



MAKING LIFE BETTER

WELCOME



NEWS

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Get In Touch

If you have any questions about the content of MLB News, have work you want to share with the Network or wish to join please email:
mlbnetwork@hscni.net

(Picture left) Prof Sir Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Department of Health

CMO Foreword

Welcome to this edition of the MLB Newsletter.

In this edition I am pleased to introduce you to my All Departments Officials Group (ADOG) colleague Joan O'Hara, who is the Director of Urban Villages and Infrastructure, within the Executive Office. You will also find articles which showcase some of the excellent work that is being taken forward within this Department and beyond.

I want to reflect on the welcomed announcement from the UK Government that the Tobacco and Vapes Act has now passed into law. The Act, which extends to Northern Ireland, will see a smoke-free generation by making it illegal to sell tobacco to anyone born on or after 1st January 2009, taking effect from next year.

From 29th October 2026, it will also be illegal to sell non-nicotine vapes and other nicotine products to under 18s. The legislation will provide new powers to reduce the harm from second-hand smoke and improved regulation of retailers of vapes and nicotine products.

The rise in the use of vapes among young people is concerning given the evidence of a gateway effect between vaping and subsequent cigarette use. Vapes carry the risk of addiction and the long-term risks will not become apparent for some time. The consumption of nicotine in children and young people can impact on brain development, leading to long-term consequences such as learning and anxiety disorders. This Act will protect our children and young people from the harm that nicotine causes.

There is no safe level of tobacco consumption, all tobacco is harmful. This should therefore be used as an opportunity to encourage anyone who smokes or vapes to join the smoke-free generation and quit, with support from HSC stop smoking services in Community Pharmacies, GP Practices and local Trusts. If you have any questions about the Tobacco and Vapes Act, please contact tobaccocontrolteam@health-ni.gov.uk.

All Departments Officials Group (ADOG)

Introductions

I am Joan O'Hara, Director of Urban Villages and Infrastructure in The Executive Office. I coordinate work across the five current Urban Village areas to strengthen partnership approaches and improve outcomes in communities experiencing multiple disadvantage.

This work supports Making Life Better by promoting prevention, reducing inequalities, and improving life chances through joined-up, place-based working across government and local partners.

As a member of the All Departments Official Group, I welcome the opportunity to share learning, align priorities, and connect Urban Villages activity to wider departmental work.

Over the next year, I hope the Group will deepen collaboration, support delivery, and help translate strategic intent into measurable impact. My current priority is progressing Urban Villages policy and delivery work, while continuing to champion collaboration, prevention, and evidence-informed approaches.



(Picture above)
Joan O'Hara
Director of Urban Villages and
Infrastructure
The Executive Office

Regional Health Literacy Forum

Annual Planning Day - Update

The Regional Health Literacy Forum (RHLF) held its annual Planning Day on 4 March 2026 and was very well attended.

As referred to in our article in Issue 12 of this Newsletter, the RHLF has undertaken an extensive review to look at the current Terms of Reference (ToR), Action Plan and reporting structures.

At the Planning Day updates were delivered on Making Life Better, Live Better, the Neighbourhood Model of Care and This is Our Health. Dr Mike Oliver of Health Literacy Matters delivered a very helpful presentation on Organisational Health Literacy. Further discussions focused on how best to apply a health literacy perspective to strategies and key documents.

The next meeting of the RHLF will take place in June 2026.



(Picture above)
Regional Health Literacy Forum
in action on their annual
planning day

Transport Planning and Modelling Unit

Eastern Transport Plan



(Picture above)
Eastern Transport Plan Logo

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) will shortly publish the Eastern Transport Plan (ETP), setting out its future vision for transport in Belfast. The plan aims to promote sustainable travel options and improve air quality, helping to create cleaner, safer places that support healthier lifestyles and improved public health.

A central focus of the plan is encouraging a shift towards active travel, including walking, wheeling and cycling. These are among the most accessible and affordable ways to build physical activity into everyday life, reducing the risk of long-term conditions such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Investment in better walking and cycling infrastructure will make these modes safer, more accessible, and more attractive, encouraging fewer unnecessary car journeys. Improved air quality will also deliver long-term benefits, as pollution has been linked not only to respiratory issues but also to dementia and cognitive decline, with considerable social impacts for older people and their families.

DfI will launch a public consultation in the coming weeks, and everyone is encouraged to have their say on the future of transport in the Belfast area.

Did you know?

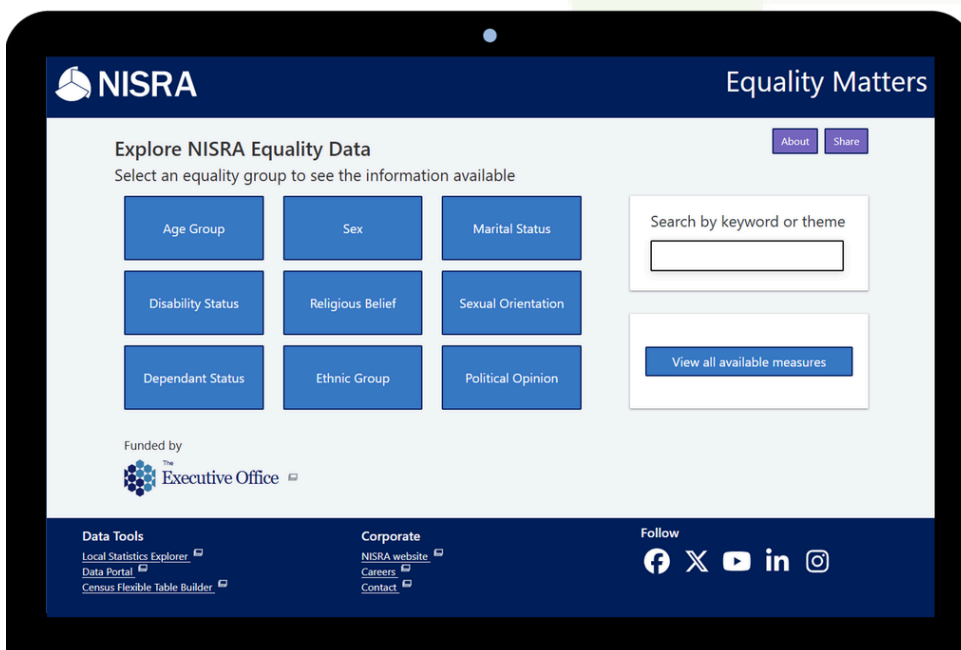


The NISRA Data Portal (data.nisra.gov.uk) acts as a central repository for NISRA official statistics, with data added and updated on a regular basis. This is the ninth article in a series which highlights the data and tools available on the NISRA Data Portal.

Data on the portal is primarily grouped under seven main themes, with additional themed sections for Making Life Better (MLB), Programme for Government (PfG) and other thematic collections. These themed views help users access the same underlying official statistics through different policy and outcomes-based lenses.

The Making Life Better (MLB) section of the portal now contains 452 datasets to facilitate the high-level monitoring of progress on the key Making Life Better indicators. Where appropriate, PfG and equality-related datasets are associated under relevant MLB themes, helping to bring together wellbeing and equality evidence within a consistent structure.

The data held on the portal also provides the underlying datasets for a number of key dashboards, including the Programme for Government, Making Life Better and the new Equality Matters dashboard, launched on 18th May 2026.



(Picture left) Screenshot of homepage NISRA's new Equality Matters dashboard.

You can find more information in [the user guide and instructional video](#) on the [NISRA Data Portal FAQs and training materials page](#).

Online training sessions delivered by NISRA staff are also available. To register your interest, please contact mlbnetwork@hscni.net

For additional support or queries about the NISRA Data Portal, get in touch at info@nisra.gov.uk.

NICS staff requiring statistical input and advice should continue to contact their departmental statistics colleagues in the first instance.

Strengthening Communities for Health

Addressing the Health Inequalities experienced by Irish Traveller Communities

Health inequalities are not evenly distributed across the places and communities which make up Northern Ireland. Many communities experience higher levels of health inequalities, caused by inequities in access to services and the wider determinants of health. This includes the Irish Traveller communities in Northern Ireland, who experience lower life expectancy and higher than average socio-economic deprivation.

The Belfast-based, Traveller Early Intervention Project partnership provides a new Traveller Support Hub, which is a central point for Irish Traveller communities to access services, providing onward referral to other relevant agencies and advocating for additional support. Guided by community development approaches, these commissioned services address local needs, focus on fostering collective action and decision making. This approach requires placing lived experience central to service development so that immediate and long-term needs can be responded to.

For further information on the Traveller Early Intervention Project, contact: Brendan.Quail@hscni.net

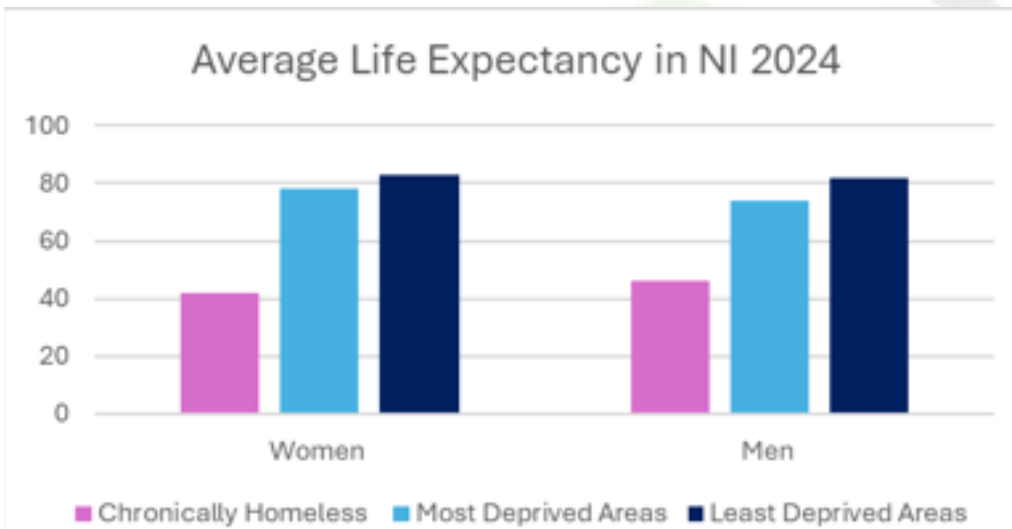


(Picture left)
Image to represent the new
Traveller Support Hub.

News from the Network

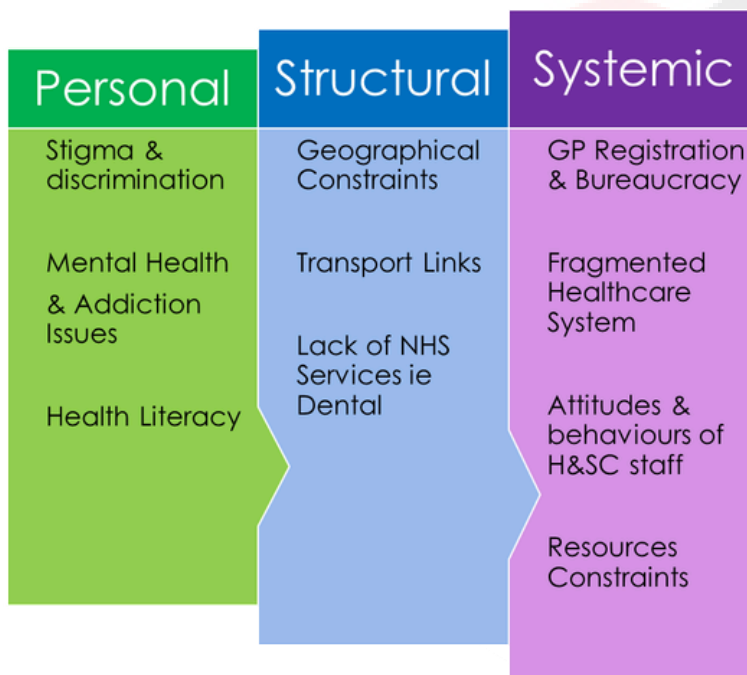
Improving Access to Health and Social Care for People Experiencing Homelessness across Northern Ireland

People experiencing homelessness (PEH) experience some of the poorest health outcomes in Northern Ireland, conversely access to health and social care remains inconsistent and inequitable. While specialist inclusion health services have developed within the Belfast Trust, provision across the remaining Health and Social Care Trusts is limited, often relying on a single Homeless Health Nurse to meet complex and widespread human need. The Supporting People Programme support 86 hostels across NI, 56 of these are outside Belfast Trust area.




(Graph left) to show average life expectancy in NI 2024 in relation to chronically homeless, most deprived areas and least deprived areas.

A qualitative study conducted in 2024 explored barriers and enablers to accessing health and social care for people living in homeless hostels across Trust areas beyond Belfast. Interviews with experienced frontline hostel staff revealed a complex myriad of personal, structural and systemic factors that continue to drive health inequalities for this population.



(Picture left) to show personal, structural and systemic factors



At a personal level, stigma, trauma, poor health literacy, mental ill-health and substance use were identified as significant barriers to engagement. These were frequently compounded by previous negative experiences of healthcare, resulting in delayed help-seeking and increased reliance on crisis services.

Structural barriers were particularly notable in rural areas. Participants highlighted geographical isolation, poor transport links, limited-service availability and fragmentation across Trust boundaries. These challenges often led to missed appointments, long waiting times and unmet health needs.

Systemic barriers were the most pervasive. Difficulties registering with GPs, inflexible and complex bureaucracy, fragmented mental health and addiction pathways, and poor information sharing between services were widely reported. Negative attitudes from some health and social care staff further discouraged engagement.

Collectively, these barriers contributed to repeated crisis presentations, avoidable emergency department attendances and hospital admissions. Of particular concern were gaps in discharge planning and communication, which in some cases resulted in serious personal harm and safeguarding risks.

The study also identified clear enablers to improved access. Homeless Health Nurses were consistently described as transformative, providing trusted advocacy, care coordination and continuity. However, reliance on a single nurse per Trust creates service vulnerability, staff burnout and regional inequity. Homeless hostel support workers were also shown to play a vital but under-recognised role, spending significant time addressing unmet health needs.

Addressing homelessness-related health inequalities requires a whole-system, population health approach. Key priorities include:

- Expanding homeless health nursing capacity;
- Developing integrated dual-diagnosis pathways;
- Embedding trauma-informed practice across the workforce;
- Improving information sharing; and
- Involve people with lived experience of homelessness in service design.

Without urgent policy and resource reform, avoidable health inequalities for this vulnerable population will persist across Northern Ireland.

If you would like more information regarding this research or a copy of the executive summary please contact Claire Green, Consultant Public Health Nurse , NHSCT at Clairel.Green@northerntrust.hscni.net