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## PRIORITY POLICY ISSUE 2007-2010

### IMPROVING PRIVATE RENTED ACCOMMODATION AND HOW IT IS MANAGED

Improving standards in the private rented sector is one of Housing Rights Service's priority policy issues. During 2007-2010 our policy work will focus on achieving the following changes to help improve property conditions and how accommodation is managed.

#### **Mandatory registration for private landlords and letting agents incorporating a dispute resolution service and statutory deposit scheme.**

Housing Rights Service actively supports the need for more effective regulation of the private rented sector. The Department for Social Development is currently examining the feasibility of establishing a mandatory registration scheme. This perhaps is needed now more than ever at a time when Government and the Housing Executive are promoting greater use of the sector as a viable housing option for more families and individuals. We firmly believe that this can only be achieved by requiring landlords and agents to register with a central agency which would also have responsibility for setting up and administering a system for resolving disputes and managing tenancy deposits.

#### **Greater security of tenure and notice to quit periods.**

With greater reliance on the private rented sector there is a need to ensure that the option exists for tenants to be able to remain in occupation of their home for greater lengths of time. Currently the length of most tenancy terms is normally agreed between landlord and tenant. Where no clear term is specified, tenancies created after 1 April 2006 have an automatic 6 month term. Thereafter it becomes periodic e.g. monthly. Similarly the notice to quit period should reflect the length of the tenancy. We recommend that the notice to quit period, given by the landlord, is set on a sliding scale depending on the length of time the tenant has spent in occupation.

## **Legal protection for tenants against retaliatory eviction for enforcing their rights.**

Tenants should have legal protection while enforcing their rights. We have numerous cases where landlords have decided to evict tenants for pursuing repair remedies or requesting rent books/landlords details etc.

## **Comprehensive accommodation standards to cover fitness, disrepair, thermal comfort and energy efficiency.**

The Private Tenancies (NI) Order 2006 focuses on enforcing fitness standards contained in the Housing (NI) Order 1992. These reflect the minimum physical habitable condition and, although a property can be classified as fit, it could still be unsafe because of defects not covered by this legislation or could lack modern facilities such as central heating. Government should be aiming to raise accommodation standards in Northern Ireland by introducing more comprehensive standards such as those in Britain (i.e. the 'Decent Home Standard' and the 'Housing Quality Standards'). We would therefore welcome review of the current fitness standards and would like to see more modern standards reflected in legislative commitment.

## **Active promotion of the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords.**

Many landlords and tenants remain unaware of their rights and responsibilities. In 2007 the Department for Social Development produced a series of detailed guides to renting privately which, while useful for landlords and practitioners, were not very user friendly for many tenants. Further work is needed to promote awareness of rights and responsibilities if the sector is to be more heavily relied upon in the future.

## **A centrally co-ordinated rent guarantee scheme for Northern Ireland.**

Renting privately can be a very expensive option particularly for people on a low income. In some areas rent in advance and a deposit can amount to around £900 up front. There are a number of different schemes in Northern Ireland which are managed by separate agencies. Their geographical spread is limited and they operate different criteria and services. From a client's perspective it would be easier if there was one organisation managing the scheme which was available across NI.

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### **Our other policy priority areas are:**

Preventing and alleviating homelessness  
Tackling housing debt and affordability  
Increasing the supply of social housing

For further information visit [www.housingrights.org.uk](http://www.housingrights.org.uk) or contact Nicola McCrudden [nicola@housingrights.org.uk](mailto:nicola@housingrights.org.uk)