

# Private Tenants' Forum Agenda for Action



As a group of private renters in Northern Ireland, we believe our housing rights should be properly protected just like owner occupiers and social tenants. We believe our homes should be safe and properly managed with existing rights properly enforced.

As part of the forthcoming Department for Social Development's review of regulation in the private rented sector, we hope the views of private tenants can be represented in a stakeholder consultation group.

We believe the following key issues need to be considered by policy makers in order to improve the private rented sector.

## 1. Better information and education

Most tenants are unaware or unsure about their rights and more could be done to inform them about their responsibilities. We believe government should introduce a requirement for landlords to provide an information pack for all new tenants in their properties. Schools and colleges could also do more to alert young people about the benefits and pitfalls of private renting.

## 2. Affordability

Those financial barriers that currently limit access to private renting should be minimised. We believe there is a case for banning, or at least limiting, the charging of upfront fees by letting agents.

## 3. Compulsory licensing of private landlords and letting agents

The current Landlord Registration scheme is very limited and is not much use for tenants. A system of landlord licensing should be introduced as the next step. Also, as the lettings industry is largely unregulated, we believe that letting agents should also be licensed before they are allowed to operate.

## 4. A standard tenancy agreement

At the moment landlords and letting agents offer a variety of tenancy agreements - some of which are unfair and misleading. These versions create confusion and uncertainty. Common usage of a standard Northern Ireland tenancy agreement would improve standards. Tenants, landlords and letting agents should be involved in sorting out

## 5. Security of tenure

Private tenants are paying significant rents for short tenancies offering no long-term security. At the moment the default tenancy term is only 6 months and many tenants would welcome greater security of tenure, particularly those with children and who wish to put down roots in their local community. We would like to see more landlords offering longer tenancies to tenants after an appropriate 'probationary period' is satisfactorily completed. Along with greater security of tenure, we believe tenants also should also be protected from victimisation for making complaints and generally asserting their rights. Legislation against retaliatory eviction should also be introduced to protect private tenants from vindictive landlords.

## 6. Improve health and safety standards

Private rental homes should be safe, secure and decent. Poor conditions are putting our health and safety at risk. The fitness standard used for assessing private rented properties is a very basic one. For example, a suitably located socket in a room is considered sufficient to meet the 'adequate provision for heating' requirement. We believe conditions need to be raised and, in particular, there should be a requirement for carbon monoxide and smoke alarms to be installed and maintained in all private rented accommodation, not just Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

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## 7. Repairs to be carried out within specified timescales

Landlords should be required to properly repair and maintain their properties, particularly to ensure health and safety for their tenants. As is the case with social housing, repairs should be completed within a reasonable period and to an acceptable standard. We believe a 'right to repair' should be included in legislation and a stakeholder group involving landlords and tenants should be set up to consider this issue.

## 8. An independent complaints service to help resolve tenancy disputes

We would like to see an accessible complaint handling service set up to specifically sort out disputes between landlords and private tenants. At the moment access to the courts can be a lengthy and expensive process and these issues can clog up the system. We believe a means of redress should be introduced to help resolve these disputes.

## More information

The Private Tenants' Forum will be pleased to provide any additional information as required in support of this agenda.

Please contact Housing Rights Service for further information.

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