

## MLA Bulletin

### Who we are

Housing Rights is Northern Ireland's leading independent provider of specialist advice and information on housing and homelessness. For nearly 60 years, we have been helping people to find and keep a home. Our policy work is informed by the views and experiences of the people who contact us for advice. We aim to identify evidence-based and user-informed solutions.

In addition to our policy work, we provide a range of services for both the public and practitioners working in the housing sector.

### Support for the public

We help ensure people in Northern Ireland live in safe, suitable and affordable homes through providing:



a housing advice helpline via phone, email and online chat



the Housing Mediation Service to help resolve disputes in the private rented sector



specialist housing advice services within the three prisons in Northern Ireland



Landlord Advice: a specialist service to help landlords understand their legal requirements and promote good practice in the private rented sector



a specialist service to support younger people at risk of becoming homeless



advocacy and legal representation



online housing advice on our website



Beyond the Gate: a service helping people leaving prison to access and sustain accommodation to help with the transition from custody



emergency legal representation at court for homeowners facing repossession

### Support for practitioners

We help ensure housing practitioners are equipped with the information, knowledge, and skills to provide advice and support to their clients through:

- a [housing helpline for practitioners](#) via phone, email and online chat
- delivering a broad range of high-quality specialist training courses (both accredited and non-accredited) on housing and welfare related issues
- delivering a practitioners' forum three times a year to keep our members up to date with the latest information on housing legislation, policy and practice
- [professional resources](#) containing comprehensive information on specific housing issues
- access to our online professional advice subscription: '[Housing Law in Practice NI](#)', providing comprehensive information on housing law, practice, and policy in Northern Ireland for Housing Rights members
- the '[Community Housing Advice Partnership](#)' to help advice agencies provide advice in their local communities

# Policy priorities for NI Assembly mandate 2022 - 2027

With the ongoing impact of a relentless cost of living crisis, alongside the devastating impact of the 2023-24 budget cuts on people on low incomes, the need to address housing problems and homelessness is more important than ever. As we look to a new Assembly, Housing Rights has identified a set of key policy asks necessary to deliver good quality, affordable, and sustainable homes for people across Northern Ireland over this current mandate. These key policy asks are informed by the experience of people using our advice services.

## Cross-tenure priorities

### Welfare Reform Mitigations



As members of the Cliff Edge Coalition Working Group, Housing Rights call for the independent advisory panel's recommendations regarding strengthening the welfare reform mitigations package to be implemented at the earliest opportunity. We continue to call for a strengthened package to:

- end the Universal Credit five week wait
- end the two-child limit
- establish a Financial Inclusion Service to mitigate cuts to housing benefits resulting from the rate of Local Housing Allowance being frozen since 2020

### Standalone Housing Outcome



It is crucial that the government include a standalone housing outcome in the Programme for Government. 'New Decade, New Approach' contained a commitment that "every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs." The inclusion of a specific housing outcome will not only place addressing the housing crisis at the heart of government, but is vital for the cross-departmental commitment needed to tackle unacceptably high homelessness levels and growing housing need.

### Participation



Experts by experience, people who have first-hand experience of housing problems and homelessness, bring an expertise that is key to identifying policy solutions and delivering effective services. It is therefore crucial that elected representatives, government departments and statutory bodies ensure that experts by experience are meaningfully involved in the development, design and delivery of housing and homelessness policy.

Housing Rights commissioned Involvement to carry out research to better understand, and identify gaps, in work happening in Northern Ireland to involve experts by experience in decisions made about housing and homelessness. Our policy paper outlines our key policy asks regarding participation in housing and homelessness.

Our asks include:

#### NI Executive

- to ensure participation is placed in a statutory footing with cross-cutting legislation to support, resource and facilitate the meaningful involvement of people affected by policy decisions in the design and implementation of policy solutions

#### Department for Communities

- expand the remit of the Tenant Participation Strategy (which solely focuses on social tenants) to include private renters, people experience homelessness and homeowners
- to develop a long-term, sustainable programme for involving experts by experience in the development and delivery of the Housing Supply Strategy
- involve private renters in the next stage of private rented sector reforms as early as possible. The establishment of a Tenant Led Commission could help to facilitate this involvement

#### Northern Ireland Housing Executive

- establish a stakeholder group, including experts by experience and organisations working to support them, to inform the development of the Homelessness Strategy's Lived Experience Programme with a view to the programme commencing in April 2024 at the latest
- consider how best to involve groups affected, especially those who have not yet been able to access social housing, in the ongoing development and implementation of the Fundamental Review of Allocations (in addition to the continued involvement of social tenants)

# Private renters

Private Renters make up a disproportionate number of calls to Housing Rights' helpline. Their experience highlights the sub-sector within the private rented sector which is characterised by poor standards, insecurity of tenure and affordability issues. 13% of households in NI live in the private rented sector, and almost 60,000 receive support with rent through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.



82% of all private renters have a shortfall between their housing support and their rent price. Given the reliance on this sector by low-income households, and the fact that loss of rented accommodation continues to be one of the top three causes of homelessness in NI, it is crucial that reform of the private rented sector and support for private renters is prioritised in the coming mandate.

## To this end Housing Rights call for:

### The maximisation of the Private Tenancies Act 2022:

- we strongly welcome the introduction of the Private Tenancies Act as the first in a series of legislative reforms to improve standards, security of tenure and affordability
- we call for the regulations under the Act that are still to be developed to be done so with input from tenants and the representatives of tenants. Learnings to ensure that input from people with lived experience is maximised are outlined above in our lived experience section
- we further call for resources to be ring-fenced to support the information and training needs of all stakeholders to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions in the Act

### Further legislation to be brought forward in order to:

- end 'no fault' evictions through the introduction of indefinite tenancies which can only be ended on prescribed grounds
- establish a free at point of access, effective adjudication and dispute resolution service which would serve as an arbitrator on disputes between tenants and landlords. Learnings can be taken from the First Tier Tribunal in Scotland
- improve fitness standards, including fuel efficiency standards and electrical and fire safety standards
- introduce landlord licensing for all private landlords
- end 'No DSS' discrimination
- ban letting fees in all but prescribed circumstances

### Steps to be taken at a local and national level to address affordability issues:

- address operational issues with the payment of Universal Credit housing costs directly to landlords
- tether the rate of local housing allowance to the 30th percentile of market rents and increase this in stages to its original 50th percentile value
- abolish the shared accommodation rate
- through increasing level of housing support available through Universal Credit and Housing Benefit, ease the demand on the Discretionary Housing Payment budget, allowing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to target those most in need and use the fund to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness

# Homeowners

With a relentless cost of living crisis immediately following the pandemic, Housing Rights is concerned about the impact the economic downturn and high interest rates will have on homeowners in Northern Ireland, where we have a higher percentage of marginal homeowners and a remaining legacy of higher levels of negative equity.

## We therefore call for:

- reversal of the change to support for mortgage interest to reinstate it as a non-repayable grant
- introduction of a mortgage rescue scheme in Northern Ireland to enable homeowners facing repossession to stay on in their homes either as tenants or shared owners

# Social renters

By March 2023 there were 45,426 households on the social housing waiting list, a rise of 25% over the last 5 years. Over half of these households, 26,310, were full duty applicants found to be statutorily homeless by the Housing Executive (NIHE). 32,633 were deemed to be in housing stress by NIHE. With the ongoing issues with the supply of social housing and proposals to revitalise NIHE, there are a number of key priorities which Housing Rights believe should be addressed in this mandate.

## We call for:

the publishing of plans for  
the proposed revitalisation  
of NIHE



tenants to have the final say on  
the plans to revitalise NIHE  
through a tenant ballot and end  
to NIHE house sales scheme



In terms of the proposals due to be brought forward under the Fundamental Review of Allocations, Housing Rights recommend with regard to:

### **Proposal 4: Discharging Homelessness Duties to the private sector**

We believe that permitting the Housing Executive to discharge homeless applicants into the private rented sector at this stage remains premature. Developments since 2010 including the Private Tenancies Act have not sufficiently improved standards, security of tenure and tenure management to make the private rented sector appropriate and reasonable for the discharge of homelessness households.

### **Proposal 7: Reform of intimidation points**

'Intimidation points' should be renamed, creating a new award for example 'trauma points' for applicants experiencing trauma which poses risk to life or serious injury. Such an award should encompass a wider range of specified groups such as domestic abuse or human trafficking victims.

# People experiencing homelessness

The inter-departmental response to support people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic showed the strength and importance of collaboration across departments in supporting this group. This learning should be built upon in a future assembly mandate with priority also given to:

introducing a statutory duty to co-operate on relevant bodies across housing, communities, education, justice, health and social services to prevent and alleviate homelessness



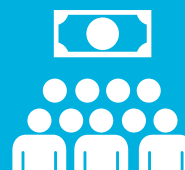
extending the period during which people are considered to be 'threatened with homelessness' to reflect the extended Notice to Quit periods in the Private Tenancies Act



adopting a 'housing first approach' to chronic homelessness



building upon the 'everyone in' approach during the pandemic to provide longer-term solutions for people with no recourse to public funds



For further information on the issues in this briefing paper please contact:  
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## 2024 TRAINING

Our 2024 training plan is now live on our website!



[www.housingrights.org.uk/training-and-events](http://www.housingrights.org.uk/training-and-events)

### **2024 training**

We offer training courses about housing and welfare related issues.

We also can tailor our training courses for organisations and groups.

We host conferences for decision makers and key stakeholders in housing.

Visit: [www.housingrights.org.uk/training-and-events](http://www.housingrights.org.uk/training-and-events)

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Subscription includes access to our professional resources on housing and welfare related topics.

MLA's, MP's, Councillors and their constituency offices, can avail of HLPNI subscriptions at a discounted price of £120, rather than full price of £150 before 31 January 2024.

Email [info@housingrights.org.uk](mailto:info@housingrights.org.uk) for further information.



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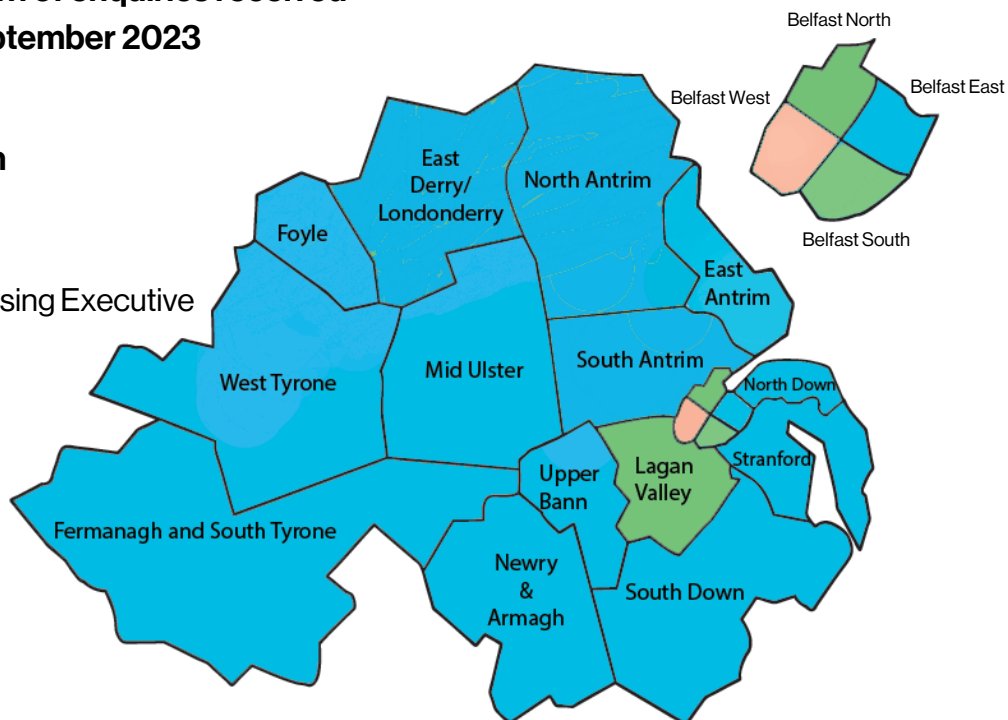
[www.housingrights.org.uk](http://www.housingrights.org.uk)

# Constituency breakdown of enquiries received

## September 2022 to September 2023

### Most common concern

- Private rented sector
- Homelessness
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive



Constituency	Most Common Concern		Second Concern		Third Concern	
Belfast East	Private Rented Sector	25%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	24%	Homelessness	22%
Belfast North	Homelessness	26%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	25%	Private Rented Sector	19%
Belfast South	Homelessness	31%	Private Rented Sector	24%	NIHE	17%
Belfast West	NIHE	30%	Homelessness	28%	Private Rented Sector	16%
East Antrim	Private Rented Sector	25%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	22%	Homelessness	16%
East Londonderry	Private Rented Sector	26%	Homelessness	23%	NIHE	21%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Private Rented Sector	32%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	20%	Homelessness	15%
Foyle	Private Rented Sector	23%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	22%	Homelessness	20%
Lagan Valley	Homelessness	48%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	18%	Private Rented Sector	12%
Mid Ulster	Private Rented Sector	37%	Homelessness	18%	NIHE	17%
Newry and Armagh	Private Rented Sector	36%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	20%	Homelessness	18%
North Antrim	Private Rented Sector	26%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	25%	Homelessness	17%
North Down	Private Rented Sector	28%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	18%	Homelessness	18%
South Antrim	Private Rented Sector	26%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	25%	Homelessness	21%
South Down	Private Rented Sector	28%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	24%	Homelessness	18%
Strangford	Private Rented Sector	27%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	20%	Homelessness	19%
Upper Bann	Private Rented Sector	34%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	19%	Homelessness	16%
West Tyrone	Private Rented Sector	32%	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	19%	Homelessness	17%