Housing Rights

https://www.housingrights.org.uk/housing-advice/private-tenants-rights/shared-housing-and-houses-multiple-occupation-hmos

Generated: 13th November 2026 9:00am

Shared housing and houses in multiple occupation (HMOs)

This information is for people renting privately in Northern Ireland.

Shared housing means living in a property with other people and sharing some rooms, such as a kitchen and bathroom. It can be a cheaper option than renting a property by yourself.

There are some different rules and responsibilities for private renters in shared housing.

As a private tenant, you might be interested in taking part in Renters' Voice. Renters' Voice is supported by Housing Rights. It's a group of people who rent privately in Northern Ireland that works to influence landlords, politicians, and government to make private renting better for everyone.

Living in a house in multiple occupation (HMO)

Houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) are a type of shared housing. They need to have a licence and meet certain standards, including having:

- proper fire safety equipment
- an electrical system that is tested every five years
- a heating system that tenants can control

What is a HMO?

A HMO is a property where three or more households live and at least one person pays rent to a landlord.

Your ‘household’ includes:

- your partner
- your relatives
- your partner’s relatives

A ‘relative’ means a:

- parent or grandparent
- child or grandchild
- brother or sister
- aunt or uncle
- nephew or niece

Your household also includes anyone living with you who is hired as domestic help or to care for someone in your household.

You’re living in a HMO if your home has all of the following:

- three or more people living in the property
- at least three separate households living in the property
- at least one person in the property pays rent

Check that your HMO:

- has a licence
- meets the standards for HMOs
- has a policy for antisocial behaviour

Contact Belfast City Council’s HMO Unit if:

- your landlord does not have a licence for the HMO
- you’re living in a HMO and think it might be unsafe
- your landlord is trying to unfairly evict you from a HMO

Belfast City Council's HMO Unit can be contacted:

- by emailing nihmo@belfastcity.gov.uk

- by phoning 028 9027 0414

For example, Oliver and Sara are a couple and live with their friend, Patrick. Oliver and Sara count as one household, Patrick counts as another household. Because there are only two households, their property is not a HMO.

Claire, Orla and Naomi are friends sharing a three-bedroom house. They're not related so they each count as a separate household. There are three households so their property is a HMO.

Problems in your shared home

Safety standards and inspections

Since more than one household share a HMO, there’s a higher risk of safety issues and other problems. There might be more noise or rubbish and it’s harder to evacuate in case of fire. There are extra safety standards that HMOs need to meet and measures to prevent overcrowding.

Shared housing that is not a HMO must follow basic fitness standards.

The standards for HMOs include:

Lighting

- light switches positioned so they can be used as soon as you enter a room
- lights on stairways need switches at the top and bottom of the staircase

Ventilation

- rooms need a window that opens
- kitchens, bathrooms and toilets need a window that opens or ventilation system
- any room with an open flue gas heating appliance needs ventilation

Heating and plumbing

- the heating system must be able to maintain a temperature of 21°C when the temperature outside is -1°C
- you must be able to control the heat from inside the property

Electrical safety

- every fixed electrical installation must be inspected and tested by a qualified person at least once every five years
- your landlord must give a copy of the electrical safety certificate to the council

Bathing and toilet facilities

- the property needs at least one bathroom or shower room and one toilet for every five people

Preparing and storing food

- the kitchen worktop needs to be big enough for the number of people sharing it
- there needs to be at least one cooker, grill and oven for every five people (if there are six or seven people, your landlord can give you a microwave instead of a second cooker)

Dealing with rubbish

Your landlord must:

- provide the right number of wheelie bins and recycling bins
- explain how to dispose of rubbish
- give you information on when bins are collected

Fire safety equipment

- the property needs to have the equipment explained in the HMO Fire Safety Guide

Decoration

Your landlord must maintain the outside of the property, including:

- gardens
- paintwork and walls
- pipes, gutters, joinery and roof tiles

HMO managers must ensure the inside of the property is clean and sound, including:

- paintwork
- staircases and handrails
- flooring, ceilings skirting boards

Problems with rent and deposits in shared housing

Check your tenancy agreement for a term that says you're 'jointly and severally liable' for rent. It means that your landlord can hold you responsible if another tenant does not pay rent or for damage they caused.

Your landlord may keep your deposit or hold your guarantor responsible if another tenant causes damage or does not pay rent.

Problems with your housemates

It can be difficult and awkward if you have problems with the other tenants in your home. Before contacting your local council, you can:

- start by talking to your housemates and try to work things out with them, you can try setting up agreements for sharing household chores
- talk to your landlord they may be able to work things out between you
- contact our Housing Mediation Service for help working things out

Even if things are tough in your home, it is risky to leave before your tenancy agreement ends. Speak to our advisers before you leave.

Before you move in, it can be helpful to talk through things with your housemates. Talk about how you expect to live and ground rules you'd like to have in your home. You can also set up an agreement for how you'll pay bills and split up chores.

Antisocial behaviour

HMOs need to have a plan for antisocial behaviour. If you are experiencing antisocial behaviour in a HMO, start by contacting the HMO manager. They must record your complaints and address the issue with the person causing the problem.

If they cannot solve the problem informally, they can take formal action such as contacting the police or evicting the person causing problems.

Complaining to the HMO Unit

You can complain directly to Belfast City Council's HMO Unit for problems with safety, antisocial behaviour, or overcrowding.

Safety problems in HMOs are called 'hazards'. If the council investigates and finds a hazard, they will give your landlord a notice that says:

- what the problem is
- what the landlord needs to do to fix it
- the date they need to finish the repairs by

If your landlord does not do the repairs, the council can issue a fine.

The council can give the HMO manager an overcrowding notice if their HMO is overcrowded or likely to become overcrowded. For example, if someone has a baby, the HMO will be overcrowded when the baby turns one.

Even if the council finds a problem with your HMO or it does not have a licence, your landlord still needs to follow the correct process to evict you.

More advice

- Tenancy rights
- Finding a private rental
- Ending a private tenancy