

STRATEGIC REVIEW OF SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND FUNDED BY THE SUPPORTING PEOPLE PROGRAMME



*Summary of research conducted by
North Harbour Consulting*

Background: The Supporting People programme

Supporting People is a UK-wide programme, which was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2003. It provides funding for landlords and other providers, such as voluntary organisations, to deliver housing-related support services that make it easier for vulnerable people to live independently. Supporting People funding enables the running of a number of supported accommodation schemes for homeless people in Northern Ireland, and the Housing Executive commissioned research to examine the performance of these schemes in terms of:

- accommodation standards;
- managing an accommodation-based support service; and
- financial measures.

Key findings

- At the time of the research, 34 organisations were providing supported, temporary accommodation for the homeless in Northern Ireland through 96 schemes which contained almost 1,500 household spaces.
- The majority (90%) of the properties assessed in a physical survey were deemed 'satisfactory' in terms of the three main statutory standards for housing: fitness for human habitation; fitness for multiple occupation; and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.
- Almost two thirds (62%) of schemes achieved the Housing Executive's benchmark for occupancy of 90% or more. A further 28% met or surpassed the minimum performance standard of 75% occupancy.
- Four fifths (80%) of schemes achieved or exceeded the Housing Executive's benchmark standard of 120% throughput, with an average stay of between four and ten months.
- Just under half (45%) of schemes had a planned move rate of 75% or more, and therefore met the Housing Executive's benchmark, which was introduced while the research was under way.
- Analysis of Supporting People grant and Housing Benefit payments *per household space* showed a very wide disparity between schemes for different client groups. In contrast, when payments from both sources were compared on a *per user* basis, there was:
 - A close correlation between payments in schemes for single homeless, homeless families, women's refuges and substance misuse schemes up to the median level when the higher costs in family accommodation were taken into account; and
 - Higher combined payments of Supporting People grant and Housing Benefit in schemes for offenders.

Homelessness and temporary accommodation in Northern Ireland

Homeless households who are unable to solve their housing problems without help are entitled to apply to the Housing Executive for assistance. In the period 2003/04 to 2010/11, between 18,000 and 21,000 households each year sought assistance on this basis. Following a review of their circumstances and their degree of need, between 8,500 and 9,000 households per annum were accepted as having a right to be re-housed by the Housing Executive. Single persons aged over 18 and small families were the largest groups accepted as homeless over this period, accounting for around 35% of all acceptances each. Older people over retirement age accounted for around 16% of acceptances, with smaller numbers of all-adult households and large families being accepted.

Households which are accepted as having a statutory right to assistance are termed 'Full Duty' applicants (FDA). This means that they are entitled to social housing and may also be entitled to temporary accommodation if they are roofless. Many of the people housed in the schemes that were the subject of the research tend to be vulnerable, Full Duty applicants, including families with young children as well as vulnerable single people. However, some households who spend time living in these schemes may not have been through the homelessness review process. These households may have been offered temporary homeless accommodation because they were deemed to be homeless (or potentially homeless) and vulnerable, and were referred by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, one of the health and social care trusts, or a front line homelessness advice agency. Alternatively, the provider organisation may have received a direct application and considered that the applicant met their admission criteria. In addition, some schemes were established to provide direct access accommodation for people who are street homeless.

Not all homeless households require temporary accommodation: some people are able to make their own arrangements with family or friends. Nevertheless, the number of people requiring temporary accommodation exceeds the supply of accommodation in Supporting People-funded schemes by a considerable margin. Other arrangements have therefore had to be made for some of the remaining 6,000 households each year who do not need, or are unable to gain access to, Supporting People-funded temporary accommodation. The organisations that are funded under the Supporting People programme are critically important in providing temporary accommodation and support to the most vulnerable homeless people. Given the shortage of beds compared with the potential demand, providers of this accommodation are under pressure to maximise its use and to move people into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Their performance in fulfilling this role was the main focus of the research.

Research objectives and methodology

The research had five main objectives:

1. To identify, in terms of a limited number of key variables, the range of performance between different providers and schemes.
2. To determine which basic measures are most indicative of performance.
3. To form a basis for benchmarking 'good' and 'weak' performance.
4. To inform the strategy for the provision of Supporting People-funded schemes to the homelessness sector.
5. To inform periodic reviews of the Homelessness Strategy.

Provider information was assessed by:

- comparing schemes intended for different client groups¹ across Northern Ireland as a whole, and
- comparing the schemes operating in each of the Housing Executive's five administrative areas.

¹ The research focused on five 'primary client groups' within the general homeless population: single homeless people; homeless families; women escaping abuse and domestic violence (who may be either single women or women accompanied by young children under the age of 16); ex-offenders and those at risk of offending; and people with addictions.

The research drew on various datasets held by the Housing Executive’s Supporting People team, and was also informed by a specially-commissioned property survey which gathered evidence on the physical condition of the accommodation. Analysis was based on a database of schemes compiled in late 2009, when a total of 110 Supporting People-funded organisations were providing supported accommodation in Northern Ireland, 34 of which provided supported, temporary accommodation for the homeless. Ninety-six schemes containing approximately 1,460 household spaces² were included in the analysis. The total value of Supporting People contracts awarded to the types of scheme included in the study was £17,139,800 in 2008/09, increasing to £23,073,000 in 2010/11.

Research Findings

Accommodation standards

The physical survey of properties in which Supporting People-funded support services for homeless people were being delivered was carried out in October 2010. It checked that they were complying with the three main statutory standards for housing: fitness for human habitation; fitness for multiple occupation; and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System³. The survey showed that:

- 90% of the properties surveyed were deemed ‘satisfactory’ or were found only to have minor points of note;
- Seven properties, housing 70 people, were in breach of one or more of the standards; the most common failing was breach of the HMO standard for ‘means of escape in case of fire’; and
- Two properties housing 63 single people were identified as giving ‘serious cause for concern’ because they failed both unfitness and HMO standards, including means of escape in a fire and other fire precautions.

Performance in managing a supported accommodation service

Three measures were adopted to evaluate how effective providers’ management of their supported accommodation service was in meeting the Supporting People performance targets:

Occupancy levels	The average percentage occupancy in a scheme during a twelve month period is a check on whether all the accommodation being funded is actually in use.
Throughput	The number of people that have been housed in a scheme in a twelve month period is a check on the rate at which people are re-housed from schemes or leave for other reasons.
Planned departures	The percentage of residents who have left during the year on the basis of an agreed re-housing or resettlement plan is an indication of whether there is a system in place for ensuring that there are planned pathways for homeless people to move into permanent housing.

Occupancy

The data used as the basis for this assessment were submitted by providers and covered the two years between January 2009 and December 2010. Occupancy data were available for 92 schemes. Of these:

- 57 schemes (62%) achieved the Housing Executive’s benchmark for occupancy of 90% or more. This represented an improvement in overall performance in that eight of these

² The term ‘household spaces’ describes a range of different accommodation arrangements in the schemes under review. These included shared rooms in direct access accommodation, self-contained rooms, shared flats, self-contained flats for a single person, and family accommodation provided in larger flats and houses.

³ The Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) is a risk-based system that identifies defects in dwellings and evaluates the potential effect of any defects or deficiencies on the health and safety of occupants, visitors, neighbours or passers-by. The system was commissioned by the Government, and replaced the Fitness Standard as the minimum standard for housing in England in 2006.

schemes had achieved below 85% occupancy in 2008;

- 26 schemes (28%) achieved between 75% (the minimum performance standard) and 90% occupancy in 2009/10;
- 9 schemes (10%) did not achieve the minimum standard of 75% occupancy.

Throughput

Data used for this assessment covered 93 schemes for the period January 2009 to December 2010.

- 90 schemes (97%) met the Housing Executive's minimum standard of a 100% throughput or more.
- 12 schemes (13%) had a throughput of residents of between 100% and 120% (the performance benchmark), giving an average stay of between 11 and 12 months.
- 74 schemes (80%) achieved or exceeded the Housing Executive's benchmark standard of 120%, with throughput of up to 300% and average stays of between 10 and four months.
- Four schemes (4%) had a throughput of more than 300%. This group included a direct access hostel that had a throughput of 1,575%, giving a length of stay of around one month. However, the rate of planned moves in this scheme was very low at 0.5%.
- Three schemes had a throughput of less than 100%, and the figure for one scheme was only 44%: this scheme also had low occupancy at 43%.
- Comparisons with 2008 data showed that performance on the throughput of residents had fallen. The average throughput per scheme for all schemes in 2008 was 305%, suggesting an average length of stay of around four months. In 2009/10 the average throughput was 164%, suggesting that the average length of stay had increased to more than seven months. This change was relatively consistent across all client groups, suggesting that there has been a tightening in the availability of move-on accommodation.

Planned moves

While the research was under way, the Housing Executive introduced a new performance measure: the percentage of leavers whose move was planned as part of a support or move-on plan. The performance benchmark was defined as 75% of all departures being based on a planned move. Data for this measure were for the period January 2009 to December 2010 and were available for 92 schemes.

Almost half of schemes (41; 45%) had a planned move-on rate of 75% or more and therefore met the benchmark. In seven cases, the rate of planned moves was more than 90%. However, more than half of all the schemes under review failed to achieve the benchmark:

- 11 schemes (12%) had a planned move rate of between 65% and 75%;
- 40 schemes (43%) had a planned move rate of below 65%; and
- 4 schemes had a rate of planned moves of less than 25%, including two schemes that had a rate of planned moves of between 5% and 15%, suggesting that very little planned resettlement was taking place in some schemes.

The 2009/10 results, taken together with the fall in throughput between 2008 and 2010, suggest that a substantial number of schemes were not meeting the requirement to plan move-on with their scheme users.

Use of funding

The research also incorporated analysis on use of funding, based on figures for 73 schemes for which complete 2008/09 financial data were available. Two measures were used as indicators: the value of the contracted payment of Supporting People grant and the average payment of Housing Benefit in the 2008/09 financial year, indexed as a cost *per household space* and as a cost *per service user*.

As the type of accommodation provided varies considerably between schemes, the unit costs were plotted as a series of frequency distributions from which mean, median and quartile

benchmarks for accommodation were derived. As no funding benchmarks for different types of support or for different client groups had been established, a 'traffic light' system was developed, based on a purely statistical analysis of the results. Therefore:

	Cost per household space or per user <i>up to the median</i> for each frequency distribution
	Costs between the <i>median</i> and <i>upper quartile</i> level
	Costs in the <i>upper quartile</i> up to the <i>90% decile</i> ⁴
	All schemes falling into the <i>upper decile</i>

The system should be interpreted with caution: not all low cost schemes are necessarily well run or cost effective, and not all schemes in the upper quartile or upper decile are expensive or inefficient if there are special reasons why costs are higher than for other schemes providing for the same client group.

The analysis was applied to six aspects of funding:

- Supporting People grant (SPG) per week per household space;
- Housing Benefit (HB) per week per household space;
- SPG and HB combined per week per household space;
- SPG per week per scheme user;
- HB per week per scheme user; and
- SPG and HB combined per week per scheme user.

Supporting People Grant per week per household space

Category					Total
No. of schemes	12	12	17	42	83
% of schemes	14	14	21	51	100

There were very substantial differences in the median level of SPG per week per household space between client groups. Grant per household space was significantly higher for women's schemes and schemes for offenders than in generic single person and family homelessness schemes and those for substance misusers. There were also wide differences in the amount of SPG per household space between schemes *within* each client group, with costs that appeared either very low or very high compared with the median value.

Housing Benefit per week per household space

Category					Total
No. of schemes	10	10	19	39	78
% of schemes	13	13	24	50	100

Levels of HB awarded to schemes that house homeless families tended to be higher than in schemes housing single people, presumably because families occupy more accommodation and therefore the costs of provision will tend to be higher. However, the median value of HB in women's refuges was well above that for single homeless, homeless families and substance misusers, while the three schemes for offenders were an anomaly, with even higher rates of payment per household space than all other types of scheme.

⁴ A *decile* is one of ten equally large sub-sections of ranked data.

Supporting People Grant and HB per week per household space

Category					Total
No. of schemes	12	10	16	40	78
% of schemes	15	13	21	51	100

This measure was based on a combination of the previous two measures. Not surprisingly, therefore, it magnified the variations between payments in different schemes. Where a scheme had payments of SPG that were below the median for that client group, its combined payments of SP and HB also tended to be below the median. Similarly, where a scheme had levels of SPG that fell within the upper quartile or upper decile for the client group, it tended to have combined payments of SPG and HB that were in the upper part of the frequency distribution. This occurred because the median level of SPG across all the schemes reviewed was approximately three times the median level of HB: results were therefore weighted towards the value of the SPG payment.

An underlying pattern in the results points towards a trade-off between the level of SPG and the level of HB. Schemes that had a low level of SPG per household space per week (i.e. values up to the first quartile) tended to have levels of HB that were in the third or fourth quartile. Similarly, a relatively low value for HB was often associated with a relatively high value for SPG. The data show that in more than three quarters of all schemes there appeared to be some form of trade-off between higher levels of SPG with lower levels of HB, or vice versa. This situation might have arisen for two different reasons:

1. The approach to costing and budgeting for schemes is likely to vary greatly between providers. At the time the data were collected, each provider was free to choose their own approach to accounting for SPG and HB, which may have included different costing systems and methods of cost apportionment between activities. The Housing Executive has since put in place a system for standardising the way income and costs are accounted for, which is intended to overcome this problem.
2. Before the introduction of the Supporting People funding stream, there had been a lack of clarity nationally in the way that housing and support costs were funded, with HB picking up some support costs in practice, even though this was not allowed under the social security regulations. Although tighter definitions of 'housing costs', 'support costs' and 'care costs' were subsequently adopted, the actual calculation of what constituted a 'housing cost' and a 'support cost', and the level at which these costs were budgeted in schemes, was nevertheless a matter for detailed negotiation between the provider and the Supporting People and Housing Benefit teams. There may therefore have been some inconsistency between schemes in the assignment of costs to HB or SPG.

Subsidy per household space of accommodation is an appropriate measure for types of provision that are aimed at people who have long term conditions (for example frail older people and people with disabilities) and who require permanent housing with support. However, price per household space of accommodation is not the best performance measure for accommodation which is intended to provide relatively short stay accommodation for homeless people where a continuous turnover of residents is required. For schemes of this type, the annual or weekly cost per service user is a more accurate reflection of the throughput of the scheme and of the costs for each individual housed. The next three indicators analyse the annual cost of SPG and HB per user being paid to these schemes. The number of users is defined as the number of people living in the scheme during the year in question: the number of leavers during the year, plus the number in residence at year end.

Supporting People Grant per scheme user per week

Category						Total
No. of schemes	13	9	19	41	82	
% of schemes	16	11	23	50	100	

The analysis of SPG per household space showed a very wide degree of variation between the levels of payment within client groups. When SPG per scheme user was taken as the measure, however, the results were broadly comparable across the homeless families, single homeless, domestic violence and substance abuser schemes up to the median. Indexing the value of SPG by user rather than by household space therefore tended to achieve a convergence in the results for these four client groups. The three schemes for offenders appeared, on the basis of these results, to be more expensive in both *per household space* and *per scheme user* terms than the schemes for other client groups.

Housing Benefit per scheme user per week

Category					Total
No. of schemes	13	10	22	33	78
% of schemes	17	13	28	42	100

Widely differing levels of HB per user were being paid to schemes within each client group, and also to different client groups. The differences were evident at the median level: with the value of HB per user per week for women’s refuges indexed at 100:

- the index for single homeless schemes was 222;
- the index for substance misusers schemes was 468;
- the index for homeless families was 597; and
- the index for offender schemes was 1,183.

The value of HB payments per person per week diverged further above the median, pointing to a need for further analysis of the wide variation in the HB per scheme user between single people, substance misusers and offender schemes.

Supporting People grant and Housing Benefit per scheme user per week

Category					Total
No. of schemes	12	10	18	38	78
% of schemes	15	13	23	49	100

The analysis of SPG and HB combined *per household space* showed a very wide disparity between schemes for different client groups. In contrast, when the levels of SPG plus HB were compared on a per user basis, there was:

- a close correlation between payments in schemes for single homeless, homeless families, women’s refuges and substance misuse schemes up to the median level if the higher costs in family accommodation were taken into account; and
- higher combined payments of SPG and HB in schemes for offenders.

Assessment of homeless applications and the allocation of temporary accommodation: policy issues

The research raised a number of issues about the way in which the systems used to assess homeless applicants for temporary or permanent re-housing – and then to allocate accommodation – operate:

- There appeared to be some inconsistencies in the way that homelessness officers investigated the social needs and degree of vulnerability of homeless applicants.
- Limitations on the supply of temporary accommodation might in some circumstances influence the decisions of homelessness officers in determining whether applicants have Full Duty status, and hence eligibility for social housing.
- The database that identifies currently available temporary accommodation does not distinguish between different types of accommodation so that the first address on the list might not in all cases be appropriate to the needs of the individual or household.
- The limited supply of temporary accommodation in some parts of Northern Ireland may mean that the private rented sector is being used inappropriately to provide temporary accommodation for vulnerable people.

In addition, the analysis showed that providers of temporary accommodation were not contractually obliged to:

- accept homeless nominees from Housing Executive advice centres or homelessness officers;
- notify vacancies to the temporary accommodation database;
- notify Housing Executive homelessness officers if they house someone directly; or
- help those they house to complete a common waiting list application form.

Many providers did all these things, but the fact that they were not mandatory activities meant that some accommodation might be taken up by people with lower priority. The wide variation in the performance of temporary accommodation schemes exacerbates the problems associated with a limited supply of temporary accommodation and the way it is allocated.

Conclusions

Having reviewed the statistical evidence, the report concludes that there is a need for an overall framework of policy and system design that creates:

- *links between homelessness services, housing options services, and the allocation processes for both temporary and permanent accommodation;*
- *more overt management of the 'market' for temporary accommodation that brings the Housing Executive, voluntary sector and private rented sector provision into a common funding and management framework;*
- *a system of funding for temporary accommodation that depends on achieving minimum performance standards and a continuous improvement programme in which performance benchmarks for the provision of supported accommodation are continually advanced in consultation with the provider sector; and*
- *forms of contract for Supporting People funding that require active support for homelessness policy and involvement in homelessness systems by all funded providers.*

This summary report is available as a free download from the Housing Executive's website at www.nihe.gov.uk.