Survey Analysis: Housing and Homelessness Survey 2021

Produced for The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland

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# 1.0 Background

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, as part of its Housing and Homelessness Programme, published a survey in September 2021 to gather the views of people with lived experience of housing issues and homelessness in Northern Ireland on the key challenges that are not being adequately addressed by existing services, policies and/or legislation.

This paper provides a breakdown of the key findings from that survey. This was a qualitative survey, designed to extract view sand opinions and therefore features limited quantitative data.

# 2.0 Survey Responses

The survey was conducted online via the Typeform platform and received 112 responses between 13 September and 22 October. The initial questions asked respondents to identify themselves by selecting one of three categories which best described them and their association with the topic.

Of these responses, 68, or 60.7%, were from people with lived experience of housing or homelessness issues, 31 or 27.7% were from people who work or volunteer for an organisation that addresses housing issues and/or homelessness and 19 or 17% were from people who discussed the survey with a group of people and were providing responses on their behalf. It will be noted that the numbers add to 118 and the percentages add to 105.4%. This is because six of the 112 respondents identified with more than one category as detailed in Fig 1 below.

Fig. 1: Survey Respondents by Type

## 2.1 A: Lived experience of housing and/or homelessness

68 survey respondents had lived experience of housing and/or homelessness. They were asked to ‘Please tell us in a few words about the challenges or issues relating to housing and homelessness you wish to highlight’ and given two additional opportunities to add further to their answers with additional challenges or issues. They were then asked to ‘Tell us more about why you think the issues or challenges you have highlighted are important to resolving housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland.’ All questions for this group required a qualitative response. They were not asked to identify anything about themselves such as gender, age or location.

## 2.2 B: Work/volunteer for an organisation that addresses housing/homelessness

Of the 31 respondents who work or volunteer for an organisation that addresses housing issues and/or homelessness, 28 provided the names of their organisation and these can be seen in Fig 2.

50% of those who declared their organisation work or volunteer for the Simon Community in Northern Ireland, with the remainder representing a range of organisations, mainly only one or two per organisation, with the exception of NIACRO and the Men’s Advisory Project who each had three respondents.

Fig 2: Organisations Represented by Current Employees/Volunteers

Aside from being asked to identify the organisation they work with; this group was asked exactly the same questions as those with lived experience.

## 2.3 C: Discussed with and responding on behalf of a group

The trend for predominance by the Simon Community seen in 2.2 above is unsurprising, given it is the largest organisation operating within this sector in Northern Ireland. This trend continued when analysing the breakdown of the organisations represented by those who had held a group discussion and were supplying answers on their behalf.

Of the 19 that selected this answer, two also selected answer B, ‘I work or volunteer for an organisation...’ both worked for the Simon Community and they are included in the breakdown above. A glitch in the survey design allowed them to select both options, which should not have been possible. Three people selected this answer but didn’t complete any further questions in the survey, leaving the 14 included in Fig 3 below.

Those selecting this answer were asked ‘From your discussions, what were the top five issues relating to housing or homelessness that were raised?,’ followed by ‘Tell us more about why the people you spoke to feel the issues you have highlighted are important to resolve housing issues and homelessness in Northern Ireland.’

Fig 3: Organisations Represented Via Group Discussions

In the group responses, we also asked for further data to record the location, gender and age range of those with whom discussions were held. The breakdown for each of these is provided in Fig 4, 5 and 6 below.

Due to the design of the survey, those who selected both B (I work or volunteer for an organisation that addresses housing issues and/or homelessness) and C (I have discussed this survey with a group of people and want to provide responses on their behalf), were only able to proceed with answers applicable to B and could not provide any details about the group they spoke with.

Fig 4: Group Responses by Location

In Fig 3, we outlined the organisations represented by the group discussions and we saw that the Simon Community NI accounted for 10 of the 14 listed. This translates to all five of the Bangor discussions, one in Belfast, two in Larne, one in Lisburn and one in Portadown. In This Together hosted the second discussion in Bangor, while Depaul hosted two discussions in Dungannon and VOYPIC covered Derry.

Those taking part in the group discussions were predominantly male, with 83 of 108 group respondents identifying as such, while 23 identified as female and 2 as ‘other’. This breakdown is shown in percentage terms in Fig 5. Numbers add to 108 and not 128 as in the responses by location above, as one respondent completing the survey for a group of participants in Larne, failed to provide a breakdown of their figures for gender or age, or indeed any further responses.

Fig 5: Gender Breakdown of Group Responses

The age profile of those included in group discussions can be seen in Fig 6. It may be noted that these figures add to 110, due to an error in the breakdown given for one location. It is not possible to ascertain in which age category the error occurs and as it accounts for just two respondents here, we have included all figures. As a result of this error, percentage figures are also slightly inaccurate, causing percentages to be worked out of a baseline of 110 rather than 108. Nevertheless, it is clear that the vast majority of those represented in the group discussions fall into the 18-25 and 26-35 age groups, with these two accounting for over two-thirds of all respondents.

Fig 6: Age Breakdown of Group Responses

A limitation of the survey is that the same demographic data was not requested for other participants, making it impossible to analyse any of the responses from people with lived experience of housing or homelessness in relation to their location, gender or age. On reflection, this would be a useful addition to any further surveys of this nature.

# 3.0 Themes Highlighted

The survey asked people to highlight their key issues or challenges in relation to housing and homelessness. Those with lived experience or who worked/volunteered for an organisation that works with homeless people were given three opportunities to answer this question, while those responding on behalf of a group were asked to list the top five themes or issues.

Having reviewed the responses and applied tags to indicate repeated themes from the responses given, it was possible to determine eight overarching themes which can be used to categorise the bulk of the responses. These are outlined in the table below, with a breakdown showing the frequency with which the different categories of respondents mentioned each theme.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Themes** | **Lived Experience** | **Working With** | **Group Responses** | **All Responses** | **% Of total** |
| The housing system | 24 | 16 | 15 | 55 | 23.0% |
| Insufficient supply/poor standards | 27 | 14 | 7 | 48 | 20.1% |
| Accessing services and support | 20 | 8 | 14 | 42 | 17.6% |
| Financial issues and cost | 13 | 6 | 5 | 24 | 10.0% |
| Mental health and complex needs | 11 | 6 | 3 | 20 | 8.4% |
| Hostels and emergency/temporary accommodation | 10 | 6 | 0 | 16 | 6.7% |
| Stigma and respect | 11 | 1 | 2 | 14 | 6.1% |
| Domestic abuse | 6 | 5 | 0 | 11 | 4.6% |
|  | **122** | **62** | **46** | **230** | **100%** |

Table 1: Key Themes by Respondent Type

As respondents were encouraged to provide multiple answers, there are many more responses than participants in the survey. It should be noted also that a small number of issues that received fewer than three mentions from any cohort of respondents have not been accounted for in the table above, as the lack of frequency meant these were not deemed key themes. This included a small number of respondents raising the issue of fear of independence and a need for the sense of community that comes with being homeless and a few mentions of family and children – much fewer than might have been expected in a survey of this type perhaps.

Three themes stand out as being of greater importance to all respondents than others:

1. **The housing system**, by which we mean how housing is allocated, how ‘points’ are awarded to assess priority for accessing housing, waiting lists, how particular categories of individuals are treated and more, as outlined in 3.1.
2. **The poor supply and standard of accommodation** available, including a lack of ‘social’ housing, lack of suitable options, lack of choice of location, poor standards in private rentals and more (see 3.2).
3. **Access to services and support**, including poor support from housing officers, difficulty accessing the internet for benefits and support, inter-agency communication and support difficulties and more (see 3.3).

Fig 7: Key Themes by Respondent Type (count)

The breakdown by percentage for each of these themes across all respondents is shown below in Fig 8, where the housing system and access to support and services each account for more than a fifth of the issues and challenges raised by all respondents.

Fig 8: Key Themes Across all Respondents (%)

## 3.1 The Housing System

Issues grouped under this theme were the most frequently mentioned throughout the responses, with 55 mentions across the three types of respondents. For those working within the sector or supplying responses from a group discussion, this was the top issue.

The system used to allocate points to help determine an individual’s priority for housing was raised repeatedly by respondents to the survey and was the most frequently mentioned issue by respondents from all three categories. Waiting lists was similarly raised consistently across all three types of respondents.

The difficulty in understanding and navigating the wider housing system was raised in the group discussions and by those with lived experience, suggesting that individuals find this challenging. Those working or volunteering in the sector were more likely to raise the issue of a lack of consistency in assessments, presumably because they see multiple candidates being treated in different ways by those carrying out the assessments.

The need for early intervention when people get into financial difficulties, before they find themselves homeless was a common thread, as was the lack of regulation for private rentals, resulting in over-priced, poor-quality accommodation – a thread picked up under the other themes such as cost and poor standards.

Both the individual responses and those made on behalf of groups where discussions were held highlighted an issue for single people, who feel the system doesn’t offer them enough support and they suffer compared with families or those with children.

The Housing Executive came in for criticism here for a lack of communication and in terms of the support offered, though this is largely picked up under the Accessing Services and Support theme.

## 3.2 Insufficient Supply/Poor Standards

The second most often raised theme across all groups with 48 mentions, was around the lack of housing and the poor standards of accommodation. For those with lived experience, this was the most important theme, with 27 individual mentions referring to the ‘lack of housing’, ‘lack of social housing’, ‘lack of affordable housing’ or the ‘poor standards in private rentals’. A particularly strong theme was around the lack of choice or options when it comes to the locations of housing available. Respondents were concerned that they couldn’t opt for a location close to family or friends and the support networks they offered.

One respondent talked about how *“There is too many properties that get offered out with the understanding that no one will accept it and this cycle continues until someone with low enough points will accept it.”*

Supply was the second most common theme for those working in the sector, where the ‘lack of social housing’ was the biggest issue raised, while the group discussions returned more concerns about the ‘lack of suitable accommodation’ and this theme was in fourth place, with just seven mentions.

## 3.3 Accessing Services and Support

The third most common theme across all groups and boosted in particular by responses from the group discussions where it came in second place, there were over 40 responses that talked about the lack of support, from personal support to housing support and support for particular categories such as care leavers, prisoners or men.

Practical issues such as not having an address for benefits or access to the internet to make applications or get photo ID were raised particularly in the group discussions while the lack of support for men was a strong theme from both the lived experience respondents and those working in the sector. The fact that the Men’s Advisory Project was represented by three respondents may help account for the relatively high proportion of references to support for men compared with other demographics.

Multi-agency communication and support is included within this theme and was mentioned by all three types of respondents, suggesting that this links with the difficulties mentioned under 3.1 around ‘navigating the system.’

## 3.4 Financial Issues and Cost

Cost and affordability or other issues linked with money were highlighted by 10.4% of all respondents. There was little distinguishable difference in the responses from those with lived experience, those working in the sector and those responding on behalf of a group.

Issues around the high costs of private rentals or B&Bs and other emergency accommodation options, predominated, while a number of people also talked about the need for education and support in managing money and budgeting so as to avoid spiralling into debt and this then contributing to homelessness down the line.

Affordability within the private rental sector was a recurring theme, with a number of respondents calling for price regulation to help overcome the problem.

## 3.5 Mental Health and Complex Needs

Twenty responses referenced mental health needs, addiction issues or a picture of complex needs requiring support and specialist consideration within the wider context of homelessness.

Having this picture of complex needs seems to be both part of the requirement for accessing housing as a homeless person, by gaining sufficient points to qualify, and part of the problem with retaining tenancies and slipping back into the cycle of homelessness requiring hostel accommodation.

The mental and physical impacts of living in poor housing were also cited, suggesting that the standard of housing itself can cause problems for some of those with lived experience and not just the ultimate lack of a home.

## 3.6 Stigma and Respect

6.1% of all respondents talked in some way about the lack of respect they faced or the stigma attached to homelessness. This was most prevalent among those with lived experience, as one might expect, as these are the people on the receiving end of such treatment.

A few people felt the very agencies that should be supporting them showed a lack of respect, while one mentioned feeling ‘judged’ by the Housing Executive. Those with gender diversity issues or criminal records also noted being treated differently as a result of their specific characteristics.

For some respondents, the issue was less about stigma and more about a lack of respect for their needs as an individual, but the issue of homelessness still being stigmatized was the most prevalent view portrayed by respondents.

## 3.7 Hostels and Emergency/Temporary Accommodation

Sixteen respondents either with lived experience of homelessness or working in the sector, raised issues around the hostels and emergency accommodation options available. Safety, sleep disruption and the negative impact on mental health were all highlighted as problems. One respondent said: *“Available temporary accommodation is often unsuitable for women and children and is likely to move them away from any supportive social networks.”*

One particular respondent had an issue with the quality of what was offered, saying *“Abysmal quality of emergency accommodation; my mother nearly developed pneumonia during the winter and despite knowing about her disabilities, they placed us on a house at the top of a hill.”*

For others, the lack of emergency or temporary accommodation or access to hostels was the main issue, with 11 respondents mentioning this is some form.

## 3.8 Domestic Abuse

Eleven respondents with lived experience or working in the sector raised the issue of domestic abuse and overwhelmingly, this was in relation to abuse of males. This can be accounted for by the participation of a number of Men’s Advisory Project staff and their clients in the survey, as this is their area of expertise.

The lack of support for those males suffering domestic abuse was the main issue, with some claiming this is an ‘unseen’ problem. One summed up the issue as *“Lack of appropriate emergency accommodation for male victims of domestic abuse, akin to those available for women.”* While another said *“I was being battered in my house by my husband. There is nowhere to go for men who are abused.”*

# 4.0 Resolving Housing Issues or Homelessness in Northern Ireland

The final question in the survey asked respondents to explain why they felt issues they raised were important to resolving housing or homelessness in Northern Ireland. This was answered by 99 people, 86 of those either with lived experience or working in the sector and 13 who were responding on behalf of a group.

Some of the responses given simply repeated the answers provided previously by highlighting again what the key issues are without providing any analysis of why they were important. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify some common themes among those who did answer what the question was asking. The following provides just a snapshot of the responses under a few recurrent themes.

### Need for early intervention and support

A number of respondents highlighted the importance of getting support at an early stage before someone ends up on the streets. Where a tenancy has been provided, support to maintain that tenancy to prevent someone losing it and starting the cycle of homelessness all over again was highlighted by a few respondents, notably those working for NIACRO, where this was a common theme mentioned by all three. *“The greatest impact on reducing homelessness is helping people sustain their existing tenancy. This may also include support for them to move and set up in a new area, we know through our own work support during these times hugely reduces the risk of a tenancy failing and repeat homelessness.”*

One respondent with lived experience outlined the importance of support in their own situation: *“Once my head was sorted out and I had accommodation with the appropriate support in place things improved massively. Addiction services like Concillios and the support to attend and come through the other side were vital. The support continuing after Concillios and into my accommodation and recovery. Residential addiction services linked to move on to own tenancy with support would be much more appropriate.”*

### Multi-agency joint working

The need for agencies to work collaboratively was raised by a number of respondents. Whether in relation to mental health and addiction services, where a dual agency approach was highlighted as a need or helping move people from hostels into housing while addressing addiction issues. One respondent said *“As we all know, a lot of guys on the streets have addiction problems. I would like to see a hostel that deals with addictions problems and then they get help to get housing. It could be a joint program.”*

Another commented *“Homelessness needs more of an interagency approach. There is a current homeless crisis in NI, figures have escalated throughout covid. House prices in NI are not affordable for first time buyers which puts more pressure on social housing, landlords are greedy and prices are not regulated.”*

### Need for change in the private sector

The issue of price regulation in private rented accommodation was another recurring theme, with a number of respondents pointing to the high costs making private rented properties inaccessible. One suggested *“DfC could pay rent-in-advance &deposit to enable long-term homeless to access the private rented sector.”*

High rents can make employment a barrier in some cases, as people feel too much of their salary would go on rent, so they end up in a vicious cycle of being unable to access private accommodation and staying within the homeless category *“Rent high so puts people off getting a job, with no job cannot save for private rental.”* Another explained it as *“Rent outweighs an acceptable proportion of a basic income leading to debt and the vicious circle of meeting rent payments vs household bills and the threat of homelessness.”*

### Points system

Again here, many respondents reiterated the need for the points system to change as there is a feeling that it is open to abuse: *“…over-hauling the housing points system would make the process easier and fairer. Many applicants 'cheat' the system to push their application to the top of the housing list.”*

Others pointed out the inherent flaw in the system whereby unless you have complex needs, it’s hard to gain enough points for housing, but complex needs often lead to the tenancy failing: *“Housing pointing needs to change as it’s the more issues you have the more points you receive and the tenancy fails as you are not tenancy ready. People with little points have no chance of being rehoused as they will never make the pointing grade......this needs to change”*

This theme of how points are allocated and how difficult it is for single people or those without complex needs to gain sufficient points recurred frequently in the responses. One respondent from the Simon Community said *“It is difficult in increasing their awarded points for their area of choice if the client does not wish to engage with outside agencies e.g., Community Addiction Team, Community Mental Health, Extern. This means the client is on the basic point score and offers of accommodation are practically non-existent which results in a long wait for an offer resulting in a negative impact on their mental health.”* Presumably, a number of those facing homelessness do not suffer the issues that would warrant engagement with such issues, thereby putting them at a potentially unfair disadvantage.

In the group discussions, one group summed it up as *“… they feel ignored and that the pointing system is wrong and stigma still is an issue with professional bodies such as GP and Housing Executive.”*

### Lack of supply

Another recurrent theme and linked with concerns about standards, costs and accessibility of private sector rented accommodation, is the lack of supply of suitable social housing. A number of respondents feel that if this were addressed, it would open up hostel accommodation for those sleeping on the streets rather than it being taken up by those awaiting suitable housing “*If there was enough social homes, there wouldn't be a need for hostel / temporary accommodation”*

Those working in the sector see the supply issue from a wider perspective and understand the longer-term implications of the current difficulties: *“The growing crisis of lack of supply and increased demand has been ignored to date and new legislation scheduled for 2022 is inadequate to tackle the problems or find solutions. A long-term strategy is promised by the Executive, but immediate measures are necessary to stop escalating problems putting the whole housing sector into meltdown.”*

From the group discussions, the views of young people on this topic were shared by VOYPIC *“The young people feel that they would be able to maintain housing if they had better support and were able to manage living on their own. Lack of support has result in them losing tenancies and being made homeless. Not enough suitable accommodation has meant that we have moved from one temp accommodation to the next or end up sleeping on friends sofas.”*

Another respondent summed up the solution as *“More suitable homes to be built will help resolve homelessness.”*

### More awareness of and support for victims of male domestic abuse

As mentioned in 3.8, a relatively high proportion of responses came from those either working with or experiencing male domestic abuse. These respondents again highlighted the need to be aware of and address the issue where it leads to homelessness for the man and often the children in the family. One said *“Homelessness cannot simply be a problem for women. We have to support men who face domestic abuse and help house those people and their children too when needs be.”*

A respondent working for the Men’s Action Project talked about the lack of options available for men and the poor resourcing of the issue when it comes to support *“Men cannot leave highly abusive relationships if they have nowhere safe to go to. There are no refugees available in NI for men who have faced abuse. Men are offered space in a mixed-use refuge. This is wholly unsupportive for men who have experienced trauma.”*

### Need to treat people as individuals

The need to see the individuals behind the problem, listen to them and treat them as people was raised by a number of those with lived experience. One said ”*We are human beings, not numbers on a spread sheet. Housing Executive staff need to be retrained in helping vulnerable individuals that have been victimised.*

Another, who had previous experience of homelessness outlined the complexities involved in making assumptions about the best solutions *“The people behind the issue, and their priorities are important. We, as housed, employed, well fed people may think that the answer is to give a homeless person a house. It is not always as simple as that, especially for people with complex needs who live on the streets.”*

In the group discussions, the issue of respect was raised as a problem to be addressed “*The general consensus is that the homeless sector of society are at times treated as second class citizens, due to presenting as homeless.”*