



Department for

Communities

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Our Ref: PSC0150.26
Date: 14 May 2026

Public Accounts Committee
Room 344
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Via email Committee.publicaccounts@niassembly.gov.uk

Dear Daniel

MEMORANDUM OF REPLY: HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Further to your letter of 1 May, I can confirm that I plan to attend the closed session to discuss Recommendation 8 which you kindly agreed to reschedule for 11 June.

As also requested, I am happy to provide some additional clarification which I hope will reassure Members in relation to the Department's approach to taking forward Recommendations 2 and 10.



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Recommendation 2

The recommendation contained within the PAC Report was (my emphasis):

‘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.’

The Department accepted this recommendation in full as it was drafted. The approach outlined will meet the immediate timeline as set out in the Committee’s recommendation while laying the groundwork for policy and legislative reform in the next mandate. I can assure the Committee that there is no lack of urgency on this point; rather our response reflects the practical reality of taking forward comprehensive policy and legislative reform, in less than a year. By February 2027 it is the Department’s intention to have developed firm proposals, however these must then be put to the Minister as options for decision.

Minister Lyons is acutely aware of the potential benefits of reforming the existing homelessness legislation. However, the legislation is highly technical and extremely complex given the interactions with wider housing legislation and policy. Furthermore, should the Minister agree that the optimum approach is to legislate, the introduction of a statutory prevention duty could create a complex, cross-cutting framework which would place additional requirements on other Departments. Consequently, this would require Executive approval and a well-resourced process with sufficient expertise to examine the issues in depth and build consensus from the outset.

Policy development will require a review of existing evidence and previous policy or analytical work, a review of the current legislative and regulatory framework to identify gaps



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or areas requiring amendment and an assessment of the various approaches taken in other jurisdictions. Extensive engagement is also required with stakeholders, including current and former service users, to gather operational insights, build support for proposed changes and identify risks. Only once this evidence has been gathered will officials be in a position to develop clear and robust policy proposals for consideration by Minister, and in due course the Executive.

Even if DfC had already explored options for strengthening homelessness prevention through new statutory duties, indeed, even if DfC had ready a change-option including new statutory duties ready to recommend to the Minister, it would still not be possible to progress the legislation in this mandate. To guarantee completion prior to the end of this mandate, Executive agreement to the new policy and legislation would have to be secured, substantial public consultations would have to be completed, considered and reported, a complex draft bill would have to be drafted, introduced and progressed through Second Stage – all before the Summer recess.

The Committee's recommendation to provide the Department with a year to explore options is one I fully accept. This reflects the potential importance and complexity of legislative change. Resources must also reflect the seriousness of this work. The recommendation will best be fulfilled and with the greatest urgency through dedicated and expert resources, separated from business-as-usual demands. The Department is finding these resources. We made reference to this within our response to emphasise criticality, seriousness and urgency.



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Recommendation 10

The recommendation contained within the PAC Report was:

‘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.’

Again, the Department responded (partial acceptance) to this recommendation as it was drafted. The proposals for amending the House Sales Scheme were well advanced and agreed by both the Housing Executive’s Board and the Minister prior to the publication of the Committee’s report and recommendations. The consultation (which is already underway and published on the NIHE website) is in line with the recommendation from the Committee that options are brought forward for ‘adapting or amending the Scheme’.

While the consultation is limited to the five specific amendments outlined in the Department’s Memorandum of Reply, the Housing Executive is also seeking views on potential future changes to key elements of the Scheme, such as full scheme closure, eligibility requirements and the level of discount, which would be subject to a separate consultation process. The consultation responses will inform future proposals to the Minister.

I hope this response addresses Members’ concerns, and I look forward to engagement in person in June.



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Yours sincerely,

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