'Hidden' Homelessness
in Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

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Introduction

This research examines the issue of 'hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland – that is, people who are homeless but whose situation is not 'visible'. The research team from Ulster University was commissioned by the Simon Community NI to conduct the study. It looks at why individuals become vulnerable to 'hidden' homelessness, the barriers and challenges they encounter in seeking help and support, and the most discernible impacts upon those affected by it. By enhancing our knowledge and understanding of 'hidden homelessness' and the factors which cause and perpetuate it, this research aims to inform policy and provision.

The study commenced in early 2020 and comprised in-depth interviews with 45 individuals from a range of voluntary, community and statutory organisations, including those working in homelessness service provision. Data was also collected through a number of facilitated workshops (which took place just prior to the COVID 19 pandemic) attended by 35 people involved in youth services across Northern Ireland. The research team made the decision due to the COVID 19 pandemic and associated restrictions that it would not be ethical or feasible to engage with participants currently experiencing 'hidden' homelessness through online interviews. However, five people who had previously experienced 'hidden' homelessness but were now in more secure housing provided important insights.

Defining and measuring 'hidden' homelessness

Statistical data on homelessness is not a measure of the scale of the issue but rather a measurement of the contact that people have with the statutory system. There will be many undocumented cases wherein households, for various reasons, are not presenting for support or accepted as homeless. These 'hidden' homeless will not be included within official statistics. There is no clear and accepted definition of 'hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland and no absolute data on hidden or concealed homelessness. The consequence of this can be seen in the variance in the number calculated to be 'hidden' homeless which has ranged from 11,000 to between 70,000-112,000 adults. Differences in figures are largely a result of different definitions and debates about what differentiates housing need from homelessness.

In their work on the Northern Ireland Homelessness Monitor, Fitzpatrick et al (2020) define 'hidden' homelessness as:

"... people who may be considered homeless but whose situation is not 'visible' either on the streets or in official statistics. Classic examples would include households living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatters, people 'sofa-surfing' around friends' or relatives' houses, those involuntarily sharing with other households on a long-term basis, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations"

Participants who took part in this research struggled to define and conceptualise 'hidden' homelessness. It was understood to encompass everything from 'sofa surfing' to people having accommodation but not having a *home*, due to the residence not being fit for purpose or suitable to their needs. Examples of what participants saw as 'hidden' homelessness included an inability for people to occupy their own home due to the lack of accessible and adaptable housing, particularly older and disabled people, and those whose housing was in a physically unfit condition.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has a statutory duty to *"assess and investigate homelessness applicants and, where appropriate, provide temporary and/or permanent accommodation"*. The Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin, produced annually, and jointly, by the Department for Communities (DfC), the NIHE and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) states that in Northern Ireland a person may be homeless if they are:

- Staying with friends or family;
- Staying in a hostel;
- Staying in a bed and breakfast;
- Living in overcrowded conditions;
- At risk of violence if they stay in their home;
- Are living in poor conditions that are damaging their health;
- Are living in a house that is unsuitable for them;
- Are rough sleeping

While this 'checklist' suggests a recognition of the complexity of differing forms of homelessness, these factors are only used as a guide. Those presenting to the NIHE as homeless must pass a four-stage test before they are accepted for Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status as homeless and provided with offers of accommodation. The NIHE are only obliged to provide accommodation for those who fulfil the criteria. The Homeless Persons' Advice and Assistance Regulations (NI) 2011 requires the Housing Executive to provide *support* for people who are either not in priority need or who have become or are threatened with becoming 'intentionally' homeless. This support must include housing advice, advice on social issues, financial advice and advice on legal procedures and services.

Who is vulnerable to 'hidden' homelessness and why?

There are 'risk' factors and pathways into all forms of homelessness (statutory, 'chronic' and 'hidden'), with individual, social and structural factors interlinking at differing points in an individual's life to increase their vulnerability to homelessness. Structural issues relating to poverty, the impact of Welfare Reform, housing supply challenges - especially regarding social housing, and the impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic are all important factors which contribute to the housing precarity of low-income households.

While theoretically it is correct to suggest that 'anyone' can become 'hidden' homeless, the data points to specific demographic cohorts who are particularly vulnerable. Drawing on their professional expertise participants identified specific groups whom they consider to be particularly vulnerable to becoming part of the 'hidden' homeless population, including: young people; single people aged over 55, members of the LGBTQ population; those with no recourse to public funds (including those seeking asylum); people leaving prison and lone parents. They identified the main reasons for that vulnerability as:

Navigating official processes - The factors which were argued to increase housing precarity and likelihood of 'hidden' homelessness included challenges in navigating the statutory processes set up to assess housing need. Demonstrating and being accepted as being in priority housing need is particularly challenging for people who are living in some kind of housing *(even if it is inappropriate)* leading to their homelessness remaining 'hidden' and uncalculated. Navigating statutory processes was also highlighted as a major challenge for those for whom English is not their first language.

Sexual identity - Community and voluntary sector organisations representing the needs and interests of the LGBTQ+ community discussed that a significant majority of their service users could be considered as 'hidden' homeless, simply due to their sexuality. This was largely attributed to individuals 'coming out' to their family and friends leading to their marginalisation or estrangement. While some may not know where, or how, to access support, practitioners working with members of the LGBTQ+ community expressed concern about what were perceived to be the negative attitudes of some housing providers and other statutory agencies. These were a deterrent to seeking help and could result in people in retreating to domestic situations which may be unsafe and insecure.

Ex prisoners - Even though there are policies and procedures in place to assist those leaving prison prior to their release, it was claimed that within homelessness services and the statutory sector there is a limited understanding of the complex challenges people face when leaving prison. Many former prisoners require a tailored package of support to assist with their reintegration, including support with mental health and addiction issues, and it was argued that this can be disjointed or slow to materialise. Subsequently, this group can experience prolonged 'hidden' homelessness,' with 'sofa surfing' and temporary accommodation becoming the norm.

Victims of domestic abuse - Domestic abuse often makes it impossible for people to stay in their own home which can lead to lengthy stays in temporary accommodation or adoption of a transient lifestyle whereby they move from place to place to avoid being found by the perpetrator.

Employment insecurity and low pay - Employment status was cited as a factor which often perpetuates 'hidden' homelessness. Those on precarious and zero-hour contracts are particularly vulnerable as their employment status makes it difficult to secure private rental accommodation.

Care leavers – For this group of young people the likelihood of becoming 'hidden' homelessness is especially pronounced. Some participants noting that children and young people in care are essentially the 'hidden' homeless throughout their lives, as their circumstances mean that they may have a roof over their head, but too often, it is not necessarily a home.

Securing private sector tenancies – Housing supply and, in particular, the scarcity of affordable housing is a major problem. It is common for private sector landlords to require at least a month's deposit up front (and may also require a family member or friend to act as a guarantor) which is out of reach of many. Some landlords are prejudiced against certain groups and impose exclusions further restricting access to already marginalised groups.

Impact of 'Hidden' Homelessness

It can be difficult to differentiate between factors which contribute to 'hidden' homelessness and those which are caused or exacerbated by experiencing it. Study participants identified what they considered the most discernible impacts of 'hidden' homelessness on those who experience it. However, they found this a difficult question to answer, given the gap in our knowledge and understanding about the true extent, scale and nature of 'hidden' homelessness. There was consensus that those subjected to 'hidden' homelessness for a longer period were more likely to be exposed to negative influences and harmful relationships, faced exploitation and hardship, and ultimately experienced a deterioration in their mental and physical health. For example, participants spoke of how 'hidden' homelessness can lead to or intensify addictions.

The impact on children and young people who are subjected to prolonged periods of 'hidden' homelessness, including long stays within temporary accommodation was seen by participants as completely unacceptable. This lack of security and stability not only puts children and young people at risk, but many argued that it has ramifications for their mental health, life chances and general well-being, the impact of which could last well into adulthood.

Those, predominantly young people, who are 'sofa surfing' face a state of 'permanent impermanence' associated with constantly fluctuating living arrangements which they often have little or no control over. In this context 'sofa surfing' often becomes the conduit for young people to move into other, and even more precarious, forms of homelessness.

Barriers/challenges to helping people who are 'hidden' homeless

Practitioners who took part in interviews revealed that they often encounter significant barriers and challenges in their efforts to identify and provide support. Some could be defined as systemic issues; others were more aligned with the social and personal circumstances of those presenting as 'hidden' homeless, and how they are perceived within society.

Lack of long term and strategic funding for service providers: the lack of funding within the homelessness sector is having a detrimental impact on the ability to respond to the diverse needs of clients who are 'hidden' homeless, even when they are identified, in a *sustained* manner. Insecure funding means that it is difficult to recruit and keep staff and provide the tailored and expert help and support required by service users. This includes access to specialist health and social services.

Accessibility and capacity of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive: participants spoke of how systemic challenges and barriers within the statutory housing system in Northern Ireland were contributory factors to the prevalence and persistence of 'hidden' homelessness. These included the four-stage process used by the NIHE to assess whether a person is classified as homeless. Key issues with the process were identified as the 'all or nothing' approach of the four-stage process; the categories of priority need and intentionality were perceived as particularly problematic. The points criteria do not provide appropriate consideration of people in employment who may be unable to afford their own homes (the 'working-poor'). Participants felt there was a strong argument for removing the 'intentionality' element of the homelessness assessment on the grounds that it is unfair, unjustified, and unsupportive and is a particular barrier for young people.

The fact that people have not been assessed as homeless seriously limits the support they can access, not least because *'there's no statutory duties to call on.'* There is little in place for those whose application is rejected. Given that many of those who are hidden homeless have other vulnerabilities it was argued that an intervention should accompany a decision to reject a homelessness application in order to ensure that support is provided for an appeal or assistance with contacting other services. This should not rely on the person having to make the first contact with an advice provider.

Scarcity of social housing -The lack of social housing contributes to the problem and is a barrier to people exiting 'hidden' homelessness. We heard examples of how those in temporary accommodation are willing to wait for social housing as it is viewed as more stable, secure and affordable than the private rental sector. However, given the scarcity of social housing many remain in temporary accommodation for some time, increasing pressure on an already heavily burdened system.

Stigma - The stigma, prejudice and ignorance associated with homelessness in general was seen as a 'critical challenge.' The prejudicial stereotype of a homeless person increases levels of 'hidden' homelessness as people are unwilling to come forward and access support at the earliest opportunity.

Private sector - many participants questioned the viability of the private rented sector as a suitable long-term alternative for those who are homeless, particularly given the lack of security of tenure within the sector and the lack of regulation.

Invisibility of 'hidden' homelessness - The lack of discussion and focus on 'hidden' homelessness as a distinct phenomenon has a significant impact on how those experiencing it understand and view their own situation. This, coupled with the fact that Northern Ireland is portrayed as a society of close-knit communities, characterised by large family networks and altruistic tendencies, feeds the perception that all needs are met, and heightens the shame and stigma of seeking support beyond informal networks.

Innovation in prevention and support

There has been innovation in the development of prevention and support services. Section 2 of the report provides examples of initiatives including:

In 2013 a *Housing First* pilot was developed by DePaul in Belfast and later extended to Derry/Londonderry. This was funded via the *Supporting People* programme. A fully commissioned programme began in 2014 and remains in place in 2021. An independent evaluation of the first year of the programme reported positive outcomes including most people maintaining tenancies, reduced their alcohol/drugs intake, improved self-care and living skills, improved their money management skills (100%), improvement in physical and mental health, improved family relationships and reported improved family relationships and reduced use of Emergency Departments.

Housing First for Youth adopts a preventative approach to reducing homelessness and promotes stability for looked after young people. This is a collaborative programme between the Simon Community, the NIHE and the health and social care trusts. Initial evaluations of Housing First initiatives suggest positive outcomes.

The Tenancy Sustainment Programme is based within the Simon Community's Housing Solutions team. It provides financial support by making a deposit payment into a statutory protected scheme on a client's behalf and provides ongoing support advice and guidance. The programme has had a high success rate with 98 per cent of tenants remaining in their home beyond six months.

The Shared Tenancy Model run by MACS is directed specifically at young people who for financial and other reasons would benefit from sharing accommodation with other young people.

The availability of prevention related outcome data in Northern Ireland is still somewhat limited and needs to be robust and tracked over the longer term but there is evidence of success, including regarding inter-agency collaboration. It is important that this is built on and not limited by short term and/or inadequate funding.

Impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic

Little is known about the impact of the pandemic on those staying with family or friends and the extent to which they felt obliged to or were forced to move out amid concerns about infection. Participants did report some cases where people had been sleeping on sofas for months with friend and were asked to leave due to fears about the pandemic. There were also examples of the increased pressure on family relationships which were already strained leading to young people in particular leaving home.

Due to the sensitivities and complex nature of 'hidden' homelessness, it was recognised that the more vulnerable people in the 'hidden' homeless population could be more reluctant to access support and discuss their complex needs online or via telephone or email. Some also claimed that the remote mode of working people had resulted in some disengaging from support processes and that restrictions presented significant challenges, including accessing specialist care.

Covid-19 social distancing measures reduced the availability of temporary accommodation, further exacerbating the 'hidden' homeless population in Northern Ireland, the full scale and extent of which is not yet known. While some special measures were introduced by the NIHE concern was expressed that the withdrawal of these would increase the levels of both homelessness and 'hidden' homelessness.

Some participants pointed to the positive learning from the COVID 19 pandemic particularly in terms of how it forced a change in the operating practices of certain statutory organisations, meaning that applications were completed either online or over the phone, and were subsequently processed more quickly. Examples were provided of how adaptions due to the pandemic resulted in a more streamlined and, for some people, accessible service.

The following two case studies illustrate some of the factors which lead to 'hidden homelessness, the impact on the lives of individuals and families and the positive outcomes when appropriate support is received.

Case Study 1

Margaret, a woman in her mid-60s with complex disabilities, was recently re-housed with her teenage daughter in a rural community in the North West. Although Margaret explained that her time on the waiting list for social housing was relatively short, both her and her daughter consider themselves as being the 'hidden homeless' for almost a decade. Their ordeal, which Margaret describes as 'a living hell', was brought to an end due to the intervention of a homelessness charity which advocated on behalf of this family, helping them to navigate what was described as "a complicated system" which made them feel unworthy.

Margaret's story is one of hardship and despair, a life that was made 'unbearable' as a result of the behaviour and actions of her previous landlord. Initially, Margaret and her husband, who passed away a few years ago, had a 'good relationship' with the landlord, yet that quickly changed when the family had settled into their home. Although the rent and rates were covered by housing benefit, Margaret explained that the landlord placed a 'huge financial burden' on the family:

"It started about 4 months after we moved in. The landlord called by one evening and said that he thought he should get more money for the house. He demanded an extra £20 a month and said that we shouldn't go through Housing Benefit as that only complicated things. My husband didn't want any more stress, at this stage he was terminally ill. Despite my reservations, I handed him the money. This increased to £40 a month, and after my husband died it went up to £80 a month. He called regularly and demanded extra whenever he wanted."

In addition to the financial pressures, Margaret also stated that the landlord failed to carry out repairs, and despite receiving a grant to adapt the home to suit her complex needs, this work was never completed. Rather, the family had to live without a bathroom for over a year and were told repeatedly by the landlord that they were problematic, and 'would never get another house.' For Margaret, his actions equated to 'coercive control'. In fact, she claimed that although he was 'manipulative and physically abusive towards her,' her complaints to local authorities, including the police and council, were never taken seriously.

"I called the police a number of times. One time, he was waiting for me coming home in the dark and pushed me up against the wall demanding money. The police told me that it was a civil matter and wouldn't let me make a statement."

As such, Margaret continued with the tenancy due to "the fear of standing up to a man who is considered a pillar of society" and her lack of knowledge about the social housing system. Throughout this period Margaret and her daughter had to find money on demand, which left them without the basics at times. They also lived in fear of being evicted from the house as they had nowhere else to go.

"Quite simply, we had a roof over our head, but it was never a home. We lived in fear for our safety as this man is aggressive. He would come into the house whenever he wanted, using his own key. He would take photos of me and say that he was reporting me to the social security office as I wasn't really disabled. He left us with no money and caused so much heartache that I can't put it into words."

Margaret is now relieved that she has a place to call home and is grateful to a housing advice organisation who have supported her and her daughter, after her social worker set up a meeting with a support worker from the charity. By telling her story, Margaret wants to raise awareness about the actions of what she refers to as 'rogue landlords,' who capitalise on those who are vulnerable.

"I don't want anyone else to go through this. I was trapped in this private rental. I couldn't see any way out. I couldn't make myself intentionally homeless, and no-one would believe me when I spoke about his (landlord's) behaviour. I was brushed aside by the Housing Benefit office when I tried to explain that I was paying extra rent, and the police didn't take the abuse seriously. I really think that the law needs to be changed or made more effective. The landlord abused his position and got away with it. I was essentially homeless in what was meant to be my home."

Case Study 2

Michelle, a woman in her thirties, lives in Belfast with her husband and son. A number of years ago Michelle lived with her parents and had what she described as 'a decent job,' managing a city centre store. Her biggest concern was where she was going at the weekend. Yet that changed when paramilitaries arrived at her door and ordered her family to leave the area.

"It was a nightmare. I arrived home to find a crowd of men in my garden, banging down our front door. Many of them wore balaclavas, others didn't as they knew they could do whatever they wanted. A number of shots were fired. I can remember my parents screaming, trying to hold the front door closed. I don't know how they weren't killed."

Michelle's father suffered a heart attack and was taken to hospital when the police arrived on the scene. The removal vans arrived the following day, leaving Michelle and her traumatised mother to pack whatever belongings they could in the midst of the chaos. Michelle explains that she 'literally left with a few essentials,' nothing else. Her parents went to stay with relatives outside Belfast, however Michelle found it difficult to find accommodation.

"I was working, I had some cash and I stayed in a hotel for a while. I had to keep my job, I always worked, so I needed to stay in Belfast. I stayed with friends, anyone who would have me, but I knew that they were afraid of the paramilitaries, so I didn't stay in one place for long. I was terrified, I couldn't settle, and I felt like I was imposing on everyone."

Michelle explained that she had to cut her hours in work as her mental health had deteriorated significantly. As such, she was not in a position to secure a private rental, nor was she in 'the right frame of mind' to seek assistance from charities or other authorities.

"I really felt stigmatised. I thought that people would think my family had done something to deserve this, that we brought it on ourselves in some way, which wasn't the case. I did speak with the Housing Executive, but they told me that my only option was to go to a hostel as I didn't meet their criteria. That terrified me. At the time, my perception was that hostels were for addicts or people with real problems. Not somewhere that I could survive in."

Michelle continued to 'sofa-surf' for over a year, until she returned to live with her parents when they eventually found a private rental in an area where 'they felt safe.' Whilst this chapter in her life has affected her significantly, Michelle explains that being homeless and 'trying to function,' was the greatest challenge she has ever faced.

"I remember going to work, afraid to tell my colleagues what had happened. I had a toothbrush in my handbag, and I had no idea where I was staying when my shift ended. I had never imagined what it would be like to not have a home, to not have a base from which to live your life. Everything deteriorated, my health, mental health, relationships, everything. I didn't know where to turn, and because I had no kids, was young, healthy and some would say, successful, I really felt that I was on my own."

Michelle was keen to tell her story as she feels that there is no real understanding of the extent of 'hidden' homelessness or the factors which lead to it. Quite simply, Michelle believes that:

"Anyone could find themselves in this position, not necessarily at the hands of paramilitaries, but there are a number of factors that could leave you homeless. Getting a house again was only a small part of rebuilding my life. I felt so vulnerable and worthless for many years, it was degrading lying on people's floors and practically begging people for a shower or to wash my clothes. If I could suggest one thing, I would say that the relevant agencies and authorities really need to understand the paths that people have travelled, and the impact that being homeless has on every aspect of their lives. I needed more than someone to help me fill out a form, I was totally broken at the time."

Key Points and Recommendations

Any discussion of 'hidden' homelessness needs to be placed in a broader context, not just of housing policy but social policy more generally. Major changes to housing tenure in Northern Ireland in recent decades and the decline in NIHE tenure and growth in private sector rental tenure has impacted disproportionately on some of the most vulnerable groups and has undoubtedly contributed to 'hidden' homelessness.

In 2021, the Department for Communities and the NIHE published a number of strategies on or related to homelessness including a draft Homelessness Strategy (NIHE, 2021), a draft Strategic Action Plan for Temporary Accommodation (NIHE, 2021) and a consultative Housing Supply Strategy (Department for Communities, 2021). The Draft Homelessness Strategy contains only a brief reference to 'hidden' homelessness but does contain reference to measures which, if effectively implemented, could help prevent and address 'hidden' homelessness. Its three key objectives - focusing on a 'prevention first' approach, supporting households who become homeless and, support with sustaining settled accommodation, relate to evidence in this report about the actions and initiatives required to address 'hidden' homelessness.

The draft Temporary Accommodation Strategy refers to the need for a 'systemic and cultural shift towards homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing' (p.15) while noting that *this is contingent on broader supply options.* The draft Housing Supply Strategy contains a number of welcome proposals including the aim to deliver 100,000+ homes over 15 years, a third of which are to be in the social sector. It also refers to new legislation which will be developed to improve the security and quality of the private rented sector including restricting rent increases to once in a 12 month period and extending the notice to quit period. The objectives of the strategy are laudable but without specific detail, including on funding and implementation, it is difficult to comment on the adequacy of some of the proposed measures. There is however no reference to protecting *the stock of increasingly scare public sector houses* by ending the mandatory sale of NIHE houses under the 'right to buy', even though Northern Ireland is the only devolved region which has not done so.

Definitional issues

It is evident that there is no single, accepted definition of 'hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland. This impacts on understanding of what it means to be 'hidden' homeless and severely limits accurate measurement. While the complexities around 'hidden' homeless render this somewhat understandable, it is imperative to improve approximations of 'hidden' homelessness. The definition provided by Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) within the 'Homelessness Monitor' series of reports is the most comprehensive and robust as it refers to five differing forms of 'hidden' homelessness (undocumented rough sleeping, squatting, those living in severely overcrowded households, those 'sofa surfing,' and those involuntarily sharing with others). The phrase 'involuntarily sharing' better captures the challenges associated with staying with others than the more generic phrase 'sharing.'

R1. It is recommended that a definition of 'hidden' homelessness is agreed amongst statutory and community/voluntary agencies in Northern Ireland and suggest that the definition by Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) would be a useful starting point. They define 'hidden' homelessness as:

> "'Hidden homeless' households – that is, people who may be considered homeless but whose situation is not 'visible' either on the streets or in official statistics. Classic examples would include households living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatters, people 'sofa-surfing' around friends' or relatives' houses, those involuntarily sharing with other households on a long-term basis, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016: 1).

Data Collection and Measurement

Data collection on homelessness in Northern Ireland has improved in recent years. The now biannual 'Homelessness Bulletin' produced by NISRA, the DfC and the NIHE from 2019 onwards provides regular updates on three core categories: the number of statutory homelessness presenters; numbers of presenters accepted FDA; and, numbers of people in temporary accommodation (by type of accommodation). Yet, linked to the point above, in the absence of an agreed and appropriate definition, the statistical data to measure the scale of 'hidden' homelessness is limited. However, Northern Ireland can learn lessons from other jurisdictions which suggests that data can be improved by focusing on two key

sources in particular. Firstly, data collected on first presentation to the NIHE and secondly, seeking to obtain household survey data on homelessness.

R.2 By agreeing and utilising an agreed definition of 'hidden' homelessness, questions asked of statutory homelessness presenters on first contact could provide valuable information.

R.3 Household surveys, such as the Continuous Household Survey, could be reviewed to assess the potential for additional questions on prior experience of various forms of 'homelessness' (including rough sleeping and 'hidden' homelessness).

There is evidence that the shift towards the *Housing Solutions and Support* model adopted by the NIHE across Northern Ireland in 2018 was a positive development and was, to some extent 'working' in terms of providing prevention and relief for some households. However, it was very difficult to quantify the extent to which this has been the case. By way of contrast, statistical data on outcomes with regards to prevention and relief duties is much easier to access in GB. In this regard:

R.4. It would be beneficial for prevention/support related outcomes data from Housing Solutions interventions to be included within future iterations of the 'Homelessness Bulletin' to improve the scope of the freely available data on homelessness.

Housing Supply and Housing Tenure

Tackling 'hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland requires addressing the long-standing housing supply problem. Housing supply was repeatedly raised by research participants, including those who had experienced 'hidden' homelessness with the lack of social housing frequently cited as the 'biggest problem'. The lack of supply in the social housing sector has contributed to increasing private sector rent which is not proportionate to wage and benefit levels of many households. There are also problems relating to inadequate regulation of the private rented sector.

R.5. There is a clear need for a rebalancing of housing provision in Northern Ireland with a much stronger focus on publicly owned housing. The focus on social housing in the draft Housing Supply Strategy is to be welcomed but should include the end of the mandatory sale of NIHE properties which would bring Northern Ireland into line with other devolved jurisdictions.

R.6. Stronger legislation is required to protect the rights of vulnerable tenants and reduce their housing precarity in the private rented sector. The loss of rented accommodation is one of the top three causes of homelessness in Northern Ireland; low income households in the private rented sector are among those most likely to live in poor quality housing. There is a need for rent regulation. The Expert Panel Review for the anti-poverty strategy also proposes that rent regulation be used as a lever to bring substandard private rented sector properties up to standard. Provisions contained in the Private Tenancies Bill will be a welcome development if legislated for. However, questions remain as to the likely effectiveness of restricting rent increases to once in a 12 month period with regard to addressing affordability issues. Policy innovations in other jurisdictions should be reviewed as proposed by Housing Rights (2021, para 24).

Priority Need

While the 2010 Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) strengthened statutory prevention and relief duties, Northern Ireland continues to lag behind other UK jurisdictions in legislative developments with regards to homelessness (Bramley, 2018). There have been two very significant shifts in GB in recent years: the decision in Scotland as of 2012 to drop priority need as part of the statutory homelessness test; and, the increased time-frame within which local authorities are required to provide support to those threatened with homelessness via the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) in England. This has increased from 28 days to 56 days (while it remains 28 days in Northern Ireland). Evidence suggests that a longer period in which to seek and provide support, guidance and signposting to services would most likely assist in preventing some households from becoming homeless.

R.7. Statutory duties should be strengthened with regard to prevention and relief support along the lines of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) which increased the period within which support can be sought if threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days.

R.8. A review of the implementation of priority need should be conducted to establish the impact upon those demographic cohorts which tend to fall down on this element of the test.

Support (Economic and Emotional)

There can be economic barriers to accessing the private rented sector for those who are either homeless or threatened with being homeless. The requirement for at least one month's rent as a deposit and in some cases the need to have a guarantor can be a significant challenge. This issue was raised by service providers who were interviewed and featured prominently in the literature.

R.9. Consideration should be given to the implementation of a bond scheme which could help support those seeking to live in the private rented sector with access to small grants to cover deposits. Such a scheme could be publicised via service provider websites (as is the case in GB with the Crisis 'Help to Rent' database).

For some, the ability to maintain a tenancy requires ongoing support. This was illustrated to us by participants. *The Supporting People* programme has provided funding to organisations to provide 'floating support' and help for vulnerable tenants to stay in their homes. It is positive that the *Supporting People* budget has been ring-fenced in Northern Ireland and thus it has not been subject to the level of cuts made in England. However, year on year the budget has declined in Northern Ireland in proportion to relative costs. In light of this:

R.10. The positive impact of the Supporting People programme in helping sustain tenancies for vulnerable people at risk of homelessness should be recognised. It is important to note that the loss of such provision for tenancy and 'floating support' in GB occurred at the same time as evictions from the private rented sector increased.

The research identified groups and individuals who are particularly vulnerable to 'hidden homelessness' and who find it challenging to find secure accommodation without significant support. This can include care leavers, LGBTQ+ young people, those with previous engagement with child and adolescent mental health services, non UK or Irish nationals and ex-prisoners.

R.11 Strengthened identification and assistance should be provided to these vulnerable groups and individuals who are at greater risk of 'hidden' homelessness because of their circumstances and lack of social/family support. Section 2 of the report contains information on a range of initiatives developed and implemented in Northern Ireland which address many of these challenges and highlight the benefits of inter-agency collaboration. However, such opportunities need to be more widely accessible and promoted. This requires longer term and more stable funding.

Education/Awareness Raising

The research suggests that education and awareness raising work on 'hidden' homelessness is required. The lack of a clear and agreed definition of 'hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland is not conducive to increasing awareness of 'hidden' homelessness and the varying forms it may take. Awareness raising campaigns on what constitutes 'hidden' homeless are important, including as a means of challenging stigma but perhaps even more important is the need to increase awareness of the statutory and community/voluntary support that is available for those who are 'hidden' homeless or are threatened with becoming homeless. Earlier identification of when someone is at risk of becoming 'hidden' homeless (either via self-referral or by support organisation) provides more time for a resolution before the individual or household reaches crisis point.

R.12. Awareness raising campaigns should be used to highlight the forms that 'hidden' homelessness can take and, to draw attention to the support structures (statutory and community/voluntary), that are there to assist those who are either in or at risk of such forms of 'hidden' homelessness.

Resources have been developed to be used in schools at Key Stages 1-4 on the theme of homelessness. While this is to be welcomed, if such curriculum materials are optional as opposed to a mandatory part of the curriculum there is no guarantee that the resources will be utilised in lessons – or how standardised this will be. In this regard:

R.13. There should be exploration of how current materials on homelessness can be further developed and more widely utilised within the classroom as part of the curriculum in Key Stages 1-4. Consideration should also be given to disseminating information on 'hidden' homelessness to youth organisations who, while not directly involved in providing housing advice or support, frequently find that the young people they work with have housing difficulties.