Housing Executive

CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STRATEGY 2019-2022

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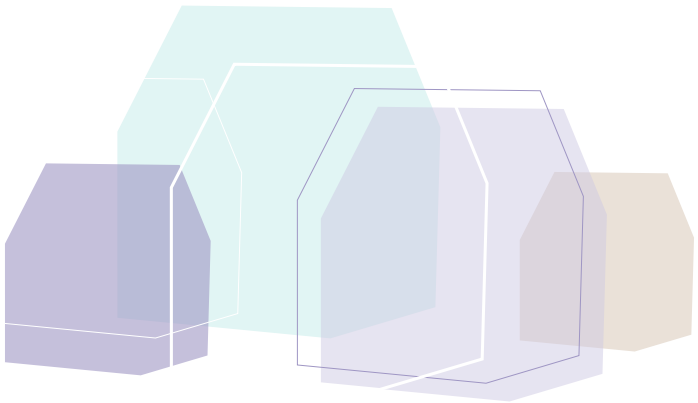


FOREWORD

WE ARE PLEASED TO PRESENT OUR CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STRATEGY 2019-2022 FOR HOUSING SERVICES DIVISION, WHICH DEMONSTRATES THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE'S COMMITMENT TO PROVIDE CARE AND SUPPORT TO MINIMISE TENANCY BREAKDOWN, PREVENT HOMELESSNESS AND PROMOTE STABLE AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES - TO BE MORE THAN A LANDLORD.

Our customers are at the heart of everything we do. As the statutory authority for housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland, and in our role as a social landlord to over 86,000 tenants, we have an acute understanding of the link between prevention of homelessness and providing cross-tenure care, support and advice to sustain tenancies for our customers. For both tenancy breakdown and homelessness, prevention is better than the cure, because having a secure and stable home and environment is an essential cornerstone to a person's life chances and has a positive impact on ability to secure employment, children's educational attainment and on overall health and wellbeing. With this in mind, this strategy is driven by the need to put our customer at the centre of our service and take an holistic approach to delivering support and advice at the right time for them, whenever that may be in their housing journey.

These themes of support, sustainment and homeless prevention cut across so many areas of our business that it will be a critical aspect of the strategy to maintain a joined-up approach and provide overarching direction to our activities in order to make sure that we are working together to excel and innovate for our customers.

In our last strategy, 2016-19, we identified 3 pillars of tenancy sustainment

- Housing Support
- Money Support
- Employment Support

These pillars align with research themes of the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) in relation to sustainment actions for social landlords. As seen in section 7, we have had much success under these pillars.

However, under our new strategy, we don't just want to follow best practice, we want to shape and redefine standards of best practice for supporting our customers and sustaining tenancies across the UK.

To achieve this ambition, we have added two further pillars of sustainment:

- Proactive and Responsive Support for At Risk Customers
- Neighbourhood/ Community Support

Based on these five pillars, we will provide a more stable platform for our customers to be able to maintain and thrive in their tenancies. We will build our Action Plan for Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment around these pillars.

Throughout this Strategy we have indicated what we hope to achieve over the next three years, the importance of achieving this for our customers and communities, whilst being cognisant of the challenges we will all face throughout its lifecycle. We will pay close attention to the outcomes and impact of our actions and we are confident that we can realise our simple but ambitious vision:

"to ensure that our customers' homes are the stable foundation upon which they can build happy and fulfilling lives."

INTRODUCTION

Defining 'Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment'

Customer support is everything we do to help our customers prepare for, look after, afford, maintain, enjoy and achieve a sense of well-being in their homes, and to prevent the tenure of that home from coming to a premature end.

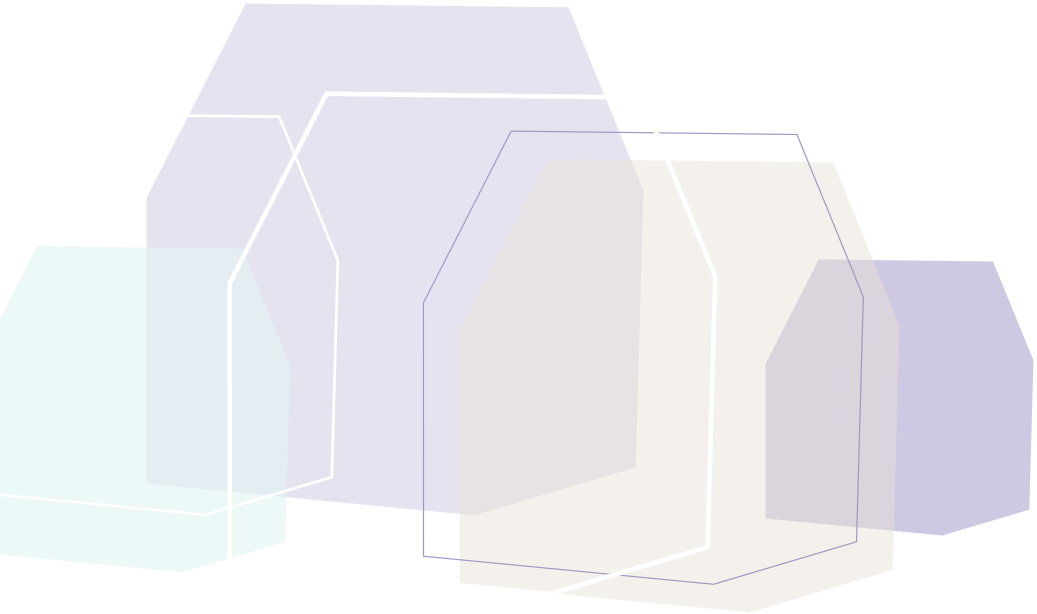
This support may be delivered directly through specific landlord activities, or part of wider organisational programmes which empower customers to manage their own housing situation.

The successful outcome of this support is **tenancy sustainment**.

As a social landlord as well as the overall housing authority in Northern Ireland with statutory responsibility for strategic activity in respect of housing and tackling and preventing homelessness, we cannot take the narrow view that tenancy sustainment is something that we need only achieve for our own tenants.

The above definition encompasses all tenures of our Housing Services customers, and moves us toward a more person-focused approach to support and sustainment across the customer's entire housing journey. It brings into our strategy, important preparatory and pre-tenancy work and support that we must do for and with our customers, irrespective of whether they ever become our tenants, because this will play a critical role in the prevention of potential tenancy breakdown and repeated bouts of homelessness.

For our existing tenants and communities, it involves reinforcing and expanding on the care and support work we do - going beyond the provision of bricks and mortar to ensure that we are creating the right environment for them to thrive.



WHAT IS TENANCY FAILURE?

NOT ALL TENANCIES WHICH COME TO AN END ARE TENANCY FAILURES.

In some cases, the end of a tenancy may signify a positive move, for example because the customer is moving to a new area to take up work or education, they are becoming an owner occupier/co-owner or they are moving to a larger/ smaller home which suits their family size more appropriately.

There are also tenancies which come to an end which we accept that it is not possible, or even desirable to sustain. We remove terminations due to death from all our analysis of sustainment. It is also not appropriate to sustain a tenancy where the customer is seeking to leave a situation of domestic violence, or must move due to an illness which requires an immediate move to alternative accommodation.

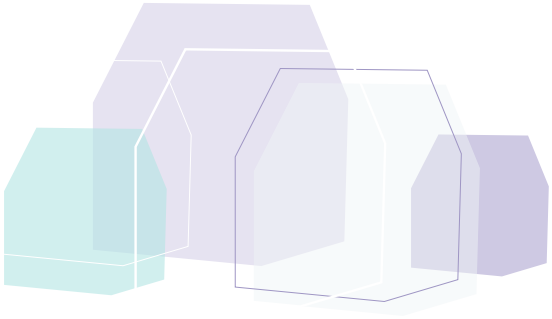
For most social landlords, tenancy failure is defined as tenancies which breakdown within the first twelve months, and those which are terminated due to arrears related eviction, anti-social behaviour or abandonment at any time.

In our last strategy, we extended this definition to include those tenancies which are ended by the tenant due to affordability issues. This does not just mean rent affordability, but also those who struggle to adequately furnish, decorate and maintain a home and to live well, free from food and fuel poverty.

In this strategy we would also wish to consider a wider definition of tenancy failure that encompasses tenancies that come to a preventable end at any time - because we know that tenancy instability or breakdown can occur at any stage of the tenancy. In many instances this is triggered by negative circumstances such as relationship breakdown, unemployment, illness, loss of income, bereavement, or neighbourhood disputes. Our analysis of Housing Executive tenancy terminations indicates that there is not a sudden drop off in termination rates after the first year, and terminations in the intervals 12-23 months, and 24-35 months are not insignificant.

We acknowledge that extending our definition introduces qualitative elements to our analysis of tenancy terminations which cannot always easily be reported on. However, we are committed to continuing with a nuanced approach to our research of terminations and tenancy failures, which includes consulting with frontline staff, speaking to customers and mapping their housing journeys, as well as in-depth analysis of person data and performance statistics.

Tenancy instability or failure is why many of our customers approach us in the first instance for advice and as housing applicants. Whilst these are not failures of Housing Executive tenancies, it has a negative impact on the lives of our customers and we must act, where possible, to prevent these failures from turning into homelessness and/or rooflessness – whether the outcome is to provide support to resolve the existing issue and help them remain in their current home, or advice on housing options, additional information, support and sign-posting to become rehoused, and prepared to maintain a new tenancy successfully.



WHO IS AT RISK OF TENANCY FAILURE?

WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH AND OUR TERMINATED TENANCY DATA THAT THERE ARE KNOWN RISK FACTORS IN RELATION TO TENANCY FAILURE, AND PARTICULAR HOUSEHOLD TYPES MAY NEED HELP OR ASSISTANCE IN SUSTAINING THEIR TENANCIES.

The following list of risk factors is not exhaustive.

We acknowledge and understand that for some individuals and families, these risk factors may be multiple and reinforce one another.

The differing needs of each of clients experiencing these risk factors will need to be addressed through the strategy's actions.

We must also take account of the best ways to successfully communicate and engage with these customers on support and sustainment issues.

- Mental health issues
- Hoarding
- Learning difficulties
- Drug and alcohol dependency problems
- Disabilities
- Leaving care
- Domestic violence
- Poverty and fuel poverty
- Affordability issues
- Being under 28 or in a first tenancy
- People with support needs
- No established local networks
- History of homelessness/ tenancy breakdown
- History of rent arrears, abandonment or antisocial behaviour in a previous tenancy
- Previously failed tenancy or eviction
- Allocations in unfamiliar areas
- Dissatisfaction with property condition
- Antisocial behaviour
- Debt problems and difficulty budgeting
- Inability to secure adequate furniture and equipment
- Lack of support with resettlement and setting up home
- Isolation
- Other health and wellbeing/mobility needs
- Offenders
- Roma and Irish Traveller community
- BME
- LGBTQ+

WHY ENCOURAGE TENANCY SUSTAINMENT

AS A SOCIAL LANDLORD, PEOPLE AND THEIR HOMES ARE AT THE HEART OF WHAT WE DO AND WE WANT TO DO ALL THAT WE CAN TO ENSURE OUR CUSTOMERS HAVE ACCESS TO A GOOD, AFFORDABLE HOME IN A SAFE AND HEALTHY COMMUNITY.

We want to prevent and end tenancy failure because this can have such negative personal and financial costs. The costs to those suffering a tenancy failure encompass the whole of their lives and may lead to a downward spiral of deprivation. For some of our customers, these costs are associated with finding a new home, for example, getting a deposit saved, moving away from family support or leaving a neighbourhood they had lived in all of their lives, loss of self-esteem. Unfortunately, for other customers, the loss of their home will result in homelessness and can lead to cycles of homelessness. In 2017/18, over 18,000 households presented as homeless in Northern Ireland. Of these, 423 were, unfortunately, Housing Executive introductory tenants (tenancies less than 1 year), whilst 2181 were secure tenants (tenancies older than 1 year). The prevention of homelessness is something that the Housing Executive is thoroughly committed to, and encouraging tenancy sustainment activities for and on behalf of all our customers, wherever they are in their housing journey, is now increasingly important area of our business.

High levels of churn or 'transience' in our social housing communities can undermine cohesion, weaken social ties, and produce isolation and fear for vulnerable customers. Research indicates that strong communities are characterised by trust and reciprocity which ultimately lead to good relations and less antisocial behaviour if people know, talk to and trust one another. This sense of community is built over time and is helped by a stable set of relationships between people who live in a particular area for a long time. There is evidence to suggest strong communities offer a number of advantages including improvement of economic opportunities, higher levels of well-being, and reduced racial tensions and crime. More broadly, trust and reciprocity may help to build and sustain social network that support people in various forms of need. Statistically, disadvantaged neighbourhoods have a high concentration of people in need as they are characterised by higher proportions of unemployment, older people and people with disabilities - groups that tend to spend more time in their local area and who research has found are the most likely to say they have no one to rely on outside the household for help when depressed, when they need to find a job, or when they need urgent assistance. Having a stable community with lower tenancy turnover may help minimise these issues.

From a business and financial perspective, encouraging tenancy sustainment is an important way for the Housing Executive to reduce levels of voids within our stock and to reduce the costs associated with re-letting our homes. In 2018/19, end of tenancy repair costs for tenancies terminating was £18.25million. Proactive sustainment and support measures which create more financial awareness and resilience among our customers could also help to reduce rent arrears, past tenant debt and costly evictions. Such activities are increasingly important as welfare reform mitigations, affecting many of our customers, comes to an end.

We must also be mindful of costs to the public purse which are impacted upon by tenancy breakdown more generally, i.e., the cost of supporting a vulnerable household to find new housing, offering temporary accommodation and protection of property under our statutory duties. Over the course of the past year we have spent approximately £36.2m on homeless services across Northern Ireland, which includes:

- £5.764m on temporary accommodation, including DIME (Dispersed Intensively Managed Emergency);
- £1.840m for storage of personal belongings;
- £2.297m on outside agencies in the voluntary sector;
- £26m on Supporting People funding of homelessness services.

OUR PERFORMANCE AND EXISTING APPROACH

Performance

Our annual stock turnover figures, also known as 'churn', looks at the number of tenancies which end in each year.

The lower this figure, the higher the level of sustainment is indicated.

Stock turnover in the last 4 financial years was:

Year	% stock turnover
2015/16	7%
2016/17	6.5%
2017/18	6.2%
2018/19	6%

These figures show consistent improvement over the lifetime of the last strategy, and compare favourably with other social landlords in the UK: the Housemark benchmark for upper quartile performance on stock turnover was less than 6.4% in 2018/19.

During the lifetime of the previous strategy the Housing Executive introduced a new key performance indicator (KPIs) for Housing Services, which relate to sustainment activity.

This was introduced in 2017/18 following a baselining exercise which determined that we should aim to ensure that a minimum of 86% of new (introductory) tenancies successfully transition into secure tenancies, i.e. are sustained beyond 12 months.

We have consistently achieved this KPI since its introduction. Under the new strategy, to promote continuous and meaningful improvement in this area, we will consider if the best measures of sustainment are captured in the formulation of the KPI, and review the baseline figure. We also recognise that tenancy sustainment is not just about new tenancies and will consider how we might effectively measure and analyse performance in relation to longer standing tenancies which come to an end.

Secondly, an organisational target was baselined in 2018/19 and aims to demonstrate the homeless prevention and accommodation sustainment (any tenure type) work carried out by staff when approached by a customer to explore housing options, or to carry out a housing/homeless or transfer application. In order to track the appropriate data to report on this activity, we have made some amendments to our system for recording case outcomes in the Customer Management System (CMS). The agreed organisational target for 2019/20 is for 6% of cases to have an outcome of 'sustained' or 'closure by customer - advice given to remain in current accommodation'

Existing Approach

When a customer contacts us, who is not our tenant, regarding a housing issue we will look in detail with them at a range of housing options and choices. Our aim is to offer effective, relevant housing advice and information at the earliest possible stage which will let our customers make choices about which option is best for them across a range of tenures.

Assisting that customer to sustain their existing tenure, if they have one, is one of those options. We also understand that the customer may require advice and assistance, not just on housing, but on issues that affect their housing situation and their ability to maintain a home, for example, understanding their benefit entitlement, debt, mental health, addiction - to name but a few.

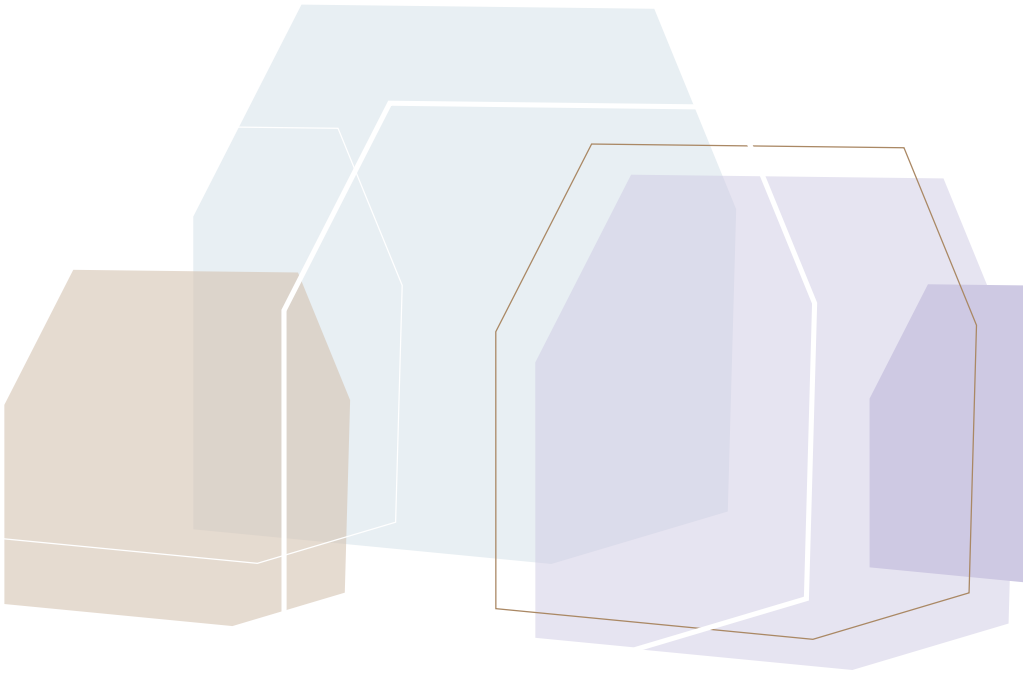
Should that customer become a tenant, we aim to set them up to succeed by providing information, advice and support, shaped around their needs, before the tenancy begins, at sign-up and beyond. For many of our customers with housing and support needs, these do not end because they have been rehoused. In fact, they are faced with a new set of challenges in relation to setting up a home, maintaining a tenancy, navigating benefits system, paying rent and bills - all of which may be very daunting, especially if this is a first tenancy, the individual is leaving an institutional setting, or they have had a previous tenancy failure.

Other tenants may not require support initially, but have a change in circumstances which puts their tenancy at risk, for example, redundancy or financial issue, a mental or physical health problem, an argument with a neighbour.

Sustainment and prevention of tenancy breakdown is the essence of the work of our local office staff.

There are over 3,500 Housing Executive staff across Northern Ireland who are committed to engaging with our customers on a daily basis. Our staff are our most valuable asset, and we are committed to empowering those staff through training, mentoring and development programmes to ensure they have the necessary skills, knowledge and expertise to help our customers. Part of that expertise lies in effective sign-posting and partnership working.

We have established strong collaborative links with other social housing providers, advice networks, community groups and other services to ensure that our customers can avail of further, specialist services which may be called upon to offer them the support that they need.



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STRATEGY 2016-2019

THE CUSTOMER SUPPORT AND SUSTAINMENT STRATEGY 2016-19 FOCUSED ON ENSURING THAT WE WERE CREATING THE BEST POSSIBLE CONDITIONS TO DELIVER OUR LANDLORD VISION OF PROVIDING OUR CUSTOMERS WITH GOOD QUALITY SERVICES/ SUPPORT WHEN THEY NEED IT, SHAPED AROUND THEM.

The lifetime of the previous strategy coincided with some big internal and external changes for the Housing Executive, through which the values of customer support, sustainment and prevention of homelessness and housing breakdown became deeply embedded across the culture of our entire organisation. Some of the key achievements from the 2016-19 strategy are highlighted below. These have provided a solid foundation for our action plan for 2019-22.

Build Yes

The Housing Executive undertook a redesign of its frontline services over the course of our last strategy. Our Build Yes programme built upon the positive work that we had been doing for many years, but reflected upon our structure and practices to produce a deeper understanding of what our customers needed from us and introduced a new way of working which seeks to deliver this first time, every time.

We have implemented two distinct roles which interact with our customers on a daily basis:

- Housing Solutions & Support Teams work with our customers at the front end to provide a comprehensive housing options service
- Patch Managers are a single point of contact for our tenants and leaseholders and are responsible for all aspects of services to those customers in a defined geographical area.

The results of this programme of change are seen in a service that:

- Engages meaningfully with our customers: customers now have one key point of contact, and cases are not passed to multiple people
- Has proper conversations - time is taken to listen and understand customer's real needs
- Tackles the real problems rather than following a process
- Works together for common good of the customer pulling on expertise
- Supports people to help themselves and works with partner agencies to do so
- Continuously seeks to learn how we want to work differently and what expertise is required

Overall, the introduction of Build Yes across the organisation has led to increased levels of customer satisfaction and in many instances reduced the time taken for the provision of services to customers.

Financial Inclusion activities

We are committed to helping our customers to be able to manage their money and sustain their tenancies, whatever the circumstances.

Our Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-19 was developed to help our tenants' access the right financial help, support and services needed so that they can manage their money better.

We have successfully:

- Implemented new arrangements in December 2018 to ensure our tenants can obtain maximum assistance from our Universal Credit and Rate Rebate support services.
- Implemented updated guidelines and controls to ensure tenants impacted by Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC) are fully aware of the financial implications of moving within the social housing sector and continuing to under-occupy.
- Continued to implement the initiatives and activities within our Rental Income Maximisation and Financial Inclusion Action Plans.

This is an area which we will continue to focus closely on and, in particular, we will be implementing significant enhancements to our Financial Capability Service that will help improve the financial wellbeing of our tenants and other customers.

Welfare Reform Implementation Project

The changes under the programme of reform to the welfare system are the most comprehensive since its inception, and has posed many, significant risks to the organisation and the customers we serve. The most valuable resource we have in mitigating this risk is our staff. Through information provision, training and practical aids the Welfare Reform Project team has empowered our staff to provide comprehensive support and expert sign-posting for customers to help them navigate the changes.

This has included

- Development of a Welfare Reform specific section on the Housing Executive's intranet Gateway
- Provision of detailed guidance on dealing with customers affected by Social Sector Size Criteria, Benefit Cap, in receipt of Welfare Supplementary Payments and Universal Credit
- Delivery of Universal Credit specific training to 34 local offices, 7 Housing Benefit Units and 7 Accounts/Customer Service Units
- Development of the UC/HB Checker for assessing and sign-posting customers appropriately
- Ongoing email and telephone support for staff queries

With increasing digitisation of benefit claims and the digital by default nature of Universal Credit each of the Housing Executive's 34 local offices have had a dedicated PC / scanner installed so customers can submit and maintain claims.

Other practical tools in place to help our customers include; the UC checklist and the Permanent loss of Social Sector Size Criteria Welfare Supplementary Payment Flow Chart. Information and sign-posting is also featured on our website and via social media - Facebook and Twitter - as well as the financial magazine for tenants Quid's In.

This is an area which we will continue to focus closely on and, in particular, we will be implementing significant enhancements to our Financial Capability Service that will help improve the financial wellbeing of our tenants and other customers.

Tackling Fuel Poverty

- We have established 27 Oil Buying Clubs
- In 2017/18 we spent £3.7 m on double glazing installations in Housing Executive homes
- Carried out 3684 heating conversions in Housing Executive homes during 2017/18

For more information on how the Housing Executive is helping to reduce Fuel Poverty across Northern Ireland, please see the Home Energy Conservation Authority Annual Progress Report

Major and Minor Adaptations Service

The Housing Executive routinely carry out housing adaptations for our tenants and their household members who have a disability. These are sorted into two types:

- Minor Adaptations - smaller works which do not require the recommendation/design of an Occupational Therapist.
- Major Adaptations - which require an Occupational Therapist recommendation.

The table below shows that over the lifetime of the 2015-2019 strategy we carried out over 22,000 adaptations to make our properties more suitable and sustainable for our tenants.

Year	Major adaptations	Minor adaptations	Total adaptions
2015/16	295	4,275	4,570
2016/17	360	5,767	6,127
2017/18	455	5,230	5,685
2018/19	397	5,271	5,668
Total	**1,507**	**20,543**	**22,050**

In addition we have carried out a MAPD Review project, focused on the reduction in timeframes for Major Adaptations, and has resulted in:

- establishment of an In-house Design team in South Region, where timeframes have been reduced
- the development of a new IT Project Management System (Insite)
- the procurement of a new MAPD Contractor contract

Tenant and Community Involvement

To ensure that we are providing the service our customers and communities need and want, at the standard they expect;

We have introduced Scrutiny Panels comprising tenant and community representatives from across our 13 Areas.

We have invested approximately £2.5 million each year in community involvement and development.

Communities and Cohesion

The Housing Executive is committed to delivering services to our communities which go beyond bricks and mortar. We want to promote a sense of well-being among tenants and communities and ensure our neighbourhoods are safe and welcoming places where people want to live.

In doing so, we work with many organisations who provide focused projects to deal difficulties that individuals and communities may be experiencing. We recognise that we cannot do this in isolation so work with partners who have the expertise to deliver what is required.

Some examples of our funded programmes include:

- A number of Community Safety Warden Schemes in partnership with Councils and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships. Since the introduction of these schemes there has been a reduction in reported anti-social behaviour and an increase in public confidence to work with statutory agencies on community safety issues.
- Good Morning Services -befriending older and vulnerable people helping to reduce isolation, provide reassurance, signposting to support organisations addressing fear of crime.
- Provision of a professional Mediation service to deliver a specialised and confidential mediation service to address neighbour and community disputes.

- A hate crime project is funded in South, East & North Belfast to work closely with local communities to provide a programme of education and support around hate crime. It acts in a mediatory and brokering role allowing prospective tenants to from ethnic minority backgrounds to accept an offer of accommodation.
- We work with the Children's Safety Education Foundation's respect Programme which teaches young people about the consequences of anti-social behaviour and crime on their own health and safety and on their community.
- A range of other initiatives are funded across the country to address issues relating to anti-social behaviour, drugs & alcohol and fear of crime.

Social Housing Enterprise Programme

Social enterprises are businesses which are set up to change the world. The Housing Executive in 2015 launched our Social Enterprise Strategy which is aimed at developing economically vibrant and self-sustaining communities through the creation and development of social housing enterprises.

To date, we have invested £1.5 million directly into enterprises which are based in or serve Housing Executive communities.

In doing so, these enterprises are making a huge difference in our communities by creating new jobs and sustaining existing jobs in areas such as cafes/bakeries, childcare, fitness, community maintenance, tourism and media/digital services.

We have supported:

- 19 full time employment opportunities to be created
- 76 existing full time employment opportunities
- 51 part time employment opportunities to be created
- 61 existing part time employment opportunities
- 774 training opportunities to become possible

A full list of current social housing enterprises can be found on our website.

Rural Strategy and Action Plan

We are committed to supporting rural communities to be vibrant, thriving, sustainable places, and under our Rural Strategy we carry out a range of actions that work towards that aim.

We recognise that sometimes in rural areas housing need can be hidden, as people do not always register on our waiting list when there is limited or no social housing in the area. We carry out housing need tests alongside local communities in rural locations each year to uncover that hidden housing need and support the delivery of new social housing. This contributes to greater sustainability for rural areas. From 2016/17 to 2018/19, housing need tests have been carried out in 23 rural locations across Northern Ireland.

We know that to be successful, communities require more than just housing so we were pleased to offer match funding to the 2014-2020 NI Rural Development Programme. Through this investment we aimed to ensure that people have access to the best possible services and opportunities, which improve the quality of life and prospects for themselves and their families. We also aimed to improve the environment and image of villages, making them attractive places to live and invest in. From 2017/18 to 2019/20, we have provided match funding of approximately £490,000 to 34 projects under the RDP Basic Services and Village Renewal Measures. These projects included community hubs, environmental improvements, outdoor gyms and multi-use games areas.

We also want to reward the invaluable work that local community groups do to support and improve their communities, to build social ties and promote cohesion. Each year we offer 6 Rural Community Awards under 3 categories. In addition to providing well deserved recognition, these financial awards support the groups to continue to deliver their projects and initiatives.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

HOUSING EXECUTIVE STAFF ARE "MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH FAIRNESS, PASSION AND EXPERTISE"

Our multi award-winning Dementia Friendly Homes Project has helped promote tenancy sustainability by incorporating practical solutions and response maintenance to meet the needs of customers with dementia. Staff have really gotten behind this project and have been organising events - from bike rides to bake sales - raising thousands of pounds for dementia services

Young people in Springhill, Strabane transformed an area that was blighted by graffiti thanks to Housing Executive Funding

Bawnmore and District Residents Association hold Health Fair for local residents and local secondary schools

Omagh Men's shed is a project led by the Housing Executive which allows men in the local area to engage in practical work experience and enhance their life skills

Our Social Housing Enterprise Programme win the Stakeholder of the Year award at Social Enterprise NI Awards 2018

The Housing Executive has worked in partnership to deliver an Assisted Living Technology Pilot Project, which received a Chartered Institute of Housing Award in 2019. The project involved the installation of a range of assistive smart technology equipment into a number of tenant's homes in the North West Area to support tenants with disabilities or mobility issues

Our staff 'came out for Pride' in 2018. We want to demonstrate our commitment to offering a range of support tailored to the differing housing needs and experiences, treating our customers fairly, and tackling hate crime in all its formsw

Anthony from our Omagh office won the 'Best Housing Story' award from the Chartered Institute of Housing in 2017 for the life-changing sustainment work he carried out on behalf of one of our vulnerable tenants

STRATEGIC CONTEXT 2019-22

The Housing Landscape

There are a number of issues arising from the current economic, social and political context which affect, or will affect, the housing landscape in Northern Ireland over the coming years. In order to take account of the factors which will have an impact for customer support and tenancy sustainment as they unfold, and those which are not yet apparent, this strategy will be a living document which contains the flexibility to respond to challenges as they arise over its lifetime.

We know from looking at current and projected trends, and through our horizon scanning exercise that there will be many challenges facing our social housing communities, and just some of these are illustrated here.

Universal Credit In 2018/19, 5994 of our tenants made new UC and Rates Rebate claims, accounting for rise in our arrears figures of over £1.5 million. This figure is expected to rise as more of our customers move on to UC.

End of Social Sector Size Criteria (Bedroom Tax) Mitigation in 2020 At the end of financial year 2018/19, the number of existing tenants who would be affected by the loss of SSSC mitigation was over 25,000.

Food Poverty The number of people in Northern Ireland using food banks has risen by over 13% in 2018/19, as more families struggle with the cost of living. 36,000 three-day emergency food packages were handed out to people in crisis in Northern Ireland (Trussell Trust, 2019).

Fuel Poverty Northern Ireland has around 160,000 fuel poor households. This represents an average fuel poverty rate of 22%.

Population Change It is projected that the number of people aged 65+ in Northern Ireland will have increased by 65% by 2041 (from 2016), and approximately 22% by the end of this strategy's lifetime (NISRA).

Private Rented Sector issues and standards The poor quality of rental housing available across Northern Ireland and the UK is an issue faced by many prospective tenants as well as the inability to accurately establish the quality of the properties on offer. Given that more than 21% of households in Northern Ireland now live in private rented accommodation according to the Family Resources Survey October 2016-17, this will become an important issue for more and more people.

Supply of affordable housing (all tenure types) Housing Supply Forum/ DSD's Housing Strategy 'Facing the Future' 2012-2017 evidences a strong backlog in housing provision across all tenure types, but primarily in the private sector stock, as a result of undersupply in recent years. This also increases social housing demand. There are now over 48,000 applications (including social tenancy transfer applications) on the social housing waiting list.

Mental Health Crisis It is estimated that more than 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland have a mental health problem, which is 20 - 25% higher than the rest of the UK (Action Mental Health).

Digital Inclusion/Exclusion According to the Office of National Statistics, Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of digital exclusion in the UK at 14.2% (ONS 2019), which presents a challenge as we seek to provide consistent services, support and resources to all of our customers. Some of our customers prefer online services and we want to meet this expectation, whilst balancing with the need to maintain traditional communication channels.

Rural Needs At June 2019, 12.9% of people on the social housing waiting list and 11.7% of those registered as homeless wished to be housed in a rural area. Whilst the proportion of social housing in urban areas has increased between the 2011 House Condition Survey (HCS) and the 2016 HCS (from 18% to 20%), the proportion of social housing in rural areas has remained static at the significantly lower figure of 7 %. Other issues for rural areas, relative to urban areas, include higher levels of dwelling unfitness, higher incidence of fuel poverty due to greater reliance on oil central heating, and the introduction of a digital by default benefits system also presents particular challenges for people in rural areas due to 'not-spots' of no internet coverage.

Strategy and Policy Context

This document is underpinning to the key strategic themes of the Housing Executive's Corporate Plan 2017-21, which are:

People to provide housing solutions, services and support to the people of Northern Ireland

Property to ensure everyone has access to a quality home which is safe, affordable, warm and appropriate to their needs

Place to work with others to develop, maintain and sustain attractive, connected, healthy and economically active places

Because supporting our customers and ensuring they can sustain successful tenancies is at the heart of who we are and what we do as a social landlord, there is significant interplay between this Housing Services divisional strategy and other divisional and organisational strategies, and much opportunity for collaborative and creative working to meet shared objectives.

As customer support and tenancy sustainment plays a key role in the prevention of homelessness, this strategy has clear linkages with the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22, and many mutually supporting actions will be carried out under each. Specifically, this strategy will support the third outcome of the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 which is 'We have the support we require to access and/or sustain a home' (customer perspective).

The strategies include:

- Financial Inclusion Strategy / Rental Income Maximisation Strategy and Action Plan
- Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023
- Customer Excellence Strategy 2017-2020
- Social Enterprise Strategy
- Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020
- Rural Strategy and Action Plan 2016-2020

This strategy is also complementary to our statutory and policy materials including:

- Housing Selection Scheme Guidance Manual
- General Housing Policy Guidance Manual
- Housing Solutions Handbook
- Homelessness Guidance Manual

It is also important to be aware that this strategy may be impacted by developments relating to:

- Fundamental Review of Allocations
- Welfare Reform changes

OUR APPROACH 2019-22

AT THE HEART OF OUR APPROACH IS THE CONVICTION THAT APPROPRIATE, AFFORDABLE AND SECURE HOUSING SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL, AND IS AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING AND COMMUNITY HARMONY.

It is especially concerned with a creating a supportive environment for social housing customers whose personal, social, health and financial/employment circumstances means they are at risk of tenancy failure or housing breakdown.

Changes in the profile of social housing tenants in recent decades have seen growth in the number of tenants with complex vulnerabilities. These tenants are especially susceptible to cycles of homelessness, and its damaging effects. The Housing Executive is in a unique position to break this cycle by integrating a sustaining tenancies approach for all our customers into routine housing management practice. There is evidence that systematic and close support of tenants can be highly effective in empowering tenants and in enabling them to remain in their homes. This means incorporating into policies and practices, a range of initiatives such as early intervention and multi-agency working. A sustaining tenancies approach is also sound housing management since improving housing stability reduces the social and financial costs associated with failed tenancies.

VISION AND OBJECTIVES

OUR VISION IS SIMPLE BUT AMBITIOUS; TO ENSURE THAT OUR CUSTOMERS' HOMES ARE THE STABLE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH THEY CAN BUILD HAPPY AND FULFILLING LIVES.

We aim to:

- Support our Customers throughout their Housing Journey
- Create Secure and Sustainable Tenancies
- Foster stable, vibrant communities

In this strategy and action plan we set out a clear direction, and demonstrate our commitment, to achieving this vision for customer support and tenancy sustainment by:

1. Building on the capacity of our frontline staff to meet the demands of a customer base with ever increasingly complex lives and housing circumstances.
2. Identifying the challenges which face social housing communities over the coming years, and providing organisational pathways/giving resource to tenancy sustainment solutions which are both preventative and responsive in order to combat those threats.
3. Supporting research and innovation at local and organisational level which aims to ensure customers have the right skills, tools and/or services available to them to maintain successful tenancies and thereby reduce social and financial costs of tenancy turnover to individuals, communities and the business.
4. Improving our data standards and analysing this information intelligently to target our resources towards those most at risk of tenancy breakdown.
5. Closely monitoring the success of our action plan, and using built in check-points to course-correct where necessary.

We know that meeting these aims and objectives will not be an easy task, especially against the backdrop of the potential end of welfare reform mitigations, housing supply and affordability issues, and an unpredictable social and political environment in Northern Ireland and the UK.

We have therefore designed the strategy, its action plan, and oversight structure to be flexible enough to accommodate the impacts of these uncertainties and other changes which may unfold throughout the lifetime of the strategy.

We also recognise that the success of this strategy hinges on strong and synergistic collaboration with our external partners in the voluntary and community sector, and other statutory agencies, as well as engagement with our customers to ensure that actions are relevant and effective.

SHAPING THIS STRATEGY AROUND OUR CUSTOMERS

KNOWING WHO OUR CUSTOMERS ARE AND WHAT THEY NEED FROM US UNDERPINS THE FUNCTIONING OF THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE, AND PROVIDING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE IS A THEME THAT RUNS THROUGH EVERYTHING WE DO.

We are committed to making a lasting difference for our customers and that starts with getting our relationship with them right from the beginning of their housing journey - developing trust and lines of communication the customer needs to have in order to come to us whenever they need support.

We provide a housing service which is universal at the point of access and so we have an extremely varied customer base which includes more than our own tenants. Housing Executive customers include anyone who approaches us for housing advice and support.

We want to prevent and end tenancy failure, within any tenure group, because this can have such negative personal and financial outcomes, and may even result in homelessness or cycles of homelessness. We want to support our customers and their families, some of whom are very vulnerable, tobe able to maintain secure and stable tenancies, which will allow them to plan for their futures and thrive. The complexity of this customer base means that we must provide a service that meets a wide range of support and sustainment needs.

More broadly, we also consider our communities as customers of this strategy.

Building stronger communities is a core objective of the Housing Executive, and there is a wealth of evidence that sustaining tenancies improves outcomes, not only for individuals, but creates better outcomes for communities, promoting more stable and cohesive neighbourhoods.

By putting our customers at the heart of what we do and the services we deliver, listening to their needs and working with them on their housing options and goals in an open, practical way, we know that we can deliver quality services and meet the expectations of our customers. The knowledge we have of our customers, adding to that knowledge and involving our customers and using their insight in how we approach their sustainment needs will be critical to the success of this strategy, and is underlying to our Action Plan.

CUSTOMER INSIGHT AND ENGAGEMENT

CUSTOMER INSIGHT IS ACTIVELY USING THE KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION THAT THE ORGANISATION HOLDS ON CUSTOMERS, THAT TRIGGERS THE RIGHT ACTION AT THE RIGHT TIME FOR THE CUSTOMER.

CIH recommend the use of this data in developing tenant and other housing initiatives; it is an important strategic asset and is an essential ingredient to a person-focused approach to service delivery.

In practice, this will mean developing profiles and indicators to predict what our customers need and target resources based on analysis of the statistical data held in our Housing Management System, for example, provision of money advice based on changes in benefit entitlement received to the rent account) which are indicative of a change in income/employment), change in household members, or a new offer of housing.

In addition we will continue to monitor our churn data and develop this dataset to look at aspects of turnover on the basis of person data, previous housing and homeless applications, re-applications subsequent to tenancy termination, property data such as maintenance and schemes, void property information such as end of tenancy repairs and difficulty re-letting, rent and arrears, and ASB records.

These are unobtrusive ways of developing our service for customers, but we know that sometimes the best insight can be achieved by simply asking our customers what they need and when they need it. To this end we will consistently engage with and seek the input of our residents groups and fora, and build in to our actions, where possible, opportunities to connect with our customers, particularly vulnerable and at risk customer groups, through surveys, focus groups and feedback on the development and outcome of initiatives. We will also attempt to increase our understanding of customers' advice, care and support needs for the purposes of sustaining a home by carrying out face-to-face analysis with a sample of our customers at intervals in their application and tenancy journey.

THE ACTION PLAN

THE ACTION PLAN (SEE APPENDIX 1) SETS OUT HOW, UNDER THE FIVE PILLARS OF SUSTAINMENT IDENTIFIED AT SECTION 1, WE WILL MEET THE VISION, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STRATEGY.

Like all parts of this strategy, the Action Plan is a living document and will be added to over the next three years. We would also ask stakeholders to note that there are some actions in development which have not been included in the action plan at present because these will be subject to successful award of exceptional funding bids.

To ensure that actions are kept moving forward, target years for completion have been identified for each. Furthermore, there will be an operational steering committee tasked with driving the action plan forward.

Because we know that one size doesn't fit all, as an adjunct to this action plan, we will also encourage and assist Area offices to develop localised action plans to ensure responsivity to variations in, and particular pockets of, support and sustainment need.

KEEPING ON TRACK

Steering and Governance

This strategy will be overseen by the Housing Services Customer and Community Strategies Steering Committee. This steering committee will be chaired by the Assistant Director of Housing Services.

The committee will consist of representatives of policy teams that have a role in sustainment including, but not limited to: Income Collection Policy, Community Cohesion, Community Safety, Customer Excellence, Social Enterprise, Business Review and Improvement Unit, Homeless Strategy, Asset Programme Delivery, Rural and Regeneration Unit. Local office/Regional services are also represented on this committee.

The committee will:

- Meet quarterly to review the action plan
- Propose and agree amendments / additions to the action plan
- Demonstrate clear link to the aims/objectives of actions undertaken
- Be responsible for providing an annual update on activities to Performance Review Group (PRG)/ Chief Executive's Business Committee (CXBC)/ Board as required
- Submit annual budget request
- Ensure that budget is appropriately administered
- Prepare and submit the final strategy evaluation to the Chief Executive's Business Committee (CXBC).

Measuring Our Performance

We will continue to report on the sustainment KPIs outlined at Section 6, and review the baseline for these on a regular basis.

The clearest indicator of tenancy sustainment is the rate of tenancy turnover and termination of tenancies within the first year. We will therefore also continue to provide annual stock turnover 'churn' analysis to the Performance Review Group (PRG), and quarterly updates on terminations, and terminations within the first year, by area, termination reason, and type of accommodation moved to.

Our ongoing terminations research, in addition to providing substantiating evidence for particular actions, also allows us to look in detail at patterns in performance over time.

The above is general performance management, but for each action under the strategy, the steering committee will need to consider how impact and success will be measurable. The outcomes and measurement will need to be tailored to the aims of the action under consideration. Some actions will have clear indicators of success linked to the desired outcome, for example, a sustainment action targeted at a specific client group will result in a reduction in terminations for that group over time. However, tracking the success and impact of other actions may be more complex, and may require actively checking customer satisfaction, for example, surveying usefulness of new e-resources, or seeking feedback staff usergroups on, for example, new training and awareness programmes. For some actions we will also consider the use of social value measurement methods to examine the non-financial benefits our actions have achieved in people's lives and communities.

In general, we will design a check and correct mechanism into each of the actions so that effectiveness and progress is reviewed at key points, identified at the outset by the steering committee, and course-corrected where necessary. In this way, we feel confident that we can deliver the on the aims and objective of this strategy.

Appendix 1: Our Action Plan

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
Pillar 1: Housing Support				
A: Pre-tenancy Work				
1	Provide housing information and advice in varying formats in order to engage different target audiences e.g. young people/older people and expand choice in ways in which our customers and residents can engage with us	1 - 3	Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 2
2	Digital engagement and media campaigns such as Bytesize information videos	1 - 3		3
3	Investigate development of Housing Health Checks/ related materials	1		1, 2
4	Review existing pre and early tenancy processes and advice to ensure we are doing everything we can to help customers to sustain their tenancies from the outset	1 - 2		1, 2, 3
5	Develop/procure a tenancy skills e-learning course for all customers	2	Community Involvement and Housing Information and Tenancies	2, 3
6	Prevent homelessness through development of housing options advice on the private rented sector and other tenure types, and actions to sustain within existing tenure, as well as promote increased security of tenure within the PRS	1 - 3	Homeless Strategy	1, 2
B: Early and In Tenancy Support				
7	Review and improve Sign-Up procedures and materials	1 -2	Housing Information and Tenancies	2
8	Review Sustainment visit process for Introductory Tenancies and 'Settling In Visits'	2		2
9	Explore the options for promoting/supporting the use of localised furniture/white goods recycling and other practical solutions to assist customers furnish and decorate their home e.g. provide painting and decorating packs or vouchers to tenants struggling to decorate their homes (discretionary)	1		3
10	Consider how we might promote awareness of Mutual Exchange as a housing option for existing social housing tenants	1 -2	Housing Information and Tenancies/ Housing Policy	2

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
C: End of Tenancy Analysis				
11	Look at the pre-termination visit process to see if more can be done to encourage sustainment	2	Housing Information and Tenancies	2
12	Carry out detailed analysis of lettings, tenancy management and terminations data - to include both 'positive' moves and tenancy failures. Establish a new baseline for tenancy sustainment KPI.	1		4
13	Continue monitoring tenancy terminations within the first 12 months but extend analysis to consider terminations within 24 months given high level of terminations in Year 2	Quarterly, continuous		4
D: Research and Funding				
14	Map the customer journey from application to tenancy termination for tenancies lasting less than 12 months and evaluate if and how we could have achieved sustainability with these cases. This may lead to feasibility analysis of introduction and potential scope of Tenancy Sustainment Officers.	1- 3	Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 2, 3
15	Review the causes of repeat homelessness and develop innovative actions to address underlying issues such as activities commissioned or grant-funded to prevent homelessness including awareness campaigns and engagement activities	1 - 2	Homeless Strategy	1, 2, 3
16	Sustainment Innovation Fund to be administered in line with key thematic priorities	1 - 2	Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 2, 3
Pillar 2: Money Support and Budgeting Advice				
A: Building the capacity of our staff to provide advice				
17	Recruitment of Financial Inclusion Managers	1	Income Collection Policy/ Welfare Benefits Unit	1, 2
18	Train frontline staff to develop the skills to help new and existing customers with a range of money matters, including household budgeting, paying bills and saving	Continuous		2
19	Progress procurement of Benefits Calculator App for staff	1 - 2		2

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
B: Advice, Support, and Resources for Customers				
20	Development and Improvement of our 'Making your Money Work' Service	1		1, 2
21	Develop information pack for applicants on 'How to plan ahead for your home' eg paying rent, planning for essentials, what you will need to buy and how to save	1	Housing Information and Tenancies	2
22	Increase access to Money Advice and Debt services/ other financial products and services to assist customers in maximising their income and prepare for/ sustain their tenancies	Continuous	Income Collection Policy	2
23	Support campaigns to raise awareness of illegal moneylending and financial abuse	2 - 3	Housing Information and Tenancies	2, 3
24	Use Customer Insight data to target financial advice and assistance at critical points in the customer housing journey	1 - 2	Income Collection Policy	2, 4
25	Provide Energy Saving Advice and information on ways to cut utility and household bills and consider practical solutions to prevent and tackle Fuel Poverty among tenants	1 - 2	Income Collection Policy/Housing Information and Tenancies /Sustainable Development Team	2, 3
Pillar 3: Employment Support				
A: Supporting businesses and local economy				
26	Develop local social (housing) enterprises and social entrepreneurs	Ongoing	Social Enterprise Team	2, 3
27	Support social enterprises and entrepreneurs to access the funding and business support they require to generate wealth for their social housing communities			2, 3
28	Create opportunities for social enterprises to deliver key outcomes which impact positively on the well-being within those communities and neighbourhoods			2
B: Customer skills development and practical employment support				
29	Develop links with education and employability services and partner on projects	2	Housing Information and Tenancies and Income Collection Policy	2
30	Support digital skills training and signposting for all customers	2	Housing Information and Tenancies	2
31	Consider how to enhance CV and Job Application skills of customers, sign-posting, and other practical solutions to support people into work, for example, a workwear fund	3		3

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
Pillar 4: Proactive & Responsive Support for At Risk Customers				
A: Understand and Innovate				
32	Develop operational/ research projects to support client groups at risk of tenancy failure (see list at section 4 - examples but no limited to)	1 - 3	Housing Information and Tenancies	3
33	Understand tenancy termination triggers for client groups at risk of tenancy failure and introduce measures to prevent	Continuous		1, 4
34	Ensure that the Supporting People Programme is provided with robust data to inform strategic planning of services	1 - 2	Homeless Policy/ Supporting People	1
B: Strengthening Referral and Signposting networks				
35	Update/renew and promote directory of health/ well-being and support services within each Area	1	Homeless Policy	1
36	Partner with Social Prescribing Services to support Health and Wellbeing of customers	1, 2	Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 2, 3
37	Review and build on content of the Mental Health Awareness booklet	1		1
C: Targeted Actions for identified risk groups				
38	Ensure staff and properties (where identified) are as dementia friendly as possible	Continuous	Housing Information and Tenancies	1
39	Foster a more proactive, preventative approach to minor adaptations	3	Asset Management Programme Delivery	1
40	Develop a practical guide to housing needs of people with autism for housing staff/ introduce JAM cards	2	Housing Information and Tenancies	1
41	Give consideration to the linkages between debt and mental health issues and develop actions to address for our customers	2	Income Collection Policy	1, 2, 3
42	Mental Health training programme for frontline staff	1, 2: new staff cont.	Housing Information and Tenancies	1
43	Consider the housing support and sustainment challenges of people with drug/alcohol dependency and other addiction issues and promote staff awareness	2		1, 2
44	Develop a programme to meet the needs of young people leaving care/ recently left care	2		1
45	Undertake the Houseproud Pledge/ actvities to better support our LGBTQ+ customers	2		3
46	Engage with Traveller Support groups and fora to bring forward a pilot project which addresses the specific housing support, tenancy sustainability and cultural concerns of this client group, both in bricks and mortar accommodation and those on sites/nomadic	2 - 3	Housing Information and Tenancies/ Traveller Accommodation Unit	3

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
Pillar 5: Neighbourhood and Community Support				
A: Digital Opportunities				
47	Build a Tenancy Sustainability App in partnership with client group forums	1 - 3	Community Involvement/Housing Information and Tenancies	2, 3
48	Development of neighbourhood welcome packs (complementary to Tenancy Sustainability App)	1 -2		2
49	Overcome barriers to digital inclusion in our communities through creation of Community Hubs/ Digital Zones	1	Community Involvement	2, 3
50	Give specific consideration to rural customer support/ sustainment and model for effective delivery of services	2	Housing Information and Tenancies/ Rural and Regeneration Unit	2, 3
51	Engage with hard to reach groups in collaboration with the existing client group fora	Continuous	Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 4
52	Develop new groups in under-represented areas through targeting of resources	1 - 2	Community Involvement	2
53	Link with Community Groups and Associations to deliver awareness sessions e.g. Health Checks, Mental Health awareness, local community issues	2	Housing Information and Tenancies	2
54	Explore how we might conduct a Literacy and housing/ homelessness awareness campaign through schools	1		2
55	Develop links with education providers with a view to early prevention and education about homelessness, and tenancy and money management	2	Housing Information and Tenancies / Income Collection Policy	2
C: Safe and Sustainable Communities				
56	Manage and deliver the HIPA (Hate Incident Practical Action) scheme in conjunction with the Department of Justice and the PSNI to support victims of crime where there has been damage to property	1	Community Safety/ Cohesion	1, 2
57	Work in partnership with and provide funding to community based groups and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to address community safety, ASB and hate crime issues in our estates.	2		2, 3
58	Continue to deliver Areas at Risk (A@R) Programme on behalf of DSD at local level	Ongoing		2

		Year/s action will be achieved	Lead Policy Areas	Obj met
Other/Administrative				
A: Governance and Performance Management				
59	Convene Customer and Community Strategies Steering Committee on behalf of Housing Services strategy teams	Quarterly	Housing Information and Tenancies/All Housing Services	5
60	Budget Management and issuing of payments in line with good governance practice	Continuous	Housing Information and Tenancies	All
61	Develop and implement measures of success which are appropriate to each action	Continuous	All Policy Areas	4, 5
62	Report on progress of strategy	Annually	All Policy Areas	5
B: Ensuring dynamism				
63	Learn and innovate by engaging with the Housing Sector in the rest of the UK and Ireland on sustainment issues	Continuous		3
64	Explore potential for funding and supporting additional pilot schemes and projects that will assist with achieving the aims and objectives of this strategy	1 - 3	Strategies Committee/ Housing Information and Tenancies	1, 2, 3

This report can be found on the Housing Executive website: **www.nihe.gov.uk**

For any information on the Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment Strategy 2019-2022, please contact:

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