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Threatened with homelessness

This information is for professionals working in housing and homelessness.

A person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that they are going to become homeless within 28 days of making a homeless application.^{[1](#)} This can include a:

- person leaving custody, hospital or other residential care
- private tenant who has been given a notice to quit
- person living in tied accommodation who has lost or is about to lose their job
- homeowner whose home has been repossessed

The person is not homeless until 28 days before the date they must leave.

Notice to quit from a private landlord

Most private tenants are entitled to at least eight weeks' notice to quit so they are not homeless when they initially get their eviction notice.

The renter can still ask the Housing Executive for help and should ask their housing officer to note in the diary the date the 28-day trigger is reached.

Asked to leave home by family or friends

A person who is living with family or friends but has no tenancy or licence agreement of their own has no right to remain in the property once the tenant or homeowner asks them to leave.^{[2](#)}

The Housing Executive will want to speak to the tenant or homeowner to ensure the person cannot return to the home. They should not do this if there is any suggestion of domestic abuse or risk of violence.

They may offer mediation if there is no risk and there is a possibility of reconciliation to try to prevent the person from becoming homeless.

Social services may have a responsibility to provide accommodation if the person being asked to leave is under 18.

Homeowners going through repossession

Homeowners who are going through repossession are homeless if they:

- have received notice that the Enforcement of Judgments Office will evict them in less than 28 days, or
- can show that they cannot continue living in their home because they have to go without essentials like food or heat in order to pay their mortgage^{[3](#)}

Footnotes

- [1] The Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, Art 3(6).
- [2] Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Homeless Guidance, Chapter 3.13.
- [3] Re Canavan [1991] 6 NIJB 85 (Murray LJ).

Relationship breakdown

A person may be homeless or threatened with homelessness because of a relationship breakdown.

The NIHE Homelessness Guidance Manual states that if a person has received legal advice or assistance, they may be able to provide documents to help the Housing Executive reach a decision.

The Housing Executive will ask for documentation to prove the relationship has ended. The person can provide one of the following:

- Order for Maintenance, Residence or Contact
- Occupation or Non-Molestation Order
- Decree of Judicial Separation or Divorce
- Dissolution Order – in the case of breakdown of civil partnership
- documents from a solicitor

If a person hasn't needed or taken legal action to end a relationship, the Housing Executive should consider:

- evidence that they had been residing with a partner
- evidence from a supporting agency, such as Women's Aid, to confirm the relationship has ended
- information from the police, social worker, social security agency or other reputable source
- evidence from a GP or other professional

The Housing Executive must use its own discretion to decide if the person can reasonably return to the accommodation they had occupied if there is no evidence beyond the person's statement.[4](#)

Footnotes

- [4] Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Homeless Guidance, Chapter 3.5.2.

Accommodation not reasonable

A person is homeless if it is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy their home. This can be for various reasons. What is reasonable is closely linked to the suitability of offers of housing.

Homeless because accommodation is not reasonable to continue to occupy

The Housing Executive can decide that someone is homeless if they have accommodation, but that accommodation is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy.[5](#)

Accommodation can be unreasonable to continue to occupy for various reasons, including:

- physical condition
- location
- cost
- overcrowding
- risk of violence

The Housing Executive must consider each case on its own merits and facts. They can take into consideration the general circumstances prevailing in Northern Ireland when making its decision.

Considering the prevailing circumstances in Northern Ireland

The Housing Executive can consider the general circumstances prevailing to housing in Northern Ireland when deciding if accommodation is reasonable to continue to occupy.[6](#)

This means that the Housing Executive may decide the person can stay in accommodation that is not ideal if there is evidence that the person's situation is commonly experienced by others in Northern Ireland.

The court of appeal in England and Wales held that it was not unreasonable for a person to live in overcrowded housing when there were other households in the borough living in similarly or more intensely overcrowded properties.[7](#)

Footnotes

- [5] The Homeless (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, Article 3(3).
- [6] The Housing Order (Northern Ireland) 1988, Article 3(4).
- [7] Harouki v Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea [2007] EWCA Civ 1000.

Continuing to occupy

The Housing Executive must consider if the applicant can continue to occupy the property over time. The person may still be homeless even though it is possible for the person to keep living there in the short term.[8](#)

The Court of Appeal for England and Wales further established a 'reasonable over time' test.[9](#) The Housing Executive must ask itself:

- is it reasonable for the person and their household to continue occupying accommodation for the present and the foreseeable future
- if not, how long in the short term could they continue occupying this accommodation and would they be likely to find suitable alternative housing within that period

Assessing whether accommodation is reasonable to continue to occupy

The Housing Executive should place a sharp focus on the following considerations when deciding if it is reasonable for the person to continue to occupy their current

accommodation:[10](#)

- is the person, or any member of the household disabled and to what extent
- what are the likely effects of those disabilities for as long as the person continues to live in the accommodation
- what particular accommodation needs does the person have because of their disability and how does the current accommodation meet those
- how do the person's accommodation needs compare to the needs of someone without those disabilities
- how do disability discrimination laws impact the decision and is there a requirement to make adjustments to protect the rights of someone with a protected characteristic

Footnotes

- [8] Birmingham City Council v Ali & Ors [2009] UKHL 36 (1 July 2009).
- [9] R (Safi) v The Borough Council of Sandwell [2018] EWCA 2876.
- [10] Lomax v Gosport Borough Council [2018] EWCA Civ 1846.

Guidance on unreasonable accommodation

The NIHE Homeless Guidance Manual provides some guidance on what to consider when they are making this decision. The accommodation might not be reasonable to continue to occupy if it:

- is unfit for human habitation
- does not meet the needs of a person in the household with a disability
- is having a negative impact on the mental health of someone in the household
- is having a negative impact on someone in the household due to overcrowding
- is causing financial hardship
- is causing the applicant to experience violence, threats of violence, domestic abuse, harassment or intimidation

Harassment and violence

It may not be reasonable to occupy accommodation where the applicant is experiencing harassment, violence or threats of violence.

Harassment can include:

- unwanted phone calls, letters, emails and visits
- verbal abuse
- online bullying
- stalking
- verbal abuse
- threats
- smashing windows
- sing dogs to frighten a person

The Housing Executive must take into consideration the severity and impact of the harassment.

Risk of violence within the home

An applicant who is at risk of violence in their accommodation from another person living there should be considered homeless.[11](#) The applicant does not have to have actually experienced violence in the home.[12](#)

The Housing Executive may advise the person about legal assistance to deal with violence in the home. They cannot refuse assistance on the grounds that the person has not reported or sought legal help to deal with the violence.

Home is unsuitable due to health conditions

A person may be homeless if their current accommodation does not meet their needs and it is unreasonable for them to continue living there.

The Housing Executive must consider the short term and foreseeable future and take into consideration any anticipated change or deterioration in a person's condition.

Physical health issues

A person's accommodation may be unsuitable if they, or any member of their household, have health or disability needs that cannot be met within the property. For example:

- level-floor accommodation
- adapted or wheelchair accessible accommodation
- a larger property to accommodate certain disability needs

The Housing Executive may try to prevent homelessness in these cases by looking at ways to make the property more suitable for the person's needs.

Mental health issues

A person's mental health can be impacted by their housing conditions.

The Housing Executive must consider all medical evidence provided and decide if rehousing would alleviate the person's mental health issues. The person can provide evidence from medical professionals, social workers or mental health staff. To be effective, the evidence needs to link the mental health issues with the person's current accommodation.

The Housing Executive may decide that the person's issues would be better alleviated with appropriate support.

Footnotes

- [11] The Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, Article 3(5)(b).
- [12] Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Homeless Guidance, Chapter 3.5.6.

Homelessness and overcrowding

An applicant will not normally be homeless simply because there are not enough rooms in the property for all the people who live there.

Overcrowding alone is not usually enough for an applicant to be considered homeless.

Overcrowding is common in Northern Ireland and the Housing Executive can consider the general circumstances which prevail when deciding if someone is homeless.

An applicant may be considered homeless by the Housing Executive because of overcrowding if it's:

- more severe or pronounced than in other overcrowded homes
- creating conditions that are impacting a person's health or welfare (for example, adding to mould growth, interfering with educational development)

The Housing Executive typically disregards ineligible people when deciding if a household is homeless.[13](#) This means that any ineligible household members will not be counted when considering if the accommodation is overcrowded.

The accommodation is not reasonable to continue to occupy if the overcrowding is having a negative impact on members of the household.[14](#)

Footnotes

- [13] The Housing Order (Northern Ireland) 1988, 7A (4).
- [14] Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Homeless Guidance, Chapter 3.5.10.4.

Footnotes