

Housing Rights Service Policy Priorities 2012 - 2014

Housing Rights Service is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of people in housing need in Northern Ireland. Our policy work is informed by the experiences of families and individuals who use our advice service. This includes people who are homeless or at risk of losing their home and those living in unsafe or unsuitable housing. During this period we will actively promote further client involvement in our policy work.

We believe that the prolonged recession and reform of the social security system will impact on people's housing circumstances locally. Our policy priorities over the next two years will focus on sustaining homes and improving housing options. Throughout this period we will work to inform and influence the development of government policy initiatives which will support people at risk of losing their home and provide a range of good quality, affordable housing options.

Sustaining rented and owner occupied homes

- Establish a Preventing Possession Fund to provide options for local households to remain in their homes.
- Ensure people in arrears can access emergency advice on the day of their possession hearing free of charge.
- Ensure that the system for rates assistance, collection and recovery is fair and reasonable.
- Introduce Pre Action Protocols for social housing tenants with rent arrears to ensure all reasonable options are explored before legal action.
- Ensure initiatives are available to support people required to move housing because of welfare reform including under occupancy.
- Increase the availability of Discretionary Housing Payments by:
 - *revising the Housing Executive's DHP Guidance to ensure payments are made to those in most need; and*
 - *extending payments to the social housing tenants.*
- Continue the facility of direct payments of housing costs to landlords and lenders in Northern Ireland.
- Introduce a Financial Inclusion and Capability Strategy to:
 - *promote affordable credit options; and*
 - *ensure that low income households have better product knowledge and money management skills.*
- Introduce policy initiatives to tackle fuel poverty.

Tackling supply and improving housing options

- Ensure that homeless people have access to suitable and appropriate temporary accommodation.
- Ensure the long term accommodation needs of vulnerable homeless people are recognised and met by Government.
- Ensure that low income households can afford to access and live in private rented sector and receive the necessary support.
- Ensure mandatory landlord registration meets its stated objectives of improving standards and that compliance is monitored.
- Ensure tenancy deposit protection meets its stated objectives and that compliance is monitored.
- Explore potential for a tenant dispute resolution service.
- Explore policy options for enhancing security of tenure in the private rented sector.
- Modernise fitness standards for private rented housing through the Housing Health and Rating System.
- Ensure a system for home improvement assistance is available to homeowners to tackle property disrepair.
- Ensure availability of appropriately sized social housing units to meet demand.
- Encourage initiatives to bring empty homes stock back into use.
- Review the housing sales/right to buy scheme.