

Securing Suitable and Stable Accommodation for Probation Service-Users in NI – A Study

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Summary: Supporting people who have offended to access suitable and stable accommodation means that they will have a better chance of turning their lives around, reducing reoffending and making our communities safer. Northern Ireland is facing significant challenges in the provision of housing for the general population. Over the past decade, the social housing waiting list has been growing, outstripping the supply of available housing. There has been a significant rise in the number of households with homelessness status and the need for temporary accommodation is increasing every month. In 2023, the number of new homes completed locally fell to its lowest level in more than 64 years, causing a housing supply crisis. Research indicates that those who have offended face even more difficulty in accessing accommodation (van Tongeren, 2022). Many of those who enter custody lose their homes, and there may be a breakdown in family and community relationships. High numbers of those who have offended also experience poor mental health, addictions and trauma. The stigmatisation and exclusion experienced by offenders, as well as the need for effective risk-management plans to be put in place, can lead to challenges in accessing suitable accommodation (McCarthy and Hagan, 2024). In seeking to address this issue, the PBNi focused on analysis of data in respect of the specific issues faced by its service-users. This paper outlines the findings of a survey conducted with Probation Officers in respect of the accommodation needs of their service-users and outlines organisational actions taken as a result of the findings of this survey.

Keywords: housing, accommodation, offenders, data, survey, approved accommodation, homelessness, hostels, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Providing suitable and appropriate housing and accommodation is one of the most significant issues impacting upon the work of the Probation Board for

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Northern Ireland (PBNI). Many service-users face significant barriers to securing stable housing due to various factors, including risk issues, legal restrictions, financial constraints and social stigma, as well as lack of housing stock and lack of ability to plan properly for people's release from prison on licence. Research shows that the provision of suitable accommodation for service-users serving a community sentence is a critical factor in reducing reoffending and contributing to desistance (Thompson, 2014). Likewise, having a home when you leave prison is a key determinant for successful rehabilitation and preventing further offending. The Report *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland* (NIAO, 2023) highlights the clear links that exist between homelessness and reoffending and found strong consensus that inadequate stable accommodation was the greatest barrier to desistance, given that having an address is key to accessing services, including healthcare and employment. According to figures released by the Ministry of Justice in England, people leaving prison without settled accommodation are around 50 per cent more likely to commit further crimes than those with stable accommodation (Nacro, 2024).

The Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland (CIHNI) believes that we are currently grappling with a profound housing and homelessness crisis. It sets out that the issues relating to this are multifaceted, spanning a critical undersupply of social housing, escalating rates of homelessness and deteriorating housing conditions across the region, and addressing these challenges requires urgent and comprehensive action at multiple levels of government and society (CIHNI, 2024). The housing challenge is recognised by government.

One of the nine strategic priorities set out in the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government launched in 2025 is to: 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' (NIEO, 2025). The Programme for Government elaborates:

Good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing. We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. The challenge we face is evidenced by the social housing waiting list, which currently stands at over 47,000 households, including 35,000 experiencing housing stress.

(NIEO, 2025, p. 42)

Accordingly, one of the actions in the Programme for Government is to: 'Continue to prioritise housing support for vulnerable people across our society through NIHE's three-year Supporting People Strategy' (p. 45). The issue of providing accommodation for those who are already marginalised and excluded from society because of their offending behaviour is a significant challenge in the face of a wider housing crisis across Northern Ireland.

Given the significant issues being faced in accessing housing for service-users and the apparent scale of the housing crisis in Northern Ireland more generally, PBNI established an internal probation accommodation working group in 2024, made up of staff along with a Board member with a background and expertise in the housing sector. The purpose of this working group was to identify key issues around accommodation for service-users, including the scale of the problem and related data; develop actionable recommendations to improve access to safe, stable and supportive housing for service-users; facilitate collaboration between probation services, housing providers, and relevant organisations to develop sustainable housing solutions and provide a forum for sharing best practices and insights on addressing service-user accommodation needs and challenges.

In respect of addressing the scale of the problem, data relating to accommodation/housing are not routinely collected by PBNI. However, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners have been anecdotally reporting that accessing housing for those who have offended is an increasing problem. In order therefore to try to quantify the scale of the issue and collate meaningful data, an internal survey was designed and disseminated to staff in PBNI. The purpose of the survey was to ask Probation Officers to reflect on the scale and impact of the accommodation/housing issues affecting service-users who are currently being supervised by probation through a community sentence or licence.

This paper reflects on the findings of this survey and, as PBNI enters into the consultation for its new strategic Corporate Plan 2026–29, it considers what solutions we can be part of and what work we can drive forward in order to address the accommodation issues that currently exist for service-users.

Methodology

A survey was developed by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statisticians seconded to PBNI in January 2025 to provide a snapshot of the issues surrounding accommodation/housing for service-users currently

being supervised by PBNI. The survey was issued on 2 January 2025, and a private link was emailed to a total sample of all Probation Officers available (253). The survey ran for just over two weeks and closed on 19 January 2025 (PBNI, 2025).

As of 31 December 2024, the number of service-users being supervised by PBNI was 4,202. Of the thirty-eight Probation Officers who responded, a combined caseload of 848 service-users was reported. The survey sample represents 20.2 per cent of the overall number of service-users being supervised. Given that information was not collected in relation to individual service-users, there is no way to quantify whether this is a representative sample with respect to gender, age, type of order/licence, therefore care should be taken when interpreting findings.

Twelve questions were posed to participants:

1. How many people are you currently supervising in the community (do not include those currently recalled and in custody, or those subject to a warrant)?
2. Of that number, how many are currently rough sleeping/street sleeping/needing a crash bed? (A 'crash bed' refers to a hostel which offers people a bed for the night based on who is first in the queue. People will usually have to leave the accommodation in the morning and will have to queue again for a bed the following night).
3. How many are currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation?
4. How many are currently residing in a hostel?
5. How many are currently residing in PBNI Approved Premises?
6. How many service-users on your current caseload were released from prison without any accommodation?
7. How many service-users on your current caseload were released from prison without appropriate accommodation?
8. Of those in your caseload who are currently housed, how many are currently at high risk of their accommodation breaking down/ending?
9. In how many cases has lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall?
10. Over the past 12 months how many people have you referred to Approved Premises, but who did not get a place?
11. As a supervising Probation Officer, what specifically do you think are the three key issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNI service-users?

12. As a supervising Probation Officer, what do you think are the three key possible solutions/actions required to reduce the amount of accommodation-related issues for your service-users, both male and female?

There was a free textbox included in the survey where participants could elaborate on their responses. The survey was collecting aggregate information and was not seeking the names or identifiable details of service-users but rather seeking a general picture of the issues.

There are limitations in respect of this as it was based on staff knowledge of their caseload. Whilst they would have a good knowledge of the circumstances of people they supervise, there may be circumstances of which they were not aware and therefore there may be an element of under-reporting of the extent of the issue.

The key findings

Of the 848 service-users identified through the survey:

- 5.1 per cent (43) were currently rough sleeping/street sleeping/ needing a crash bed
- 9.9 per cent (84) were currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation
- 2.8 per cent (24) were currently residing in a hostel
- 3.2 per cent (27) were currently residing in PBNI Approved Premises
- 4.5 per cent (38) were released from prison without any accommodation
- 3.7 per cent (31) were released from prison without appropriate accommodation.

There were a number of common themes from the survey findings and the provision of qualitative feedback, which is considered in more detail through this paper, including the scale of those at high risk of their accommodation breaking down, cases where a lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall, the availability of approved premises, issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNI service-users, and suggested solutions put forward by staff.

Those at high risk of accommodation breaking down/ending

According to staff responses to this point-in-time survey, 9.6 per cent (81) of service-users were at high risk of their accommodation breaking down or ending. The most common reported reasons for this were addiction, mental health issues, unstable relationships and community tension. For example, one Probation Officer responded:

'Ongoing multitude of concerns/needs/risks including addictions, hedonistic lifestyles, poor and often untreated mental health, lack of support network, domestic concerns, under threat, low motivation and overall lack of regard for rules/statutory requirements.'

Staff were invited to provide some of the details of the reasons for accommodation instability/housing difficulties of people on their caseload. One Probation Officer noted the diverse circumstances of four individuals on their caseload. These included experiences of 'sofa surfing' and 'poor state of apartment (squalor) due to history of alcohol misuse'. Another service-user whose parents were selling their home faced homelessness, while another's mother was evicting him and his adult children (with additional needs) due to ongoing family disputes. Another person under supervision was living in an aunt's refurbished shed while awaiting his own accommodation. He also had additional complex needs.

All of the responses highlighted the complex needs and chaotic lifestyle of many of the people under supervision of probation. There were also comments in respect of community tensions in a number of cases and individuals being under threat from within their local community. One Probation Officer responded in respect of four service-users:

'For all four indicated above they have been the subject of paramilitary attention so have had to move location due to the threats made against them. They are moved to Northern Ireland Housing Executive temporary accommodation from which they can be relocated at any time should suitable permanent accommodation become available.'

Cases where lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall

Significantly, staff respondents also reported that the lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in the breach of a community order or recall of fifty-three service-users. An individual is recommended for recall when they can no longer be safely managed in the community. Likewise, someone can be in breach of their community sentence if they fail to abide by the conditions of the order. Some common themes in these responses were a lack of stability, having to share accommodation with peers who had a negative influence, leading to relapse and being unable to meet requirements of their order/licence due to the lack of suitable accommodation. In other cases, service-users struggled to maintain independent accommodation, with pressure from other individuals leading to relapse into addictions or deterioration of mental health issues/isolation issues.

Highlighting a common theme, one Probation Officer commented:

‘Lack of stability that a home with supportive family provides is not present for many of my service-users. They often feel isolated and are isolated in hostels (away from their hometown) and B&Bs and sofa surfing. This lack of appropriate accommodation has often lent itself to service-users further involving themselves in substance misuse that has led to further offending – then recall/breach.’

Availability of approved premises

The survey data also illustrated that over the last twelve months, thirty-eight service-users were reported to have been referred to approved premises but did not get a place. In Northern Ireland there are currently seven approved premises with 91 beds available in total. These premises are establishments that are owned and managed by the community and voluntary sector, including organisations like Extern and the Simon Community. They are not owned by Probation; however, they provide criminal justice organisations including Probation with a really important service, particularly where there are concerns about an individual’s risk of serious further offending, or there are additional considerations about how the public will be protected in the early stages of their release from prison. Approved premises provide short-term accommodation for people who meet these criteria, to help them make a successful transition from custody to community in a structured and supportive environment.

Referrals to approved premises mostly came through a weekly allocation panel. Demand for places is high, and priority is given to those subject to licence. This can impact on the availability of sufficient places to support the testing of long-term prisoners on temporary pre-release testing at the latter stage of their sentence. We know that there are other challenges, as highlighted by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJINI) (CJINI, 2023), including that there is no separate provision for women and the approved premises have difficulty supporting the needs of people with underlying health conditions.

In their report on approved premises, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate noted:

Often those released from prison could not be told where they would be living until shortly before their release and there were therefore consequential impacts on processes to support their transition from custody. Issues identified in previous inspections about continuity of medication, registration with general practitioners, availability of photographic identification, access to benefits and bank accounts at the point of release persisted despite work taken forward by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to improve this.

(CJINI, p. 7)

Further, a significant issue with approved accommodation, highlighted by CJINI in 2023 and reiterated by probation staff in this survey, is the lack of move-on accommodation following a stay in approved premises. The Criminal Justice Inspector noted that:

Move-on planning could be improved but accessing suitable sustainable accommodation in the community was challenging especially set against the wider issues in the housing sector in Northern Ireland. A number of residents were spending too long in approved premises.

(CJINI, p. 7)

Issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNi service-users

Some of the issues and/or barriers identified by probation staff as requiring resolution in terms of accommodation for PBNi service-users included: the overall lack of available accommodation across the board within private

rented, social housing, hostels, and approved premises. It was also noted that there was a specific lack of appropriate accommodation for those service-users managed within the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (certain sexual and violent offenders).

One respondent stated:

‘There is a clear need for more hostel bed availability, and at short notice. There is a need for “move-on” plans for those in hostels longer term, so as to free up bed space and fuller support for hostel accommodation for SROSH [those presenting a significant risk of serious harm] service-users prior to their release from prison – as this is a known risk status prior to their release date. There are also concerns around the vulnerabilities of individuals providing accommodation – for example older grandparents.’

Practitioners also reported a reliance on crash beds leading to service-user instability, with one practitioner stating: ‘A crash bed miles away is of little benefit – people resort to sofa surfing as they may have support from people they know in an area they are familiar with.’

Other Probation Officers reported the difficulty in managing cases when service-users were released from prison without accommodation and prison releases occurring at the weekend when housing services are not readily available. A common theme was the difficulty in managing releases on a Friday afternoon: ‘Friday afternoon releases cause a significant issue as people can only resort to emergency out-of-hours accommodation, if this is even available’. This issue has been raised with the Department of Justice, with the ultimate aim of new legislation to address this matter under statute. In addition, the Lady Chief Justice has recently instigated listings changes in High Court bail hearings, to avoid bail releases from Friday courts (Judicial Communications Office, 2024).

Suggested solutions put forward by staff

Some suggested solutions made by staff to the issues raised included: improved communication with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and one specific point of contact for PBNi within the Northern Ireland Executive; the development of a dedicated multidisciplinary team with representation from all stakeholders to address the issues; earlier planning during contact with the Northern Ireland Prison Service to reduce the number of service-users being

released from prison without appropriate accommodation, and a specific resource within PBNI dedicated to helping source housing.

The challenge of finding solutions was articulated by one Probation Officer who stated:

‘This is a particularly difficult question due to the complexities of homelessness and the multitude of barriers there are for individuals who are homeless i.e. access to services, lack of identification, dual diagnosis (substance misuse/mental health), difficulties with accessing employment, exploitation, etc.’

Another highlighted the fact that one agency cannot solve all the problems, stating:

‘If we were to look at actions, it is important that there is a strong presence of multidisciplinary working which I think can get lost at times. Specifically considering how difficult it is for an individual who is homeless to maintain so many services across different locations. Unfortunately, many individuals resort to breaching their Orders/Licences just to have shelter.’

This also highlights the desperate circumstances that some service-users find themselves in, where they may resort to offending in order to access accommodation.

Organisational actions taken as a result of this survey

It is apparent there are no easy or simple solutions to tackling the issues highlighted above. However, within Probation we have set in place an organisational response following the analysis of the available data. Probation’s business plan for 2025–26 (PBNI, 2025) sets out that Probation will support the work to develop a Departmental Adult Reoffending and Desistance Strategy for Northern Ireland. A key part of this strategy will relate to issues regarding the provision of accommodation. Probation has commenced the development of a proposal with NIHE, which would see an arrangement between both organisations to second a NIHE housing officer to PBNI. The seconded role will focus on addressing the accommodation needs of PBNI service-users across Northern Ireland, as well as potential access to probation-specific crash bed(s). This initiative reflects both organisations’ shared commitment to reducing

reoffending, preventing homelessness and improving outcomes for justice-involved individuals.

We have also committed within our Business Plan to developing our partnerships with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, the community and voluntary sectors and others to support service delivery in identified areas, and primarily housing support.

The complexity of housing needs in the PBNI-supervised population often requires joint, tailored approaches that cannot be achieved through siloed service delivery, as highlighted in many of the responses to the survey. A seconded housing professional from the Housing Executive embedded within PBNI would enable direct collaboration, enhance housing access pathways (particularly to temporary accommodation), and improve support for individuals under probation supervision to maintain their accommodation. It is anticipated that this seconded role will

- Enhance PBNI's access to temporary accommodation
- Consider the viability of PBNI having access to a crash-bed facility solely for PBNI service-users
- Provide expert housing advice and support to PBNI staff and service-users
- Develop and assist in the execution of housing plans for individuals with complex accommodation needs
- Facilitate direct communication and referral pathways between NIHE (and Housing Associations) and PBNI
- Identify and escalate to government ministers systemic barriers to housing for this cohort
- Inform strategic planning within both organisations.

A steering group comprising senior representatives from NIHE and PBNI will provide oversight of this initiative, with regular progress reporting, including data on housing outcomes, case impact and learning, and a formal review will be undertaken at the twelve-month point, with recommendations for sustainability or scaling.

Conclusion

This survey has provided data, from the perspective of probation staff, about the scale and impact of accommodation and housing issues on a cohort of

service-users within PBNI. It has provided a snapshot of some of the pressing issues as identified by staff, including that 5 per cent of those service-users included in this survey were currently rough sleeping, street sleeping or needing a crash bed, and that almost 10 per cent were currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation. These arrangements add to the chaotic nature of the lifestyles of many of our service-users and make it difficult for them to access employment, education and support without an appropriate address.

Small numbers of service-users were living in hostels and approved premises, which reflects the small number of available beds throughout Northern Ireland.

Finally, almost 10 per cent of service-users were released from prison either without any accommodation or without appropriate accommodation, which makes the reintegration and resettlement of people post-custody extremely challenging. This supports the anecdotal information we have received over recent years from staff about the difficulties in preparing people for release from prison.

The survey has enabled us to use the available data to inform our organisational response and put in place initiatives which we hope will begin to ease the challenges currently faced by service-users and enhance our partnership and collaboration with housing executive colleagues.

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