

Response from the Church and Society Commission of the Church of Ireland to the Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy 2017-2022.

The Church and Society Commission of the Church of Ireland broadly welcomes the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's draft Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland. Homelessness is a scourge on society, and the strategy's recognition of the various causes of homelessness is insightful.

Through pastoral engagement, parishioners and church leaders often find themselves at the coal face in terms of helping to respond to situations of homelessness, and other connected issues – for example, many parishes are host to debt counselling centres and foodbanks. However, the Church of Ireland itself does not have a specific housing organisation (although some Fold-style housing organisations have Church of Ireland connections). We recognise that other service providers, including our sister Churches, may be in a better position to make a more detailed response to the strategy. This brief response is intended to articulate some general principles.

At the heart of the Church of Ireland approach to governance and social care is the dignity of the individual at the centre of any particular situation. We welcome the strategy's acknowledgement that the current system of allocation may need reform, and we would urge a person-centric attitude in this review/reform. As with welfare reform, it is all too easy for the needs of the individual to fall victim to the variations and changes of bureaucracy in the system. We would encourage a robust system with minimal turnaround times after initial applications and equal efficiency in the case of challenges and appeals. If there are to be penalties in the system these should be realistic, and not so stringent as to exacerbate already difficult situations.

In the first ten years of this century, the need for social housing increased by over 30%. A clear commitment to develop social housing and effective implementation from government is necessary to meet the needs of our society. It may be particularly important in the next three years that a range of housing stock is developed in order for there to be minimal disruption once the local mitigation of the so-called 'bedroom tax' lapses in 2020. It should also be noted that there is a wide range of needs in terms not only of the size of houses (i.e. the number of bedrooms) but also in terms of accessibility and geography. Someone with an acute physical disability, for example, may be enabled to live independently in appropriately accessible housing, but may also still depend upon the support of family and friends nearby.

Broadly speaking we are encouraged by the pro-active nature of this draft strategy. We wish to encourage the Housing Executive to continue its implementation, and to continue to consult and review along the way.