

Housing Rights

www.housingrights.org.uk

@HousingRightsNI

Briefing Paper

**Briefing paper on Northern Ireland Assembly
recall Thursday 8th August**

August 2024

Introduction

Housing Rights is Northern Ireland's leading independent provider of specialist housing advice. For over 60 years, we have been helping people to find and keep a home. We believe that prevention is better than cure. Our work seeks to ensure that individuals and families living in Northern Ireland do not reach this crisis point. We recognise, however, that this is not always possible, and we also provide advice and assistance to help ensure that the experience of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurrent. Housing Rights passionately believes that no one should be without a home and works towards the goal that every citizen in Northern Ireland has a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that meet their needs. In particular, the organisation's services are targeted at people who need help to:

- Prevent them from becoming homeless;
- Find suitable rented accommodation;
- Sustain their tenancies;
- Explore their housing options;
- Avoid repossession and eviction;
- Tackle disrepair or poor conditions in their homes; and
- Meet their housing costs;
- Repay mortgage and/or rent arrears;
- Resolve disputes with their landlord and/or lenders.

In the year ending March 2024, our advice services dealt with enquiries from over 13,000 households on over 53,000 housing issues. We provide a specialist housing helpline open Monday to Friday complemented by a digital Live Chat service accessed through a comprehensive and user-led advice website www.housingrights.org.uk. Our busy frontline advice service is supported by an advocacy and representation service staffed by dedicated caseworkers and a small legal team who prevent and alleviate homelessness by liaising with landlords, lenders and other agencies, as well as provide representation for County and High Court.

In addition to preventing homelessness, our services also assist in promoting access to justice by providing an emergency court representation service (Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme) which assists households at risk of homelessness due to mortgage or rent arrears who are unrepresented in court proceedings. Since December 2019, we have also administered a Housing Mediation Service to address and avoid the escalation of disputes to prevent homelessness.

The reach and expertise of our advisers also extends to Northern Ireland's prisons to assist those entering or leaving custody to safeguard tenancies and/or to access appropriate support to prevent homelessness on release.

We work to support communities and other frontline advisers across Northern Ireland by providing a well-established practitioner support programme, through our Community Housing Advice Partnership and through a comprehensive training and legal information service.

In addition to our frontline specialist advice, representation, and support services, Housing Rights has a policy and participation service that influences government policy decisions to improve housing and homelessness in Northern Ireland. Our policy work is informed by the views and experiences of

the people who contact us for advice and aims to support the identification of evidence-based, informed solutions.

The purpose of this briefing

Housing Rights believes in a society in which everyone has a home. Housing Rights is deeply troubled by the events of the last few days with the violence and disorder and the devastating impact this is having on our newcomer communities.

We encourage all those in civic and political leadership to promote the importance of a rounded and factual debate in relation to the housing issues aired in connection with this disorder. The briefing below outlines some key facts to support this aim.

Northern Ireland is indeed in a housing crisis. However, it is not a crisis which has been caused by migration. Rather, the crisis is as a result of sustained underinvestment in housing to meet the needs of all communities in Northern Ireland.

The Housing Waiting List has almost doubled in the past 20 years

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) waiting list has almost doubled since 2004. In 2003/4, there were 27,515 households on the housing waiting list.¹ As of March this year, there were 47,312.² Of these, 29,394³ households are statutorily homeless, meaning there are more statutorily homeless applicants on the waiting list today than there were total applicants 20 years ago.

The recent increase in pressure in our housing system has been attributed to a range of factors, including but not limited to the impact of the pandemic, the socio-economic consequences of the economic shock which followed and a rise in people with leave to remain. However, it is important to note that this pressure occurred in the context of an already weakened housing system, where supply had not kept pace with demand.

Why has this happened?

Northern Ireland has failed to build enough social homes to meet demand

Northern Ireland has a stock shortage regardless of housing tenure. The Department for Communities' draft Housing Supply Strategy recognises this problem explicitly and attributes the gap in housing stock to be linked to the 'much slower' rate of construction of new homes in the period since 2006. The draft strategy states;

"There was steady growth in the number of dwellings between 2012 and 2021 – an annual average rate of growth of almost 6,200. However, this is much lower than the rates of growth experienced in the years leading up to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Between 2001 and 2006 the housing stock increased at an annual average rate of 11,500"⁴

¹ [ni-housing-stats-21-22-tables3.ods \(live.com\)](https://live.com/ni-housing-stats-21-22-tables3.ods)

² [Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin January - March 2024 \(nisra.gov.uk\)](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/northern-ireland-housing-bulletin-january-march-2024)

³ Provided to Housing Rights via email by NIHE

⁴ Draft Housing Supply Strategy, p.12. accessed at: https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-housing-supply-strategy-report_0.pdf

Specifically, in a social housing context, concern relating to supply and demand is further magnified. Despite the levels of need, in the last four years only 2,403, 1,713, 1,956 and 1,506 new social homes started in Northern Ireland.⁵ These low levels are compounded by the devastating news that, according to the NIHE, the current budget allocation for new build social housing in Northern Ireland this year, will see a maximum of 600 new social homes built.⁶ Indeed the NIHE has further identified that the House Sales Scheme⁷, which sees on average 500 social homes lost to the sector each year, means that the net increase in social homes this year could be less than even this.

Migration and housing

Home Office statistics show proportionately low numbers of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of the UK.⁸ NISRA statistics also show that the population change in Northern Ireland because of migration is small, amounting to an additional 2,300 people in 2022.⁹

While seeking asylum, people live in accommodation provided by the UK Home Office, who fulfil this obligation through a contract with Mears Group PLC.¹⁰ Asylum seekers are therefore not housed in social homes owned by the NIHE or Housing Associations. Only once a strict process has concluded and a decision has been made that someone has a legal right to remain in Northern Ireland, can anyone apply for support with their housing from the NIHE.¹¹

The NIHE uses 4 legal tests to determine if someone is entitled to access social housing.¹² The tests applied in Northern Ireland are amongst the strictest in all of the UK.¹³ Once someone has been granted leave to remain, and therefore refugee status, they are legal residents of the UK. In order to be deemed to be statutorily homeless, they must pass the same tests as any other person presenting as homeless to the NIHE. It is therefore untrue that refugees face any enhanced access to social housing over any other applicant.

What needs to happen now?

There is an urgent need to support newcomer communities, many of whom will feel frightened and distressed by the current disorder. Housing Rights is working with and through our partner agencies in these communities to meet the emerging housing needs which may range from racial intimidation to homelessness.

⁵ <https://homelessconnect.org/housing-and-homelessness-sector-leaders-outline-grave-concerns-at-social-housing-new-starts-figure-for-2024-5/>

⁶ <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/f70cd07c-4ddc-4ae3-93d2-119e042322ec/NIHE-Response-to-DFC-Budget-EQIA-24-25.pdf>

⁷ The NIHE House Sales Scheme has contributed to the decline of social housing stock declining from 153,000 in 1974⁷ to approximately 83,000 today

⁸ NI hosts just 2.5% of asylum seekers in the UK, as reported by the Law Centre NI <https://shorturl.at/GlqQZ>

⁹ As a result of migration, there was a net population increase of 2,300 people in 2022, according to NISRA <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/Statistical%20Bulletin%20-%202022%20Mid-year%20Population%20Estimates%20for%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

¹⁰ [A Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation – English \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100000/A_Home_Office_Guide_to_Living_in_Asylum_Accommodation_-_English.pdf)

¹¹ [People seeking asylum | Housing Rights](https://www.housingrights.org.uk/people-seeking-asylum/)

¹² [Homelessness assessment | Housing Rights](https://www.housingrights.org.uk/homelessness-assessment/)

¹³ In Scotland for example, the priority need element of our assessment is not used. For further see, Page 16, [CBP-7201.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/publications/2019/1/cbp-7201/)

The NI Executive must urgently address the disorder and Housing Rights supports the call from the Law Centre NI for a Refugee Integration Strategy to be brought forward as soon as possible.¹⁴

Our leaders have a responsibility to ensure that the debate in relation to housing is informed by factual contributions and is solution-focused. Solving the housing crisis requires adequate investment to meet the housing need that exists in Northern Ireland. This will require brave and agile leadership, more resources and greater partnership working and collaboration, not division. We must take swift and decisive action to meet this crisis head on so that all of our citizens have a safe and stable place to call home.

Meaningful steps forward should include:

- **Prioritisation of housing in the next Programme for Government to ensure that the housing needs of all our citizens are progressed.**

In, 'New Decade, New Approach,' a commitment was made for a Programme for Government (PfG), which included an outcome which provided a, '*specific focus on ensuring every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs.*'¹⁵ This commitment was to be supported by, '*robust programmes and actions.*'¹⁶

- **Investment in new build social housing and in homelessness prevention. There is an urgent need to both strongly signal and deliver real progress in addressing urgent housing need.** Housing Rights has highlighted the devastating allocation to the new build social housing programme this year as well as the impact on housing and homelessness services.¹⁷ We note that the NIHE has recently also highlighted similar concerns.¹⁸ **Enhanced NI Executive funding for bids from the Department for Communities must be found in both these areas in the October monitoring round.**
- **The draft Housing Supply Strategy must be brought to the NI Executive for approval without delay so that a range of actions can be taken across government to comprehensively address the housing crisis.**

¹⁴ See Law Centre NI Statement <https://www.lawcentreni.org/news/standing-together-for-us-all/>

¹⁵ [New Decade New Approach](#), page 39

¹⁶ [New Decade New Approach](#), page 43

¹⁷ <https://www.housingrights.org.uk/professionals/policy-and-research/library/housing-rights-response-consultation-department>

¹⁸ <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/getattachment/f70cd07c-4ddc-4ae3-93d2-119e042322ec/NIHE-Response-to-DFC-Budget-EQIA-24-25.pdf>

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