



**NIACRO Response to Northern Ireland Housing Executive  
Customer Support & Tenancy Sustainment Strategy**

**20<sup>th</sup> February 2020**



## NIACRO Response to Northern Ireland Housing Executive Customer Support & Tenancy Sustainment Strategy

### Introduction

NIACRO is a voluntary organisation that has been working for almost 50 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. Our vision is of a society in which the needs and rights of all citizens, including victims of crime, adults and children who offend and those who are at risk of offending, are equally respected.

The Charity's Articles of Associations, approved in October 2015 by the Charity Commission for NI, identify NIACRO's objects which meet public benefit test, as being:

- to alleviate need and disadvantage through the provision of services, assistance, advocacy and representation to care for, resettle and rehabilitate offenders and ex-offenders, alleged offenders, persons at risk of becoming offenders and to care for the victims of crime and the families.
- to work for the prevention and reduction of crime for the benefit of the public in Northern Ireland.

Specifically, NIACRO's contributions are to:

- support the resettlement of adults leaving prison and those on community supervision.
- build skills, confidence and employability of people both in prison and in the community.
- support children, young people, families and adults who are displaying behaviour that would put them at risk of engaging with the criminal justice system, to make positive lifestyle choices.
- influence service providers in the statutory, voluntary and community sector and build their capacity to provide appropriate support to those affected by the criminal justice system.
- impact policy and practice by communicating our policy asks and engaging relevant publics at every level.

At the heart of NIACRO's work is the aim to reduce (re)offending in the belief that integrated and flexible approaches towards desistance are most effective.



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### Preliminary Comments

NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment Strategy 2019-2022.

Our response is informed through discussions with our Adult Services Programme, Senior Practitioners, and Project Workers who deliver services to adults in prison and the community.

The long-standing relationship between NIACRO and NIHE has resulted in providing many positive outcomes for those who use our services by helping stabilise accommodation and finances. Access to stable accommodation, and the requisite finances and money management skills, reduces the risk of offending behaviour and contributes to family and personal stability.

NIACRO delivers three services that aim to help people maintain tenancies:

- a) **Assisting People and Communities (APAC)**: a support programme to help people who are experiencing difficulties to maintain their tenancies, thereby helping to prevent homelessness. This service is resourced through the Supporting People fund and supports people demonstrating anti-social behaviour characteristics, people under threat, and people with previous convictions. Most of the people referred to APAC for support have significant difficulties including poor mental health, substance abuse, and social isolation. Many of the people accused of anti-social behaviour have also been victimised.
- b) **Supporting Tenants from Ethnic Minorities (STEM)**: a floating support service, providing support and assistance, for people who are considered to be at risk of intimidation in their tenancy due to their ethnicity. The project aims to improve the social inclusion of people from ethnic minority communities, providing support to help them maintain their tenancy, removing barriers to integration, encouraging participation in their community, and providing positive community responses to dealing with incidents of intimidation.
- c) **Base 2**: a crisis intervention project offering clarification, support, and mediation to individuals and families at risk of violence or exclusion from their community. Base 2 receives about 1,300 referrals annually and engages with 60 community-based sources to verify threats, to mediate with individuals and groups, and to signpost individuals to other statutory and voluntary support services. It has been operating since 1990 with funding through the NIHE.



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NIACRO welcomes your introduction defining Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment, noting the person-focused approach to support and sustainment across the customer's entire housing journey is a value to help prevent tenancy breakdown and repeated bouts of homelessness. We have organised our response to address:

- d) Tenancy Failure;
- e) Who is at Risk of Tenancy Failure;
- f) Encouraging Tenancy Sustainment;
- g) Performance and Existing Approach.

### **Tenancy Failure**

NIACRO believes that at the heart of tenancy sustainment should be the belief that tenancy is a human right, and recognise the benefit of supporting people to maintain their right to tenancy regardless of tenancy sustainment status. We believe that a sustainment strategy needs to focus on the journey of tenancy – whether it be before a customer engages with NIHE—all the way to following them into their next tenancy. It also needs to focus on where a tenancy broke down, rather than what went wrong, to ask what helped to sustain a tenancy. It would serve useful for communities to receive feedback from NIHE and tenants who have decided to/or have been forced to relocate so that an integrated strategy could be co-ordinated between NIHE and the communities they are located in to inform each other what was the reason for the breakdown, and how to prevent a matter from re-occurring in the future. This would encourage better partnership between communities and statutory agencies, furthering NIHE's person-focused, and holistic approach to delivering support and sustaining tenancies.

### **Who is at Risk of Tenancy Failure**

On page five of the strategy, 27 listed risk factors could potentially contribute to tenancy failure. NIACRO and other third-sector voluntary/community organisations provide floating support services that specialise in providing support and intervention to people experiencing risk factors indicated in the strategy. NIACRO urges the importance of utilising existing pathways to support in early stages of tenancy failure to prevent housing insecurity and displacement. Collaborating with organisations that provide existing services and utilising those services, rather than duplicating services, would serve as a good model to sustain tenancies, and to ensure that existing specialisms inside floating support services are protected. Knowing that a one size fits all approach is not effective, integrating specialised floating support needs to be at the centre of the model.



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### Encouraging Tenancy Sustainment

Understanding the negative personal and financial cost to a person when a tenancy failure occurs, tenancy sustainment must be encouraged. The strategy does provide means to offer support and assistance to address any hardships that arise. NIACRO is supportive of the initiative being considered to provide localised/recycled furnishings to customers struggling to furnish their home. In the bigger picture of sustaining tenancies, it might seem like a less significant factor in providing housing security, however, there is a difference of living in a house and living in a home, and being able to feel comfortable increases confidence.

In the context of our work with our STEM service users, we often see people from the BME community who are being relocated from either asylum accommodation or hostels into new communities in which they do not have any community ties and connections and therefore are facing a barrier to receiving support. We believe there needs to be a clear connection between tenancy sustainment for this client group and the role of the community cohesion team within NIHE, ensuring resources are informed by what is needed on the ground to support cohesion.

In situations where a person who is wanting to move from one social housing to another, the tenant often faces challenges in doing so because of notice periods and the new offered property having a limited window of time to accept. The tenant is required to give four weeks notice when ending the tenancy, and are given less than 10 days to accept the new offered property. They are expected to pay the required costs for the new property whilst also concurrently required to pay rent on the tenancy they are leaving. If the tenant is facing financial difficulties, they are essentially starting the new tenancy in debt. The tenant can apply for overlap funding through discretionary funds, however, we are often finding that the funding applications are turned down most of the time. This adds to the financial pressure the customer is already facing and creates a further burden.

We welcome the commitment from the NI Executive to continue the 'Bedroom Tax' mitigations beyond March 2020 and call upon the Housing Executive to use its influence within the Department for Communities to support the calls from the Voluntary and Community sector, notably through the Cliff Edge Coalition campaign, to also

- extend all other mitigations including protection against the Benefit Cap and support for the advice sector beyond March 2020
- Strengthen the mitigations to tackle the impact of Universal Credit, particularly the two-child limit
- Address cuts to Housing Benefit in the private rented sector and review Local Housing Allowance caps.



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### Performance and Existing Approach

The strategy overall demonstrates that NIHE has clear and attainable goals and documents key achievements. NIACRO believes that a way to strengthen the strategy is to value results and outcomes. When the strategy values results and outcomes, service will improve.

Increased transparency and flexibility in decision-making would improve customer experiences. Oftentimes people are dealing with complex cases that fall into grey areas, where discretion and engaging in flexible problem solving would provide better outcomes. Our APAC/STEM project workers and service users often report difficulty receiving consistency when engaging with staff, finding that it is rare to speak to the same person more than once and are repeating their case in following interactions. Improving transparency and recording detailed case notes for future reference would benefit the process.

### Conclusion

NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Customer Support & Tenancy Sustainment Strategy and looks forward to ongoing collaboration and engagement with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

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