

Mother of disabled boy says religious bias means she can't get a house

Allison Morris

ANORTH Belfast woman who has been living in a hostel for almost two years with her disabled son claims she is being discriminated against in an area where nationalist homes are at a premium.

Sammy Lavery's three-year-old-son Connolly has spent most of his life in temporary accommodation in the Grainne House tower block in the New Lodge area. The hostel, occupying the first four floors, is run by the Daughters of Charity religious order.

Her son, who suffers from severe asthma and uses a nebulizer, wears corrective shoes for the condition club foot and has undergone several operations since birth.

The temporary flat is sparsely furnished with wooden armchairs and tiled flooring. Residents are not permitted to change the decor or carpet the floors during their stay. Last Wednesday Ms Lavery's son was rushed to A&E having fallen and banged his head on the hard flooring.

He required six stitches to his forehead and will be permanently scarred. The mother-of-one is currently on the Housing Executive waiting list with 162 points.

However, in the New Lodge and Cliftonville areas where there are almost 600 people on the waiting list. Of those 420 are deemed to be in 'housing stress'.

Social Development Minister Nelson McCausland was criticised recently after selecting the Lower Oldpark and Tiger's Bay districts of north Belfast - traditionally loyalist areas - to pilot a housing-based regeneration programme despite the majority of those on the waiting list being from the nationalist community.

Other nationalist areas outside north Belfast have been chosen as part of the scheme.

Ms Lavery wrote to the department about her plight, but it responded by saying it "does not accept your statement that there is religious inequality in social housing".

"When I first moved here I was told it would be a temporary measure and I'd only for about six months," she said. "Two years later I'm still no closer to being allocated a home. The lift is constantly broken and I'm having to carry Connolly and shopping bags up flights of stairs and then go back down again to collect my pram."

"I was offered a place covered in damp that would have made Connolly ill. We don't want much, just a home I can make safe and comfortable for us. It's so unfair he has to live this way."

A spokeswoman for the Housing Executive said it had made Ms Lavery a number of offers of accommodation, one of which she accepted but subsequently refused. "We will of course consider her for accommodation that becomes available in her areas of choice in accordance with the Housing Selection Scheme."

The spokeswoman added: "Housing Executive hostels are all furnished with goods and furniture that meet current health and safety and fire retardant standards."

"It is Housing Executive policy not to allow any residents placed in our temporary accommodation to replace the existing furniture with their own to minimize the risk of fire and maintain health and safety standards for all residents."

Sean Brady, a development worker for the Participation and the Practice of Rights, insisted the housing shortage which disproportionately affects Catholics in north



Belfast is a clear case of inequality.

In August the human rights group published a report claiming that Catholics in the area had suffered from 10 years of failure to build and allocate houses based on the principle of need.

"Religious inequality impacting the Catholic community in north Belfast is laid bare in the experiences of families like the Laverys and many more like them who are forced to remain in unsuitable housing for long periods because of a failure by the minister to act," he said.

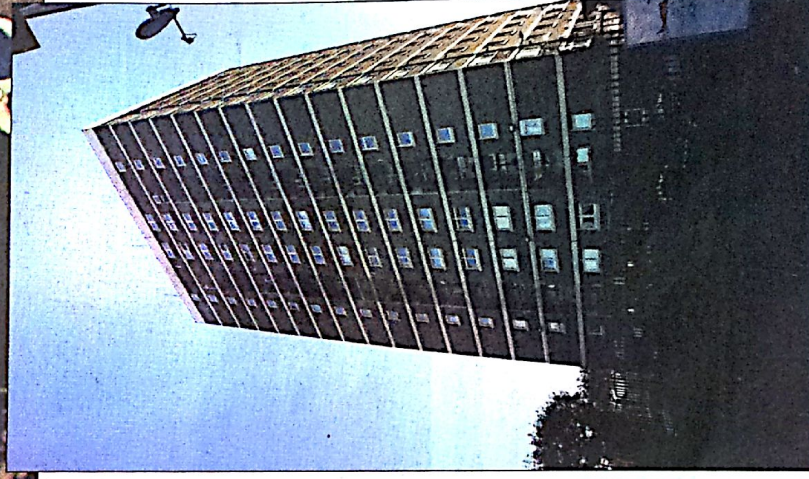
Responding to Ms Lavery, the Department of Social Development insisted that housing services across Northern Ireland "are widely recognised as being delivered on a fair and equitable basis".

"Different geographical areas as inevitably have their own localised housing issues, and the most appropriate solutions to these will vary.

"The department has, through the Housing Executive, invested over \$368 million of public money in north Belfast, with \$222m spent on new built since 2001. In this period, 2,494 additional new social homes have been provided; not only the lion's share of new social housing in the city but across Northern Ireland."

■ **STILL WAITING:** Above, Sammy Lavery with her son Connolly in her temporary accommodation at Grainne House, left, in the New Lodge area of north Belfast

PICTURES:
Hugh Russell, above,
and Colin O'Reilly



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- Sammy Lavery