



Submission

Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill

July 2026

homelessconnect.org

Homeless Connect Response to Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill

Introduction

1. **Homeless Connect** has been working to prevent and alleviate homelessness across Northern Ireland since 1983. As the representative body for more than forty organisations operating within the independent homelessness sector, we provide a collective voice for the sector and advocate for effective responses to homelessness. We also empower individuals with lived experience of homelessness to influence policy and practice by ensuring their voices are heard and valued. In addition, we deliver initiatives that help sustain tenancies and programmes that redistribute surplus nutritious food to charities and other not-for-profit organisations.

Context of Homelessness in Northern Ireland

2. According to the most recent *Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin* (October 2025 to March 2026),¹ homelessness remains a significant and persistent challenge across Northern Ireland. Over the past decade, the total number of households on the social housing waiting list has increased by 34%, rising from 37,586 in March 2016² to 50,381 in March 2026. During the same period, the number of households with homelessness status grew from 15,075 to 33,412, an increase of 18,337 households (122%) over ten years. Compared to the previous year, March 2025,³ the number of households with homelessness status rose by 1,693, a rise of 5%. Notably these figures only include recorded homelessness and do not account for hidden homelessness and informal arrangements (often referred to as sofa surfing or staying in unconventional structures). The clear indication is that homelessness remains on an upward trend despite ongoing prevention and support measures.

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Clauses Relevant to Homelessness

3. The *Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill* aims to strengthen support, protections and accountability within the criminal justice system through the establishment of a statutory Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime; the mandatory publication of victim-related statistics; enhanced safeguards governing access to complainants' private information in serious sexual offence cases; and the provision of pre-trial independent legal representation for complainants in such cases. The Bill also includes a technical amendment relating to the implementation of Committal Reform in Northern Ireland, extends Special Measures for victims and witnesses of

hate crime-aggravated offences, and protects them from direct cross-examination by an accused person charged with such offences.⁴

4. Of particular relevance is the notion of the Commissioner's powers as noted "2. - (1) *The Commissioner may do anything which the Commissioner considers to be appropriate for facilitating, or to be incidental or conducive to, the exercise of the Commissioner's functions. (2) The power in sub-paragraph (1) includes in particular - (a) co-operating with other bodies exercising functions relating to victims and witnesses or their rights (whether in Northern Ireland or elsewhere)*"

Homeless Connect Position

5. Homeless Connect welcomes the objectives of the Bill to strengthen protections for victims and witnesses of crime and to improve accountability within the criminal justice system through the establishment of a Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime. People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately likely to experience victimisation, including violence, intimidation, hate crime, exploitation and sexual offences⁵. However, they often face significant barriers in reporting offences, engaging with criminal justice processes and accessing appropriate support services⁶. As a result, Homeless Connect recognises the potential of this legislation to improve outcomes for some of the most vulnerable members of our communities.
6. Homeless Connect particularly welcomes:
 - a. The creation of an independent Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime, which has the potential to strengthen the voice of victims and provide greater oversight of how services respond to vulnerable individuals.
 - b. Efforts to improve the criminal justice response to offences aggravated by hostility, recognising that people experiencing homelessness can be targeted because of their perceived vulnerability, social exclusion or marginalised status.
 - c. Enhanced protections for victims of sexual offences and vulnerable people who have suffered serious harm.
7. Homeless Connect believes that effective implementation of these measures can help improve access to justice, strengthen protection for vulnerable individuals and increase confidence in the criminal justice system among people experiencing homelessness.
8. Homeless Connect encourages Committee members to press the Department to ensure that:

- a. The legislation and/or accompanying guidance ensures that the Commissioner has an obligation to actively engage and consult with organisations supporting people experiencing homelessness as well as other marginalised groups. This should include investigating barriers impacting on these groups, including people experiencing homelessness.
- b. Careful consideration should be given to how people with lived experience of homelessness as well as those coming from other marginalised groups will be involved in the advisory groups set up to support the Commissioner. This could be through membership of these groups or through active engagement with other existing structures.
- c. Annual reports on outcomes from the proposed Commissioner should include explicit consideration of the experiences and outcomes for marginalised groups, including people experiencing homelessness.
- d. Victims who are homeless or living in temporary accommodation can access justice on an equal basis with others, including through appropriate communication methods, advocacy and support services.
- e. Training is provided to criminal justice practitioners to improve understanding of the experiences and vulnerabilities associated with homelessness. The Department should report on an annual basis on the training delivered.
- f. Data is collected and monitored to understand the experiences of victims who are homeless, including those living in informal arrangements or insecure accommodation, and to identify any continuing barriers to reporting crime or participating in criminal proceedings. Annual reports should include data and reporting on outcomes when it comes to marginalised groups.

Conclusion

9. In implementing these provisions, consideration should be given to the experiences of victims who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Commissioner's broad powers, including the ability to cooperate with other bodies that support victims and witnesses, provide an important opportunity to promote cross-sector working with housing and homelessness services. Such cooperation could help ensure that the needs of individuals experiencing housing instability as a result of crime are identified at an early stage and addressed effectively. This could help ensure that the needs of individuals experiencing housing instability as a result of crime are recognised and addressed, improving their access to support, safety and justice.

References

¹ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-homelessness-bulletin-october-2025-march-2026>

² [Homelessness: July to September 2016 - Official statistics announcement - GOV.UK](#)

³ <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-homelessness-bulletin-april-september-2025>

⁴ [victims-and-witnesses-of-crime-bill---efm---as-introduced---fpv.pdf](#)

⁵ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7618086/>

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20502/crisis_its_no_life_at_all2016.pdf

Groundswell (2011) *Healthy Surviving: Peer Research into Health Care Provision and Access for People Experiencing Homelessness*. London: Groundswell.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178913001225?via%3Dihub>

⁶ [Criminal justice system and homelessness: A rapid evidence assessment - GOV.UK](#)



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