housing rights service

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THE UNIVERSITY of York

Meeting the housing needs of vulnerable homeless people in the private rented sector in Northern Ireland

Anna Ellison, Nicholas Pleace and Eric Hanvey - November 2012

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Foreword

The last decade has witnessed a period of substantial change within the NI housing landscape. Whilst public attention has focused largely on the dramatic highs and lows experienced within the home ownership market, perhaps the most notable change has been the re- emergence, for the first time in almost a century, of renting privately as a significant tenure. From a minority position it has grown significantly, and now contains more properties than the social housing sector which encompasses all the accommodation owned by both the Housing Executive and registered Housing Associations.

The private sector offers a wide spectrum of accommodation and is home to an equally diverse range of people. There is no doubt that it works very well for some; providing greater flexibility of choice particularly in terms of location and the opportunity to live within a mixed community. It continues to generate however, a disproportionately high number of the enquiries which we receive in Housing Rights Service. Analysis of these suggests that, for those renting at the lower end of the market, the tenure presents underlying issues of limited security and affordability which can lead to people losing their home. This perspective is reinforced by official statistics which consistently cite the "*loss of rented accommodation*" as one of the main reasons leading to someone presenting as homeless in NI.

Housing Rights Service is aware, through our work with clients, that the inherent challenges presented by the lack of security and problems of affordability are greatly exacerbated for those individuals who have more complex needs. In particular, our advisers encounter real difficulties in helping them to find and secure accommodation. Too often, for a myriad of reasons, the arrangements which have been painstakingly put in place fail within a very short time.

The apparent inevitability of the outcome has led to a growing sense of frustration. There is genuine concern about the suitability of the traditional landlord and tenant arrangement within the private rented sector to deliver a mutually beneficial relationship which can provide a long term and sustainable housing option for the most vulnerable and marginalised. Quite simply, experience tells us that it does not work for either party.

Despite this, with fewer social rented homes available to meet the growing demand, the stated direction for housing policy in the years ahead is to make greater use of private sector accommodation. In this context, Housing Rights Service believes it is imperative to develop a better understanding not only of the barriers which exist but also how, and in what circumstances, the sector could be more effectively utilised in the future.

The report suggests that there is a sub set of generally older, highly vulnerable individuals whose needs and aspirations are perhaps best met in a hostel environment. Beyond them however it identifies real potential for private accommodation to be used, albeit differently, as part of the public response to the problem of homelessness

in NI. It would require however resources to be invested in developing an appropriate management arrangement and ensuring a spectrum of support services, including intensive support services which are quite distinct from those models currently provided.

We hope this report will help to inform debate and support future policy and service development for those chronically excluded homeless people who are living in NI today. A commitment from policy makers within government and the relevant agencies to develop a holistic people centred response to their needs could arrest the cycle of failure which leads to repeated episodes of homelessness and, in the most acute cases, even more tragic consequences for these individuals and their families. Most critically it would provide them with the much needed foundation from which they can start to rebuild their lives.

Janet Hunter

Director, Housing Rights Service

Acknowledgements

Housing Rights Service would like to thank the Oak Foundation for their support in funding this project, for their long term commitment to supporting research around homelessness and funding practical support for delivery of homelessness services here in Northern Ireland.

Housing Rights Service would like to thank the members of the advisory board, consisting of key representatives of both the relevant government departments and key stakeholders from across the sector, for their wise counsel in considering the evidence and the implications thereof for future policy development and service provision.

The research team at Policis and the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York would like to thank Housing Rights Service for their vision in commissioning this timely and independent research into an important issue for the development of housing and homelessness strategies in Northern Ireland. The research team would also like to thank the many stakeholders, domain experts and the PRS landlords who gave so generously of their time in sharing their experience and views. Above all, the team would like to thank the many homeless individuals who shared their experiences and histories and whose views lie at the heart of what is intended to be a people-centred perspective on the issues around the use of the private rental sector in meeting the needs of homeless individuals in Northern Ireland.

Housing Rights Service

Housing Rights Service was established in 1964 and is the leading provider of independent specialist housing advice services in Northern Ireland. We work to achieve positive change by protecting and promoting the rights of people who are in housing need in Northern Ireland. Our policy work is based on the experience of our clients. Our services are delivered throughout Northern Ireland and focus on key areas of preventing homelessness; accessing accommodation; tackling affordability and poor housing conditions.

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Policis is a social and economic research consultancy specialising in evidence-based policy and service development, working for a wide range of central government departments, local and regional authorities, community organisations, charities and think tanks. Policis has a particular research focus on issues around poverty and social disadvantage and financial and social exclusion

Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York is one of Europe's leading centres for housing and social policy research. CHP has a twenty-year record of academically excellent and policy-relevant research, with measurable impacts on policy and services.

Executive summary

- **It is unlikely that the social housing sector will ever be in a position to meet future housing need in Northern Ireland**. Against the background of a decline in the social housing stock and no realistic prospect of new social housing build on any scale, housing authorities in Northern Ireland, in common with those in England and Scotland, are increasingly looking to the private rental sector (PRS) to meet housing need. The PRS is already a significant source of housing for those on welfare benefits.
- However, **the major barrier to use of the PRS** to house those on welfare benefits, who have little chance of being housed within the social housing sector, largely singles and non family households, is **affordability**. Rents are significantly more expensive than the social sector in any case while **the requirement for a deposit and rent in advance poses an insuperable barrier for many**.
- **For the serially homeless** and those at greatest risk of homelessness, such as those leaving care or ex-offenders**, the affordability barriers are compounded by issues around mental health, drug and alcohol addiction, financial and social exclusion and a lack of life-skills**, which means that, from the landlords perspective, such individuals can be undesirable as tenants. Tenancies have in these cases, a high propensity to break-down.
- Going forward, the new caps on benefit entitlement, and **the reduction in funding for self-contained accommodation for the under 35s, will be a major barrier to accessing and sustaining housing for those at greatest risk of homelessness**, who frequently have difficulties with social interactions and are thus likely to struggle in shared accommodation.
- Against the background of buoyant rental demand, **PRS landlords have little appetite for housing vulnerable or high risk tenants;** they also see little need for negotiating reductions in rent when letting to benefit-dependent tenants. They are however open to propositions which guarantee rent and length of tenure and which provide assurances that property will be returned in good condition – providing these features are also combined with tenant support to minimise disturbance to neighbours and some form of exit management in the event of a tenancy going badly wrong.
- **Most of the vulnerable serial and chronic homeless come from a background of instability on many levels** with a very high incidence of institutional and foster care. **Pathways into homelessness reach back into early childhood** with many having had inadequate parenting. Others have been exposed to neglect or abuse, with many leaving home at a very young age. A drift into the drinking and drugs culture had often become entrenched as a chaotic lifestyle. For some addiction had led to exposure to a criminal lifestyle, serial offending and spells in custodial institutions. **Many experience mental health issues, with depression, self-harm and suicidal tendencies common-place**.
- Older homeless people for whom hostel living represented familiarity, safety and support, and which included some of the most high-risk and vulnerable individuals, were highly resistant to the idea of living in other than a hostel environment and reluctant to move away from familiar staff and support on whom they were often highly dependent.

- Against this background, **housing experience has been a revolving door of temporary placements and serial housing failure**, in both social housing and the PRS. **It is clear that a significant degree of support is required if the vulnerable homeless are to sustain tenancies**. Failure of tenancies hinges on a lack of life-skills or financial capability or the inability to manage health conditions without support. Alternatively, tenancies have fallen apart because peers and social networks have adopted the premises as a centre for sleeping over, drug-taking and partying.
- For their part, **the vulnerable homeless aspire above all to self-determination and a space of their own, and the opportunity to re-set their life.** Many had a heartfelt desire to get away from peer pressure, the party culture and the temptation of the drug and criminal lifestyle. The most commonly expressed desire was for peace and quiet and the means **to escape the relentless pressure and unique distress of the homeless lifestyle**.
- **Policy approaches based on the reaction to crisis and serial placement in temporary hostel accommodation have not served the homeless well**, setting up a pattern of instability and insecurity and leaving vulnerable individuals exposed to peer pressure and influences conducive to the perpetuation of a chaotic lifestyle. Similarly, providing individuals with **housing solutions without an appropriate degree and mix of support have set individuals up to fail**.
- Unequivocal evidence from elsewhere in Europe and the US suggests that **the PRS can be used effectively to meet the needs of even the most vulnerable homeless, and create sustainable, long term tenancies**. This requires a radically different approach which puts the housing solution first with tailored support then based on core principles which are people-centred and needs led.
- These solutions, known as **the "Housing First" model take housing as a basic human right and provide a permanent housing solution as a first step in addressing chronic homelessness,** with housing entitlement separate from service development and delivery. Housing is within the PRS on a scattered basis (i.e. not concentrated in a single building or area), with choice and self determination, within a budget, a key part of the concept.
- **Housing provision is accompanied by an emphasis on independent living, managing relationships with landlords and the community and a commitment to working with the client** for as long as and to whatever extent is required to sustain the tenancy.
- **Support is provided by a multi-disciplinary mobile team** which includes a peer specialist as a model for "recovery" from chronic homelessness. There is a recovery orientation in relation to mental health problems and drug and alcohol use, and a harm-reduction rather than an abstinence approach.
- **Support is people-centred and tailored to individual need.** For the relatively few individuals with complex multiple problems and entrenched chronic homelessness this approach may need to be permanent and 24/7. For others experiencing serial homelessness but with less serious problems a more light-touch version of the model, known as "Housing Led" may be appropriate. In this model, the same approach is taken to housing provision and support via an integrated multi-disciplinary team but support may be time limited, visiting and on-call and may be focused most heavily on the transition period.

- Both approaches are supported by a critical component ;**The Social Lettings Agency model,** exemplified by Smart Move in Northern Ireland, which **seeks to enable rapid access to affordable housing for those who have become homeless or are at risk of homelessness**. This is (often a self funding) model which offers a full property management and rent guarantee service to landlords in return for a competitive fee.
- The model varies but typically the agency finds the tenant, collects rent, funds deposits where required, and manages any problems or issues that arise. Typically these agencies, now widely deployed by Crisis in England, Scotland and Wales, also provide limited tenant support and skill-building in the interests of sustaining tenancies. **The Social Lettings Agency Model can be used as a stand alone service for those at risk of homelessness and with relatively low support needs, but is not appropriate for high risk individuals needing multi-dimensional support.**

Figure 1: Housing and support needs for vulnerable homeless individuals

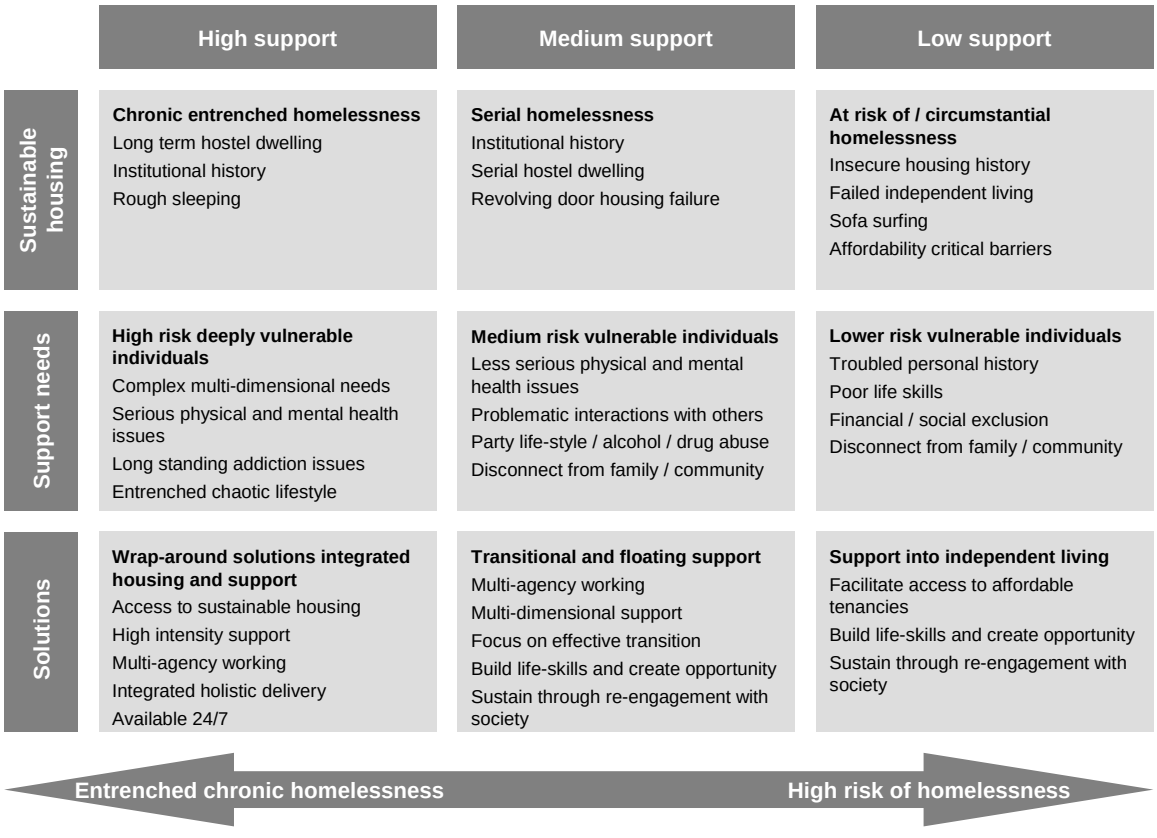
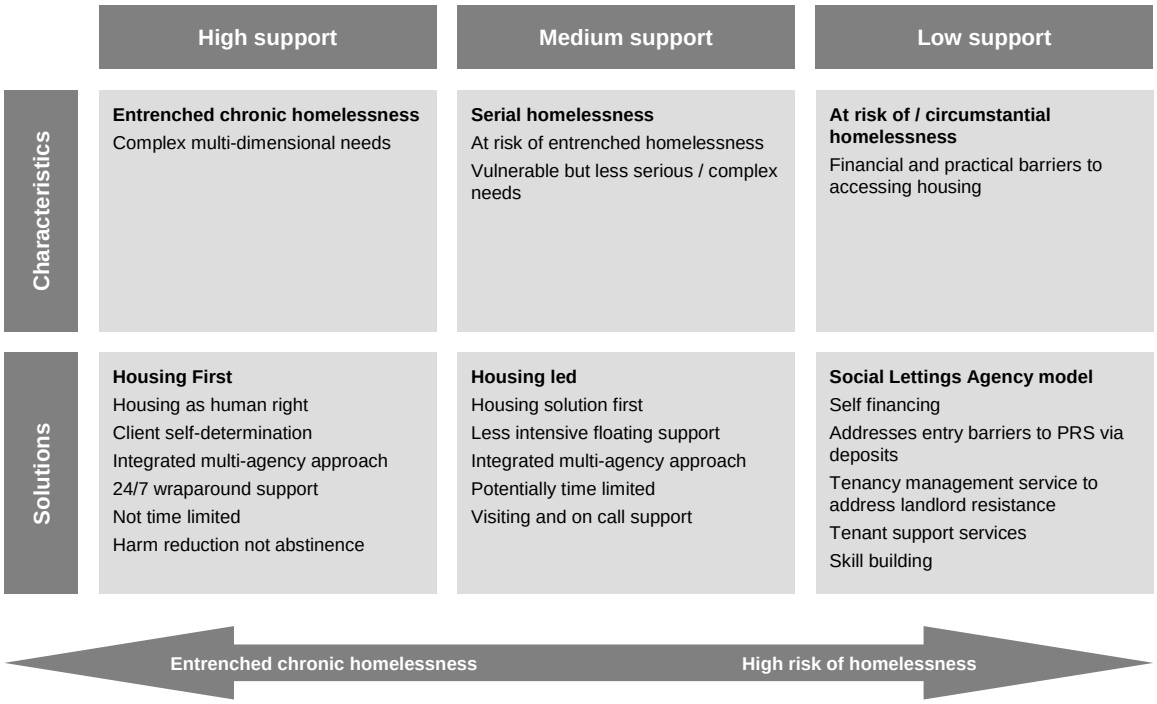


Figure 2: Client needs and the fit with the new housing and support models



Key recommendations

- The potential for flexibility and innovation that the PRS represents should be embraced in a determined move to end the unique distress of homelessness.
- Ending chronic homelessness will require a new focus on prevention and arresting the cycle of housing failure
- A move away from temporary accommodation and towards the use of “”Housing First” and “Housing Led” models are required – which put the housing solution first and then builds multi-agency services and support around it.
- The Housing First model will need to be deployed in combination with an expanded – and already successful – Social Lettings Agency approach to address the barriers to vulnerable individuals entering the PRS, to overcome landlord resistance to housing vulnerable tenants and to build the life-skills which will make tenancies sustainable. It needs to be recognised however that as a stand alone service, the Social Lettings Agency model is only appropriate for those with low support needs.
- For those with more complex needs and recovering from chronic and serial homelessness a more or less intensive multi-agency support service will need to be developed within a Housing First Framework offering:
    - Intensive wrap-around 24/ 7 support on a permanent basis for the relatively few very high risk individuals who need this approach
    - Less intensive, potentially time-limited support for those with less complex problems who may need extensive support in the transition period but may be able to live independently with less support on an ongoing basis
- Within the context of forthcoming welfare reform, consideration will need to be given to the risk of homelessness and the implications of adopting a Housing First approach when framing the implementation of welfare reform in Northern Ireland, including the development of an “exception and support” policy.

1.0 Project background and aims, methods and governance

This report focuses on the challenges in seeking to make greater use of the private rental sector to meet the needs of the vulnerable homeless in Northern Ireland. The study is intended to stimulate discussion and engagement with this important issue and to inform policy debate around how best to meet the housing needs of the vulnerable homeless in a private sector context.

The report has a particular focus on the most vulnerable "chronic exclusion" homeless clients with complex needs, whose voices are not often heard in public debate, but seeks to place the issues for this client group in the wider context of the potential role of the private rental sector in addressing homelessness. The report brings together existing evidence, original research with homelessness service users, perspectives from Government and other stakeholders, research with private sector landlords and consultation with domain experts in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

This chapter describes the project aims and methods, the broad policy context, the homelessness trends and the current role of the private rental sector in meeting housing need in Northern Ireland. Subsequent chapters cover the experience and views of homeless people themselves, of private landlords, of key government and other stakeholders and briefly review the experience of various other countries in using the private rental sector to meet the needs of the homeless. The final chapter brings together conclusions and recommendations for the future.

1.1 Project aims

- To provide a people-centred view of the nature of housing need among the vulnerable homeless with complex needs and to understand the support required to address complex problems within a sustainable and settled housing context.
- To understand, from the service user perspective, the barriers to accessing and sustaining settled housing within the private rental sector and how such barriers might be addressed.
- To understand from the perspective of the landlord, the issues that arise in letting to vulnerable and welfare-dependant tenants and how changes to housing benefit under the welfare regime may impact on attitudes and willingness to let to benefit-dependent tenants.
- To understand the spectrum of tenants that private landlords are willing to consider and the barriers that arise in taking on more vulnerable tenants, including the homeless and those with more or less complex housing needs,
- To understand, from the stakeholders perspective, the key issues that arise in progressing and implementing the private sector rental agenda and working with the homeless in this context.
- To identify best practice and models from elsewhere in utilising the private sector to meet housing need and, in particular, meeting the support needs of vulnerable individuals with complex multi-dimensional problems.

- Overall, to understand how most effectively to utilise the private rental sector in meeting the needs of the homeless, including the vulnerable homeless, in Northern Ireland.

1.2 Project methods

The project rested on a number of key research strands.

- A scoping policy and literature review:
  - Relevant studies published in Northern Ireland, UK, European Union and the US
  - Focused on homelessness or the use of private sector rentals to meet complex housing need
- Qualitative interviews and focus groups with vulnerable client groups:
  - Two focus groups and twenty depth interviews with vulnerable homeless clients in a variety of circumstances
    - Mental health issues
    - Drug or alcohol addiction issues
    - Long term health issues
    - Physical disability
    - Ex -offenders
    - Care leavers
- Qualitative interviews and focus groups with private sector landlords
  - Two focus groups with both small scale landlords and professional landlords
  - Telephone in-depth interviews with letting agents and property developers
- Qualitative interviews with senior executives in government departments, key homelessness stakeholders and with domain expert practitioners.
    - Belfast Trust Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
    - Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland
    - Depaul Ireland
    - Department for Social Development
    - Housing Rights Service
    - Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)
    - Landlords Association for NI (LANI)
    - NIACRO
    - SmartMove NI
    - The Welcome Organisation

1.3 Project governance

The project was sponsored by the Housing Rights Service with funding provided by the Oak Foundation, who commissioned independent research from Policis and the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York.

The research team reported to an independent advisory board of domain experts, front line practitioners, stakeholders and key government departments, who were collectively responsible for the overall project direction.

The board was convened at the inception of the project, to review the research design and the draft conclusions and implications arrived at by the research team. A draft of the final project report was reviewed by the board in order to finalise the report and the recommendations for the future.

The members of the advisory board and the organisations they represent can be found in the Acknowledgements section of this report.

2.0 The policy context and the capacity for the PRS to meet the needs of the homeless in Northern Ireland

This chapter is drawn primarily from the policy and literature review and aims to provide some broad context for the findings of the original research in Northern Ireland described in the following chapters. It describes the broad UK and Northern Ireland policy context as the backdrop to discussion of issues around use of the PRS, provides a sense of scale for homelessness and the use of the PRS for benefit dependent and homeless tenants in Northern Ireland. It also describes the potential barriers to the PRS that can exist for homeless people, as identified in the literature review.

2.1 The policy context

The housing and homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland places greater emphasis on prevention and relates to wider social inclusion goals

The immediate policy context is the wider strategic review of housing policy in Northern Ireland and the current effort to develop a housing strategy and policy framework that will meet the future housing needs of Northern Ireland and ensure that housing has a key role to play in meeting wider social and economic goals. Key components of the emerging framework are the Homelessness Strategy and the Supporting People strategy and the effort to protect the most vulnerable, including the homeless and those at risk of homelessness. Both strategies place emphasis on prevention and an increased focus on need. The homelessness strategy aims to minimise homelessness though a range of preventative measures and early intervention while enhancing and joining up services for homeless individuals. The strategy aims to prevent homelessness arising, to reduce the time spent in temporary provision by improving access to affordable housing, to remove the need for rough sleeping and to improve services to the most vulnerable homeless. Against this background, there is a new drive to utilise the private sector as part of both a preventative effort on housing stress and as a major part of the solution to homelessness. Homelessness strategy is itself set in the context of wider social inclusion goals.

Social housing is unlikely to be sufficient to meet housing need with housing strategists increasingly looking to the private rental sector

In Northern Ireland – and in the UK more widely – a number of economic, political and social strands have come together to place greater emphasis on the private rental sector within housing policy. The private rental sector is increasingly seen as an appropriate solution for those who might previously have looked to social housing, including the homeless. The emphasis on the PRS within housing policy is driven by a number of factors. Most importantly, the current stock of social housing is seen by Government and other commentators[1] on housing policy as a response to housing need that is difficult to sustain, which has produced some negative as well as positive

[1] Pleace, N.; Teller, N. and Quilgars, D. (2011) *Social Housing Allocation and Homelessness: EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness,* Brussels: Feantsa

outcomes and which is not necessarily always suitable for some groups of homeless people. At the same time, demand for social housing, in the face of increased barriers to home ownership, stressed economic conditions, changing demographics and – at least in some areas – rising private sector rents, is likely to increase. Against this background, housing planners increasingly look to the private rental sector to fill the gap and to meet housing need.

Tenancy models in the social housing sector are likely to move closer to the shorter and less secure tenancies of the private sector

The historical model of a social tenancy for life is also giving way to one in which social housing is seen as a public resource, to be managed for optimal use of the housing stock[2] in meeting housing need for people at risk of homelessness and who are facing housing exclusion. To facilitate this, social housing tenures, particularly in England and Wales, are moving closer to those in the PRS, with new tenancies becoming shorter and increasingly insecure. This process will however take time to work through and is unlikely to generate large numbers of newly available homes any time soon. The PRS is thus seen by housing planners as offering greater flexibility of tenure to match housing with tenant need. From the perspective of tenants, the likelihood is that, for new tenancies, the perceived differential in relative security between the PRS and social housing will lessen, potentially undermining one of the key perceived advantages of social housing.

Greater use of the private rental sector is intended to increase social mobility within more mixed-income and economically vibrant communities

Wider social and economic policy considerations are also a factor, with housing policy seen as a key element of regeneration, growth and community cohesion strategies. Both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK, some evidence suggests that areas which are lived in exclusively by low income households work against the expansion of opportunity and hold back social mobility, with deprivation becoming entrenched and perpetuated in the poorest areas and across generations [3]. The same is true for segregation of communities on racial and / or religious lines, particularly where segregated communities are also deprived, as is often the case. These are particularly important considerations for Northern Ireland, where the historical segregation of close-knit communities along religious lines has been an economically and socially damaging feature for many years. The interviews with housing and homelessness stakeholders in Northern Ireland undertaken to support this project suggested also that there is increasingly a strategic move away from historical models of mono-tenancy, social housing-based communities with a high concentration of low income and benefit dependent households towards the creation of more mixed-income and

[2] These changes in England and Wales are encapsulated in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and The Localism Act 2012.Property in the social housing sector, in terms of size and numbers of bedrooms, will be matched increasingly to the specific circumstances of prospective tenants. New social housing tenancies will be time-limited while measures will be taken to encourage those, primarily older people, living in “under-occupied” accommodation to move into smaller housing units to release larger properties for family occupation.

[3] Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2011) 'A Difficult Mix: Issues in achieving socioeconomic diversity in deprived UK neighbourhoods' *Urban Studies*, Volume 48 Issue 16, pp. 3429 - 3443.

economically vibrant communities, following the policy direction taken across much of Northern Europe[4]. This sits alongside an effort to support the creation of housing approaches in which those with differing religious backgrounds are able to cohabit in thriving communities. Greater use of the PRS is seen as a key component in achieving these aims of encouraging more diverse communities which are more conducive to social mobility, economic opportunity and social cohesion.

The extremes of the Northern Ireland housing market boom and bust offers opportunities to the public sector in meeting housing need

The shift to greater use of the PRS also takes place in the context of the recent experience of private housing boom and bust, which has been more extreme in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. The housing bubble in Northern Ireland in the years prior to the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent spectacular housing bust has seen property values collapse by as much as 50% or more in some areas. This has left a legacy of unsold or unfinished developments across Northern Ireland, particularly in city centres. There are also significant numbers of domestic property owners whose personal household balance sheets have been devastated by negative equity. Equally, there are many small scale private sector landlords drawn into buy to let investment in the boom years who are now unable to sell. Against this background, effective use by the public sector of empty and difficult to sell property built by private sector developers and of rental property owned by small private sector landlords is seen as offering an opportunity for regeneration of city centres and as a means of bolstering economic confidence more widely.

In recent years, the funding of new social housing developed by housing associations/registered social landlords has been increasingly focused on generating investment from private banks and other commercial investors. This has created some pressures, which are echoed in social housing in comparable countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, where social landlords have to consider the 'business case' for new housing development. In practice, this means ensuring that rents will be paid and management problems will be minimised to ensure capital development costs are repaid effectively.

The era of austerity and the prospect of welfare reform will make the challenges of any transfer to the private sector more complex

All of this takes place against the wider political backdrop of the aftermath of the financial crisis, a deep and continuing recession and the Coalition Government's commitment to an era of austerity in the provision of public services and significant cuts in public spending. In Northern Ireland, where public sector employment is a critical factor in the local economy, the prospect is held out of increasing financial distress and thus increased risk of housing stress and homelessness.

The focus on austerity sits alongside a determined drive for welfare reform. This is intended to create greater readiness for work among benefit claimants and to inject greater personal responsibility into claimants' approach to the management of their

[4] Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2011) ibid.

finances. Critically however, it rests also on a drive to achieve a significant reduction in government expenditure on housing costs and to reduce the overall benefit bill. Housing Benefit claimants will see both reductions and restrictions on entitlement with significant numbers of low income claimants likely to face cuts in their housing benefit. These will require tenants either to make up any shortfalls, to renegotiate the terms of their agreement with landlords, where this can be achieved, or to move to cheaper accommodation where landlords are not willing to reduce rents, as is likely to be the case against the background of a relatively buoyant rental market in Northern Ireland. Reductions in entitlement will be felt across the board but are likely to impact particularly on those aged under thirty five, whose entitlement will now be limited to funds sufficient to pay for a room in a shared house, rather than self-contained accommodation which has previously been funded. This latter feature of the reforms is likely to be particularly problematic for those vulnerable to chronic homelessness, including those leaving care, living in hostels and offenders leaving custody, who can be ill-suited to living in shared housing.

It is not yet clear how welfare reform will impact on the most vulnerable tenants with complex housing needs but the dynamics of the PRS will change

The changes to entitlement to housing benefit will also be accompanied by a shift to monthly payment of benefits under the new Universal Credit regime. In other jurisdictions in the UK, this is to be accompanied by the payment of Housing Benefit direct to tenants as distinct from landlords (as has overwhelmingly been the case historically).These changes will require claimants to manage much larger sums of money over a longer period than they have been used to historically and to take personal responsibility for paying their rent. At the time of writing it is not yet clear how some aspects of these changes to the welfare regime – notably payment of housing benefit direct to tenants – will apply in Northern Ireland, nor is it clear how the parameters of exceptions to the regime will be drawn. It would seem likely however, that in any case, the most vulnerable individuals, such as chronic excluded homeless, will be exempted from the payment direct to tenant regime. Under certain circumstances, such as leaving care or hostel living, at least some of those most at risk of homelessness and who would likely struggle to sustain shared accommodation will have some entitlement to self-contained accommodation. It is therefore not yet clear how the wider changes to the welfare regime will play out for the vulnerable homeless relative to the wider population of statutory homeless. Stakeholders report, however, that there is already an uplift in the numbers leaving care or offenders institutions who are seeking hostel accommodation rather than seeking to go direct into independent living, reflecting the desire to preserve entitlement to funding for self-contained accommodation.

There remains considerable uncertainty on how – on the supply side – PRS landlords will respond to the changes implied by welfare reform

Clearly, however, some of the broader changes in terms of reduced rental entitlement for tenants and the potential loss of the certainty historically associated with direct payment of Housing Benefit to landlords will likely impact on the dynamics of the cheaper end of the private rental market and the strategies of landlords in relation to benefit supported tenants more broadly. The Government anticipates that reduced

benefit entitlement in relation to rental payments will work to bring down rent at the cheaper end of the market but it is not clear that this will indeed be the outcome or how the various changes will play out in the context of the market in Northern Ireland. The evidence from the research with landlords in Northern Ireland undertaken for this study, suggests that any expectations of a significant reduction in rental prices may be unfounded.

A time of radical change in the contextual environment which presents both challenges and opportunities in using the PRS to meet housing need

Taken together therefore, this is currently a time of radical change in the effort to meet the housing needs of those on low incomes, of vulnerable tenants more widely and of the vulnerable homeless in particular. The challenges and risks are complex but equally change also represents opportunities to design new solutions, to tackle long-standing issues and to address the barriers to sustainable and settled housing that meets the needs of the homeless. This study seeks to inform that effort by bringing together the evidence and perspectives of all key stakeholders, but above all, that of the homeless themselves.

2.2 The potential for the private rental sector to accommodate the homeless in Northern Ireland

The literature review sought to summarise the existing evidence base on the use of the private rented sector (PRS) to prevent and tackle homelessness and the experience thus far, in the UK and elsewhere, of the use of the PRS to house homeless people with high support needs sustainably.

Clearly the PRS presents opportunities to house homeless people and in chapter five, we examine the evidence base on innovative and effective use of the PRS to house homeless people, including homeless people with high support needs, as part of a wider discussion of new approaches to the PRS and the provision of support within it. In this section, however, we concentrate on the potential barriers to the PRS that can exist for homeless people.

The available evidence suggests that there are a range of potential barriers to the PRS for homeless people. Similar barriers appear to exist for homeless people trying to access the PRS across much of the EU, North America and in other countries that are broadly economically and socially comparable with Northern Ireland. These barriers can be summarised as follows:

- The *effective* PRS housing supply that is available to homeless people is only a proportion of the total PRS stock.
- There is PRS landlord reluctance to engage with certain groups of homeless people. This reluctance exists in terms of both *practical* and *perceptual* barriers.
- There is some resistance to the use of the PRS from homeless people.

Direct research evidence on barriers to the PRS for homeless people is limited (Gray and McAnulty, 2010). It is important to note that PRS markets are unique, both in the

sense that the PRS exists in a particular form in Northern Ireland and that different PRS markets exist *within* Northern Ireland. These barriers may therefore be more or less significant within Northern Ireland than is the case elsewhere.

2.2.1 The effective PRS stock that is available to the homeless

The PRS is already a significant provider of housing in Northern Ireland

The 2009 House Condition Survey estimated that one in six people lived in the PRS and that there were a total of some 124,600 PRS properties, accounting for approximately 17% of total housing stock. By comparison, some 8% of households living in Scotland in 2007 were in the PRS (Scottish Government, 2009); some 12% of the households in Wales in 2010 (Statistics for Wales, 2011); 17% of households in England in 2010 (DCLG, 2012) and approximately 15% of households in the Republic of Ireland in 2007 (Hayden *et al*, 2010).

The long term share of the housing stock represented by the PRS is difficult to determine

Housing markets have been through unprecedented volatility in recent years. A major boom in house prices saw large scale increases in investment in PRS housing, with the tenure experiencing a 300% increase in size during the period 2000-2009. In comparison, while PRS growth linked to Buy to Let was considerable in England, the rate of increase was much slower, at 51%. There are uncertainties about the long term shape of the PRS. Some people have become 'reluctant landlords' who are unable to sell because of negative equity. The PRS may contract to some degree if house prices start to rise significantly and 'reluctant landlords' exit, although it is arguable that some of the factors that led to the rapid growth of the PRS during 2000-2007 would also, again, be present (Pawson and Wilcox, 2011; NIHE, 2011).

One of the key questions about use of the PRS to tackle homelessness centres on how much of the PRS is *effectively* available to homeless people

Recent housing need projections in England drew a distinction between the submarkets in the PRS that were housing people who were reliant on Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance and the total PRS market. These projections estimated that, on average, 28% of the PRS in England was being let to people claiming benefit to meet some or all of their rental costs, meaning that, typically, less than one third of the PRS was potentially accessible to the (great majority) of homeless people who were reliant on benefits (Bramley *et al*, 2010). The other parts of the PRS were either too expensive and/or had landlords who would not house people on benefit, which meant most of the homeless population could not afford, or would not be accepted as tenants for, much of the PRS housing in England.

A little less than half of the PRS housing in Northern Ireland is let to benefit-dependent tenants

The picture in Northern Ireland is rather different. The total number of households claiming Housing Benefit in the PRS has increased, from some 37% in 2001 to 48% in 2010/11 (NIHE, 2011). This suggests a relatively *high* potential availability of PRS

housing to homeless households who are wholly or partially reliant on Housing Benefit. Nevertheless some 52% of the PRS may be partially or wholly inaccessible to many homeless people because it is unaffordable to low income households and/or managed by PRS landlords reluctant to take people reliant on benefit. There was a marked contrast between the PRS and social housing, with 87% of NIHE tenant households being in receipt of Housing Benefit in 2010-2011 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2011). Recent estimates for the Republic of Ireland are that some 40% of PRS tenants (some 97,000 households) are claiming Rent Allowance, which is broadly equivalent to Housing Benefit, suggesting the PRS may be less accessible to poorer households in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland[5].

Homelessness has been rising in Northern Ireland with annual acceptances of homeless individuals the equivalent of 8% of the PRS stock

Homelessness presentations have been showing an increase, rising 8% from 18,664 in 2009/10 to 20,158 in 2010/11, with households actually accepted as homeless increasing 5% from 9,914 to 10,443 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2011). The relative scale of annual homelessness compared to the housing available in the PRS is quite considerable. Annual *acceptanc*es (10,443) in 2010/11 are equivalent to some 8% of the total PRS stock, and the equivalent of 16% of the PRS stock occupied by benefit-dependent tenants. Annual presentations (20,158) were equivalent to some 16% of total PRS stock. Given the unavailability of the less affordable PRS housing submarkets for many homeless people, homelessness levels start to look quite large in relation to *effective* PRS housing supply.

Homeless acceptances alone would fill the equivalent of two thirds of the vacant PRS stock at any one time

It is of course the case that if the rate of PRS turnover – the rate at which households exit – the PRS is high, then the PRS could absorb a larger number of homeless households in any given year. Data on the total annual lets in the PRS is not available, but in 2009 it was estimated that some 12% of the *total* PRS stock was vacant at any one point, double the rate for all housing stock, although PRS void levels had actually fallen from a high of 15% in 2006 (NIHE, 2011). Not all of the vacant PRS stock would be available to homeless people because some of it would be too expensive and/or owned by landlords unwilling to let to homeless or other people claiming Housing Benefit. However, to give some sense of the proportions involved, the homelessness acceptances in 2010/11 would have filled the equivalent of 67% of all the PRS stock that was estimated as vacant at any one point in time in 2009.

The PRS is therefore unlikely to offer a total solution to homelessness in Northern Ireland but nonetheless represents a significant resource

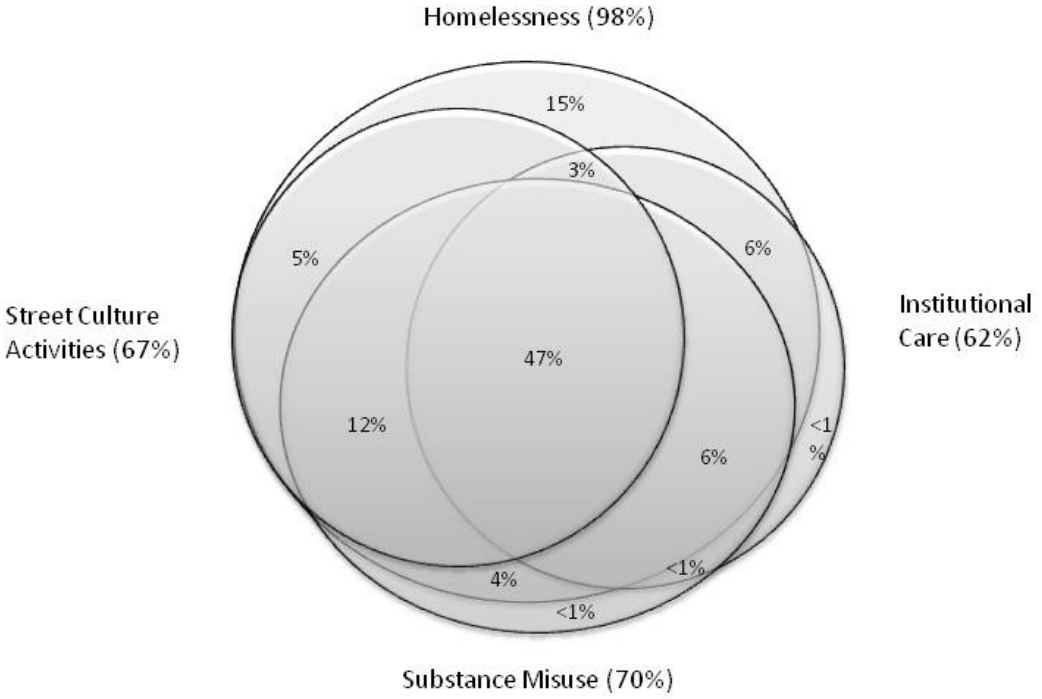
The PRS therefore looks unlikely to have enough available stock to provide a 'total' solution to homelessness. However, the PRS represents a *major resource* that contains extensive stocks of decent and affordable housing that can play a crucial role in

[5] Source: Estimate from Ministry of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2011

tackling homelessness. Even a marginal improvement in access to the PRS could make a significant difference in preventing and tackling homelessness.

Large scale studies in the US have looked at the entire populations of single and other homeless people using services. For example, one study of homeless shelters found a fairly small group of single homeless people with generally high support needs, centred on mental health problems and problematic drug/alcohol use, who stayed in homeless shelters for very long periods. Around one tenth (11%) of all the people using homeless shelters (i.e. direct access services) in the US in one year were using one half of the annual bed spaces[6]. There is some evidence, which is less robust than the American research, suggesting a similar pattern in England, France and in the Republic of Ireland[7]. If this situation is also true for Northern Ireland, there are probably several hundred individuals who are chronically homeless at any one point in time.

Chronic homelessness



[6] Measured as 'system days', i.e. the time a project had available over the course of the year to give to homeless people, so for example a 20 person project would have 7,300 days available a year (20 spaces times 365 days is 7,300 system days). This work reported that just 11% of single homeless people with high support needs, i.e. severe mental illness and problematic drug use, a group who US researchers often describe as 'chronic homeless people' were using 50% of the system days in projects. Culhane, D.P. and Metraux, S. (2008) *'Rearranging the deck chairs or reallocating the lifeboats? Homelessness assistance and its alternatives'*, Journal of the American Planning Association 74, 1: 111-121. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/dennis_culhane/51

[7] Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000 - 2010*, London: Crisis; Homeless Agency (2008) *Counted In, 2008 A report on the extent of homelessness in Dublin*: Homeless Agency.

2.2.2 PRS Landlord reluctance to house homeless people

Clearly, part of the solution to any capacity issues in the PRS will lie with persuading PRS landlords, many of whom are very small-scale landlords, that housing benefit / rent allowance recipients and the homeless are a viable, even attractive tenant group.

PRS landlord resistance to house homeless people rests on both practical and perceptual barriers

The literature from a range of markets suggests that PRS landlord resistance to housing homeless people can take the form of both practical and perceptual barriers. From the perspective of PRS landlords, research in England has identified barriers to letting to homeless people that centre on a number of key areas (Bevan and Rhodes, 1997; Nocon and Pleace, 1997; Luby, 2008; Pleace and Minton, 2009).

Homeless households are disproportionately long term workless or in and out of low paid work and so can appear to be high risk tenants

Potentially homeless and formerly homeless households are disproportionately characterised by low educational attainment and long term worklessness and the minority that are in employment are often insecurely employed on a low wage. From a PRS landlord's perspective, this puts many homeless people into a 'risky' category when compared to tenants who can show that they have secure, long term employment.

Landlords can be unwilling or feel unable to provide housing to people with mental health or addiction issues

PRS landlords may feel ill-equipped to provide housing to people with mental health problems and/or who exhibit problematic use of drugs and alcohol – including vulnerable homeless people – without specialist support being in place. The concerns here centre on housing management, with the issues ranging from whether or not rent and bills will be paid through to possible concerns about neighbouring households.

Adaptations to property to accommodate disability are not viewed as desirable or economically viable

PRS landlords may not view the adaptation or modification of their properties to suit the needs of a particular disabled person, or person with long term limiting illness, as economically viable. This is a barrier to those homeless people who are disabled or who have a long term limiting illness. This is a particular issue for some homeless groups such as people with sustained experience of living rough.

Some evidence exists to support the idea that perceptions on the needs and behaviour of homeless people are not shaped by direct experience

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between what might from one perspective be viewed as a 'practical' barrier to PRS housing and what might be regarded as a 'perceptual' barrier from another perspective. There will of course be instances where someone's support needs and/or behaviour make them a difficult tenant to work with

and PRS landlords are ultimately running a business providing housing that is seeking an operating profit. PRS landlords are not social or health care service providers.

However, a vulnerable homeless person with high support needs may not *necessarily* be a difficult tenant, as that will depend on what their specific needs and behaviour are like. Some evidence does suggest that the reluctance of PRS landlords to house some groups of homeless people may centre less on direct experience, or careful assessment, than it does on a perception of what 'homeless people' are like and how they will behave.

Landlords are influenced by media presentation and may believe that mental health or addiction issues are universal among homeless people

PRS landlords, in common with other service providers, are influenced by mass media, cultural and other images of what 'homeless' people are like. In particular, mass media images foster a belief that severe mental illness, problematic drug and alcohol use, criminality and sustained worklessness are almost *uniform* characteristics of homeless people, making all homeless people seem like potentially difficult tenants.

The evidence base suggests that one of the most common perceptual barriers to the PRS is the belief that 'homelessness' describes *only* a street using population who are *all* characterised by severe mental illness, problematic drug and alcohol use and criminality. This is closely linked to mass media representations of many forms of poverty as being solely the result of individual action and inaction, such as a refusal to work or a decision to use illegal drugs (Robinson *et al*, 2009).

There are disproportionately high levels of mental illness and addiction issues among rough sleepers but these factors are far from universal

While severe mental illness and drug and alcohol addiction levels can be disproportionately high among groups such as people sleeping rough, young homeless people and lone homeless people, they are *not* by any means universally present (Quilgars et al, 2008; Jones and Pleace, 2010).

Among the wider population of homeless incidence of severe mental illness, addiction or criminality is no higher than for other citizens

In fact, there is mounting evidence across the EU and from North America that the population with experience of sleeping rough is a minority of the homeless population. This is because large groups of homeless people, such as homeless families, have rates of severe mental illness, drug and alcohol use and criminality that are the *same* as among the general population, i.e. they are no more likely to have these sorts of issues than any other citizen (Pleace *et al*, 2008; Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010

Misconceptions about the nature of the homeless population and their risk profile as tenants is a key barriers to use of the PRS to address homelessness

Media presentation of homeless people, coupled with a tendency for some research to focus only upon the minority experiencing sleeping rough, creates a perceptual barrier to the PRS because *all* homeless people are perceived as all being members of a high risk group by PRS landlords. PRS landlords are far from unique in being influenced by mass media and cultural images of homelessness, as there is evidence from across the EU that social landlords are often reluctant to house homeless people because there is a widespread belief that they will *always* present a housing management problem (Luby, 2008; Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010). PRS landlords will naturally tend towards seeking tenants who are reliable, pay the rent on time and who will not cause problems in the property or in the surrounding neighbourhood. The perception that homeless people are almost without exception likely to be unreliable and risky tenants is not a barrier to the PRS that is entirely *specific* to homeless people, it also exists for groups like drug users and former offenders, but it is a potentially significant barrier to the PRS.

It is important to exercise some caution here. There is no direct, recent rigorous research on the barriers to the PRS for homeless people in Northern Ireland and research on access to the PRS for homeless people is relatively sparse in comparable countries such as Wales, Scotland, England, the Republic of Ireland and Northern and Western Europe (Bevan and Rhodes, 1997; Luby, 2008; Martin, 2008; Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010; Hayden *et al*, 2010). Bearing this in mind, it is difficult to be certain about the extent of perceptual barriers to the PRS, though the available evidence does indicate they are likely to be present to some degree. The other significant caveat is that a PRS landlord would have to *know* that a household or individual was a potentially or formerly homeless person for some potential barriers to be raised. This could mean that the barriers centred on not taking anyone claiming Housing Benefit are likely to be more significant, though there is not the evidence base to be certain of this.

The literature suggests that measures to facilitate access to the PRS for the homeless will need to address both practical and perceptual barriers

Nevertheless, specific barriers to the PRS for homeless people are potentially significant because they mean that – alongside the more obvious barriers, such as the difficulty that homeless people might face in assembling a rent deposit – there are other barriers centred both on the reality and perception of homeless people's characteristics. This may mean that enhancing access to the PRS for homeless people can only be *partially* facilitated through using measures designed to enhance access to the PRS for the general population (Donald *et al*, 2011; DSD, 2010).

2.2.3 Possible reluctance to living in the PRS among homeless people

The barriers to use of the PRS do not necessarily all lie with supply-side factors. The literature review suggested that there is some evidence that homeless and potentially homeless people may be resistant to the idea of living in private rented housing (Bevan and Rhodes, 1997). There are three main reasons for this:

- The relative unaffordability of PRS housing.
- Worries about security of tenure.
- Worries about standards and behaviour of PRS landlords.

This review has not been able to find direct research evidence on concerns about living in the PRS among homeless people, but there is some research from England suggesting this may be an issue for some homeless people. There is some evidence that a poor *image* of the PRS which stems from past scandals influences the opinion of homeless people (Bevan and Rhodes, 1997; Martin, 2008). There is also evidence from large scale survey work with statutorily homeless families in England that a sense of *housing insecurity* is one of the biggest worries and concerns that homeless families have. The sense of security offered by a social rented tenancy, i.e. the permanent social housing provided through the statutory system, was, from the point of view of homeless families, one of the most positive aspects of receiving assistance under the statutory system (Pleace *et al*, 2008).

It is clearly critical to have a local perspective on the issues

Taken together, the policy and evidence review both point up areas of potential consensus and convergence with the findings of the original research undertaken to inform this study in Northern Ireland and described in following chapters. It also highlights, however, the importance of having a genuinely local perspective on the issues as they arise for Northern Ireland. This is indeed what this report has sought to provide.

As a general point, from the perspective of use of the PRS to meet the housing needs of the broad population of homeless, the evidence review highlights the importance of addressing the perception among landlords and the wider public that the homeless are a homogenous group all of which share the characteristics of the most vulnerable – but relatively small – sub-set of the homeless most commonly portrayed in media presentation as typical of homeless individuals.

The following chapter moves on to explore the experience of these most vulnerable "multiple-exclusion" homeless individuals, with complex multiple needs.

3.0 A people centred perspective on the issues for addressing homelessness within the private rented sector

The study was intended very much as a people-centred view of the issues around homelessness and the potential of the private rental sector to meet housing need. This chapter describes the experience of the most vulnerable homeless people, their pathways into homelessness, their housing experience and support needs. It also explores their own aspirations in terms of housing, life-style and personal goals, their views on a move into the private rental sector, the barriers to such a move and what it would take in the way of support and adaptation for a move into the PRS housing to be settled and sustainable.

It should be emphasised that the original research focused intentionally on the most vulnerable homeless, whose voices are least often heard and whose needs are least well understood. In the light of the discussion in chapter two earlier, it is important therefore to make clear that there is no suggestion that the descriptions and analysis of these most vulnerable homeless individuals applies to the broader population of statutory homeless in Northern Ireland and the larger number of those who present as homeless but who do not qualify for acceptance as homeless for the purpose of the Housing Executive's obligation to re-house.

3.1 Pathways into homelessness

Pathways into homelessness reach back into early childhood with many having had inadequate parenting or been exposed to neglect and abuse

The personal history of many of the vulnerable homeless who participated in the project was of deep-rooted and long-standing disadvantage and exclusion across multiple dimensions. Most had a history of neglect or childhood trauma, dysfunctional family relationships or abuse. Parenting had often been inadequate, inconsistent or absent, with broken parental relationships very frequent. Interviewees frequently reported that parents had had alcohol or drug addiction issues, often resulting in a long term pattern of offending, custodial sentences and re-offending, and resulting in separation and disruption. Violence (domestic and otherwise) confrontation and argument were frequently reported as part of the fabric of early life.

Personal history was often of serial instability on many levels from family and relationships to housing – with a high incidence of institutional and foster care

As a consequence, serial instability had often been a continual thread throughout childhood and early adolescence, with individuals moving between parents and grandparents and serial foster homes. Many had spent their childhood in care and very few were able to point to any consistent family support.

> *"If you add up the years of being on the streets and the years in the hostels. Even as a young child – then the teenage years, hostels for children that can't behave right. I was always a problem child, I think."*

"I've been in foster care all my life and then once I got our of foster care I moved in with my brothers and sisters and we had a fight and I moved into halls… and I got arrested and I moved in with my ma and then we couldn't get along and she threw me out and then I moved in here."

"I didn't really know my mum when I was younger. And then when I got out of jail I said 'Can I live with you?" and so I was living with my mum but then she got sent down again."

Broken relationships, lack of family support and a history of confrontation had often resulted in leaving home or institutional care at a very early age

Equally there was a pattern of broken relationships, ongoing confrontations with parents and other family moments, often from a very early age, with individuals frequently leaving home, or being thrown out of the house, in their mid teens and even earlier.

"I've been on the streets for years, years I was on the streets. My dad threw me out when I was 15."

"Well, I started off in hostel from when I was an early age. I was about 18 I would say, that was through family fall-out. Just me and my father couldn't see eye to eye."

"She (mother) couldn't really afford to have me around and we were always arguing and my mum just had an on and off disease in the end she just said 'I can't have you living here. You're ruining my health'."

For many a drift into the drinking and drugs culture as teenagers had become long term alcohol or drug dependence and an entrenched chaotic life-style

For vulnerable young adults leaving home as teenagers and living a peripatetic life, often based around "sofa-surfing" and informal temporary living arrangements, drink and drugs and the drug culture were very frequently the central feature of their social life from an early age. For many this drift into drinking and the drug culture had gradually become entrenched dependence, reinforcing a chaotic life-style.

"I lived with him (dad) until he died of the drink and then I couldn't cope on my own. I stayed with my sister and her couple of kids but she wouldn't allow me to drink so I was out on the streets. That was a couple of years ago. I stayed in the graveyard and camping about and then in hostels and then I ended up in here."

"Ever since I can remember I've been addicted to one thing or another. If it's not drugs, it's the alcohol."

"What happened was basically they saved my life that many times up there (hostel) it was getting out of hand. Then something happened that shouldn't have happened. So I went back on the bottle because I've been doing it for 21 years. That's all I've known what to do."

Exposure to a criminal life style and the drug culture had often led to serial offending and spells in custodial institutions

Partly as a consequence, early exposure to a criminal life-style was common, particularly for young men. Many of the interviewees, especially those who had been looked after children in care reported having spent time in young offender institutions, and later, that they had moved on to spend time adult custodial institutions, often as a result of acquisitive, drug or violent offences. Some had parents who themselves had been in and out of prison while others had experienced family rejection as a result of their drug and alcohol use or offending behaviour.

> *"I was just getting into trouble all the time (why ended up with series of short custodial sentences). All types of trouble… Just being a nuisance and burglaries… just being a complete nuisance… that was because of sniffing. I used to sniff and all that."*

Serial offending or immersion in the drug culture had often reduced social networks to a hard core of individuals with similar behavioural tendencies

Criminal life-styles and difficult behaviour work against social integration and reinforce a pattern of deep, multi-dimensional exclusion. For those who had established a pattern of serial offending and moving in and out of custodial institutions, remaining social relationships had increasingly become concentrated among those with similar behavioural tendencies. For some this had resulted in becoming enmeshed in a continual "party" life-style, leaving little opportunity for personal space or quiet contemplation, particularly where individuals did not have accommodation of their own, as was often the case. In such a situation it was often very difficult to find the motivation to break out of a chaotic life-style, with few having any practical options for doing so in any case. Others had simply become very isolated,

Opportunities for family relationship, formal support, housing or alternative more productive pathways could become increasingly closed off

At the same time opportunities for relationships with family and those outside this circle had tended to shut down – on the grounds frequently that individuals were undesirable company, disruptive or too difficult to deal with. Options for support, alternative channels for energy and endeavour, far less productive opportunities for work or education also appear to have become increasingly closed off. This pattern extended also to housing, in that disruptive behaviour or the breaking of hostel rules could lead to becoming barred from hostels, itself often one of the last remaining housing options. Those who had been in this position reported that their reputation then tended to spread among what is a relatively small community of potential support workers and hostels, with the result that support and accommodation then became ever more difficult to access.

> *"I've been in and out of jail almost since I left the house… I'm not going to be doing that again. My ma's not wanting me in the house. "*

> *"Mouthing off and fighting mainly but also robberies. Last time in jail was armed robberies. People think you're bad news – they hear about you and they don't want to help you."*

"Well that one (hostel) got closed down and I was in the Morning Star and I got barred for beating (named person) up. Shouldn't have been so cheeky to me and then I wouldn't have hit them."

Those who become excluded from the hostel system could face a revolving door of homelessness and offending from which it was very difficult to escape

Indeed the research revealed that those who have become excluded from the hostel system can be among the most vulnerable individuals who can become trapped in a revolving door of offending and homelessness from which it could be very difficult to escape.

Case study

Sophie had a baby at the age of eighteen and had moved out of her mothers' house to housing association property where she lived independently with her child. She began using a mix of soft drugs and prescription medicines during a period of post-natal depression. Following an incident when she was found unconscious whilst responsible for the care of her young daughter, her child was removed to the care of her mother, with Sophie allowed only supervised visits

In the wake of the separation from her child, Sophie turned to harder drugs and became caught up in a downward spiral of depression, self-harm, drug-taking and criminal behaviour. As a result, aged 23, she had spent a large proportion of the intervening three years in an out of prison.

In between spells in prison she had spent time in a number of hostels and had undertaken two periods in rehab in the effort to clean up, acquire appropriate accommodation and get access to her daughter. During one of her spells in a hostel, she had reacted to news of her Uncle's suicide by burning her possessions, resulting in her being evicted from the hostel and effectively barred from all other hostel accommodation, as an insurance risk. Consequently it had become very difficult for resettlement to place her following periods in prison, leaving her few options other than sofa surfing, rough sleeping or temporary crisis accommodation.

Sophie was found dead following a drugs overdose in 2012, less than a week after her release from prison. She was twenty three.

Young women reported patterns of early sexual experience and serial, sometimes abusive relationships with a high incidence of early pregnancy

Young women reported early sexual experience and serial relationships with frequent relationship breakdown and, for some, early pregnancy also. Several of those interviewed reported experience of domestic violence, with threats or violence or actual violence a recurring theme of relationships with men. Others described a lifestyle in which either they or their partners continued to be enmeshed in the drugs

and drink culture or were living with addiction while also bringing up babies and young children. Others had left violent or unsatisfactory relationships, fallen out with relatives or been unable to sustain tenancies and had ended up living in hostel accommodation, both with and without their children.

"I moved out of my mummy and daddy's house when I was 16, so I was always in and out of hostels and stuff. So in the end I ended up falling pregnant and I was in with the wrong crowd and ended up on drink and drugs and stuff in the end."

"I grew up in care and then I had children… I ended up in a hostel with my kids".

For some, chaotic life-styles, health issues, domestic violence or unsuitable accommodation had led to separation from or permanent loss of children

Some young mothers who had become entrenched in an unstable or chaotic life-style, had suffered from serious mental health issues or who were unable to provide a home for their children, had lost their children in the course of safeguarding arrangements or to a former partner in a more favourable housing position. This loss, however chaotic the lifestyle, was invariably a source of considerable anxiety, sadness and guilt. .

"I got sectioned in July and my kids stayed went to their dad. They're on the child protection register … at the moment he's got a house and I've only got supervised access…. I've been in three hostels since June and then in two months time I have to leave here and I don't have anywhere suitable for them to come to."

"I've been here two and a half years and I need to get out of here. I have a child I don't see because I'm here. This is not suitable accommodation."

"Basically I had to live on people's sofas for eight months with a three year old child. I've been here (family hostel) eight months. I'll be a year here in June."

"From about fifteen and a half (homeless for first time)… I wasn't coping, she (partner) wasn't coping (in private rental flat)… So she went her way and I went my way. The children got fostered. Then one got adopted. One went to live with my mum."

Long term mental health issues were a common feature of experience

Perhaps unsurprisingly mental health issues, behavioural and personality disorders, depression and self harm were commonplace. Both men and women reported a long history of self harm and suicidal thoughts. Others had diagnosed personality disorders while yet others had mental health conditions which they were not always able to manage without support.

"What's next for me?… Haul a set of ropes up. I've tried to kill myself seven times, not in jail or anything. I was out of jail. Never tried to hang myself, always been overdoses."

"Just on the street. I was even up in hospital because of malnutrition. I wasn't coping. I've been in and out of hostels more or less all my life, you know, because I used to take overdoses."

"I do suffer from depression and anxiety. I'm in a very dark place sometimes. I've been self-harming a lot of years now."

Mental health issues often sat alongside a complex mix of serious health conditions which required considerable management

Serious health conditions, such as heart disease or diabetes, were also common, particularly among the older homeless, some of f whom had lived a life-style of self-abuse and neglect over decades. This in turn could result in having to take a complex mix of drugs and treatments, which, for some, would be difficult to manage without the support of hostel staff.

"I'm epileptic as well. I have a heart condition. I've got pins in my leg… I have to get up every ten minutes because I take the cramps in my leg and they're very, very sore, like. You have to walk them off, you know, the pain off. I don't really get a decent amount of sleep."

"Well, I've bad health. I've bad legs, psoriasis from head to toe and mental health and all that crap, depression and shit I suffer from. I take medication."

"Hepatitis. My liver's not too good. Asthmatic. Stabbed couple of times in the lungs. It kind of hits my breathing a wee bit. I've been in a psychiatric ward a couple of, a few times, self-harming, that kind of thing."

"Because of my younger days, the drugs, it's affected me in the nervous system. It affects every organ. I'm on, like, 40 tablets a day. Then I've got all my creams to get on with a rash underneath the skin. It gets so itchy sometimes I would actually rip the flesh off. It's bleeding."

3.2 The housing experience

The pattern of housing experience was of a revolving door of placements interspersed with serial failures

The pattern of instability and of shifting serial relationships described in the previous section was reflected in housing experience. For many of the vulnerable homeless interviewed, their entire housing experience had been of interim or temporary solutions, with housing essentially a revolving door of foster placements, institutions, custodial sentences and hostels, many of which had ended in a failure or breakdown of some kind.

Many had spent time sofa surfing with friends or family, frequently until the point they were asked to leave or a confrontation blew up. Others had spent time on the streets, with rough sleeping interspersed with periods in hostels. Others had spent short periods in either social housing or the private rental sector.

A sub-set of older highly vulnerable individuals with complex needs lived relatively settled lives as long-term hostel residents, and relied heavily on support

There was also a group of older very vulnerable individuals with complex needs and entrenched chaotic life-styles who appeared settled in stable, long-term hostel accommodation to which they were clearly closely attached. These individuals appeared extremely vulnerable or at risk, had complex needs and required intensive

support – with some effectively institutionalised. These had often been resident in their hostel for some time and had no desire to move on.

"I love here. Everybody in here, the staff and all that are brilliant. They've looked after me. I couldn't see myself anywhere else."

"I'm going to my doctor once a month and I see my heart doctor once a month and then the main one I only see every six months and I forget (appointments). I give it to them (staff) and they put it in a diary and then a member of staff comes with me to the appointment… they keep a close eye on me. I need that."

Many of the younger homeless had some experience of social housing or PRS accommodation – with both types often described as sub-standard

Most of those outside this group had some experience of independent living, both in the PRS and social housing. Many individuals reported however that the homes that they had been offered, both in the social housing and private rented sector, were often inadequate or sub-standard in some way, with few having the resources, focus, cash or skills to make their housing more habitable or home-like. The condition of housing was frequently cited as one of the factors in tenancy failure.

Almost all had been unable to sustain tenancies with the breakdown of independent living driven by similar factors in both the PRS and social housing

Very few however had been able to sustain tenancies for more than a short time, whether in the social housing or private sector. In both sectors the drivers of breakdown appeared to be very similar, resting on a series of factors relating to lifestyle or behavioural issues or lack of social and life-skills.

Serial offending with spells in custody or extended stays in hospital had caused some tenancies to lapse

In some cases tenancies proved temporary because continuing re-offending resulted in a return to custody and thus a lapsed tenancy. In others, mental health or health issues led to a prolonged period in hospital, again causing tenancies to fail.

"I did have it for just over a year but I was never there because I was always in jail. I was in jail for most of the time I had it."

"It didn't work out. I was just in it (PRS flat) a couple of months because I had to leave it because I was going to jail."

Tenancies can be rapidly compromised by disruptive behaviour or by a party life-style if the premises are adopted by an addiction or social network

In some cases, individuals simply lacked the social, communication or anger management skills to interact effectively with others and their neighbours. Fighting, anti social behaviour, confrontations with neighbours or bad language had resulted in complaints that in turn led to tenancy breakdown. Alternatively, the accommodation had acted as "party central" for the individual's social or addiction network, with the consequence that neighbours were disturbed and became hostile or concerned for their families, again resulting in complaints and the ending of the tenancy.

"I've had one, got out of jail and moved down there (PRS flat). Then I went and wrecked it because I had a party… I lost that one because of the bad company."

"We had to leave there because of the landlord. He was an arse. The next door neighbour was complaining because in the summer everyone has a drink in the summer in the front garden and you play music and he was saying people in the house were partying."

"I woke up and the front door was kicked in and there was some man punching me in the face – that was when I was living there in that flat."

In some cases failure hinged on a lack of life-skills or financial capability or an inability to manage health conditions without support

Other tenancies had failed in a far less high profile way, not because of noise, damage or anti-social behaviour but because individuals lacked the life-skills or financial capability to manage their money and look after their home. Alternatively, individuals had been unable to manage their medication and health conditions, resulting in both physical and mental health crises.

"I wasn't coping very well with the money and the shopping and that. I was always out of money. And then I was just sat in my place in the dark and all with no money and no food and getting depressed."

"I kept getting sick and not taking it (medication) and then I ended up in the hospital and then it was OK for a while and then it wasn't."

"I just wasn't strong enough to say 'No" and so they (social acquaintances) just came round and took advantage, you know, and it just ended up in trouble."

Alcohol dependence and drug addiction had also played a role in the failure of some tenancies

Some of those who had been provided with accommodation after a spell in rehabilitation had simply found themselves unable to stay sober or away from drugs, in some cases because unable to stay away from their social network.

"I had my own wee flat in University Street and I took to the drink and I was drinking too much… the main reason the tenancy broke down was because I was drinking too much, falling all over the place… when I went into the hospital the tenancy lapsed because I wasn't in residence."

"I mean I had a private rental up in Ballycastle. But I was completely alcoholic dependant and I couldn't work it. I was only there six or seven months."

"In there (PRS flat) I could drink what I liked. There was no-one to say no and I messed it up in a few months. Carried off into the hospital."

3.3 Housing aspiration

Key aspiration for most is for sustainable housing, safety, security and a permanent home

Despite this history of instability and serial failure, one of the most striking aspects of the research was the extent to which the key aspiration of many of these deeply vulnerable homeless individuals was for stability, security and permanence. Ultimately what many wanted was a space to call their own, as a base from which to start rebuilding and stabilising their life. This was particularly strong among the younger people and those who had been through a traumatic breakdown or divorce, and for those for whom a continual cycle of offending and a series of custodial sentences had dominated their lives. In very many ways, the aspiration was for the intensely normal – for decent and secure housing, in which they could find respite from the stresses of the homeless or street life-style.

"I want my own place again. Don't get me wrong. The staff down here's brilliant, you know, but I like my own space, I do."

"I was homeless from 2008 right to – they got me in here (hostel) 4th January 2011. I want a flat, a one-person flat, just to make it my own, so I know it's my own. It's like your own world – because I was in jail for three years."

"Something more permanent. That's what I've always wanted."

"I'd just love a two bedroom bungalow. I just want somewhere that's my own space. If I had a bit of a garden, even better. Just somewhere that's set aside for me and that's it."

A powerful desire for self determination and a strongly felt need to move on from temporary accommodation in order to stabilise and re-set their lives

The desire for a permanent and sustainable home was allied to a powerful desire for self determination. Those living in hostels felt strongly that their situation was by its nature "temporary". Many felt that the temporary nature of hostel living was holding them back from moving on and stabilising their situation and developing the life-skills they would need to change their lives. Younger individuals, particularly young men, were uncomfortably aware that hostel living was creating a dependency and saw the position of older homeless men – who they felt had become institutionalised – as something to be avoided at all costs. Young women, particularly those with children, wanted something closer to a normal family life,

"The longer I stay in here the more I'm going to become useless. I've seen people like 40 and 50 and they're just sitting in hostels. I don't want that. I want to get out and live on my own and get a job or get into education or something."

"Well, I would like to get my own place, you know, move out of the hostel. I've had the experience of going wrong in the old place (previous flat). I could stay here for another wee while or I could get my own place and start getting myself together again, you know, cooking for myself."

"This is a good hostel. But I'm unhappy in it to be honest. I'd like my own place. I just want, like, somewhere peaceful where you don't have someone rapping on your door."

"I'd rather be on my own, like, instead of having to come in here and he (boyfriend) has to leave at 10 at night or get barred. So he's barred from seeing his own child and me."

Some found supervision and support intrusive and demeaning while others were very conscious that they lacked the skills and confidence to cope alone

Some of the younger men which included a number of serial offenders who had spent time in and our of juvenile institutions as well as adult prison, were resentful of supervision and support and were more likely than others to find it intrusive. Others on the other hand were very conscious of their need for support and felt that they lacked the confidence or skills to cope without it.

Many had a heartfelt desire to get away from peer pressure, the party culture and the temptations of the drug and criminal life-style

For others the hostel situation perpetuated a social network and a drinking and partying culture that they were keen to escape from, as a precondition for gaining some control of their lives. Some simply wanted a refuge from what they saw as the relentless pressure of a homeless lifestyle.

"I want to stop drinking and I want to get a proper job and have my own place to live. Get sorted out."

"I'd like my own place. It's not a long-term solution being stuck in here, especially when I'm trying to stay off the drink."

"I don't want somewhere where there's drugs and that… I won't take drugs again. I've a known history but with all the drugs around, you know. Everyone in here (hostel) has basically been on drugs or has emotional problems and, you know, everyone, no-one is safe… You just want to be safe and quiet."

"A house in a nice area. Just no parties around. There's enough (parties) around here (hostel). You don't want all of that."

The most commonly expressed desire was for peace and quiet and the means to escape the relentless pressure of the homeless lifestyle

The most commonly expressed aspiration was for housing that was peaceful and quiet, away from peer pressures around partying, drink and drugs. For those who had become involved in sectarian issues within their own communities, there was also a strong desire to get away from these pressures and from the associated tribal loyalties. People also wanted decent premises which were sufficiently secure for them not to have to worry about break-ins and burglaries, again seen as associated with the drug culture and criminal life-style.

"Somewhere were people don't come round breaking in. Somewhere that's quiet, a quiet area and it's not, like, Republican or Loyalist."

"I would look after it. I don't even want a party and all that anymore, so I don't. I want somewhere where I could bring my kids, like. I don't want somewhere where it could be run down and all."

"Somewhere quiet. I don't want it to be wild because then if it's wild, I'm likely to fall in with that kind of crowd."

"It can't be some shithole where there's parties and all."

Older hostel-livers who saw the hostel as their permanent home and refuge had no desire to move into independent supported accommodation

There was a smaller, largely older group, for whom hostel living represented familiarity, safety and support. For this group, which included some of the most high-risk and vulnerable individuals, their major concern was to maintain the status quo. They were highly resistant to the idea of living other than in a hostel environment and reluctant to move away from familiar staff and support on whom they were often highly dependent. This group included some of those with very longstanding alcohol dependence. Almost all saw little prospect of any change or improvement in their circumstances.

"I'm well looked after in here.. I've people around me, whereas if I go out on my own, I'm on my own… at the minute I don't feel ready or I don't feel safe or something, for some reason, you know."

"They make sure I'm taking my meds. They're checking me every hour in my bed. I couldn't live on my own. Because I know if I live on my own I'd be able to drink whenever I want. And I would just end up dead. I only drink 6 times a day in here. I cut down because every time I drink too much, I take fits and I always end up in hospital. I'm used to it. I'm used to the staff."

"It's more or less home now because my mum – and my own doctor – have told me that I'm best staying here now for my own good because the chances of my surviving out there are very low. So I've sort of accepted that."

3.4 Attitudes to social housing and to the PRS

Social housing was the preferred and often the only tenure considered – primarily because it was seen as substantially cheaper

In most cases social housing was seen as the preferred tenure for a variety of primarily practical reasons but essentially as a lower cost and lower risk option. The most important consideration was that social housing was seen as cheaper and more affordable and thus more accessible. Nonetheless individuals were aware that social housing rents have increased in recent years. Regardless of the merits of private sector tenancies, many simply saw these as out of their reach. For those who aspired to get into work, this was a particularly important consideration in that few saw themselves as earning other than a relatively low wage which would not cover private sector rents.

"I'd rather housing executive. Just because the rent would probably be lower. But some of the housing executive rents aren't cheap these days… "

"Of course I've looked at that (PRS) but there is nothing under £45 quid instead of £75."

"Social housing 's cheaper so when I do eventually get out of the hole that I'm in I will be able to actually afford to pay my rent – go out to work and pay my rent. Private housing I would find it very hard to do that."

"You have to look at the lowest places like (in the PRS), because all the nice places are, like, £600, £700 rent. Housing Executive is cheaper"

The issue was not only the relative affordability of social rents but also the requirement for a substantial deposit, seen as an insuperable barrier

The affordability of the rent aside, the other big barrier to use of the PRS was seen to be the requirement for a large deposit upfront, regarded as an insuperable hurdle by many.

"They want £500 deposit. Us on the dole, we've not got that. They're going for people with jobs – and we're living in here."

"It's the deposits they are wanting. They're on another planet. Where am I ever going to get that kind of money?"

"That's (PRS) not going to be something I could do. Because you need a deposit and they (landlords) won't give you the time of day if you don't have it, you know."

Social housing tenure was also seen as more secure and the risk of eviction therefore lower

Against the background of serial housing failure, the other key consideration for those who have been homeless was that the risk of eviction from social housing was perceived as lower than in the PRS. This was partly because tenancy agreements themselves were seen as more secure but also because the social housing ethos was seen as more caring and the Housing Executive as having some duty of care. Security of tenure was particularly important for those with families who were concerned to maintain continuity of education and social networks.

"It's (Housing Executive accommodation) more permanent. But a landlord can come in any time and just say, give you a month's notice or whatever it was, doesn't matter how long you've lived there. And then you're messing kids about and all, their routines because you have to keep getting up and moving."

"Yes, they (Housing Executive) can't kick you out. They have to give you notice. Whereas landlords, they just keep kicking you out and they keep your deposit and you're on the street whereas the housing executive they have to get you somewhere."

"You're safer away with the Housing Executive house, because you're definitely going to be looked after."

"Private is really good because it's quick and all but it's when, like, you need help, the landlord doesn't care about you one bit. He just cares about the house not the people in it."

For some qualifying hurdles for social housing were seen as high and waiting lists so long that the PRS was seen as a more realistic option

There was, however, also a perception that the qualifying hurdles for social housing were so high and waiting lists had become so long that social housing was not necessarily always a realistic option. This was particularly the case for young men who felt that, for them, social housing was unlikely to be a possibility. Among those who did feel that they would eventually qualify for a home, views were mixed. Some felt

that the longer wait for accommodation was worthwhile because the tenure would ultimately be safer and more secure. Others simply felt that the PRS might be a better option than hanging on for social housing in less than optimal conditions.

"Private rent is virtually impossible unless you've got a good job… I was looking at a one bedroom flat and they're wanting £500 deposit and you're paying £180 a week. You're safer waiting on the housing and seeing where they can move you, you know. To be safe."

"If I could get it (PRS) quicker, then whichever was quicker would be the way I look at it."

"I can't be staying here much longer so it is soon going to be a question of beggars can't be choosers. Trouble is if you do go with a private flat, you've lost your chance (of social housing). But we've got to get somewhere permanent and it's got to the point where I'm past caring as long as we (family) can all be together."

Social housing was often seen as of a poor standard with homeless tenants feeling they had little choice but to accept inappropriate accommodation

For those who had had experience of social housing tenancies, this had not always been positive with some claiming that accommodation had been substandard or unsuitable for their needs.

"I would prefer housing executive, not a housing association… that last one (housing association flat), it was like a derelict flat and they told me they were going to do all this and that and they didn't. Only thing they done was put in a new front door. I had to do all that myself and I was only halfway through getting it done when I lost it."

"There's no proper flooring or nothing. The walls are like, pure, all black. They won't give me a dehumidifier or nothing so I had to move in even though the dampness is still there… The housing as the housing gives you is just crap."

"They give me a flat on the 14th floor and I've got emotional problems. I cried when we were going in that place… But I had to be out of here (hostel) by March so I had no choice."

Others saw Housing Executive properties as potentially a target of anti-social behaviour and estates as intimidating

Others explained that their Housing Executive accommodation had been insecure or the focus of anti-social behaviour, burglary and even arson or that they had been intimidated within their homes and around residential blocks.

"I moved in about a month and somebody broke in the flat and started a fire and it was a housing executive flat so the door was really easy to put in. They were drinking in there. It was really bad."

"I moved out when I was 16 and I moved in with my boyfriend and he had a housing executive house and all the windows got put through and he got kicked out of that."

"They just don't take no notice of you. Do what they like. It's not safe. You don't feel safe. It's scary"

The PRS could be seen as offering greater choice and flexibility and potentially also higher standards of accommodation – albeit at a price

Some who had some experience, direct or indirect, of the PRS saw private sector tenancies as potentially having some advantages over social housing. The most important of these was that the locations of PRS housing could enable them to break away from community and social network that would tend to lead to patterns of behaviour or a lifestyle that was damaging and would perpetuate the cycle of instability and homelessness. Other perceived advantages were more practical, in that the PRS was seen as offering greater choice and flexibility in terms of accommodation and potentially also higher standards in terms of finish and facilities.

"Obviously if it were a private rental it would be better… Because you can go and look at the places and choose."

"I loved going with private landlords. It was brilliant. I'm very keen on it because, like I said, all, like everything was set up and all, like no problem and we had heating going in the house and electric and stuff and fitted cupboards and all, you know."

"You can live where you want and get away from people and you don't have to get all furniture. You can get it with furniture in it."

Many were more concerned with finding appropriate accommodation than with nature of tenure

Not all were aware that the PRS was an option for those on housing benefit while others were simply indifferent as to which tenure they used, being ultimately more concerned with finding appropriate accommodation in a reasonable time-frame.

"I didn't really know you could have private flats on housing benefit. I've never given it much thought, to be honest with you. But why not?"

"I think I would be comfortable with any option. I just want my own place"

"Housing Executive or private. It doesn't bother me. I wouldn't really mind."

For some of those wedded to social housing, this had everything to do with family and a specific community – with tenure a secondary consideration

For some where there was a close link with family there was a strong desire to remain close to or within a specific social housing community. This was the case also for some of those with children who were concerned to be close to schools or the homes of separated partners with whom they intended to co-parent. The connection in this case was less to the tenure or to social housing per se but rather to a particular community.

"I'd want to live near my mum and my auntie and my friends. It's what I know and what I'm used to. I'd like to get back there. And I'd be behaving myself this time so I'm hoping they'd let me back in the house."

"It's got to be walking distance from him (ex partner who has custody of children) or it's not going to work, taking them to school and that, coming to mine".

Others would actively avoid the community they grew up in – perforce or otherwise

For the many who had little in the way of established family or community connections or where family or community relationships were problematic, there was often an active desire to avoid the community in which they had grown up and in which their reputation was already established. For some this was seen as part of establishing a new life and getting away from a "bad crowd" or a bad reputation. For others, the drivers were rather to do with issues around crime, drug dealing, gangs and paramilitaries – with their home community seen as too dangerous to visit, far less live in. Indeed perceived or actual danger and threats had for some young homeless men been the initial trigger for homelessness.

> *"I have got a family, but I've got a threat on me where they live, so I can't go over and visit them or anything… It was when I got the threat that I had to move out (aged 15)."*

> *"Teenage life, you know. I got involved with the wrong people. Got involved in drugs. I was dreading to be shot. In fact one of the fellows was shot. One went to jail and one fled to Scotland and I just ended up here there and everywhere, just as long as I wasn't there.*

> *"A flat in South Belfast or East Belfast. I don't want to move back there (home community) again. There's too much trouble up there for me."*

> *"I just got beat up and all. I don't want to go back and don't want to keep looking over my shoulder every ten minutes."*

> *"I got involved with the wrong crowd and I got into a fight one night with the wrong person whose dad was in the paramilitaries and I had to leave that area."*

Security of tenure mattered more to some individuals than others. Generally those with children were the most concerned with security and length of tenure while many of the single homeless, particularly young men, saw themselves moving fairly frequently in any case and were relatively unworried by short rental contracts. In part this reflected a lifetime in various forms of temporary accommodation but also low expectations of their ability to sustain a tenancy over a long period.

3.5 Support needs in the transition to the PRS

Some were confident that they had learned from previous tenancy failure but also felt the need for support to make the transition to a new lifestyle

Many of those who had failed to sustain tenancies in the past were clear about the reasons for the breakdown of their tenancy and their own role within the failure. Some felt that they had learned from their mistakes and experience and were anxious not to repeat history and confident that they could avoid doing so. Even so, several among this group who had had experienced tenancy failure in the past were conscious that if they were to make a sustained transition to a lifestyle that was consistent with long term security and stability, they would need support to do so. For some this was a matter of support in the early stages of becoming established in a new home and lifestyle.

> *"All the parties and that, you know so I think they (landlord) were pretty happy to see me leave. You know, I've learned my lesson not to do it again."*

"I've got it all planned out. I'm not going to have anyone round in the evening. Unless it's someone I really trust."

"Afterwards when you get out there (into independent living accommodation), they will give you floating support when you come out of here… I'm a bit wild at the minute still… You need something to keep your feet on the ground."

"I think I'd need some help with that, setting it up and sorting myself out, especially for the first six months. I'd be too anxious otherwise."

Many felt strongly that they would need support both at transitional stage and longer term if their tenancy was to be sustainable

More, and particularly those who had had serial failed tenancies or placements, were not at all confident that they would be able to manage a tenancy by themselves and were clear that they would want longer term support. These people tended to feel that they would need help not only in maintaining a secure and sustainable home but also that they would need ongoing support with drug or alcohol issues or mental or physical health problems and to build a more resilient and sustainable life-style.

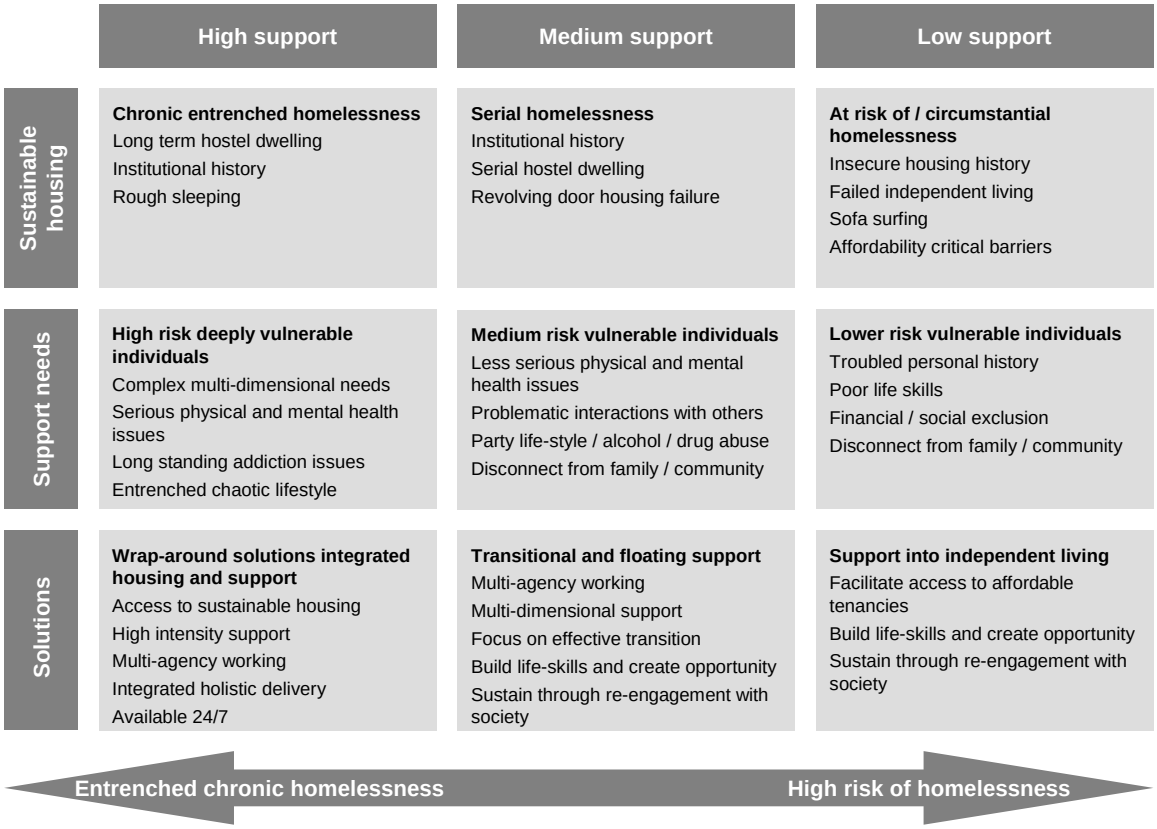
"I have support needs. I've a friend, he's just moved out. And he gets support from a group called Triangle or something. Something like that, you know, somebody come out and see how you're doing and the flat's doing – are you looking after yourself. I'd probably need something like that, you know."

"I mean I'd like to have full support from in here because my key worker's brilliant. She's really helped me getting rid of the drink and all that… If I move on maybe they (staff) could come down and visit and do whatever, you know. I love cooking and all that. I wouldn't have any problem there. It's just the drink."

A spectrum of more or less complex needs which will require differing service models within a framework of addressing housing and service needs in tandem

Figure 1 describes the a spectrum of housing and support need and the nature of the solutions and services that might be required to address the barriers to sustainable housing for those with more or less complex needs. At one end of the spectrum, deeply vulnerable individuals with multi-dimensional needs and who have suffered entrenched homelessness over a long period are likely to need intense wrap-around support with an integrated approach to housing and other support needs, if housing is to be sustainable. At the other end of the spectrum, where individuals may be homeless because they lack the means to access housing, the skills to negotiate the system or to sustain tenancies effectively, accessing sustainable housing may be more a matter of addressing access barriers and building independent living skills. There will be various shades of need between these two extremes, requiring differing levels of support, with it likely to be key to success that support is tailored to individuals' needs.

Figure 1: Housing and support needs for vulnerable homeless individuals



Housing and support needs exist across multiple dimensions. The box following described these key needs under a series of headings, with the various dimensions building to an integrated picture of service and support needs.

Summary of Housing and Support needs

- **Accommodation**
  - **Suitability (repair, overcrowding, infestation)**
  - **Security (of tenure)**
- **Health**
  - **Physical**
  - **Mental**
  - **Problematic drug and alcohol use**
- **Safety and security**
  - **Risk from gender based/intimate partner violence**
  - **Legal issues**
  - **Safety from harassment and abuse**
  - **Safety risks and emergency procedures**
  - **Use of technology (alarms etc)**
- **Social and economic well-being**
  - **Life skills (for running a home successfully)**
  - **Money matters and personal administration**
  - **Leisure activity**
  - **Social interaction**
  - **Self-esteem**
- **Employment and meaningful activity**
  - **Core skills**
  - **Training and education**

3.6 The potential impact of welfare reform changes

Awareness of the potential impact of welfare reform was largely limited to changes impacting on Housing Benefit

The passage of welfare reform is less advanced in Northern Ireland at the time of writing than it is in other jurisdictions in the UK. Awareness of many aspects of forthcoming change was low among all of those interviewed, particularly around the prospect of the shift to monthly payment of benefit under the Universal Credit regime. People were, however, much more aware of some of the forthcoming changes to Housing Benefit / LHA. Awareness was primarily limited to the potential caps on entitlement and the prospects for the under thirty fives to be funded only for shared accommodation (as distinct from a self-contained unit).

Access to the PRS was felt likely to become increasingly difficult in the wake of caps on benefit entitlement

Caps on benefit entitlement and on rental values are felt likely to make accessing the PRS even more difficult. Respondents anticipated that finding affordable accommodation will become increasingly challenging, with benefit recipients in a position to consider only the cheapest accommodation. Here there were concerns

that the only accommodation that could be afforded would be sub-standard, small, difficult to reach or a long way from facilities.

Shared accommodation was seen as likely to be a temporary arrangement and thus as reinforcing the pattern of instability and serial housing failure

By far the greatest anxiety arose among the young people – who had concerns around being forced to share accommodation with others. There was concern and resistance to relative intimacy with strangers, concern around the demarcations of personal space and a need for privacy and peace and quiet. Those in their late twenties and early thirties felt that sharing was inappropriate for people of their age – seen as both a regressive and demeaning step in the wrong direction. Shared accommodation was also seen as inherently temporary, not least because likely to end in failure, and thus as reinforcing the pattern of instability that already characterised their lives.

Shared accommodation was felt likely to lead to a series of potentially disastrous outcomes including confrontation, violence and tenancy breakdown

Issues arose around difficulties of interacting and living with others, particularly for those with anger management issues or a lack of interpersonal or social skills. Those who had a history of fighting, violence or confrontation were concerned that personal conflict would blow up into violence and result in loss of housing, a return to custody or to street homelessness. There was concern also around personal safety and the security of personal belongings

> *"I don't know how they expect us to live together in a house without killing them all. You have to have an awful lot of respect and trust with a person (implication is to live with them)."*

> *"I wouldn't share with people. Moving in with somebody I didn't like. Then one day I would just go mental, you know what I mean."*

> *"Not comfortable with sharing a house with someone you barely know… like your door's open and your possessions and all. You don't know what they're going to do."*

Shared accommodation was seen also as setting up the conditions for a return to partying and the drink and drug culture they were trying to escape

Others simply feared that shared housing would be a recipe for a return to "partying" and peer pressure around drink and drugs when their goal was ultimately to stabilise their lives and move on.

> *"Everyone comes and there will be parties and all and you can't tell them 'No, don't be doing that'. Because it's going to be equally theirs. You can't live with that."*

> *"There's going to be drinking and there's going to be drugs. And you're going to be joining in and you're back where you started."*

The prospect of shared accommodation was also a major issue for non resident parents

Non-resident parents feared loss of access to their children if they were not able to provide appropriate accommodation for visiting children

> *"I'm not going to be able to share accommodation with people and have my children in… They're on the child protection register."*

> *"There is no way I can share a house with somebody if I'm trying to get my kids back. And where are my kids going to sleep?"*

3.7 Overall

From the perspective of vulnerable individuals themselves the key issue is housing sustainability as a first step to enhancing life chances

It is clear from the research with vulnerable homeless individuals that access to permanent, decent, safe and sustainable housing is the critical first step in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and enhancing life-chances. Despite the adverse life-histories that were so very common among the vulnerable homeless, aspirations are for personal space and self-determination, security and safety in much the same way as everybody else. While some of the older high risk and vulnerable individuals saw no prospect of significant change in their lives, almost universally the younger vulnerable homeless aspired to re-set their lives and move away from a chaotic life-style to one that is more productive and stable.

If the housing needs of vulnerable homeless are to be met within the PRS the primary issues are affordability and sustainability

The evidence suggests that if housing needs are to be met within the PRS, access and sustainability are the primary issues. Access to the PRS hinges critically on rental affordability and the ability to offer deposits. Sustainability rests on accommodation that is appropriate to needs and which is combined with effective support and some degree of stability and security of tenure. It is quite clear from the evidence and the life histories of the homeless, that housing based solutions without adequate support will quickly break down, whatever the tenure concerned.

The principal barriers rest on high rents relative to the social housing sector and the requirement for deposits

The principle access barriers to using the PRS rest on the high rents relative to social housing and the requirement for deposits, issues that might be addressed within homelessness and supporting people strategies in a variety of ways (see later discussion in chapters 6 and recommendations in chapter 7). Unless PRS rental prices fall significantly in response to welfare reform, the new welfare regime and the caps on benefit entitlement would appear likely to increase the pressures around affordability and access to the PRS for the vulnerable homeless.

Shared housing is likely to be very problematic for individuals with low inter-personal skills, personality disorders or a history of violence and offending

Appropriate accommodation in this context is likely to mean accommodation that is decent, secure and not shared. Those with anger management issues or a history of violence or confrontation if funded sufficiently only to live in shared housing, will likely be exposed to an inappropriate risk of offending, tenancy breakdown and potential return to street living or custodial institutions. Similarly for those that have alcohol and drug issues, shared accommodation will leave individuals potentially exposed to a lifestyle that many are seeking to leave behind as a first step in re-setting their life. Shared accommodation is also unlikely to be appropriate for non resident parents of children, of whatever age, who clearly need housing that recognises their role as parents and which allows for the accommodation of children.

Tenancy sustainability is unlikely to be achieved without ongoing support whatever the form of tenure

It would appear that whatever the form of tenure, sustainability is unlikely to be achieved without support both in the transition to independent living and longer term. While there are common needs, pressure points and risks clearly differ from individual to individual, with different groups requiring both more or less support and different types of support.

Social tenancies do not appear to have been any more secure than those in the PRS and appear equally susceptible to breakdown

It is not clear from the evidence that social housing has proved any more secure than the PRS in terms of tenancy attrition and sustainability. Indeed the drivers of tenancy breakdown and homelessness appear to be very similar whether in the PRS or social housing. As noted above, sustainability will rest at least as much on support and appropriate housing than on formal length of tenure, the latter issue potentially being amenable to solution in a variety of ways (see chapter 6 for discussion of different approaches to the formal tenure issue).

It is also not clear that social housing has been more appropriate than PRS properties in terms of quality of accommodation, facilities and maintenance. Indeed respondents pointed to sub-standard accommodation in both the PRS and social housing. Overall, the indicators are rather that the PRS was viewed as more advantageous in terms of standards and choice of accommodation than social housing.

There is some evidence that tenancies in social housing communities may reinforce negative patterns while those in the PRS may open up opportunities

Tenancies were clearly lost as a result of anti-social behaviour, partying and take-over by a social or addiction network in both the PRS and social housing. Some of the evidence suggests, however, that social housing communities and concentrations of poverty and worklessness may present greater risks for the vulnerable homeless than the PRS. Within social housing communities, individuals appear more likely to be drawn into an existing network that has already played a role in the pathway into homelessness. Similarly the evidence suggests that placing vulnerable homeless

within social housing communities can expose individuals to a greater degree of anti social behaviour, particularly where the properties in which they are placed are identifiably sub-standard and tenants are evidently vulnerable. By contrast the PRS, in offering the opportunity to live in more mixed income communities or at least those at some distance from existing social networks, may provide opportunities to move away from patterns of behaviour and connections that have previously proved damaging or which have played a role in triggering or entrenching homelessness.

Housing solutions in isolation would appear unlikely to be viable – meeting the needs of vulnerable homeless requires an integrated and holistic approach

Overall it is clear from life histories and housing experience that housing solutions in isolation will rapidly break down. Serial housing failure will only be addressed with a holistic approach to housing and support which combines appropriate housing with multi-dimensional support tailored to individual needs

4.0 The perspectives of PRS landlords

One of the key aims of the study was to understand more about the perspectives of private rental sector landlords, many of whom in Northern Ireland are small-scale, even reluctant or "accidental" landlords and about whose attitudes comparatively little is known. This chapter rests on original research with both small and professional landlords and depth interviews with larger landlords, letting agents and members of the trade association.

It covers landlord's broad thinking on the issues facing residential landlords in Northern Ireland today, their own motivation in becoming a landlord, the financial dynamics of their business and letting criteria and requirements of tenants. It also covers landlords' awareness of the welfare reform changes, their perceptions of likely changes to the rental market for housing benefit dependent tenants and how landlords will respond to these changes and attitudes to taking on more vulnerable tenant types. Finally, the research explores what would need to be put in place for landlords to be willing to take on vulnerable, formerly homeless individuals and to make such tenancies sustainable.

4.1 Landlords' perspectives on the residential rental market in Northern Ireland

Against the background of collapse in property values and economic stress there is no expectation of any recovery in property values any time soon

For all of the landlords who participated in the study the backdrop to their thinking was the precipitate decline in property values in the Northern Ireland housing market. Clearly, for many this had sucked the investment motive out of the market and most were not at all sanguine about prospects for any future recovery in prices even in the medium to long term. The difficulties in Europe, extended recession and continuing economic stress in the UK, public spending cuts, seen as likely to impact Northern Ireland particularly heavily and the impacts of welfare reform were all felt likely to weigh heavily on the market, inhibiting any recovery in prices, and potentially leading to further falls for certain property types.

> *"It is all still very uncertain and now there is talk that the Euro is going to be disbanded and that is going to send everything haywire for five or ten years. It is not going to get sorted overnight"*

> *"The capital value? Now it's totally irrelevant. You can't sell and who knows what is going to happen"*

> *"It's all very worrying. Welfare changes. That is going to affect some areas of the market. Euro-geddon, public sector jobs going down the toilet… In my mind we could be headed for a perfect storm here. So I can't say I'm hopeful – but I may be a pessimist."*

Many who might otherwise have done so were clearly unable to exit the market

Those who had planned to sell down property as part of a retirement funding strategy or those who wanted – or needed – to exit the market had found themselves unable to do so.

"To be frank with the business as it is, I would dearly like to sell and get rid, but it's not going to happen. You can't sell, well not even for what I would owe on the mortgage"

"The actual capital value has gone down significantly and I'm at the stage that I would have liked to have got out of land-lording, but with the way things have gone, I've had to review that completely and just hold on to the properties, that otherwise I would have liked to be completely divested by now, because I'm nearing retirement."

Borrowing to fund property acquisition or fund improvements has clearly become very difficult but some with cash are buying property very cheaply

Equally those who wanted to borrow money to fund property improvements or to make opportunistic property acquisitions in what they saw as a very cheap market were largely unable to raise the necessary funding from the banks. Yet others, unable or unwilling to invest in property in Northern Ireland were nonetheless investing in residential property in other parts of the UK and elsewhere.

"It's very hard to get any money from the banks – when I started off it was almost self funding so at the end of ten years your rent had paid off the property and during that time you might have geared up and raised more capital against more properties but now there is no prospect of borrowing."

"I'm buying property for peanuts at the minute. If you look hard and find the right properties, you can buy extremely cheap".

"It's certainly reinforced my strategy of investing in property elsewhere in the UK."

Landlords feel locked into the Northern Ireland market for the long term and have refocused on maximising income rather than capital appreciation

Against this background, landlords felt locked into the market for the long term and were thus for the most part focused on making the best of a challenging situation. Most had refocused around income rather than capital appreciation.

"I'm justifying everything that I buy just in terms of income stream. I could write the capital value off and still justify the investment in terms of income stream."

"You couldn't sell. Not at the moment. You've got to make the best of it and make sure you are getting the best income and the best tenants that you can."

"We are where we are. You've got to take a long term view. There is no getting out at the moment. So hang on and you can still make a very good income even if your investment has gone down on paper."

Long term investors and larger landlords were under less pressure and were pragmatic on capital values and sanguine on yields and income prospects

There was a very clear difference between those landlords who had been in the market for a long time and those who had entered the market near or at the peak of the boom. The former group had often repaid or substantially reduced mortgages and had made a significant return on their original investment with some having built up a substantial property portfolio over years. This group largely had liquid assets in addition to their residential property and, while clearly having lost significant asset value "on paper" were nonetheless largely comfortable with few admitting to being under significant financial pressure. As a result, the long term landlords, often also the larger landlords, were much more relaxed about the market, both in terms of capital value and yields and prospects for rental incomes. For these landlords the major focus was on an income stream.

"I look at it – a lot of my properties have obviously diminished in value but not a lot has changed because the rent is more or less the same and the repayments on my borrowing is more or less the same, my outgoings are more or less the same so nothing has changed unless I want to get out of the market and I'm doing okay. No problem getting tenants. So I'm not worried."

"Because I have been at mine for a good while now, here the yields are very high. I've also bought in Australia and I'm having trouble getting 6-7% over there… So it still works for me."

"It went in such a bubble like when we bought we were able to clear the mortgage in four years on the property so the rent has been an income and you do have a certain amount of flexibility."

For those who had bought at or close to the peak finances could be finely balanced leaving little room for manoeuvre or margin for error

For those who had bought into the property market more recently, particularly where they had borrowed heavily to do so, the financial position was much more finely balanced; with outgoings much closer to rental receipts and margins could be tight. For these landlords, often smaller or accidental landlords, and including some who had over-stretched themselves at the height of the boom, there was, unsurprisingly greater anxiety about the prospects for any market recovery – especially for those with negative equity. For some of these landlords changes in interest rates or downward pressure on rental values had the potential to derail an already precarious financial balancing act.

"Any equity I'd built up, the investment value of the property has been wiped out and the rents aren't even covering the mortgages but the rents are doing something towards the mortgage and in the hope that, you know, in the five, ten year cycle, the property prices will come round again. And then of course there will be an extraordinary exodus of landlords so prices will fall – and so it's a vicious cycle."

"If like me you bought at the peak, you know, you can't really afford anything to go wrong… and that's based on the mortgage rates being so low. There are a lot of people teetering on the edge with the rent and the mortgage and a percentage point increase, you know, would be enough to push you over."

Hangover from development of unsold new properties in turnkey condition in prime sites increasing competition and forcing up standards of presentation

From the position of the small landlord, the other major feature of the market was the legacy of the boom in property development and the perceived excess of newly developed, high quality properties intended for sale but now available for rent. This was felt to have made the market more competitive in terms of standards and finish and to have put additional pressure on competing small landlords to keep their properties to a high standard in order to attract quality tenants. This factor also had focused landlords' thinking on optimising their portfolio and seeking to present their properties well so as to maximise their rental income and appeal to tenants".

> *"West Belfast is very heavy in properties and there are all these new properties that investors bought and they are in turnkey condition and so you have to keep your properties very nice to compete with shiny new, brand new everything. So it's more competitive and the developers are dropping their rents… So there are still good tenants out there but you have to be a wee bit sharper."*

> *"Your property has to be in good shape, especially now, but there's no shortage of tenants"*

Strong sense that rental demand buoyant across the market and likely to remain so

The downbeat view on investment values and the focus on maximising income sat alongside a strong sense of confidence in continuing demand for rental property. Demand was seen as buoyant and likely to be further stimulated by the difficulties that young people now face in getting into home ownership. For those whose properties were targeted at young professionals and towards the top end of the market, there was clearly no shortage of demand and the view was that rents were not only holding up but likely to go up. In the middle and lower end of the market, there was some sense that rental demand was softening. Nonetheless there remained a strong feeling that provided the property was competitively priced and to a reasonable standard, there is a good pool of quality tenants looking for property in all parts of the market. Few reported voids as being an issue – indeed landlords pointed to tenants staying longer than previously.

> *"Well from a Northern Ireland landlord point of view the only good thing at the moment is that there is fantastic demand. Now vacancies and voids are at an all time low. There's no question of that. And rents are creeping upwards. So that's all positive for landlords."*

> *"There is still a high demand for rental property. I never have mine lying empty for any length of time. Across the board there doesn't seem to be a problem getting the tenants, and the right tenants. It doesn't seem to be a problem getting property let out."*

> *"There's a wealth of demand out there – from emergency housing right up to young professionals – so there are good opportunities in every section of the market."*

Some sense at the lower end of the market that demand and prices are softening and that quality tenants taking longer to find

There was a sense however that at the bottom end of the market, there was less choice of good tenants than there had been in the past. There was also seen to be downward pressure on rents while lettings were taking longer to achieve.

> *"It is a little bit hard at the moment because of the Eastern Europeans going home – but there is a bit of a gap there. Again it is down to location – the better the area, the greater the choice of type of tenant."*

> *"You're having to do deals with them, you know, you always work something in just to get them in the door."*

> *"Maybe you might have to wait a little longer to get the right tenant but you know you have the luxury of knowing that there is still a choice of tenants. I haven't reduced my rents yet but then I would hesitate before I put them up."*

> *"I noticed a change in the last couple of years and for the first time in 21 years probably we had real difficulty finding tenants."*

> *"Certainly, I would be more anxious now when a house becomes free, I would be thinking this is going to be harder work and I would probably have dropped my standards in more ways than one."*

4.2 Tenant selection and letting criteria

Most of the landlords who took part in the study were relatively small scale. They included "accidental" landlords who were renting out what had been their own home, those who had invested in one or two properties, sometimes in consortium with other family members, those who had built up small portfolios of property, typically between three and six properties, some sub-divided into a number of letting units and those who had, over time built up substantial portfolios with perhaps thirty or more properties. The smaller landlords, even where they employed an agent to find and vet tenants, were usually heavily involved in the day to day management of their properties, though this was true of some of the largest landlords also. Different landlords were more or less hands on, but many had given tenants their personal phone numbers while others collected rents personally or visited tenants or premises relatively frequently, especially if they saw themselves as "professional" landlords or rental income represented a major part of their income. Those, for whom renting property was not their day job, were more likely not to be engaged on a day to day level or even to have any direct contact with tenants, unless something went wrong.

Landlords would not consider tenants that came without deposits and references and saw no reason to do so

Most landlords claimed to take an active role in selecting tenants, with many wanting to meet tenants personally and relying heavily on "gut instinct" in making judgements on tenant's suitability. Most see deposits and rent in advance, references and even guarantees as essential precursors to granting a tenancy and were unwilling to consider tenants unable to provide these.

"Gut feelings are very important but when you have a guarantor, it just gives you that protection that they aren't going to misbehave."

"I wouldn't consider a tenant that did not come with references."

"If they can't pay a deposit, you would automatically think they can't pay their rent."

"I think you would avoid people that can't pay a deposit – the chances are that they may be in debt and if there is a problem with debt collectors they can trash your house."

"If people can provide all the correct documentation, you do know they are going to be serious about their tenancy."

Landlords in all segments of the market are primarily concerned to ensure that rent is paid on time, low tenant turnover and minimal damage or disturbance

Landlords of all sizes and targeting each segment of the market shared very similar letting criteria. Their key concerns in relation to tenants were unequivocally that:

- Rent is paid in full and paid on time
- Property is looked after and returned in good condition
- Neighbours and other tenants not disturbed
- Low tenant turnover and minimum void periods

"There's always three golden rules in relation to a satisfactory tenancy. One – that rent is paid on time. Number two is the upkeep of the property – to look after the property. And number three is not to cause a nuisance to the neighbours."

Landlords also seek to minimise their own time involvement and any support required and so tend to avoid perceivably vulnerable individuals as tenants

Secondary considerations hinge around how far tenancies will be trouble-free, in terms of noise or intrusion on their personal time and space, how far tenants are judged as likely to be demanding. From the point of view of a small private landlord the potential for frequent ongoing support or the possibility of calls late at night over minor issues is a potentially powerful disincentive to let to tenants judged likely to take up valuable time or be unable or unwilling to deal with minor day to day issues as they arise. Those who had had experience of this type of tenant were the most wary and in each of these cases, the tenancy had ultimately failed, either because the tenant ran into some kind of crisis or because the landlord gave notice because they were unwilling to tolerate the ongoing hassle. As a result landlords tended therefore as a matter of course to try and avoid taking on vulnerable tenants, in large part because they were seen as likely to generate additional work and hassle.

"Well I guess the other thing I do think about is do they seem like they are going to be on the phone every five minutes? You know, it's not my day job."

"I'd kind of realised when they went into my property that they were kind of vulnerable but as I said to the agent 'I can't be a mother figure to these people, I've got my own family. I mean getting a phone call at 10 at night to my husband, there's a fly

in the kitchen… it's really infringing on my family life (explaining why she is giving notice to a tenant who is taking up a lot of time)."

"I found out afterwards he had some kind of a breakdown… So like this guy rings me 11.30 at night or whatever time it is and his lights have fused. And he didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to change a fuse. He rang me again before. His toilet was blocked. There was a window smashed twice at the property because he had lost his keys. Now as a landlord, you know, you just can't entertain that. You've got your own life."

With the exception of student landlords and those with HMO properties, the preference was for couples and older tenants

Others, with the exception of student landlords, were reluctant to take on young people, who were felt more likely to annoy neighbours or hold parties. Much here depended on the area in which the property was located. Landlords with student houses and shared HMO houses in areas occupied by a students and young people were more tolerant in this regard.

"I'd avoid very young people even if they did have a guarantor. Young people are out to party mostly – to do what they cannot do at home. If they don't party their friends will. They can be more trouble than the actual tenant."

"Young people are just not going to look after your place. They're barely able to look after themselves and they're hell bent on having a good time. And who can blame them? But not in my property. I go for more mature tenants, established couples who are going to look after your property and keep things nice."

The category of tenant that most sought to avoid were heavy drinkers and alcoholics – seen as unreliable payers and deeply problematic tenants

The tenant type that most were keenest to avoid were heavy drinkers and recovering addicts or alcoholics. Such tenants were regarded as not only likely to be unreliable in terms of making rental payments but likely also to be disruptive to other tenants. Those who had taken on tenants with alcohol or drug addiction issues, in the most part unknowingly, reported that tenancies broke down rapidly and that properties were returned in an unacceptable condition.

"Well I have in the past had a recovering alcoholic and it only worked for 3 months, because once he got back on the drink, that's it. Violence, trouble, fights. Also I did get overall the years in between I did get someone who was on drug recovery and unfortunately that didn't work out either."

"He was a friend of one of the tenants but the other tenant didn't tell me that he had a major drinking problem, most of the time he was alright and then he suddenly would sort of go mad and he was creating an awful lot of noise for the other tenants and I would get… he would be alright for a week while then everything would go up and I had a lot of trouble with him."

"I have had a few people that have had serious drink problems and they make a mess, other tenants have left because of them."

Those who had taken on vulnerable tenants were keen not to repeat the experience

Those landlords who had, either unwittingly or knowingly, taken on vulnerable tenants who had had problems or required considerable support were particularly wary about taking on similar individuals in the future. Those where tenancies had gone very wrong as a result of alcohol or drug problems were adamant that they would not repeat the experience. It should be emphasised that all of these views were expressed spontaneously in the course or the discussion about letting criteria and before the interviewers posed direct questions about how landlords might feel about taking on vulnerable or high risk tenants and the homeless.

"I would have said everybody deserves a second chance so I had two ex prisoners renting. It wasn't a good experience, I'm telling you. It really wasn't. I wouldn't do that again."

"He (tenant) was known to the system but I was left to sort of handle the problem (tenant had nervous breakdown) and if I hadn't had a key to the door and got him into the Ulster Hospital, you know, I had no authority to go into that flat. So I'd be pretty nervous after that."

"The biggest problems have been with heavy drinkers. Alcoholics – that's one I would avoid if I could. That and drug addicts obviously but you don't always know."

"I don't know that I would go back to that (someone with alcohol and mental health issues). It is too big a responsibility and you have to think about your other tenants even if you are sorry for that person."

"Alcoholics is the worst. They do present a lot of difficulties so if you knew that somebody was an alcoholic I wouldn't take them."

4.3 Attitudes to welfare-supported tenants and the perceived impact of welfare reform

For landlords taking or specifically targeting welfare-supported tenants a key part of the attraction has been the direct payment of benefit to landlords

One of the recruitment criteria for the qualitative research with landlords was that respondents must have a willingness to at least consider welfare-supported tenants. So it is important to recognise that the perspectives provided in this research are those of only that sub-set of landlords who are prepared to let to tenants on benefits. There was recognition among the landlords generally that welfare supported tenants represented an important segment of the market. Indeed a number of the landlords had focused specifically on properties targeting this group. A key part of the attraction of welfare support tenants has however clearly been the direct payment of housing benefit to landlords. Indeed under stressed economic conditions, DHSS tenants could be seen as potentially more reliable than those in employment.

"We are realistic enough to appreciate that, what is it, 46% of all households depend on benefit of some kind, so if we have a couple of single males on benefit they are not going to go anywhere – they will more than likely behave."

"I mean anyone now could be in that market for the simple reason of repossession of houses and people losing their jobs so anybody could be on housing benefit. In today's climate you would be daft not to take DHSS. I mean there's no stigma attached to DHSS and you know you are going to get your money while someone else might lose their job."

"I'd very happily take DHSS because you know you're going to have your money. It's going to be directed straight into your account, so there's not going to be a problem."

"Any Housing Executive tenants we've had have always been spot on and, you know, you've got your money coming in."

"Sad comment on the state of the world. I've had landlords say (to agent) 'No I prefer a Housing Executive tenant because their rent is guaranteed because the ordinary man on the street can be unemployed tomorrow."

Those with reservations were influenced by perceived process delays and difficulties in collecting tenant's personal contributions to rent

Conversely among those who were more reluctant to take DHSS tenants, any resistance was based on concerns about delays in housing benefit claims being processed, or, alternatively, concerns about tenants' ability to make good personal contributions to rent where these were required. A number of landlords had patchy experiences of tenants' personal contributions to rents.

"I think some landlords don't like them (DHSS tenants) because sometimes the housing benefit can take a long time to sort and if you're maybe working on very tight margins then you don't have a contingency."

"I think if you needed the money quickly sometimes, I mean with one tenant it was three months before it got fixed so that is a consideration in my case"

"The other thing is that they can struggle with that little bit of top up so you're not always going to be getting your full rent. That's the only thing with them (DHSS tenants), otherwise I've got no objection really. But other things being equal, you might think, do I want the extra hassle with the top up."

"For a start there was a very small shortfall (in the rent paid by Housing Executive) and they (tenants) just wouldn't pay the shortfall (i.e. their personal contribution to the rent). What are they going to be like if they're given all the money? (under new UC regime)."

Little awareness of welfare reform among small landlords but larger landlords and those targeting welfare-supported tenants very concerned

Among smallest landlords there was relatively little awareness of welfare reform and the potential implications for landlords. Among those specifically targeting welfare-supported tenants and among larger professional landlords, however, there was considerable concern around welfare reform, which was felt likely to potentially have a significant impact on the market.

Deep opposition to direct payment of housing benefits to tenants with most taking view that tenants could not be depended on to pay reliably

The major issue was the proposal to pay housing benefits / rent allowance direct to tenants, to which landlords were deeply opposed primarily because most were not confident that tenants would be able to manage their money or prioritise their rent.

"Rent would not be a priority for them (tenants) in any form so that (payment direct to tenants) would put me off doing it."

"With the housing executive tenants, there was an amount of the rent not paid, not much, but they (Housing Executive) were saying 'No, hold on, they (tenants) have to show responsibility as well to pay part of it (rent)… But as I say, they (tenants) don't see that as rent being their priority and they don't pay and that's what gives me real concerns about my business. The fact is that then they're going to get the full amount (of rent) and it is not their priority."

"In our experience some tenants will pay fitfully, the first thing they do is make sure the rent is paid but others, they don't. Simple as that. If they (tenants) don't understand their responsibilities it is going to be a disaster."

"If it was paid direct to them there is no obvious guarantee it will be paid for rent… That goes against the whole reason I've been going for those tenants."

Those targeting welfare-dependent groups claimed that they would need to rethink this strategy

Those specifically targeting this part of the market tended to feel that this strategy would no longer be viable, on the grounds that cash flow would become much less reliable.

"It will steer Landlords away from people on benefits… It will me certainly and I've been letting to that type of tenants for twenty two years now."

"I was saying to my husband, we'll have to see another way of thinking around that (part of rental market which targeting) but not to keep on with the social housing, that end of it, do you know what I mean"?

"I would say roughly 50% of mine would be on housing benefit roughly, give or take. The ones that are on housing benefit I have never had a problem with and all of them have the housing benefit paid directly to me. In the future I wouldn't be confident that all of them would pay the rent on time. I wouldn't be confident of that at all so obviously I would be worried about letting to people on benefits."

"At the moment I have about 60% on benefits. I would have a place empty before I let anyone drink their benefits at my expense."

"I have quite a few tenants on benefits and they cannot manage their finances. I think basically what will happen is they will not pay their rent. And I would rather nobody in the house than someone not paying their rent so I think they will be out. I think it will end up with that whole part of the housing renting sector will collapse."

Landlords who might previously have been happy to consider welfare-dependent tenants saw them as an unattractive tenant group for the future

Others, less dependent on housing benefit-supported tenants simply took the view that they would no longer consider such tenants. Most saw themselves simply as moving away from welfare-supported tenants and felt confident that there would be sufficient private sector demand to preclude having to consider tenants on benefits.

"You might have judged DHSS the same beforehand, but not any more. You'll take a private tenant first."

"I think it will go back to no DHSS like you used to see in newspapers. I have a DHSS in at the moment but I wouldn't be comfortable now taking on another."

"I mean I wouldn't take them. Bring their cash if they are working, I can't get it, I don't really care whether people are on benefits or not but then I would care."

Caps on benefit entitlement were also a major concern as were the proposed funding arrangements for under 35s

Potential caps on benefit entitlement was also a major concern, with landlords taking the view that many existing tenants would no longer be able to afford existing rents and that few would be capable or have the resource to make up the gap between current rents and their allowance entitlement. Those who were already dealing with tenants who were making personal contributions to their rent were the most likely to feel this way. Equally, the new requirements for the under thirty fives to live in shared accommodation was a particular concern for those with one bedroom flats, who felt that this part of the market would be significantly impacted by the new funding criteria.

"I have several one bedroom flats. I've converted houses to make one bedroom flats. Now there is not going to be the people to take on those flats."

"There are simply not that number of multiple occupation houses here in Northern Ireland. Where are these places going to come from?"

"People are not going to be able to afford to pay their rents and I am not going to be able to afford to keep them. It's that simple."

"Even if I had that kind of property I would not want to be in that kind of business. Shared houses is just trouble with a capital T. Respectable one and two bedroom accommodation, people are going to look after it because it is their own home."

Except at lowest end of the market most felt demand sufficiently outstripped supply not to force reductions in rental values

Views on the impact of reductions in benefit entitlement were mixed. Some, towards the middle and upper end of the market did not see themselves as likely to have to reduce their prices. Others simply could not afford to do so. The longer-term larger landlords with the greatest leeway in terms of cash flow tended to be more pragmatic, taking the view that ultimately prices would be determined by the market and supply and demand. Most of these landlords felt cushioned against falling prices by relatively ample liquidity and remained confident that demand would outstrip

supply in any case, limiting price falls. For those who had already moved to invest outside Northern Ireland, the prospect of falling rents in what was already seen as an unattractive market reinforced views that returns were likely to be better elsewhere in the UK.

"In the end there is still a shortage of supply so I don't think that is going to change. So I don't think that we're in a position where we do have to reduce our rents."

"I could adjust mine and still have an income but that is only because I have not mortgages. Anyone who has a mortgage couldn't do it."

"I've always got a good choice of tenants. Never had any problem letting. Keep my properties nice. Just wouldn't consider it."

"My costs are going up and I don't see it being viable financially for me to consider reducing the rent, so 'No, I wouldn't'."

"I think it is going to make it very difficult for single people on benefits under 35 to get any accommodation. They will become homeless because you simply cannot afford to let anyone like that in – you could bring your rent down a little bit but not by that much."

"In the last few years I've invested in property elsewhere in the UK because the returns are so much better and this will reinforce that strategy."

At the bottom end of the market there was greater readiness to accept that the impact of welfare reform might be to effect a fall in rental income

At the bottom of the market, landlords were more ready to accept that the outcome of caps and reductions on benefit entitlement would be price falls, albeit that this was the cause of some considerable concern

"I think we have all got to realistically accept that we are in the market and rents will fall if there aren't tenants there and we can all say we don't want to reduce our rents but if that means your house stays empty long term, you are faced with choices at the end of the day."

"When I buy the property I've worked out, do you know what I mean, what I need to get there. What's happening now is that if the rent's going down… it's going to make it harder for me… because it isn't fitting in now with what I had, do you know what I mean, I had worked out that the business was going to take in. I could be in a very difficult position."

Other landlords took the view that while they could not afford to drop the rent they could afford to leave their properties empty even less.

"Obviously no-one is going to like it but we cannot stop it happening and in the end if you have had a property empty for three months you are going to take a risk and let someone in at a lower rent because it is better than no rent and an empty house and someone stealing all the pipes because the house is empty."

"My opinion, if the universal credit comes in, no one in their right mind is going to take on a DHSS person so ultimately private tenants are going to have their pick of the crop – but that's a limited market as well. If you cannot get out of the market you may have

to consider what rent you can get but you are not going to be investing in that property in the way that you would like to."

"I mean, obviously it's easy to say offload but if you can't sell it you can't get out but certainly it would have an impact (on the viability of the finances of his rental business which is focused on benefit-dependent households). Some of the house I bought I bought in good times and some of them I bought I didn't buy in such good times so that would pose a problem for me with some of those properties. I simply couldn't afford it… but I can say that till I am blue in the face but the reality is I can't afford for those properties to be empty either."

A widespread view that welfare reform will disrupt the market resulting in empty housing and benefit recipients being shut out of much of market

Overall the view was that the impact on the housing market was likely to be significant, and for landlords, highly adverse, accelerating existing declines in prices. Some of the more pessimistic took the view that the potential outcome could be a dysfunctional market in which the poor could not access decent housing and landlords could neither achieve an appropriate level of return nor leave the market. Some saw the result being that already inadequate rents relative to the rest of the UK would fall further, causing rising financial distress among landlords, an increase in empty housing and distress sales, a decline in the standard of the housing stock and a permanently depressed residential property market. A small minority took the view that greater use of the PRS for social housing would help to re-set the market at a level from which it could start to recover and grow, albeit that it would leave rents at a lower level and result in a painful period of adjustment.

"I think they (welfare tenants) will all be out because they will not be paying their rent. I think it will end up with the whole housing renting sector at that end of the market collapsing."

"It will increase homelessness because you will not take anybody on unless you have got a Guarantor because you won't take that risk as a private Landlord or letting agent."

"The private tenants are going to have a field day and the other sort are not going to be housed and we as landlords are going to lose out both ends and it will be a disaster for the property market. It's going to be very, very painful."

"People on benefits will not be able to get accommodation through the private sector but where are these people going to come from with jobs to fill those empty houses? They're not going to be there and you'll get a lot of empty houses and a lot of people on benefits who won't be able to get accommodation."

4.4 Attitudes to taking on vulnerable and homeless tenants

PRS landlords were deeply resistant to taking on what was seen as a high risk tenant group

The letting criteria and attitudes to taking on vulnerable tenants described in 4.2 do not sit well with the idea of serving more vulnerable and homeless tenants within the PRS. The research team specifically proposed to the various landlords the idea of

taking on vulnerable and higher risk tenants and sought to explore with them both the degree to which they would be prepared to consider such tenants and where the potential limits to acceptance of such tenants might lie.

For the most part landlords were deeply resistant to the idea of taking on vulnerable tenants and most were emphatic that they would not consider housing tenants with needs at the more complex end of the spectrum.

"I wouldn't entertain it. Plain and simple. No."

"I know people deserve a second chance. But they can get it elsewhere as far as I'm concerned. We can't afford to."

"We're talking about risks here and I think we have risks enough to deal with without having another risk and for me it would be a risk too many."

"Even if I was sympathetic I would have to be hard nosed. This is my house and I need the rent to cover my debt and I just could not take the risk."

"Well, I don't think the support would be there from landlords truth be told for problem tenants. Especially if rents were going down, you just couldn't afford to."

A broad spectrum of greater or lesser resistance with depression at one extreme and violent and sex offenders at the other

The researchers explored a number of possible tenant types and the degree of resistance associated with each to map those with varying degrees of vulnerability and with differing characteristics across a spectrum of more or less deeply felt resistance. Concern was relatively mild in the case of some mental health issues but became absolute resistance in the cased of addicts or violent offenders while resistance to housing sex offenders went off the scale.

"I think it very much depends on the type of vulnerable tenant. Say it's someone who has a long history of depression or something. Not a problem. I would consider them in a heartbeat. Someone who's a violent alcoholic. Not a chance. There's a sliding scale."

"To be honest, sorry as I might feel for someone who has got mental health problems, while I'd be quite sympathetic, if I had a choice I'd probably take someone without those problems purely because I think they would be more likely to stay and look after the place. I've got young women living in my flats and children so I wouldn't be able to take on anyone who might be violent or sex offenders or anything like that even if I was willing personally, which I wouldn't be. I wouldn't want anything to do with alkies and druggies either. So that's a big fat No."

"Some things I would never do. I wouldn't consider a sex offender. Not only because I wouldn't want to have to deal with that sort of person but for practical reasons as well. Would my place get damaged if anyone ever found out?"

Concerns centred on the potential for short and broken tenancies, damage to property, anti-social behaviour and disruption to other tenants and neighbours

For the landlords, the key concerns and fears rested on the following points:

- Tenancies with vulnerable tenants were thought more likely to break down
- Many feared damage to the property, with fire hazards being a concern also

- Vulnerable tenants were seen as having the potential to disturb other tenants and neighbours
- Many felt that young vulnerable men in particular implied a high risk of anti-social behaviour and partying
- Most associated vulnerable tenants with an unacceptable level of additional work and sheer hassle
- There were concerns that tenants would be difficult to deal with in the event of rent arrears and that it might be difficult to get rid of a vulnerable tenant in the event that problems did arise
- There were fears that anti-social behaviour or neglect of the property could devalue property and / or /or the neighbourhood

The prospects of alcoholics, addicts and offenders as tenants raised a series of fears from violent confrontation to difficulties in evicting problem tenants

"Basically, you don't want the extra work. Most landlords are just one person on their own. You don't want all the extra cost and hassle that is going to go with taking on someone who is going to be on the phone all the time or there are going to be problems which you are going to have to deal with."

"You would sort of worry. If I go down and ask for the rent and its two months late, will I get smacked for my trouble?"

"Will they trash the place? Will there be violence and the police called?"

"There would also be the fear that if anyone finds out (in case of sex offenders) would the windows get broken and the place torched?"

"How would you get rid of them if it all went pear-shaped?"

"And what sort of escape clause do we have that we don't have to sort of go to Court if it all ends in tears?"

Landlords felt strongly that it was not their role or that of the PRS to take on a social role in supporting vulnerable tenants

Housing and supporting vulnerable tenants was seen very much as the role of social housing and social services and not that of private landlords, who see themselves primarily as running a business.

"I'm only supplying a house, you know. I'm not a social worker. Even if you had their social worker on speed dial. Even if you had someone there monitoring. You're still going to be getting phone calls from your neighbours."

"Basically. You don't want the extra work. Most landlords are just one person on their own. You don't want all the extra cost and hassle that is going to go with taking on someone who is going to be on the phone all the time or there are going to be problems which you are going to have to deal with."

"It is not what I am looking for it is not what I am in this for, it is not in my view it is not really what the private rented sector is about."

4.5 Overcoming private landlord resistance to housing vulnerable tenants

Some landlords were open to discussion of how the PRS and housing authorities might work together on housing vulnerable tenants with complex needs

The research team explored with PRS landlords what it would take to overcome their resistance to housing vulnerable tenants with complex needs. Some landlords, particularly those who felt most confident on the potential for alternative tenant demand and were least financially pressured were not prepared even to consider any proposition around this tenant group. Others, especially larger landlords, those targeting welfare-dependent tenants or whose finances were more finely balanced were more open to discussion.

Premium rents and direct payment of rent to landlords would not be sufficient in isolation to overcome resistance to housing vulnerable tenants

It was clear that fears were such that neither a premium rent nor exempting vulnerable tenants from the direct payment of housing benefits to tenants would be sufficient in isolation as a motivator. Premium rents were important to some, but even those who currently let at premium rents for short term emergency accommodation did not find the additional income sufficient compensation for the risk of housing vulnerable tenants on a long term basis. Similarly, partly on the basis of historical experience, landlords did not think that direct payment of rent to landlords would have any impact on the probability that lettings to those with complex needs would rapidly break down, especially in the case of tenants with drug, alcohol or certain types of mental health issues.

Landlords were clear that they would wish to contract directly with the housing authorities or other third parties

The primary issues for landlords were around mitigating the key business risks on both their income stream and the quality of their asset – and thus around security of income and tenure and the care of their property. Essentially, in order to be comfortable landlords wanted to contract with the authorities directly, to be guaranteed a reasonable length of tenure and to have a guarantee that their properties would be returned to them in their original condition.

> *"Well one of the things that could work is if an organisation is looking to place people, why don't they take the tenancy and take on the responsibility of the property and then manage the person within that. Not like a guarantor. I would envisage letting to the organisation."*

> *"If they could undertake to give the property back to you in the condition you gave it to them and guarantee that there will be no damage."*

> *"It could be a wee bit like a corporate let but on a different scale. They return it to you after five years in the state you give it to them whether that's repainted or kitchen fixed, whatever. And if you were guaranteed then I don't really care what they do in the meantime."*

"The only way I'd be doing with it would be dealing with it with an association. I wouldn't be dealing with individuals or anything, I would be completely out of the loop so somebody from an office would be coming out with a clipboard and saying this house suits, we'll take it for three years and there's the deal and then what happens after that – that's the only way I would deal with it to be honest. I wouldn't consider it otherwise – because I don't have the skills."

A minority saw long term contracts with the housing authorities as a potentially attractive alternative to dealing direct with tenants post welfare reform

A minority of landlords, particularly those worried about the impact of welfare reform on their business saw the prospect of such arrangements as potentially a way to resolve what they saw as a looming threat.

"We aren't going to have a choice; you are going to have to look to another alternative because there aren't that many private tenants out there at the moment. On the basis of that, and with what [name] says as the assurances, I would have no hesitation. It would be a choice possibly over a private tenant because it's a guaranteed long term income. It would probably be a better choice for me."

"If they were taking it on as a rented property, they were going to give me a secure income- maybe less than what I'm getting now because I'm able to be guaranteed for it, I mean I'm not looking for people all the time but, you know … . That could actual work really well for me and take the worry out of whether you're going to get your rent, you know."

Landlords wanted to be relieved of the perceived hassle of dealing with tenants that were thought likely to be demanding and time consuming

There was a very strong sense however that guarantees, extended secure tenures and direct contracting arrangements would not be sufficient to make such arrangements work or to make them attractive to landlords. Landlords felt strongly that they lacked the skills and capacity – far less the will – to handle tenants with complex needs and most were simply unwilling to countenance the degree of hassle and support that they felt would be involved. The key for most landlords therefore was the idea that the authorities would take responsibility for tenant support on a series of levels. On one level landlords simply did not want to deal with what they saw as an excessive level of likely support calls.

"For that to work for me they would just have to pay me the rent and give me the property back in perfect condition and I would have to have no hassle at all… they would be responsible for the rates and the upkeep and the maintenance. I'm not going to get the phone call at half past eleven on a Saturday saying there is no battery in the fire alarm."

"I just feel that even then (sense is even with guarantees on tenure and condition of property on return and direct payment of rent)*… it makes it more awkward. I have only got a certain amount of time to manage properties myself so it would just make it… there's a good chance you would have to spend more time managing, you may not be I wouldn't be prepared to take the risk."*

Ultimately the view was that an effective and intensive support package would be the only way to make letting to vulnerable tenants with complex needs work

More fundamentally, however, the major issue was that landlords needed to be confident that tenants with complex problems would receive a fairly intensive level of support from the appropriate authorities. Landlords wanted to feel that support would be delivered at a level that would result in tenancies being stable and that would minimise the potential for crises or upsetting other tenants or neighbours. Essentially they wanted the reassurance that tenants and tenancies would be actively managed with a view to sustainability and stability for tenants and with due respect for property and people around them. Landlords also felt strongly that it was important that authorities were open with them about the nature of the problems prospective tenants faced.

"I think that is very important that if the tenant, a perspective tenant comes with a package as it were there is back up there, then yes you can consider that but if essentially the Government or the State is kind of asking you to house a problem case and leaving it in some ways to you… "

"A serious premium rent and if there was proper support as well. If they came with a package I don't think I would have a problem."

"For me it would depend on the quality of the support package. If they were bringing something along the lines of yes, we'll contract to you for five years or something then the quality of that, you would weigh against the risk of losing control of who came in."

"I would consider it and it would depend on the person and the backup they had, I could not take the responsibility but if I could help someone get a place with the proper support that they need I think I might consider it."

"Now if they had mental health issues… and they've got some back up and they are presented to you from a statutory organisation then that is completely different (sense is would consider tenant would otherwise reject)*."*

The other key area of concern was how crises or seriously unacceptable behaviour would be dealt with and how problem tenancies could be ended

Other concerns then arose over how tenancies would be resolved in the event that things went wrong. Here landlords were thinking both in terms of personal crises and seriously unacceptable behaviour. Landlords wanted to know that the authorities would take responsibility in the event of a crisis. They also wanted some form of rapid resolution exit in the event of serious problem behaviour and not to have to take responsibility for evicting problem tenants. Finally several raised the issue of compensation for damage or loss of rent in the event of a breakdown of a tenancy that took a long time to resolve. Here the backdrop was a perception that the courts tended in any case to have a pro-tenant bias and a view that legal action was always a protracted process.

"I mean not just necessarily with say with the property but say with that, you know, if for example, that person kind of freaked out and had to be taken out of the house, you know? I mean I wouldn't want the responsibility of me having to boot them out, you know what I mean, putting it mildly. But, you know, I mean, for okay then, whoever it

is, they come in and take her out and sort it out. So if they're going to give us the problems then they need to be able to be there to deal with them."

"And what sort of escape clause do we have that we don't have to sort of go to court? … "By the time you get them to court, the courts are not your friend, so you need to have some sort of certainty that you would get support.

"If it's maybe a high risk tenant who has a history of drug/alcohol problems, if after six months they wreck your house, you really have no comeback. So what would they do about that?"

Summary – Landlords' needs if to be comfortable with letting to vulnerable homeless tenants with complex needs

Premium rents important to some but not sufficient as a motivator in isolation

- **Key components of package that might feel comfortable with:**
  - **Contract made with relevant authority**
  - **Authorities provide guarantees for:**
    - **Rent paid direct to landlord**
    - **Length of tenure**
    - **Property returned in original condition**
  - **Authorities take responsibility for:**
    - **Letting and interaction with tenants**
    - **Management of tenancies**
    - **Support for tenants**
  - **Easy exit in event that tenancy does not work out**
  - **Transparency on nature of tenant and reasons for homelessness**

The evidence from landlords would seem to suggest that there may be a number of ways forward in engaging private landlords in Northern Ireland with housing vulnerable and homeless individuals. However, it also suggests that solutions will need to rest not only on addressing the financial and management aspects of these tenancies but also a wider range of vulnerable tenants' support needs. The next chapter, which describes best practice models from other countries, suggests that private landlords in Northern Ireland share many of the attitudes and needs of landlords elsewhere.

5.0 Best practice models – evidence and lessons from elsewhere

This chapter draws from the literature review and interviews with practitioners at the front line of delivering new and innovative housing solutions within the PRS to tackle homelessness, including entrenched chronic exclusion homelessness. It is intended as background both to the review of the perspectives of stakeholders and housing policy makers described in chapter six and to the conclusions we draw in chapter 7.

5.1 A brief contextual history of changing attitudes to use of the PRS

Historically homelessness organisations were resistant to use of the PRS

For several decades in both Northern Ireland and the UK more widely there was some resistance to using the PRS as a housing solution for homeless and potentially homeless people among the voluntary and charitable organisations who campaigned on behalf of homeless people or which provided homelessness services. During the 1980s and 1990s, the objections to using the PRS centred on three main issues (Bevan and Rhodes, 1997):

- PRS housing could not offer the same security of tenure as social housing.
- PRS housing was less affordable than social housing and social housing tended to offer better standard accommodation for significantly less rent.
- The PRS sector had a bad reputation, a legacy of the images of 'slum landlords' from the 1950s and 1960s.

Attitudes changed as evidence pointed to negative effects associated with concentrations of spatial poverty and understanding of PRS increased

During the 1990s and 2000s the attitude towards the PRS among many voluntary and charitable sector services working in homelessness underwent a significant change. The Right to Buy and reductions in building of new social housing began to constrict the supply of social housing, and although the discounts lessened and the regulation increased, 116,000 NIHE properties had been sold to sitting tenants by 2007 (Gray and McAnulty, 2008). Concerns also grew, reflecting those elsewhere in the UK, that as the more affluent tenants bought their homes, social housing was becoming a tenure in which workless households were concentrated, leading to the creation of spatial concentrations of poverty that 'caused' negative area effects (Gray and McAnulty, 2010).

As pressures on the capacity of social housing have increased, homelessness agencies have sought to understand how to utilise PRS to meet housing need

As pressure on the social rented sector increased, voluntary and charitable homelessness agencies began to look more carefully at how they could use the PRS to tackle homelessness. Research had begun to contradict some of the earlier views of the PRS, showing that the widespread image of the PRS as always being an 'insecure' tenure and as offering only poor quality accommodation, were not actually an accurate picture of most private renting. While there were still abuses and problems in the PRS, much of the sector delivered decent housing and was also capable of

providing security of tenure (Rugg and Rhodes, 2008). The restriction of supply of social housing combined with new evidence and understanding that the PRS could make a good housing offer to homeless and potentially homeless people, led to the development of new forms of homelessness services.

5.2 Innovative and effective use of the private rented sector to house homeless people

The PRS has the advantage of flexibility and greater immediacy of access

The PRS has several advantages over social housing, which centre on the degree of flexibility it is able to offer. Social housing tends to be relatively concentrated and while there are areas in towns and cities in which the lower end of the PRS dominates, the PRS can often offer more choice in terms of location. In towns and cities, the PRS can also offer more flexibility in terms of the range of properties that can be offered, an advantage over social housing in those areas in which the Right to Buy tended to deplete particular kinds of stock, or in which the nature of housing need has changed since social housing was built on a large scale. Finally, the PRS has the advantage of immediate or near immediate availability in a context in which access to social housing may take considerable time (Gray and McAnulty, 2008 and 2010).

Three key forms of innovative service delivery that have been proven to improve effective use of PRS even for homeless with high support needs

There are three forms of innovative service that can improve access to the PRS for homeless people: social lettings agencies, Housing First and Housing-Led services. The latter two service types can be used to successfully house homeless people with high support needs in the PRS.

5.2.1 Social lettings agencies

Social lettings agencies can be employed both for prevention and to enable rapid access to affordable housing for people who have become homeless.

Many of the concerns that homeless people and the agencies working with homeless people can have about using PRS housing can potentially be addressed through the use of social lettings agencies (Rugg and Rhodes, 2008; Crisis and CLG, 2010; Crisis, 2011).

The social lettings agency model (sometimes called the local lettings agency model) is a self financing access scheme that was developed by the Centre for Housing Policy (Rugg and Rhodes, 2008) and which has been widely advocated and deployed in England, Scotland and Wales by Crisis (Crisis, 2011). The social lettings agency offers a full property management service and guarantees rent payments to PRS landlords in return for a competitive fee. Once a PRS landlord has signed up, the social lettings agency then arranges access to PRS housing for potentially homeless people, people who have become homeless and other groups who might have difficulty securing PRS housing on their own. In return for their fee to the social lettings agency, the PRS landlord collects the bulk of the rent for their property and has all the housing

management, from finding a tenant through to rent collection and the management of any problems or issues that might arise, handled by the social lettings agency.

The social lettings agency model theoretically removes a number of the potential risks and barriers in using the PRS to tackle homelessness

The risk that potentially homeless and homeless people might be placed in substandard PRS housing is removed because the social lettings agency inspects PRS properties before accepting them and maintains the properties once they have been accepted. The potential risks from the perspective of the PRS landlord are removed, the rent is guaranteed and the process of letting and managing the house is entirely handled by the social lettings agency, meaning there is no need for the PRS landlord to even meet the tenant or tenants. Equally, any concerns about the possibility of substandard PRS housing management, from the perspective of homeless and potentially homeless people are also removed, again because the housing manager is the social lettings agency. The social lettings agency model cannot remove all risks, for example it cannot guarantee sustained security of tenure (though there is the potential for PRS landlords to sign up for long periods), but it does address a wide range of concerns and potential barriers.

Social lettings agencies have become increasingly widespread in England, Scotland and Wales[8]

Although social lettings agencies are a recent innovation and the research base is not as well developed as it could be, there is some evidence that social lettings agencies can work well with single homeless people, including vulnerable groups (Luby, 2008).

The core components of a social lettings agency are as follows (Crisis, 2011):

- The model is a working business. It is designed to be self-financing and must operate on the basis that it generates enough revenue from PRS landlords to sustain the housing management services it offers to PRS landlords and to potentially homeless and homeless people. A social lettings agency could work with any PRS landlord, including those charging higher rents, to support its wider business and core role in ensuring access to affordable, adequate PRS housing for homeless, potentially homeless and vulnerable people.
- An effective housing management service that satisfies PRS landlords that their properties are being cared for, reliably delivers the rental income to those PRS landlords and also meets the housing management needs of tenants who might be vulnerable because of their exposure to homelessness or because they are at potential risk of homelessness.
- Alongside housing management, a social lettings agency can also provide other services such as marketing PRS properties, providing accompanying staff when a potential tenant views a PRS property and advising PRS landlords on rent levels.

[8] http://www.privaterentedsector.org.uk

In Northern Ireland, the key working example of such an access scheme is the well respected and successful "SmartMove NI", which operates in Derry, Belfast, Fermanagh, Omagh and Armagh and offers a mix of housing advice, support to landlords and assistance with rent deposits[9].

The social lettings agency model goes some way to address the needs of PRS landlords but is designed to support those with less complex needs

The social lettings agency model builds upon earlier attempts to improve access to the PRS. These earlier attempts centred on housing advice and, particularly, rent deposit schemes, which arranged for rent deposits to be paid so that potentially homeless and homeless people could access PRS housing. These schemes could facilitate access to the PRS, but they left the concerns of both PRS landlords and some homeless people about living in PRS housing unaddressed, because housing management was left with the PRS landlord (Crisis, 2008). Crisis has produced a range of guidance on the use of social lettings agencies to house single homeless people[10].

It is important to emphasise that social lettings agency models are not sufficient in themselves to address the complex needs of the most vulnerable homeless

A social lettings agency might also offer some related support services for homeless people and/or operate as one element of a service that is designed to provide stable housing for homeless people with support needs at varying levels. Used in isolation, the evidence is that social lettings models are suitable only for those with relatively low level support needs. For those with more extensive support needs a social lettings agency has been most effectively combined with the Housing First or Housing led service (see below), with the former most appropriate for those with the most complex needs and the latter used where less intensive support is required.

5.2.2 Using the PRS for homeless people with high needs

There are various forms of service provision that enable the use of the PRS to house homeless people with high support needs. A homeless or potentially homeless person with high support needs would include someone who:

- Is chronically homeless, i.e. characterised by repeated attempts at rehousing and resettlement that had failed, has problematic drug and alcohol use and severe mental illness.
- Has high support needs linked to physical disability or long term limiting illness (this might also include some chronically homeless people).

These models all use the same underlying structure, which is to provide the same kind of housing management service as offered by social lettings agencies, coupled with the provision of mobile support services that enable homeless people with high support needs to live independently in PRS housing.

[9] http://www.smartmoveni.co.uk/
[10] http://www.privaterentedsector.org.uk/key_principles.asp

5.2.3 Housing First models

The Housing First model was developed originally in New York to address the needs of the chronically homeless

The most prominent example of these kinds of service is Pathways Housing First (PHF) which was developed in New York (Tsemberis, 2010a). Housing First was developed when evidence began to mount that a small proportion of the homeless population on the streets and in emergency shelters were what is termed 'chronically' homeless in the USA. These homeless people very often had severe mental illness and exhibited problematic drug and alcohol use and had very poor physical health. They were also often experiencing homelessness for long periods, which had severe impacts on both their well-being and chances in life. In addition, chronically homeless people had been found to represent a significant financial cost to American society because they made heavy use of very expensive emergency medical services, the homeless emergency shelter (i.e. direct access) system and were frequently encountered by criminal justice services and characterised by very high rates of short term imprisonment.

Unparalleled and sustained success in promoting housing stability among the chronically homeless while also reducing costs to the state

The New York model of Housing First run by Pathways, provides access to PRS housing coupled with floating support services and dedicated addiction and mental health services. This model takes a unique approach in offering immediate, largely unconditional access to PRS housing, i.e. while service users must accept home visits from the housing support workers, there is no requirement that a client must use the mental health and addiction services on offer or that they cease to engage in problematic drug or alcohol use. This largely unconditional access to PRS housing does not change over time, someone can be housed by PHF for years, continue to drink, use drugs and not use the mental health and addition services that are made available. PHF has shown *unparalleled* and *sustained* success in promoting housing stability among a group of chronically homeless people who were hitherto very difficult to house on a lasting basis (Tsemberis, 2010). Housing First models have been adopted as a core element of the US Federal strategy to end homelessness (USICH, 2010).

The Housing First model rests on provides housing solution first with support based on core principles which are people-centred and needs led

The Pathways Housing First (PHF) model is described as following a core philosophy which has been summarised as follows (Tsemberis, 2010b). It is not a "pick and mix" menu of components but rather an integrated approach underpinned by an underlying holistic philosophy which has been the key to its success.

- **Housing as a basic human right.**
- **Respect, warmth and compassion for all clients (a 'client' is a chronically homeless person using the PHF service).**
- **A commitment to working with clients for as long as they need.**
- **Scattered site housing, i.e. ordinary PRS housing that is scattered across a city or region and not concentrated in any one building, street or postcode.**
- **Separation of housing and services.**
- **Consumer choice and self determination.**
- **A recovery orientation in relation to mental health problems and drug and alcohol use.**
- **A Harm reduction, rather than abstinence based, approach in relation to drugs and alcohol.**

Housing is within the PRS to welfare recipients with chronic mental health conditions with service users having a choice on accommodation

- A **housing specialist** who arranges access to suitable housing. All PHF service users have PRS housing. A PHF service will often sign a contract or tenancy agreement with a PRS landlord and then require a formerly chronically homeless person to sign a sublease or sub-tenancy agreement. Chronically homeless people using PHF must usually be in receipt of welfare benefit payments linked to severe mental illness in order to make a contribution to the rental costs of their apartment. PHF allows service users some choice about where they live and what kind of housing they live in, though this is subject to some budget limitations.

The emphasis is on independent living and managing relationships with landlords and the community

- **Support** with **maintaining housing stability** and **living an independent life.** This might include assistance with claiming welfare benefit payments to which a service user is entitled, help in getting used to living independently and learning about their neighbourhood, help managing relationships with the private landlord, maintaining their home, budgeting and shopping. The main mechanism for this is a weekly home visit to each service user in the apartment by a PHF staff member.

Integrated multi-disciplinary mobile support team which includes a peer specialist as a model for "recovery" from chronic homelessness

- An **Assertive Community Treatment (ACT)** team of mobile support staff and medical professionals. This part of the service is closely modelled on the ACT teams developed in mental health services in the US. A PHF ACT team includes a Team Leader who coordinates the services provided, along with a part-time psychiatrist, a part time provider of primary medical care (either a doctor or nurse-practitioner) and a full time nurse. In addition, the ACT team will include a

qualified social worker, usually with specialist knowledge of mental health, and specialists in supported employment, a drug and alcohol specialist and an administrative assistant. The ACT team must also include a 'peer specialist'. This is an individual qualified to provide support who has been through the experience of chronic homelessness themselves. Alongside providing practical support, the 'peer specialist' is also seen as a 'living illustration' that 'recovery' from chronic homelessness is possible.

High ratio of support staff to service users and emphasis on reconnection with family and building personal relationships

- An ACT team may also include what is termed a 'family specialist'; this is essentially a worker whose role centres on positive reconnection between a formerly chronically homeless person and their family. In addition, an ACT team may also include what is termed a 'wellness management and recovery specialist', a role that centres on helping a formerly chronically homeless person develop and manage positive personal relationships and which encourages a generally healthy lifestyle. The ACT team provides intensive support; a ten person ACT team would be responsible for around 70 formerly chronically homeless people, a ratio of one staff member for each seven service users.

Co-ordinated multi agency approach which "brokers" service provider with service users

- An **Intensive Case Management** (ICM) team. The ICM is also based on a service model used for people with mental health problems in the US. As a 'case management' service, the ICM team has what is termed a 'brokerage' role. This means that the ICM connects a service user with services provided by other agencies. The ICM refers service users to external services and supports them in accessing those services. The ICM therefore helps arrange support for people using PHF services, by connecting service users to service providers other than PHF. The ICM team also provides some direct support itself. The ICM model uses dedicated support staff who are each assigned up to 20 service users, the ICM team focusing primarily on chronically homeless people with lower levels of mental health problems and problematic drug and alcohol use.

"Recovery" and participation in society rests on promoting social and economic inclusion

- Promotion of **social and economic inclusion** for homeless people alongside meeting their support needs, centring on enabling community participation and facilitating access to education, training and support with securing paid work.

5.2.4 Housing Led models

Less intensive Housing First and Housing Led services may be suitable for homeless people with less intensive support needs.

Alongside the PHF model, there are various alternative models that are sometimes described as 'Housing First' (as *distinct* from Pathways Housing First or PHF) and sometimes described as 'Housing Led' models. These services essentially function in the same basic way as PHF, but they differ in three important respects:

- Support is less intensive, some 'Housing First' or 'Housing-Led' models offer only an ICM service and may also offer a less intensive version of case management that does not provide any direct support.
- Support may be time limited, unlike the PHF model.
- There may not be wholesale adoption of the PHF philosophy.

They can be significantly cheaper to run than PHF, which is designed for the most extreme form of homelessness and enables independent living for chronically homeless people in PRS housing. Most of the examples of Housing-Led services in the UK and the rest of Europe are centred on social rented housing, but there are an increasing number of services that either focus on the PRS or support formerly and potentially homeless people in a mix of PRS and social rented housing (Busch-Geertsema *et al*, 2010). Evidence on the effectiveness of Housing First and Housing Led models is much less rigorous or extensive than for the effectiveness of PHF services (Pleace, 2011), but the use of Housing Led services using the PRS for some groups of homeless people, including former offenders, is quite widespread in England (Pleace and Minton, 2009).

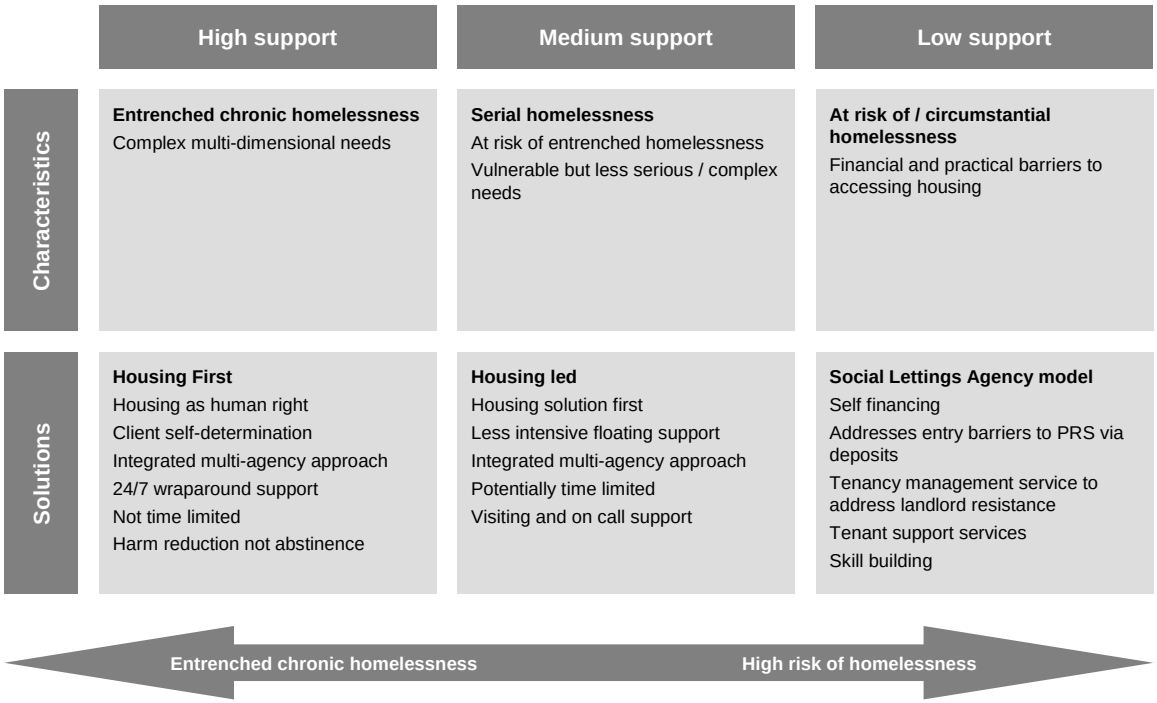
5.3 Using the PRS to address homelessness

Summary of lessons from elsewhere

The key lessons identified by the literature review and from the experience of other countries are as follows:

- **Social lettings schemes can overcome many of the concerns of PRS landlords and potential PRS tenants who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless**. The social letting scheme model effectively takes over the housing management function from a PRS landlord, reducing or removing the potential concerns of both PRS landlords and potential tenants from among the homeless and potentially homeless population.
- **There is strong evidence from the USA that PRS housing can be used to house the most vulnerable groups of homeless people**. The Pathways Housing First model has led to the widespread adoption of Housing First and Housing Led services that are designed to use mobile support services and housing management services to **successfully sustain homeless people with even the highest needs in the PRS**.

Figure 2: Client needs and the fit with the new housing models



The critical factor in success is to match the solution to the complexity of the needs of the client and the extent to which homelessness has become entrenched. At one end of the spectrum, when seeking to address the needs of the chronic homeless with complex problems across multiple dimensions, the full "Housing First" model has been shown to deliver a sustainable move away from homelessness. Those experiencing serial homelessness but with less complex needs have been effectively helped into sustainable housing with the cheaper to deliver and less intensive support encapsulated within the "Housing Led" model. In both of these instances, the Social Lettings Agency model may have a role to play in facilitating the set up of the initial tenancy, but would not be effective in isolation for those with less complex problems. For those with lower support needs, where barriers to housing may rest on the need for a deposit and a tenant profile that would otherwise be unattractive to private landlords, the Social Letting model has been shown to deliver sustainable housing for those who are at high risk of homelessness or serial tenancy breakdown. Here the intervention is primarily aimed at effecting entry to the PRS and avoiding the revolving door of serial housing failure.

6.0 The stakeholder perspective

This chapter describes the perspectives of various stakeholders in government and in the charity and voluntary sector on the issues. It describes, from a Northern Ireland perspective, the drivers for greater use of the PRS, the perceived issues and challenges likely to arise and the experience of those seeking to work with the homeless and meet housing need within the PRS. Finally it describes stakeholders' views on the way forward in using the private rental sector to meet housing need for the homeless, including the vulnerable "multiple-exclusion" homeless with complex needs.

6.1 Drivers of use of the PRS to meet housing need and address homelessness

Use of the PRS is seen by policy makers as a logical response to changed conditions

There was some divergence between the views of those in Government and the third sector around the desirability of use of the PRS and its advantages and disadvantages relative to social housing.

For policy makers, the use of the PRS was a logical response to changed conditions, with planners increasingly inclined simply to make best use of all the housing options open to them, and taking the view also that the PRS had some advantages for housing planners in offering inherently greater choice and flexibility.

> *"For us a housing unit is a housing unit. I don't think it matters who it is managed by as long as the person gets the appropriate support."*

> *"I think the challenges and perceived difficulties with it (the PRS) are keener in the minds of those who are used to being able to place people in a secure-tenure environment. But in the current economic situation, you know, that is a luxury we can no longer afford."*

> *"We have a serious image problem in that people tend to think that if you're in the private rental sector, you are already disadvantaged… but in fact a lot of the work that we've been doing demonstrates quite the opposite… people can have their independence and decide what kind of property they want and where they want to live and quite often they want to live in mixed areas."*

Community organisations were more likely to see the PRS as a second-best option because it can be perceived as inherently less secure and more expensive. There was, however, broad recognition across the stakeholder community that the reality is that housing need cannot be met by the social housing sector alone. It was widely accepted that the PRS has been, and will increasingly become, an important part of the mix in terms of housing the homeless, welfare-dependent and low income households.

> *"I have seen a sea change, even over the last 18 months. Community organisations realise they have to use the private rental… and in the last two years people have gone, Well, I think we'll have to make it work."*

Use of the PRS in addressing housing need is seen as the corollary of the shortage of social housing and the rapid growth of the PRS in Northern Ireland

Policy officials saw the increased use of the PRS as driven by a shortage of social housing, a long term decline in funding for social build, the explosive growth and collapse of the property market in Northern Ireland and rapid growth of private sector rentals as a tenure option. This was set against the long waiting lists for social housing, including many tenant types, such as single men, who were unlikely ever to accumulate sufficient points be housed within the social sector and the communities in which they had grown up.

> *"We're increasingly conscious of the ever growing waiting list that we have, and our ever reducing levels of new build in the social housing sector, and therefore the need to explore to what extent the private rented sector could play a part in assisting us to meet that housing need."*

> *"It's a lack of finance for social build. Therefore we need to use the private rented sector for people who require housing. It's quite straightforward."*

> *"If you look at our waiting list nearly half of it would be singles who have little or no chance of getting in to that stock and with welfare reform coming along won't be able to afford it anyway. To my mind there is an opportunity. We have quite an over-supply of flats around the major towns and cities."*

> *"There simply isn't enough social housing to meet the need. So we are now looking to the private rental sector as a medium to long term solution for those that cannot get access to the social housing side".*

Greater use of PRS is also seen as having social mobility and community cohesion benefits

Policy and planning officials also saw greater use of the PRS as offering wider social mobility, economic, regeneration and community integration benefits.

Greater use of the PRS for welfare-supported tenants and thus the creation of more mixed income, mixed religion communities was seen as moving away both from concentrations of spatial poverty, felt to perpetuate disadvantage, but also from the traditional sectarian ghettoised estates that have been so divisive in Northern Ireland.

> *"It's an opportunity also in terms of social mobility and physical mobility. In a Northern Ireland context we are a very polarised society, with some traditional sectarian ghettos while… in the private rental side both sides of the community are happy to live."*

> *"You have more shared spaces being provided through the private rented side for both communities as opposed to the traditional estates, where they're each fighting themselves in."*

> *"It would do far more than the current social housing model to move from a mono-tenure to a mixed tenure – We aspire to that and using the private rented sector is going to facilitate that."*

> *"Another benefit is we would have a lot of clients that would be coming in that would be in mixed marriages. I think the stock, the private rental is more flexible in the areas*

it's in, and it allows for those mixed relationships. I think social housing's often not able to accommodate that."

The PRS was also seen as having a role to play in economic regeneration and in attracting employers and new jobs

Similarly moving tenants into city centres and close to new centres of employment was felt both to have a role to play in regenerating the cities and in attracting employers and new jobs. These regeneration effects were thought to flow from an influx of young people moving into the city centres, and introducing a degree of economic vibrancy and creating a night time economy in the process. The establishment of new housing close to new industry outside the city centres was felt to be benefiting local economies outside city centres.

"In terms of jobs, it (private rental sector growth in city centres) *is actually facilitating growth and jobs and access to job opportunities."*

"The introduction of flats, apartments, etc, even in our smaller towns, right, have facilitated folks to move where the work is, especially as you go further west from Belfast."

"We are also seeing an increase, even in Belfast, of city centre living. Now, you have to remember where we came from here. Like, ten, 15 years ago, this city's closed down at six o'clock at night. So, we now have apartments, regeneration within the area. There's a much more vibrant atmosphere and it's young people that are actually living in the city."

"People are living around new, technology business, the likes of, call centres, outside the city. But in the city, you find banking jobs, ICT jobs, call centre jobs, and they are actually being, being taken up by young folks living in the city, in the towns, with that accommodation being, being made available. What, you know, would have been, if you like, commuter belts for Belfast are now retaining the folks locally."

The PRS was seen primarily as appropriate for singles who are unlikely to qualify for social housing

Housing officials tended to think of the PRS as housing singles and couples, who would be unlikely to qualify for social housing, primarily because the supply within the PRS was primarily one and two bedroom apartments. Indeed the relative lack of larger, low density, family accommodation was seen as one of the limiting factors in deploying the PRS and one which over time would limit the extent to which the PRS could take up the slack left by the lack of new build social housing.

"At this stage here, in terms of meeting housing need, it would still strategically be a major string to our bow in terms of actually meeting day-to-day housing need, especially amongst the singles market. Traditionally, the social rented stock here has been built for family-type accommodation. It really hasn't addressed singles at all. If you look at our waiting list, near half of it would be singles, who have little or no chance of getting into the, the stock that we have, and indeed, with the welfare reform coming along, wouldn't be able to afford it anyhow."

"Is Northern Ireland society prepared to go back to where we basically might have been 40 or 50 years ago in terms of accepting as the norm such high density living for families with young children, you know? So there are broader issues in there and debate about that (the potential of the PRS to meet a range of housing need including families)*"*

As furnished property PRS lets could be a better fit with needs of the young than social housing

PRS housing, often being fully furnished, was also felt a better fit with the needs of many younger people who did not have the resource or desire to equip and furnish a property, as was often required in the case of social housing lets.

"Another big thing is that the majority of it (social housing) is unfurnished, and some people, we had one girl who was offered a wee social house, social flat, through the housing association, but it was unfurnished and undecorated and she had no money to do it."

"The landlords sometimes are beaten with a big stick, but they actually are providing the accommodation fully furnished, that people can walk in with their bags. And that is actually what people actually need – it is depressing to be sat on orange boxes and not be able to do anything about that, which can happen on the social side."

Practitioners on the front line of working with housing need also reported a shift in attitudes among young people and greater acceptance of the PRS

Practitioners working with a range of young people in housing need reported that attitudes and expectations around housing were also changing among the clients that they saw. They reported that younger people who might once have been entirely set on achieving accommodation within a particular community had rather come round to the view that the only realistic option for housing was to look to the private rental sector.

"They want a house in the street which their mother or their sister lives in. But I think people have woken up to reality and realised, do you know what? I'm not getting a social house and the people in Belfast have changed their opinion, there are a lot of other places to live".

"And I'm sorry, well, that street you're going for hasn't got any bigger in 300 years and it's not getting any bigger, you know. So I think people are now more flexible with their choices, and they realise, I just want somewhere to live, so I think people's mindset is changing when they're coming in, that they're going okay, really, this (PRS) is my only option."

6.2 Perceived issues around, and barriers to, effective use of the PRS

Three key issues were raised by stakeholders in relation to greater use of the PRS in meeting housing need – for both welfare-dependent tenants more broadly and the homeless in particular:

- Affordability, seen as a key barrier to access to the PRS, particularly for the young, and likely to become more acute post welfare reform

- Security of tenure
- Standards of accommodation and landlord compliance with health and safety legislation

Affordability was seen as the major issue in seeking to grow use of the PRS

There was consensus among all stakeholders that the major issue in accommodating homeless and welfare-dependent tenants more generally in the PRS was that of affordability. Private sector rents were seen as out of reach for many potential tenants with the requirement for large deposits a huge barrier for those on very limited incomes and with no real capacity for savings.

> *"There are big issues to do with affordability, and by affordability I mean affordability at the point of access, in terms of what can be considerable set up costs involved in taking up private rental accommodation. And, secondly, affordability in terms of maintaining a tenancy and that brings in the whole issue of entitlement to housing benefit, rental levels in the private rented sector, and the extent or otherwise of potential shortfalls between housing benefit entitlement and so on."*

> *"It doesn't matter whether we think that, you know, there should be more social housing or that the private rentals are or are not a good thing, or whatever. People are just not going to be able to afford to live in the private rented sector. And they certainly are going to be pushed into the cheapest margins."*

> *"We have always been conscious that for many young – well, not necessarily young – single adults that private rented accommodation was possibly the only option open to them, and the big stumbling block for many of the people we work with has been, rent deposit and references, and that has been a huge challenge for people who have found themselves not entitled to social housing".*

Restrictions on Housing Benefit entitlement arising from welfare reform were seen as potentially compromising the effort to make greater use of the PRS

The affordability issue was felt likely to be greatly exacerbated by the impact of the forthcoming welfare reforms and in particular by the caps on housing benefit entitlement and the limits relating to local reference rates for private sector rentals.

The various caps, restrictions on entitlement and the under-occupation provisions were felt likely to shut many new potential tenants out of the PRS. These were also though likely to force some of those who were already renting within the PRS out of their existing accommodation in the search for more affordable homes, with both existing and new tenants then competing for the relatively small supply of property at the cheapest end of the market. This in turn was felt likely to increase pressure on demand for the already inadequate supply of social housing stock. Some took the view that affordability barriers could ultimately undermine the effectiveness of the effort to make greater use of the PRS.

> *"I honestly think that outside those who are economically active, given the return that they (landlords) will need to get on it (their investment), I don't think people will be able to pay the rent or afford it (PRS), especially after welfare reform."*

"I think we are going to have, I would call it nearly a crisis there in the private rental side where folks are not going to be able to afford to pay the rents that they are currently servicing. That is going to be a major problem. We're going to see significant pressure being brought on the social sector in terms of our waiting lists."

*"That (*impact of welfare reform) *is the $64,000 question at the minute. But I suppose the overwhelming impression would be that they (Government) run the real risk of totally undermining, sort of, any efforts that we might be able to make in this regard* (making greater use of the PRS)."

Affordability issues were seen as most acute for the under 35s who make up the majority of the homeless and the singles on which PRS effort is focused

Concerns were particularly acute around the forthcoming restrictions on funding other than for a room in shared accommodation for singles under thirty five, a group that makes up a large part of both the homeless population and the population that housing planners are unable to serve within the social housing sector. This was felt likely to severely restrict the potential for the PRS to serve this tenant group, with particularly negative consequence for vulnerable clients who had already settled in private sector accommodation. The reductions in entitlement relative to the rents currently being claimed by this group were seen as so large as to be unacceptable to landlords. Landlords with young single tenants in one bedroom accommodation were expected to give established tenants notice to quit and be unlikely to consider new young welfare-funded tenants. Many took the view that there was in any case insufficient supply of alternative multiple occupation housing in Northern Ireland.

"It's going to be catastrophic, to be truthful because the majority of people I'm working with are generally under 35 years of age and will have numerous barriers to social housing; therefore their, most realistic option is private rental. And there is no way that they can afford the rents that are being charged."

"Can I go to his (client's) landlord and say, actually, instead of that £86 a week you're getting, you're only going to get £43? Do you mind doing that? The landlords can't afford to take a reduction like that."

"You know, he's (client) had bumps along the road but he has settled and now telling him, in February, he can no longer afford his house; he'll have to leave. He's getting to the stage that he's starting to improve himself and now he's built his skills up, and I just feel that we're knocking him right back, setting him back by two years, for £40 a week."

"Now we are going to have perhaps, a conservative estimate, 9,000 people looking for places who are not students, next year which will force people into unregistered HMOs. It's going to put people under extreme risk if they're vulnerable and we do not have a history in Northern Ireland of shared housing. We don't have lodging houses and whatever. We just don't have that".

The potential for falls in rental pricing was seen as limited against the background of buoyant rental demand from frustrated owner-occupiers

Policy makers tended to feel that in Northern Ireland market conditions were such that comparatively few landlords would respond to the changes by reducing their

rents to any significant extent. This was partly because efforts by the housing authorities to reach out to private sector landlords and negotiate rental reductions in exchange for finding tenants and administering tenancy set up had not proved successful in the past.

"When we put out our advertisement for landlords, the response wasn't there. And it's not that the properties aren't there. It's not the private rental market's not there… every local newspaper has at least a full spread, of local lettings that are available there, you know?"

"While landlords might negotiate around a 5% reduction, it's on the understanding they're working with an organisation like SmartMove where they know there's support for tenants, and they know that that element of management has been taken off their hands. In some cases particularly around shared rent, we would be looking at a 50% reduction and what landlord can give that?"

More fundamentally, however, the view was that rental demand was sufficiently buoyant among those who might have previously aspired to owner occupation that landlords would not necessarily feel under any pressure to reduce their rent.

"Now, the government theory is that landlords will reduce their rents accordingly. I do not think that it is in any way realistic. I haven't seen any evidence of that happening in the past, you know, when changes like this have taken place."

"There is a high demand for that property from a market that would otherwise maybe have moved into home ownership and that in turn is pushing up rental levels, you know. So I don't think it's realistic at all to expect or assume that landlords will reduce their rents, so those two aspects alone are going to really bite in terms of the shortfalls, potential shortfalls, between housing benefit levels and rental charges."

"I actually think that there are those (landlords) *that will be able to accept some reductions* (in rent), *and think that that will happen to some of them, to keep it just, just, more or less keep their head above water… Depends on their headroom and what kind of property they have."*

Uncertainty on ultimate outcomes – with stakeholders anticipating a painful period of adjustment and potential market dysfunction

Views were mixed on how outcomes would play out in terms of affordability and accessibility and the impact of welfare reform on the success of the effort to make greater use of the PRS. Some felt strongly that there was a potential risk of compounding existing housing problems, resulting in a potentially dysfunctional combination of unmet housing need and deteriorating and empty housing stock.

"Potentially it's nearly like a perfect storm. For the landlords… their first reaction is going to be that 'If you can't afford it, I will get someone who will' And then they will find that they won't be able to get someone else and it will be left empty and it will go on from there… I honestly believe that we're going to find a flood in the market of properties that cannot be let and that cannot be repaired and maintained."

"We don't know whether landlords will reduce rents or perhaps people who can't get mortgages perhaps will squeeze out those who are on benefits. We really don't know what the impact is going to be… We will just have to wait and see."

Many felt that there was a risk of a potentially significant increase in homelessness arising from the likely squeeze on affordability in the PRS

The potential for an affordability crisis to drive an increase in both deprivation and homelessness was a serious concern, expressed by a range of stakeholders. There were fears that tenants would find themselves unable to afford their rent and would either do without essentials or fall behind on rental payments, leading to the breakdown of tenancies.

> *"There's a serious risk of compounding our housing needs issues and increasing our waiting lists and increasing homelessness… It doesn't take an Einstein to see straightaway that there is going to be a significant shortfall."*

> *"I would say we would have a significant increase in homelessness. I think that we will have people becoming homeless for the first time in social housing. I think we will have a great deal more families… and I do believe that we will have an increase in rough sleeping."*

Some saw potential opportunities to acquire or lease distressed PRS stock on a large scale to meet housing need at affordable rents

Others felt that the situation would ultimately represent exceptional opportunities for the public sector to meet changing housing need at affordable rents by acquiring or leasing new stocks of quality housing from distressed landlords at exceptional prices, albeit after a period of painful re-adjustment.

> *"If there's a fire sale, we may actually find ourselves able to take some of the (PRS) stock into the social sector. If it comes down to the right price and the right access to finance, we could buy a lot of this stuff, and then bring it into the social side. That could be one outcome… "*

> *"We have large numbers of developments there that really haven't taken off at all, are empty and they're sitting about there at the minute. I think when folks start not to be able to afford the rents that are coming up, you're going to see a glut of on the market and that may represent opportunities."*

Policy makers seeking to house relatively mobile singles in the PRS did not see shorter tenures as an issue while the community sector were more concerned

One of the major differences between tenancies in the PRS and the social sector is of course the differences in length of tenure. Short-hold tenancies in the PRS, assumed to be temporary by nature, are typically a year or less, while social housing tenancies have traditionally been effectively permanent. Given that taking on a PRS tenancy would in most cases mean coming off the Housing Executive waiting list, these differences clearly have potentially significant implications for long term security.

Stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector were more concerned about issues around security of tenure than were housing policy makers. For those on the front-line dealing with the homeless at delivery level, short term tenures were seen as problematic in that they were concerned that that their clients required an extended period of stable accommodation in order to stabilise their lives more broadly.

"It's partly you know about the security of living in locality that you view as your home area, being part of a community, and knowing that you are secure in that. That is important to the types of clients that I deal with. And in the private sector you don't get that."

"People need that security to get themselves established and feel that this is actually their home. Many of these people have been moved about all their lives, you know."

Housing policy makers, who tended to see the PRS as primarily a vehicle for housing the young and relatively mobile tended not to see short term tenancies as a big issue. Indeed policy makers could see the flexibility of shorter tenures as an advantage in that it was seen as injecting much needed flexibility into the management of the overall stock.

"Again, I see primarily at the minute that it's (PRS) being used for singles, and really, the security of tenure is not an issue, especially for the young. They want to be mobile. They want to move on, etc, so that the security tenure as not an issue. As folk get older, the security becomes more, more important."

"You know some would say that the private rented sector is not as good because you don't have security of tenure there. For the housing authorities, I guess being able to use the private rented sector might in some ways be easier, because you've got the flexibility of moving people on."

Community organisations dealing with the cheapest PRS housing saw quality standards as lower in the PRS, a view not shared by housing policy makers

There was a similar divide between the views of policy makers and those in the third sector when it came to perceptions of standards of accommodation in the PRS. Community organisations who tended to work with hard-to-place clients living in the cheapest end of the private market tended to see PRS properties as inferior in facilities and quality. They were also concerned that inadequacies in maintenance and compliance with standards were much more difficult to address in the PRS than in the social housing sector.

"Obviously the physical condition of private rented sector accommodation can be very difficult at times and difficult to challenge the landlords. There's the feedback I get from my clients (ex offenders) *that there's a level of disrepair (sense is in the PRS), which I'm not saying doesn't exist within the social rented sector, but I'm saying when it does exist in the social rented sector there's an avenue for challenge."*

Policy makers on the other hand viewed the standard of accommodation available in the PRS as being of largely a high standard, in large part because much of what was coming on stream was new development intended originally for sale and in turnkey condition. There was also a view among the housing policy community that social housing and private rental sector standards would need to move closer together in any case because budget restrictions would no longer support the same standards of build and finish in the social housing as had been achieved historically.

"I think that is over-played (differences in standards between social housing and PRS). My experience here is that the vast majority of those who actually let the properties out maintain them to a good standard. My experience would be that the risk of non

performing landlords is not really a major issue. Because the stock's so new in the first place."

"I think that there's no doubt that social rented standards for new build are much higher than they are even in the private rented sector. We're kind of questioning, can we afford that any more? In the current economic climate, maybe we don't have the luxury of maintaining those standards. So perhaps we want to be lowering social rented sector standards and raising private sector standards."

Stakeholders felt it important that as the PRS grows landlords should be registered and codes of conduct established

All stakeholders welcomed the forthcoming registration of landlords. Some wanted to go further and see codified minimum standards of practice, accommodation and facilities. Landlord education and awareness raising about the duties and responsibilities of landlords as key to ensuring both standards and redress was also seen as important.

"Registration of landlords will be an important first step. That's a big step forward."

"It is about getting private landlords to sign up to a certain code, not just registration but to a code to become a responsible landlord. Then people on the waiting lists can be properly housed with these landlords."

"I think there needs to be something there for private landlords to provide equitable treatment for people. And provide safeguards."

6.3 Experience to date current challenges in enabling vulnerable tenants with high support needs to move into the PRS

In this section we examine the experience to date of working with vulnerable people in making the transition to the PRS and explore the issues encountered by the various community and voluntary organisations working with vulnerable homeless individuals with high support needs to establish and maintain private sector tenancies.

The PRS has played an important role in meeting statutory obligations to the homeless, albeit primarily on a short term basis and at unsustainable cost

The PRS has clearly been important in meeting the statutory obligations to the homeless, both in terms of short term lets and emergency housing. This has however been an expensive option. Policy makers reported however that they have struggled to turn such accommodation into long term lets, primarily because of a lack of appetite from PRS landlords to accommodate tenants at the rental prices that are on offer.

"We use an awful lot of the private sector to address our statutory duty to the homeless. We've got 800 or 900 single lets, and about another 1,400 hostel spaces… That is expensive for us. It's the, local housing allowance, plus what we would call a top-up, and that is somewhere between £50, £60 per week, which is not sustainable"

"From our own point of view, some of these tenancies should be actually brought in as long-term leases, and actually, you know, to do the job, that would, that we would have done on the social rental side, and give them a tenancy for a year, two years,

three years, or whatever… There's an appetite for it from the policy makers, and from the Housing Executive but it is not there on the landlord side."

"They (landlords) think that they could get more out of the market on their own, without actually taking tenants from ourselves. We were only going to pay up to the local housing allowance but we were saying, 'Look, we'll find your tenant and we'll put them in… but there is not the appetite for that out there."

The Social Lettings Agency model has played a major role in enabling clients with support needs to move into the PRS and sustain their tenancies

The effort to move individuals into the PRS appears, however, to have been most successful where the social lettings agency model (see chapter 5 for a description) has been deployed. In Northern Ireland this is SmartMove NI, funded by the Housing Executive and the Oak Foundation, which has several offices across Northern Ireland, and which is responsible for 11,000 PRS tenancies and which works with circa 400 landlords. By negotiating with landlords over deposits, to enable tenants to take on a PRS tenancy, SmartMove addresses one of the key barriers to access to the PRS. The critical factors in its success appears, however, to have been the agency's intermediation between tenant and landlord, the effectiveness of their tenant management arrangements and thus their "buffering" role in minimising risk and the hassle factor for landlords.

"We no longer guarantee the deposits for the landlords. But what we have done is negotiate with the landlords that they will take a lower deposit for each property and they will also allow the tenant to pay the deposit off on a payment plan… the landlords are quite happy with us because we're doing all the rubbish. They don't have to do the chasing of the money. At the end of the day, all that they want is their money in the bank."

"You know, we have landlords that have handed us over their stock where they haven't seen their houses or three years. And they trust that we're putting the right people in, or we're giving them the right support."

"They don't want the churning of the tenants back and forward. They've realised, if we put somebody in there and with our support, they're going to stay longer."

It should be noted however that SmartMove has focused primarily on tenants with low to medium support needs, not having the capacity and resource to deal with those with relatively high support needs, other than in very limited numbers and in partnership with a range of other agencies.

Housing is clearly only one part of the solution and without appropriate support is unlikely to be sustainable

The experience of community and voluntary organisations working with vulnerable people and seeking to support them into PRS tenancies makes it very clear that the provision of housing is only one part of the solution.

Vulnerable clients often lack literacy and numeracy skills, ID, access to banking and thus require intensive support simply to set up a tenancy

Vulnerable homeless individuals seeking to set up tenancies often face major challenges in identifying suitable properties and in negotiating with landlords, not least because of literacy and numeracy issues as well as a lack of social skills. Agencies working to place vulnerable tenants in the private sector have not only to provide support in identifying properties and negotiating with landlords but also in many cases for handling all or some aspects of associated applications for Housing Benefit and funding or making payment arrangements for deposits. Support was then needed to also ensure that individuals had the necessary documentation and a bank account to facilitate making a tenancy agreement. Support would also be required to complete applications and fill in forms.

"They have no ID. We would for many people help them to get ID or to open a bank account. That they're getting the benefits they're entitled to."

"We have to show them and help them how to get a bank account. It's very frightening to go into a bank and ask for a bank account. Sign these forms. You know, they can't read and write and that's why most of them don't."

"Actually we are going to be filling in the forms and applications for a lot of these clients. Taking them through it. They could not handle that on their own."

"We get a lot of tenants that cannot read or write. Literally we go over the tenancy agreement with them. What their responsibilities are. What their rights are what the landlord's rights and responsibilities are, try and basically lay the ground, lay the foundations to start off with the tenancy."

Limited life skills and low financial capability can mean that vulnerable clients lack the ability to manage many basic aspects of independent living

Even once the tenancy has been set up, individuals with limited life-skills and very low levels of financial capability can have very little understanding of budgeting and how to manage their money, organise and pay for fuel payments, far less to prioritise the payments of their personal contributions to the rent. Support needs at this early stage of transition to a PRS tenancy could be intensive. Vulnerable individuals frequently needed continuing ongoing support to manage their budgets effectively

"It could be daily; it could be four or five times a day… You're assessing do they have the money, do they have budgeting skills. We do a budgeting plan with them because we don' want our tenants to get into arrears (on personal contributions to rent) because they won't have the money to pay it back."

"You have to be hands on. They just don't have the skills or the support network that the rest of us take for granted… Nobody's ever showed him how to work the gas, you know. They've had a very poor childhood. No-one has ever forced him to go to school or learn the basics in life."

"Nobody has ever taught them that you get a pound of mince and you get two dinners out of it. Nobody has ever taught them the life-skills. They'll get their money and spend it on a pizza."

"It's having to show people how to do the electric and the gas and… we have one wee girl, she would phone us twice a week when she first moved in. My gas is broken but I eventually worked out that she didn't know that you had to put more than £5 a week in the gas."

Rapid action on arrears and pro-active landlord management to sustain tenancies and keep tenants budgets on track

Tenants who have run into difficulties in managing their money appear to have needed rapid intervention to tackle any arrears that arise and a pro-active approach to managing relationships with the landlord in order to sustain tenancies.

"So we're seeing the tenant minimum in the property three times a year, but we'd also pretty much be seeing most of them weekly, and because they're coming in and paying the shortfall into the office. So that's where we get to know our tenants. And we're able to know, has somebody's circumstances changed or they come in and they're not looking well or, you know, automatically we'll go out and do a home visit if something's flagged up and try and sort it out before it gets serious."

"We actually try to negotiate with the landlord and say yes, I know Tenant B owes you money, can you bear with us a couple of weeks, we're trying to get the money sorted?"

"We run a pretty tight ship with the rent arrears, because we don't want the tenants to get into rent arrears, because they don't have the money to pay it back… Within two weeks of somebody being in rent arrears (on personal contribution to their rent – majority paid direct to landlord via benefit system)*, we would basically, have them in to get them sorted out what is going on, straightaway after the two weeks."*

The shift to monthly payment of benefits and / or direct receipt of rent allowance was felt likely to be particularly challenging for this group

Issues around lack of financial capability were felt likely to be exacerbated by some of the changes envisaged under welfare reform. Front line workers were concerned that various aspects of budgeting and financial management would become more difficult for those with complex needs as welfare reform is rolled out. In particular community organisations were concerned that those with very low financial capability would find budgeting with larger sums over a longer period much more difficult with the shift to monthly payment of benefit under Universal Credit. There were concerns also about how the parameters of the exceptions to direct payment of housing benefit would ultimately be drawn. Direct payment of housing benefit to landlords was seen as one of the keys to persuading landlords to take on vulnerable tenants and as an important component of vulnerable tenants' security. For those with alcohol and drug addiction issues, any expectation that such individuals should be allowed to handle larger sums of money over an extended was felt likely to be particularly damaging.

"Monthly payments is going to be very, very difficult to manage for this client group, for anybody to manage if you're on low income… it's much easier to manage your money if it's coming in every week and you can set aside this for this and this for that. People will not be able to manage."

"I mean, there's been the talk around people having to choose between heating and eating. From my experience working for housing associations for many years, people

will withhold their rent if they have an emergency… or whatever, they won't pay the rent."

"Like if you have an addiction to heroin, you know, it's (benefit paid direct to landlord) a real safeguard you know, the worry that you're going so spend your rent, so that's going to be very difficult for people."

Clients need support to make connections with a range of local services such as medical and dental services

Entrenched homelessness and long periods of stability have often led to chronic health problems and a lack of dental care. Clients often need support to manage existing health conditions, adopt preventative health practice and to look after themselves effectively and to make connections with local GP and other services.

"Helping people get registered with a GP, for example. A lot of people that we're working with sometimes, aren't connected in to those kind of services, dental services, health services"

"I suppose, we work with them to ,identifying where they know they can get assistance with particular problems that arise, so that they'd be encouraged to address problems rather than store them until a serious problem develops"

"So it's very much about looking at what kind of… ah, what kind of services are around, and does… can that person connect; does that person feel comfortable where they are?"

Social isolation poses a series of risks for individuals setting up new PRS tenancies in unfamiliar areas

One of the first issues that arises in working with clients taking on new PRS tenancies is often that of isolation and a move away from established and familiar communities. For others, isolation and lack of a familiar support structure could be a major factor in tenancy breakdown, often arising from an exacerbation of mental health problems.

"It's, you know, the lack of a locality and community and it's about a person's capacity to stabilise and resettle and if they go into private rental they're taken away from the support structures that do exist in their own localities and so it's about isolation. They feel quite isolated, you know, it's very hard."

"Social housing is based within a community. In Northern Ireland the private rented accommodation is a very transient population and that doesn't exist within our estates. People like to stay within their own communities, their family, the people they know. Whereas if they go private they're moving away from all that… I've found clients can find it very difficult to cope on their own, especially if they have mental health issues. It can be very isolating."

"They move people out of a hostel where they've been living with 25 people for two years. And all of a sudden they're sitting in a room on their own. And they can't cope. He was doing quite well when he moved in but now he's actually got a serious drug and alcohol addiction. When you're dealing with the drug and the mental health issues, they need counselling and support. They can't be put into the private rental sector on their own."

Changing behaviour and achieving some degree of social inclusion and integration requires support to make new connections

Difficulties in establishing new connections or appropriate relationships with neighbours and community then acts as a fundamental barrier to wider social inclusion and to moving on and changing damaging behaviours.

> *"With a lot of the people we work with some of the challenges are around how they integrate in the places in which they live. It's not just the accommodation. It's all the other kinds of things that that you want people to be able to connect into. You know?"*

> *"And without the people they know, especially if they're unemployed and not connected into training or something else – it's very hard to find new friends, new people to talk to. So you will end up then having people come to your accommodation and drinking. And actually you need support to get away from that."*

> *"There are issues also with young people needing care with, you know, who need help to make connections to any family support or rebuild relationships that have failed because of their drinking or their behaviour or whatever."*

PRS accommodation can enable a new start but needs also to be accompanied by support to make new connections and facilitate social inclusion

For some clients, particularly those whose experience was of entrenched or serial homelessness and a back-history also of troubled family and community relations or offending, a move away from their home environment could be seen as either essential (as in the case of sectarian intimidation for example) or a positive, in the sense of a move away from connections to a social network that was conducive to drug or alcohol use or a criminal lifestyle. Moving to a PRS tenancy in a new area and at a distance from their community can address a number of negative factors in the effort to stabilise and re-set their lives but nonetheless can leave individuals very isolated and without the skills or opportunities to make new connections. As a consequence it can be very difficult not to return to the lifestyle that has previously been damaging or which has entrenched homelessness or been conducive to continuing addiction and/or offending.

> *"I mean a lot of issues we deal with here are where people feel, ah, threatened in the areas in which they're living, um, maybe because of their offender reputation. Ah, I mean a huge problem is where they've been involved in offending that they're known by other offenders who will then take advantage of the fact that they have accommodation."*

> *"We've known people to keep secret that they've been allocated accommodation because they're afraid that their mates or ex-mates will cause problems and that's a real worry."*

> *"People prey on each other sometimes, and force themselves onto someone who's really trying to make changes in their life. That's a very hard thing for people, who are actually trying to change how they live."*

Those at the frontline of delivery were also concerned that shared accommodation would not work for this vulnerable client group

Community organisations and those at the front line of the effort to support the vulnerable homeless into stable housing and those working to resettle offenders also made the point however that as much as isolation was a big issue for their clients, the prospect of shared accommodation was likely equally to pose risks to sustainable tenancies.

Young people with poor social skills, anger management issues, personality disorders or a history of anti-social or violent behaviour were felt unlikely to cope well in the shared accommodation envisaged for under thirty fives under the new welfare reform regime.

> *"A lot of them have had a lot of negative experience in their lives. It's not easy for them to go into shared living. They're not like students… It's not always feasible for people who have had a rough time, really, to go into shared living."*

> *"They don't have the tolerance or the self control or the skills to interact with other people at close quarters and it is likely to blow up."*

> *"You know, the difficulties that they're going to have in sharing all of these facilities with someone who maybe is getting on their goat, they're annoying them or, or riling them in some way, you know… You know, people are very anxious about being forced into a position that they're going to have to do that and it will just not work. It is likely to end badly."*

There was concern also that exemption provisions for hostel dwellers would not capture vulnerable individuals moving straight into PRS tenancies

There was recognition that exceptions to the new arrangements were proposed for those who have been living in hostels. However concerns arose over whether the new emphasis on minimising the time vulnerable individuals spent as homeless would mean that more individuals with high support needs would go straight into permanent accommodation in the PRS, thus not benefiting from exemption from the requirement to share that would otherwise have arisen if they had first spent time in temporary hostel accommodation.

> *"The big difficulty in Northern Ireland is that those who are most vulnerable in terms of mental ill health and addiction are actually temporarily housed with support in the private rental sector and they are not eligible for exemption, even though we had made the case to say that the circumstances between, you know, Johnny and Tommy in regards to their needs and the services provided to them, are identical.*

> *"The one who's in a hostel is going to be able to get a flat of his own and the one who's getting the same service but his landlord is a private rental is going to have to share a house. And I don't know how we manage that."*

Community groups also raised issues around shared accommodation and the needs of non-resident parents

Young parents who are not living with their children were also a group of key concern, with shared accommodation seen as likely to act as a barrier to re-establishing or maintaining meaningful relationships with children.

> *"We have concerns about, for example, women – and men – who don't have permanent rights to their children, but could have access if they have suitable accommodation."*

> *"That's (shared accommodation) a big issue, you know, for single homeless people who might have a chance of having their children stay over, but only if they have another bedroom, you know."*

Vulnerable clients may require considerable support to appreciate the impact of their behaviour on others and to change anti-social behaviour patterns

Individuals could also require considerable support to understand how to interact appropriately with their landlord, fellow tenants, neighbours and those around them more widely. This was seen however as one of the most important aspects of establishing and maintaining a sustainable tenancy and of social inclusion.

> *"You're always going to follow up issues with the resident you know, in terms of, ah, helping them, maybe stabilise their behaviour maybe appreciate the impact their behaviour's having on other people… That can require quite intensive work with individuals if they are to change their behaviour."*

> *"I think a lot of it comes down to if you can get the relationship between the tenant and the landlord right at the very beginning and we've actually have done quite a lot of work on that."*

> *"His neighbours are not going to put up with him bringing four or five other drug users into the flat or finding needles on the street. He doesn't know when he's in a drugged state that that's not acceptable. It's not just about the roof over their head. You have to look at what brought them into those circumstances and that needs group and try and package something together so they can actually live in the community."*

A continuum of more or less intensive and complex high support needs being accommodated in the PRS in a range of ways

There was clearly a continuum of individuals requiring more or less intensive and complex support even within the group of vulnerable homeless that might be classified as having high support needs. At one end of that continuum the support might be intensive in the early stages and then could be relatively low level and occasionally, albeit requiring a monitoring and supervision on an ongoing basis. At the other end of the spectrum, some clients however clearly required very intensive and specialist support across a range of dimensions if they were to cope effectively outside an institutional environment. Such clients appear to have been supported in a variety of ways, in some cases requiring very intensive support.

> *"He (client) has very high contact support needs because of prolific self harm. He has no concern over whether the self harm is fatal. He doesn't have diagnosed mental*

health problems and he has told us if he doesn't have high levels of support, that he will increase his self harming and his variety of offences in order to go back to prison where the support will be provided."

"He's (client) had drug and serious mental health issues and he is now receiving counselling and a whole package. We (social lettings agency) could deal with somebody with one or two issues, but when you're dealing with the drink and the drugs and the mental health issues… you can't put someone like that into the private rental on their own. That needs a whole package of support in there that is on top of things all the time."

Tailored multi-disciplinary assessment of needs and partnership working has been key to making PRS tenancies work for those with high support needs

Community organisations pointed to multi-agency teams and partnership working as having been key to being able to support vulnerable homeless individuals with high support needs.

"We would do referrals and for anything we are not trained we would do referrals or if it's just going to take a long time to sort out. I think a lot of our tenancies have been sustained not just through our services but through the partnership work we do with other services."

"I think it's about partnership working to say, OK we need them in and settled in a tenancy. We need a multi-assessment team to see what they can do for them and to try and help them with the issues and provide them with the skills to get on in life."

Taken together therefore it is clear both that there is growing acceptance amongst all stakeholders that the PRS can offer appropriate, safe and sustainable solutions for vulnerable homeless individuals with high support needs, provided that the accommodation is appropriate, tenancies and tenant well-being are proactively managed and the right level of support is delivered.

The experience of stakeholders seeking to support vulnerable tenants in the PRS and the various approaches that are already being adopted in Northern Ireland stop short of the Housing First and other models described in Chapter five. They are however illustrative both of the nature of the challenges to be addressed and the power of effective support and innovative approaches to using the PRS to tackle housing need among the vulnerable homeless in a local context.

6.4 PRS solutions and homelessness going forward

Stakeholders remained deeply concerned around how affordability in the PRS would be resolved and the impact that a potential affordability crisis would have on the incidence of homelessness. That said, policy makers, community groups and practitioners were largely positive about the potential for innovative solutions using the PRS to meet housing need, not only for the statutory homeless but also for the much more challenging group of the chronic exclusion vulnerable homeless.

"Absolutely, Yes, absolutely. It can be done. But it needs support and it needs funding and resource

"So yes, I think with the right support and the right model being, kind of, put into place, yes I think it is possible (to use PRS for to house those with complex needs)."

Solutions were seen as requiring long term funding and commitment

Stakeholders across the spectrum were clear that solutions for the vulnerable homeless would require long term funding and resource, with stakeholders looking to both the Supporting People budget and longer term committed funding, to facilitate the multi-dimensional services and support which would be necessary to make PRS tenancies work and become permanent, sustainable and stable housing for the homeless with high support needs.

"There has to be acceptance of the basic premise first of all that individuals require long term support. And secondly that the operational staff and resources have to be put in place in order for that to happen."

"And I think to manage it properly requires pretty intensive resources and intensive input from a staffing perspective. And that has to be properly resourced and funded."

Thinking on homelessness is clearly moving towards Housing First models and approaches that have proved their effectiveness elsewhere

Thinking among stakeholders and policy makers centred on outcome-focused models and approaches which had been proven to have been successful in tackling chronic entrenched homelessness in Europe and the US, such the Housing First and Housing Led models (see discussion in Chapter 5 preceding). Policy makers and practitioners also pointed to models, such as SmartMove and other smaller initiatives being trialled within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which appear to provide a basis for successful local models.

"It's the European model of having your housing solution first of all and putting your support around it."

"We're moving more to the model of Housing First where you try and find your permanent solution rather more quickly"

Consensus that the goal must be to move more rapidly to a permanent housing solution

In line with the strategic objectives of the homelessness strategy and the emphasis on the reduction in the length of time that individuals experience homelessness, there was a broad consensus that the aim should be to move vulnerable homeless individuals with complex needs into a permanent housing solution as rapidly as possible. This was felt to provide the optimal context for individuals to stabilise their personal position and lay the basis for a long term secure and sustainable housing environment within which they could make connections and acquire the skills to move on and lead productive and socially included lives.

"You're not putting people into hostels on a temporary basis – that way we are perpetuating a dependency culture. It would be better to have people thinking 'I'm taking my place in the community' – but with the appropriate support to enable them to do that."

"I think there needs to be a recognition that many people, particularly with complex needs, need to be offered accommodation from a long term perspective."

"There has been the recognition that some individuals will require long term support, Whilst we operate a 24 hour support for people with huge complex needs, it's a traditional hostel, but there's nowhere for those individuals to move on to easily at this point in time. Whereas new models could provide that."

Clear recognition that to be successful housing solutions must be combined with tailored, multi-dimensional support planned for on a long term basis

There was clear consensus also that in order to achieve this goal, housing solutions needed to be combined with wrap-around services, tailored to individual needs.

"We see it as being sort of an integral part of this move towards use of the private rental sector, for there to be an immediate tie up between assessment of support needs and the provision of private rental sector property, and critically, then rapid access to the provision of that support."

"Combine it (PRS tenancies)… with floating support, where they would keep in touch with people. They would be there often when issues arise, to help people with them quickly rather than things spiralling out of their control, and to be able to assign those people also on to appropriate organisations who could help them further."

A continuum of widely defined needs that need to be addressed in order to effect behaviour change and break an entrenched cycle of homelessness

Individuals tended to think in terms of a continuum of needs, ranging from relatively light touch, transitional support for some with lower level needs as a preventative and maintenance measure, all the way through to intensive, multi-dimensional 24/7 support on an effectively permanent basis for those with the most entrenched and complex problems. This holistic approach was seen as needing to cover not only issues such as physical and mental health and addiction issues but also a wide range of support for life-skills, people skills and financial capability and budgeting and to focus on changing damaging behaviour and entrenched behaviour patterns.

Most importantly, to be successful, housing and support solutions need to be conceived as long term, even permanent, approaches rather than as interim patches for crisis situations. Similarly there was a broad feeling that intervention should take place much earlier, in order to prevent or disrupt a pattern of entrenched or serial homelessness becoming established.

"Now I think the nature of that support requires to be assessed on an individual basis… the individual needs of the service user themselves – from health, physical and mental health, addiction, behaviour and for the tenancies to work long term, things need to be managed very, very carefully."

"It's that continuum model… It's a recognition that for some people for the rest of their lives will require on site support 24 hours, some less… for other people that support may look different, may be less intensive or more medium term."

Long term effective solutions were seen to require commitment and joint working from all of the key government departments and relevant agencies

There was also a view that to be successful, the various agencies and government departments needed to come together to support a truly integrated approach to what is a complex multi-dimensional set of challenges, some of which lie outside housing policy considerations alone.

> *"This has been a perennial issue within Northern Ireland, Health and Social Services stepping up to the mark with regards to recognising that they have a role within housing and tenancy sustainability in taking some responsibility for the meeting the support needs of that individual."*

> *"Making this work will take more than will from the Housing Executive and Supporting People. All the agencies and relevant departments have to have some kind of stake and commitment."*

Part of the solution was seen to lie with working with private sector landlords to develop long term funding models that worked for all parties

The key to developing innovative solutions that would deliver for vulnerable tenants with high support needs was seen in part to rest on collaborating with the private sector to develop funding models that were realistic, which reflected the realities of the market place and which worked for all parties. Larger landlords and developers were seen as particularly likely partners in developing long term solutions for permanent housing for those with the need for intensive support on a long term basis, with small-scale landlords recognised as more appropriate partners for scattered PRS tenancies combined with floating support. In the latter case, a number of stakeholders took the view that that the only way to attract landlords at rental levels that were realistic in the current economic and policy context was to offer a wraparound tenant support, management and letting service.

> *"I think the private rental sector is essentially around economics, you know, it is a basic issue that's dependant on market forces. So from that perspective I think with us going into it, we have to kind of recognise that, that's a fundamental issue. That people who own property are in it because essentially they wish to make a profit. They wish to, either for themselves or their shareholders."*

> *"We simply don't see it being an attractive client group for private landlords unless we can offer them some incentives, particularly if we're not going to be able to offer, you know, rents at a level that they're likely to insist on… we're going to have to offer them, not just support for more vulnerable clients but almost a quasi management service, you know."*

The management of wider community relationships also seen as critical to success

Practitioners also pointed to the management of relationships with the wider community, location and the careful management of client behaviour in public spaces as key components of success.

"So, you know, kind of two main elements I think, you know, the housing management element of things, and managing that individual on site and his behaviour, adverse behaviour and how that impacts on public space. So you know, location and relationships with local communities are critical, and putting an actual effort into I suppose those relationships, is really, really important."

"Well the complex needs group do provide particular challenges both for the landlord and for the local community at times, if it's not managed properly. … So for instance drinking on the street, you know, being potentially violent at times, have to be managed, intensively managed, in a particular way."

Stakeholders looked forward to developing innovative arrangements combining private sector housing and support from a range of service provider types

Stakeholders looked to innovative deployment of arrangements made with private sector property owners combined with services and support provided by a mix of providers, both voluntary and private sector, either as a package or as separate elements.

"In terms of choice and opportunity and workability, there's nothing to prevent the private rent side actually helping out on that side (supporting and housing vulnerable groups) at all. We have a number of schemes where that option has been explored and been used and it is small numbers now and so far it is working out okay."

"I think we need to have a better understanding of the needs of people and just a wee bit more inventive and use our imagination a bit better about how these needs can be met… And how they can be enabled and supported in tenures other than social housing."

7.0 Conclusions

Social housing will no longer be able to meet housing need in Northern Ireland

- Use of the PRS will be the only realistic option for meeting housing need among the homeless, including the chronic homeless with a high level of vulnerability. Against the background of a decline in social housing stock and no prospect of new social build on any scale, the use of the PRS to meeting housing need that might once have been accommodated within the social housing sector is increasingly the approach that is being adopted in both England and Scotland.
- The PRS in Northern Ireland would appear to have a sufficient stock of housing of appropriate standard, particularly of one and two bedroom apartments, much of it new build, which could be effectively deployed to meet housing need among the homeless, particularly for singles and couples. There is however less housing suitable for family accommodation and little housing available suitable for multiple occupation. Housing standards and quality at the cheapest end of the market are not of the standards of new build.

Approaches which have rested on reactive response to crisis and extended hostel stays have set up a revolving door of serial housing failure

- The evidence would suggest that historic approaches to serial homelessness and vulnerable individuals at risk of homelessness have not always served the homeless well. When those at high risk of serial homelessness, those leaving care or custody, for example, do not have their housing needs addressed at the point of exit, they are set up for a cycle of damaging behaviour, problematic drug or alcohol use, re-offending and serial homelessness that is self perpetuating. Chronic homelessness is also entrenched with an approach that rests on reactive response to crisis and extended stays in hostel accommodation. Similarly, allowing individuals to remain for extended periods on waiting lists for social housing on which they are highly unlikely ever to accumulate sufficient points to be housed creates unrealistic expectations and works against positive action on alternative solutions. This pernicious combination of a lack of pre-emptive preventative action, extended temporary housing in the wake of crisis, and unrealistic aspiration perpetuates the serial instability and the revolving door of failure and crisis accommodation that entrenches homelessness and degrades life chances.

The evidence suggests that serial housing failure – whether in the PRS or social housing – hinges on a lack of support

- Indeed it is clear from the housing history of vulnerable individuals with a background of chronic homelessness, that it is effective support, not the nature of the tenure itself, that is the critical issue in the sustainability of a tenancy. Social tenancies appear to have been no more sustainable than and just as vulnerable to break down for those at risk of chronic homelessness as PRS tenancies, and for much the same reasons. The need is for those living with, or at risk of, chronic homelessness to make a rapid move into permanent accommodation that, with support, can be sustained. Stable accommodation can then be a first step in a

wider re-set of lifestyles and behaviour change that can enable individuals to move on from homelessness.

The evidence is that the PRS can be an effective solution for addressing the needs of the homeless and, critically, for ending chronic homelessness

- Meeting the needs of the chronic homeless within the PRS is more challenging than for the much larger body of the homeless. The evidence from the US and Europe is unequivocal, however, that the PRS can be an effective solution for addressing the needs of the homeless and, critically, for ending chronic homelessness.

Sustainable housing for the chronic homeless requires an integrated housing and support solution

- The evidence is equally clear, however, that this cannot be achieved with a housing solution in isolation. Stable and sustainable housing tenancies for vulnerable, previously chronically homeless individuals can be achieved, provided that support needs are met and that tenancies are set up and managed effectively with a view to sustainability.

The evidence is clear is that sustainable PRS solutions must offer landlords a total financial and management service if resistance is to be overcome

- It is evident from the research with PRS landlords that in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, there is little appetite for housing vulnerable chronic homeless tenants. Evidence both from the Northern Ireland experience and internationally, suggests that effective use of the PRS to house such tenants must address the concerns and resistance of landlords if such tenancies are to be successful and sustainable. Overcoming the barriers requires that the public sector minimises the risks and tackles the potential financial and other downsides, while also providing assurances that problems will be managed.

"Housing First" solutions offering intensive support combined with Social Letting Agency models have proved effective in securing sustainable tenancies

- Landlord resistance has been overcome and housing needs for vulnerable homeless tenants most effectively met through the use of social letting agencies, which can be self funding, combined with "Housing First" models. Housing First takes as its central premise that the housing solution is first put in place and from this base a support package is built around it to ensure that non housing needs are met and that the tenancy is sustainable. From the perspective of the landlord, these solutions provide a letting and management service, remove the cost and risks of potential tenure break-down and offer reassurance that properties will be well managed and ultimately be returned in good condition. Critically, however, they offer landlords the reassurance that tenants will have a support package in place and that they will not have to deal with problems that arise.

A clear spectrum of more or less complex needs require different solutions within the broad Housing First conceptual framework

- The chronic homeless population is undoubtedly highly vulnerable, with many having a highly troubled personal history, often with a background of fractured relationships, inadequate parenting or a childhood in care, offending and drug and alcohol addiction with personal housing experiences characterised by serial failure and instability. There is however a spectrum of need and vulnerability, with some requiring a combination of financial assistance and relatively light touch support to stabilise their lives ,acquire life-skills to reconnect to a community ; and others requiring more intensive and specialist help, for example, to address specific mental health and addiction issues. A relatively small number of very high risk individuals, with complex needs and with a history of chronic homelessness, will require intensive multi-agency support on a permanent basis. All of these needs can be addressed within the broad Housing First framework, in combination with the Social Lettings Agency model, provided that there is clarity that the depth and reach of support services needs to be tailored to the risk and complexity of the presenting clients' characteristics, housing history and the nature and complexity of their various needs.

Tailored, intensive multi-agency support is critical to effective solutions for the most vulnerable chronic homeless

- Models that have been successful in addressing chronic homelessness and supporting individuals to move on have hinged on tailored support on the one hand and effective joint working arrangements on the other. Tailoring support packages to individual needs and clarity on the likely needs of different segments of the chronic homeless population requiring more or less intensive levels of support, and over shorter or longer periods as either transitional or permanent arrangements, appears critical to success in establishing sustainable tenancies and enabling individuals to make the transition to a more productive life-style and enhanced life-chances.

Enabling a degree of self determination and choice and a harm reduction approach to the management of drinking appears key to sustainability

- The evidence from the vulnerable chronic homeless themselves is that they, above all, long for stability, a space to call their own and self-determination. It is telling therefore that the other key element in the success of the Housing First models has been the degree to which these models rest on core principles around respect and self determination. Critically they rest, as far as is possible within the limits of available budget and resource, on giving those with a history of chronic homelessness as much choice and control over their lives as possible. This stance extends to an alcohol reduction rather a prohibitive approach to the management of drinking. The PRS is in many ways better suited to this model than social housing in that it enables greater choice of where to live and, importantly for many of the chronic homeless, a move away from peer pressure or a community environment which may not be conducive to lifestyle or behaviour change.

The PRS may offer greater opportunities for choice and a move away from peer pressure which has reinforced negative behaviours

- Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of the PRS in meeting housing need is that it offers the opportunity to move away from communities that have concentrations of spatial poverty that entrench deprivation and a lack of opportunity and degraded life-chances, towards more mixed income communities that offer greater opportunity and economic vibrancy. In the Northern Ireland context, where social housing communities have also been highly segregated there may be important community cohesion benefits also.

Welfare reform and the caps on benefit entitlement may of itself create an affordability crisis among those most vulnerable to homelessness in any case

- Welfare reform may make the task of addressing homelessness in Northern Ireland considerably more challenging. Welfare reform and the associated caps and limits on entitlement would appear likely to create very significant affordability pressures for those on Housing Benefit and has the potential to significantly increase homelessness. There is the potential for an affordability crisis as those currently living in the PRS who are no longer able to afford their current tenancies are forced to leave their homes.

The expectation that rents will fall in line with cuts in benefit appears unrealistic in a Northern Ireland context

- Landlords report that rental demand is buoyant in all sectors of the market. There is likely to be considerable competition for the stock of decent and new build homes arising from those, who in different market and economic conditions, might have opted for home ownership. Welfare reform is also likely to significantly increase competition for housing at the cheapest end of the PRS market, as tenants unable to afford their current accommodation seek more affordable housing.

The rules on shared accommodation for the under thirty fives are likely to be problematic in the context of those most at risk of serial housing failure

- Some aspects of welfare reform are likely to make it much more difficult to utilise the PRS to house the homeless, and particularly the chronic homeless. The rules on shared accommodation for the under thirty fives and the significant associated cuts in entitlement are likely to pose significant challenges. Shared accommodation will often not be suitable or sustainable in this context for those at the highest risk of chronic homelessness, many of whom have a history of failed tenancies precisely because of difficulties with social interaction. Alternatively the "partying" associated with shared accommodation and concentrations of young people will work against the effort to leave addiction or damaging behaviour behind. The issue will be most acute for those leaving care, offenders requiring resettlement, those with mental health issues and personality disorders or alcohol or addiction issues, all of which constitute a significant sub-set of those with a history of serial homelessness.

7.1 Recommendations

The potential for flexibility and innovation that the PRS represents should be embraced in a determined move to end the unique distress of homelessness

- Against the background of the current economic and political climate and the current status of social housing, it is essential to be realistic in assessing the role of the PRS in future housing and homelessness strategies. It is important to recognise that there are few realistic options other than to make best use of the PRS and to move away from a stance which sees the PRS as a second rate option and towards thinking that seeks to take advantage of the opportunities for flexibility and innovation that the PRS offers.
- Overall the opportunity to innovate and build flexible support and new housing models aimed at preventing and ending chronic homelessness within the PRS should be embraced as having the potential to address the unique distress of chronic homelessness in a way that has not been possible to achieve historically within the social housing or hostel system. Ultimately, the issues and the critical success factors are tenure-neutral in that ending chronic homelessness rests on developing practice and approaches around the housing solution independent of its ownership.

Ending chronic homelessness will require a new focus on prevention and arresting the cycle of serial housing failure

- Meeting the housing needs of highly vulnerable individuals and ending chronic homelessness will require a determined focus on prevention, on disrupting and arresting the cycle of damaging behaviour and relationship breakdown, and the revolving door of crisis and serial housing instability that entrenches homelessness and failure.

A move away from temporary accommodation towards the use of "Housing First" models, in combination with a Social Letting Agency approach

- It will also require an equally determined move away from temporary and hostel accommodation and towards a rapid move to permanent housing solutions as the lynchpin of a wider support package aimed at addressing the drivers of homelessness within the context of a sustainable and stable tenancy. The Housing First and Housing Led models which have been effective elsewhere in Northern Europe and the US provide a template for adaptation in a Northern Ireland context.

The need for intensive multi-agency support tailored to needs within the framework of the Housing First approach

- It needs to be recognised that those presenting with different support needs and more or less entrenched homelessness will require differing degrees of support. Putting a permanent housing solution in place as the first step in tackling homelessness needs to be the common thread in the approach to homelessness, regardless of the complexity of need. Thereafter those with complex needs and a

history of entrenched chronic homeless are likely to need a full "Housing First" approach which combines the housing solution with long term intensive wraparound support. Those experiencing serial homelessness, but with less complex needs, may need multi agency support but on a less intensive and, if appropriate, on a time-limited basis – on the "Housing Led" model. For yet others, the Social Lettings Agency Model, combined with transitional support and skill building, will be sufficient to effect sustainable change, secure tenancies and enhanced life-chances.

Consideration will need to be given to the risk of homelessness in framing "exceptions and support" policies as welfare reform is implemented

- It will be important to recognise the potential risks of welfare reform for the wider effort to address homelessness more widely and to end chronic homelessness in particular. If efforts to meet housing need using the PRS are to be successful for this highly vulnerable group, it will be critical that "Exceptions and Support" policies and protocols around the transition to the new welfare regime are structured so that such individuals are exempted from the requirements on shared accommodation and the associated caps on entitlement. Care will need to be taken also to ensure that there are not unintended effects that could work against the goal of a rapid move into permanent housing, for example, by ensuring that exemptions that apply to vulnerable individuals in hostel accommodation are extended also to their counterparts moved into permanent housing.

Efforts to tackle chronic homelessness will need to address the needs of both vulnerable tenants and PRS landlords.

Addressing the concerns and commercial needs of landlords

- There is a need for the provision of a letting and management service on the Social Lettings Agency model which involves:
- Mitigating the risk of serial breakdown of tenancy through direct contracting arrangements with public agencies
- Property returned in good condition
- Reassurance on support
- Engage with and manage community relations

Meeting the housing and support needs of the vulnerable chronic homeless

A "Housing First" approach

- Permanent housing as the first step towards sustainable tenancies
- Suitable accommodation of an adequate standard with some security of tenure
- Choice and self-determination within budget constraints
- Safety and security

Tailored support for individuals

Support strategies need to be holistic, focused on outcomes and tailored for different segments within the chronically homeless population:

- Disruption of cycle of instability and crisis, acquisition of life-skills, enhanced opportunity for those with light support needs
- Address specialist needs around mental health, drug and alcohol use for those with medium support needs as a basis for a wider effort on longer term behaviour change, new connections and new life-chances
- Intensive support and harm reduction within stable and secure environments with respect, control and choice, for the relatively few who need intensive permanent support

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