

Housing Rights believes everyone should have a home. For over 50 years, Housing Rights has been helping people affected by housing problems and homelessness and our policy work is informed by the experience of our clients.

Our policy work helps to inform developments in local housing legislation, policy and practice by providing client focussed comment. Our policy team works hard to ensure that the experience of the people who use our services informs the comments we make to policy decision makers. Often we look for ways for people experiencing housing problems to be directly involved in work to change policy. We also implement a rolling public affairs programme to maximise the opportunities to influence policy decision makers.

A number of priority areas have been identified for our policy work over the coming period. These are based on the most common issues experienced by the people we assist. Alongside these priority areas we have noted the relevant areas of government policy we want to influence and improve.

1. Preventing Homelessness

- Ensuring the successful operation of the **Housing Solutions** approach by the NIHE and other agencies to prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies where possible.
- Ensuring **government policy continues to be characterised by the drive to prevent homelessness**. This should be evident at all levels of policy making from the Programme for Government (the housing outcome should include a prevention indicator) through to the homeless strategy itself. Consideration should be given to assessing how the policy development process itself can support prevention work by e.g. including a screening process which assesses how any new or revised policies can best promote homelessness prevention.
- Advocating for the adoption of a **zero discharge into homelessness approach** (similar to the approach in Wales); ensuring all social housing providers do all they can to prevent homelessness, particularly in the context of austerity and the rollout of Universal Credit.
- Advocating for the development of a **robust legislative framework to prevent and address homelessness** which should include e.g. the **updating of our legislation to reflect developments elsewhere**. In Wales for example, since 2015 the statutory timeframe of 28 days under which someone threatened with homelessness is able to access support to sustain their accommodation or be rehoused, has been doubled to **56 days**. Since 2017, this has also been the case in England.
- **Opposing the proposal to allocate on a ‘tenure neutral basis’**; in effect this would mean that the NIHE’s statutory duty to provide accommodation to people experiencing homelessness could be met by providing private rented accommodation. Loss of rented accommodation continues to be one of the top 3 reasons for homelessness presentations in NI. **It is therefore our view that it is premature to consider allocation on a tenure neutral basis at this time and would urge the removal of such a proposal.**
- Improving the **cross departmental approach** to homeless prevention by advocating the adoption of legislation which would **place a statutory duty to co-operate** on each of the statutory bodies named in section 6A(5) of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988. The duty would be operationalised by a mechanism to allow the pooling of resources between Departments.

2. Affordability

- Ensuring that **government policy in relation to both the supply of affordable housing (including the definition) and the development of an anti-poverty strategy** takes full account of the affordability concerns faced by low income households, many of whom are impacted by housing cost induced poverty.
- Ensuring that the **social security and housing functions of the Department for Communities work more closely together** to improve the situation of low income households who are particularly impacted by changes to social security.
- Working **collaboratively across sectors as part of the Clifledge Coalition** to call for the continuation of the existing welfare mitigations and to highlight areas where these should be strengthened.
- Ensuring **access to support for low income households**, particularly those in the private rented sector, to sustain their tenancy is maximised where it currently exists e.g. through Discretionary Housing Payments and developed, in cases where it does not currently exist.

3. Standards

- **Improving standards for the regulation of the private rented sector**, particularly in relation to landlord and letting agent regulation and tenancy information and support.
- Advocating for the need for better regulation with increased emphasis on tenant services and the establishment of an independent housing regulator. The independent regulator should be developed based on the Scottish model and have a consumer focus, particularly in light of the Grenfell tragedy.
- Ensuring the **development of a fitness standard which is fit for purpose** and which takes account of the impact of housing fitness on the occupant's health. Advocating for the adoption in Northern Ireland of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS).

4. Accessing and sustaining accommodation

- Ensuring policy development around the **allocation of social housing** continues to be based on objective need.
- Supporting efforts to increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing for households in greatest need.
- Making sure people in greatest need get the right support at the right time.
- Ensuring that **systems developed to identify and assist people experiencing chronic homelessness take account of their housing and support needs.**

5. Participation

- Ensuring that policy makers create and support opportunities for **people who are directly impacted by housing issues – to influence decisions made** about housing policy.
- Advocating for the development of a government supported structure of participation support for low income private renters who tend to be more excluded from policy making than their social renting counterparts.

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