

Dear MLA,

Congratulations on being elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Whilst you are no doubt being inundated with information from a broad range of organisations, as Northern Ireland's leading charities tackling homelessness, we have come together to highlight a pressing issue which we feel needs the Assembly's attention as a matter of urgency.

We are extremely concerned that, on top of all the cuts to Housing Benefit announced in the Spending Review, the age range for the 'Shared Room Rate' is being extended from 25 to 35. In other words, from January 2012 **single claimants aged 25 to 35** will receive the Local Housing Allowance Rate for a shared room (on average, around **£40 a week**) irrespective of the size of the property occupied. This regulation previously only applied to under 25s and has caused considerable hardship for many people within that age range.

According to the NI Housing Executive, the scheduled change will affect around 5,000 existing claimants with an estimated weekly reduction of £24.50, which equates to a cut in support of more than one third. A survey of 500 tenancies managed by First Housing also found that **62% of tenants were under 35** and will be potentially hit with shortfalls.

When the original regulation was first introduced in 1996 to discourage young people with no job from leaving home and moving into expensive self-contained private accommodation (mainly in London), the private sector made up about 5% of the accommodation available in Northern Ireland and its effect was negligible.

The private rented sector now accounts for more than 20% of the available housing in Northern Ireland (larger than the social housing sector). At a time when buying a property has become more and more difficult and public provision is shrinking, the private rented sector is virtually the only option for single people in need of accommodation. This means that the existing regulations and the proposed changes will have a much greater impact on people than was originally the case.

From the 1st January 2012, the new regulation will be applied to thousands of people who have been living and working independently for many years. It effectively means that a single person losing their job will have three months to find another or face a housing benefit shortfall equivalent to half their weekly rent.

As a consequence many are likely to be forced out of their existing accommodation. This will lead to both a significant increase in homelessness and will place further pressure on the limited pool of shared properties available, which in turn will lead to increases in rent for this type of property.

In many areas of Northern Ireland, the type of shared accommodation the government expects people to live in simply doesn't exist. Rural areas in particular will be affected potentially driving people into cities away from their families and children. Even where accommodation is available claimants, in receipt of Housing Benefit, are already struggling to find an affordable property.

In particular, the changes will affect:

- Individuals who have broken the cycle of homelessness and secured self-contained private rented accommodation.
- Vulnerable people, care leavers and ex-prisoners who may find that shared accommodation is not appropriate to their circumstances or may be detrimental to their well-being, undermine their recovery and undo the progress they have made.
- Single men and women whose relationship has broken down will struggle to get access to their children because they are being forced to live in a shared accommodation.

At a time when all parties in the Assembly have made a commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in our society, we are deeply concerned that these changes, which will see some people's benefit entitlement literally halved, will have a real impact on levels of homelessness and will at the same time reduce our ability to solve it.

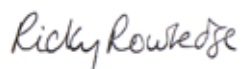
Given the current economic climate, with the cost of living soaring and the job market stagnating, these cuts to the basic support provided to people who are already in a straitened position will have a catastrophic impact.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet you to discuss this further and to explore ways in which the impact of this proposed change to Housing Benefit could be ameliorated, for example through:

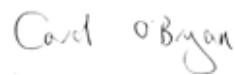
- provisions in the NI Executive's Programme for Government and Budget
- how the SSR scheme is administered, and
- protecting any additional subventions for Treasury

We look forward to hearing from you.

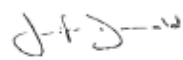
Yours sincerely,



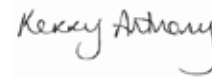
Ricky Rowledge
Director, CHNI
Secretary, VSHPF



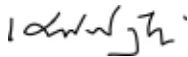
Carol O'Bryan
Chief Executive, Simon Community NI
Chair, VSHPF



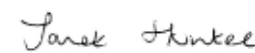
Jennifer Donald, Policy and
Public Affairs Officer,
Charter Institute of Housing
NI.



Kerry Anthony, Chief
Executive, DePaul
Ireland.



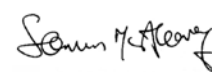
Kevin Wright, Chief
Executive
FHASS.



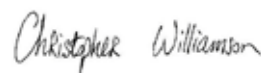
Janet Hunter, Director,
Housing Rights
Service.



Patrick Yu, Executive
Director, NICEM.



Seamus McAleavey,
Chief Executive,
NICVA.



Chris Williamson, Chief
Executive, NIFHA.



Anne Moore, Policy &
Assembly Coordinator,
Save the Children.



Tony McQuillan, Director,
Shelter NI.