations in this report as a matter of urgency to ensure that we do not lose the vital infrastructure that keeps people off our streets.

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Committee for Communities

Emer Boyle

Northern Ireland Assembly

Parliament Buildings

Ballymiscaw

Stormont

Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 90 521895

Email: Committee.Communities@niassembly.gov.uk

X (formerly Twitter): [@NIA_Communities](https://twitter.com/NIA_Communities)
