

CIH Northern Ireland
Carnmoney House
Edgewater Office Park
BELFAST BT3 9JQ

Public Accounts Committee
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw, Stormont
BELFAST BT4 3XX

Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) Northern Ireland written submission to the inquiry into homelessness

CIH Northern Ireland welcomes the committee's inquiry into homelessness. Our submission provides evidence that the Northern Ireland housing system is facing a severe, costly and deepening crisis. Current budget proposals and systemic failures risk increasing human suffering and public expenditure.

Summary of key points

Our key recommendations are focussed on a necessary shift from expensive crisis management to proactive, preventative measures:

- Strengthen statutory prevention: Introduce legislation to extend the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) statutory prevention duty from 28 days to at least 60 days for those threatened with homelessness; this crucial window allows for sustainable solutions, drawing on good practice from other UK nations
- Mandate inter-agency cooperation: Introduce a statutory 'duty to refer' for key public bodies (e.g. health, justice) to ensure people at risk are connected to NIHE at the earliest opportunity

- Address supply failure: Reverse the capital funding shortfall for social housing and significantly increase the annual delivery target of new social and genuinely affordable homes to address a root cause of the crisis
- Establish cost-effective alternatives to temporary accommodation (TA): Urgently fund new initiatives, such as long-term leasing of private rented homes, to move away from expensive, unsuitable TA placements (which cost the public purse £39 million in 2023/24)
- Prioritise 'Housing First' for complex needs: Commit dedicated, long-term funding to scale up the Housing First model, prioritising immediate access to permanent housing and intensive, holistic support for people with complex needs (e.g. addiction, severe mental health issues)
- Protect core support services: Provide additional, sustained funding for the Supporting People (SP) programme to cover operational costs (inflation, National Living Wage, changes to National Insurance contributions [NICs]), thereby protecting critical homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment services.

1. Introduction and the scale of the crisis

1.1 CIH is the professional body for the housing sector, representing approximately 600 individual members who work across the housing, homelessness and supported housing sectors in Northern Ireland. Our perspective is independent and evidence-based, focussing on whole-system reform.

1.2 The indicators show a system under immense and worsening pressure:

- The number of households with homelessness status reached a high of 31,719 on 31 March 2025
- The number of placements requiring TA has increased by over 160 per cent in six years, rising from 4,527 to 11,887 placements annually.

1.3 The human and financial cost of crisis management – the failure to prevent homelessness and provide sufficient supply is resulting in prolonged and expensive stays in temporary accommodation:

- The number of children living in temporary accommodation has alarmingly risen to 4,730 as of 9 May 2025
- Many vulnerable people are trapped in the system: 1,438 households living in TA have been there for over two years, with 500 of them living in TA for over five years (7.7 per cent).

1.4 The public expenditure on managing this crisis is unsustainable. In 2023/24, £39 million was spent on temporary accommodation, due to the 81 per cent increase from 2017 on temporary accommodation demands. This reinforces the need for further funding to invest in cost-effective prevention.

2. Key recommendations for reform

2.1 Strengthening the statutory prevention framework

2.1.1 Extend the statutory prevention duty to 60 days: CIH Northern Ireland strongly supports the proposal to amend legislation to extend NIHE's statutory duty to support those threatened by homelessness from 28 days to at least 60 days. A 28-day window is insufficient to address complex needs or find sustainable housing options.

2.1.2 This extension provides a crucial longer window for intervention, allowing NIHE and its partners more time to:

- Proactively address underlying issues (e.g. debt, family breakdown, mental health)
- Negotiate with landlords or mediate in disputes to prevent the loss of a tenancy

- Avoid the need for costly emergency interventions, ultimately saving public money and achieving better outcomes.

2.1.3 Introduce a statutory 'duty to refer' for public bodies: While the primary duty should remain with NIHE, we advocate for the introduction of a statutory 'duty to refer' for other key statutory organisations. This would legally require bodies such as Health and Social Care Trusts, the Probation Board/NI Prison Service, and Jobs and Benefits offices to refer people they identify as being at risk to NIHE at the earliest opportunity. This is vital for a truly person-centred, collaborative and preventative system.

2.2 Addressing housing supply

2.2.1 Increase social and affordable housing delivery: The funding shortfall for new social housing in recent years will inevitably lead to longer stays in TA, which is more expensive for the public purse. The Committee should recommend:

- Reversing recent capital cuts to the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP)
- Committing to a substantial and sustained increase in the annual delivery target for social and affordable homes
- Suspending the House Sales Scheme to protect the existing social housing stock.

2.3 Establishing cost-effective alternatives to temporary accommodation

2.3.1 The current reliance on unsuitable and costly temporary accommodation must end. Instead of funding this reactive crisis response, the Committee should recommend funding strategic initiatives for cost-effective alternatives, such as:

- Long-term leasing programmes that secure private rented sector (PRS) accommodation for households facing homelessness
- This approach, alongside an increase to social and affordable housing, provides people with their own front door and full access to the facilities a household needs, offering a more settled and higher-quality experience than hotels and B&Bs, and at a more sustainable cost to the public sector.

2.3.2 Strengthen tenancy sustainment: We advocate for improving support within the PRS, including robust advice and support to tenants, and removing fiscal disincentives for private landlords that promote property sales and threaten tenancy security, to make the PRS a more stable housing option.

2.4 Prioritise 'Housing First' for complex needs

2.4.1 The 'Housing First' model is highly effective for supporting people with the most complex needs (often those experiencing chronic rough sleeping, addiction or severe mental health issues) and should be scaled up across Northern Ireland.

2.4.2 This approach prioritises immediate access to stable, permanent housing without preconditions, coupled with intensive, flexible and person-centred support services.

- Recommendation: The Committee should call for a dedicated, long-term budget to fully implement and expand Housing First initiatives, recognising its ability to achieve better, more sustainable outcomes and reduce the long-term financial burden on health, justice and crisis services.

2.5 Protecting core support services (Supporting People)

2.5.1 Sustain and increase SP funding: The SP programme provides essential housing-related support, acting as a critical preventative measure that helps

vulnerable individuals (including those across Section 75 equality categories, and households with mental health or addiction challenges) live independently.

2.5.2 The recent funding uplift does not adequately account for increased operational expenses due to inflationary costs, the rising National Living Wage, and changes to Employers NICs. This financial strain threatens the viability of essential support services. The Committee should recommend that additional, ring-fenced funding is provided to ensure these vital homelessness prevention services remain operational and sustainable.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Homelessness in Northern Ireland is a preventable social and economic failure. The evidence points to a system that is over-reliant on costly, reactive solutions.

3.2 By focussing on legislative prevention (the 60-day duty), mandating inter-agency cooperation (duty to refer), investing strategically in supply and alternatives to TA, and protecting core support services (SP), the Committee can recommend a path to a more humane, sustainable and fiscally responsible housing system.

We would welcome the opportunity to be called upon to give oral evidence to the Committee to discuss and expand upon the points raised in this submission.



Chartered
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About CIH

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the independent voice for housing and the home of professional standards. Our goal is simple - to provide housing professionals and their organisations with the advice, support, and knowledge they need to be brilliant. CIH is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. This means that the money we make is put back into the organisation and funds the activities we carry out to support the housing sector. We have a diverse membership of people who work in both the public and private sectors, in 20 countries on five continents across the world. Further information is available at: www.cih.org.

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