



**THE HUMAN
IMPACT:
Residents Tell
Their Stories**

**EQUALITY
CAN'T WAIT**



Department for
Communities and
Local Government

THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

Accessibility Equality Participation



CAMPAIGN



“We are North Belfast residents, some of us with families, who are living in poor housing, some of us for years. Despite our extremely high number of points and our constant efforts and pleas to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive our families remain living in unsuitable housing; in hostels, living in high rise with small children, living with damp, mould, freezing temperatures and poor conditions

The answer from the NIHE is always the same - ‘Your area of choice is extremely high demand’.

Our area of choice is where we grew up, where our families and wider support networks live, where our children go to school and where we work.

We continue to live in unacceptable housing conditions while opportunity after opportunity for addressing housing inequality passes before our eyes; the 27 acre Girdwood site, the 20 acre land at Belfast Harbour, the substantial land available at the former Dunnes Stores on the Crumlin Road, the space in Belfast City Centre such as Frederick Street and more.

It is unacceptable that car parks are prioritised over the health and well being of our children and our families. It is unacceptable that schemes are being proposed to build new social housing in areas of low demand while literally thousands of people in the neighboring communities continue to live in dire need.

We are the human evidence of inequality in housing. We are the result of the failure to officially recognise a problem exists. We are living proof of the failure to develop sufficient new build social housing, targeted at the areas and the people experiencing inequality, as was made a legal requirement by the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

Excerpt from a letter sent by residents from North Belfast to Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland MLA, 20th September 2013



Introduction

On the 22nd August 2013, a report detailing over a decade's worth of failings by a range of government bodies to Tackle religious inequality impacting Catholics in North Belfast was published.

The report named "Equality Can't Wait" borrowed its name from a campaign launched by residents in North Belfast a year earlier after the announcement that 'a deal' had been made on housing at the former Girdwood Barracks site. The campaign simply called on the Minister with responsibility for housing to build homes where they are needed and tackle inequality in the way demanded by the law following the Good Friday Agreement.

The campaign of the North Belfast residents; who live in the Seven Towers, Pilot Street and the wider New Lodge areas, has attracted international attention with the former Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing both pressing for action by the Minister to tackle the continued existence of religious inequality.

Unfortunately, the most recent response of those who hold the power and the responsibility to tackle the housing problem in North Belfast has been to deny that the problem exists at all. In a letter sent to residents on behalf of the Minister the following position is stated;



"...the Department does not accept your statement that there is religious inequality in social housing."

The experiences and voices of those residents living in housing stress demonstrates otherwise. The experiences of these residents makes visible the problem that is currently being denied, and therefore not seen as a problem which requires a solution.

This is their story.

Equality Can't Wait Report Findings:

Inequality persists

- In 2000 the Housing Executive launched a seven year North Belfast Housing Strategy designed to tackle religious inequality in housing. Despite £133 million of public money being spent, Catholics continued to make up the majority of those in housing stress.
- Housing Executive figures showed that Catholics in North Belfast wait 23 months on the waiting list before getting housed. Protestants wait 12 months.

Gemma Burns speaks to five young mums from the Seven Towers about their current living conditions and their bid to escape from the flats and hostel in which they live with their kids

The human face of our housing crisis

Back in 2005 the Housing Executive admitted the New Lodge tower blocks were unsuitable accommodation for young families and vowed to eventually remove all tenants with children from the flats.

Seven years on and The Seven Towers Residents Group (STRG) with local human rights group the PPH Project has carried out a survey that shows 31 families still live in the high rise buildings, many of which are riddled with damp and plagued by antisocial behaviour.

The HE's own data shows there are nine families living in the flats, however the STRG contends this is because the HE has a different method of categorising the final figures.

Today the North Belfast News shows the human side to the North Belfast housing crisis. As work after work we are bombarded by statistics that show the bulk of those in the housing waiting list are Catholic and the numbers of people in what is deemed 'housing stress' the North Belfast News tells the story of five women who are living in the tower blocks with young children.

Each woman has a shocking account of repeated attempts to be rehoused yet they still remain in high rise living unsuitable for young children.

The Seven Towers Residents Group has been campaigning to have the women rehoused in suitable accommodation. Marissa McMahon from the group said they carried out a recent survey of all residents in the flats which showed shocking results.

"In our last survey we identified 16 families, many of whom lived in accommodation plagued by damp and poor heating which are issues faced by 87 per cent and 80 per cent of all residents out-

"The STRG's work has shown that the current approach by the HE masks the reality on the ground, which is symptomatic of a much greater housing crisis across North Belfast."

lined respectively," she said. "The number of families living in the towers is further increased when the 20 units in Grange House is included in this count. When questioned as to why these young women and their families are not included in the housing executive figures, they have stated that they do not view them as residents but "visitors".

She said residents who have young children need to be found a suitable home fit for raising a family.

"It is the view of the STRG that any family which lives in the Towers and who wishes to be rehoused should be included in figures and that if the Housing Executive is serious about its commitment to house families in suitable accommodation they should examine the issue urgently," she said.

"The STRG's work with families who live in the towers has shown that the current approach by the Housing Executive masks the reality on the ground, which is symptomatic of a much greater housing crisis across North Belfast."

The Housing Executive's full response to the housing issue is on page 10.



Christine Lavery with her three year old daughter Kaitlyn Reid Lavery

HE unaware family were in hostel for more than three years

GRANGE HOUSE woman Malena (name asked to be referred to by just her first name) has lived in the hostel for more than three years.

She lives in the two bed roomed hostel flat with her three young children, one of whom was born there over a year ago. Her kids suffer from respiratory problems including asthma and bronchitis, exacerbated by the cold and dry Economy Seven heating system and heating temperatures.

In October last year she contacted the HE to find out the status of her case and was shocked to discover the HE had not her in the system and believed her to be living in the Towers area.

In November she asked for her case file under the Data Protection Act but has yet to hear any word on the file or the possibility of being rehoused from the flats.

Sean Brady from the PPH Project told Malena's issue with the HE is what first brought the Grange House issue to light.

"The onus laid of responsibility to the HE is still unclear," he said. "They do however pay rent to NHE. Malena has assumed herself, quite reasonably, to be on the housing waiting list for north Belfast when in fact the NHE believed her to be housed in Towers. The question must be how does a girl with a family be moved into a hostel and then completely disappear off the radar?"

No advance in case raised in the media last year

Sarah Smyth has lived on the 1st floor of 66 Chisham House with her nine year old son since August 2008.

The young mother has had issues with her flat since she moved in including damp and mould that is affecting her son's health; ongoing antisocial behaviour at the flat and maintenance problems.

In March last year the North Belfast News covered the story of Sarah's ongoing issues with her home and in a related interview with Good Morning Ulster the North Belfast housing manager said he was hopeful she would be rehoused within the month. She is still waiting.

Sarah has fought hard to be rehoused sending numerous letters and making phone calls to the Housing Executive but has seen no real progress.

PPH Project representative said Sarah's case is typical of thousands of others in the HE.

There is no real progress in Sarah's housing case and her son's health is still a concern.



Mum of two's housing points lost due to HE 'system error'

JENNIFER MCNALLY is due to give birth to her second child any day now.

The single mother has another son aged one and has been living in Grange House for more than a year. She originally moved into the New Lodge hostel because she was on the waiting list for Liberator house in Twickenham, which is closer to her family and hoped that they would shortly move back to west Belfast.

However more than a year has passed and she is still living in the two bed roomed hostel flat with a toddler and a new baby.

While heavily pregnant and preparing for her new baby's arrival she was told by a Housing Executive representative that she must remove her two children or "be rehoused with furniture that relates to rules will in the hostel."

In September last year Jennifer was informed by a North Belfast district official that she had lost housing points due to a system error and for a period of six months her points had been half what they should be. In November she wrote to the HE asking for clarity on her case and a data protection request for details of her file.

She had to pay the stands £10 for the data protection request and is yet to receive a reply other than being told it she is not the responsibility of the North Belfast office.

The mother said she has been bringing her child into a world in a cramped, cold 6 roomy miles from her job and the community she grew up in.



Expectant mum with no kitchen

BY KERRAN BROWN
k.brown@belfastmediagroup.com

ARTIST OF TWO Laura Ward is due to have a baby in five weeks time but the kitchen in her New Lodge home can't be used because of a damp and fungus problem she first reported in 2009.

Despite efforts by the Housing Executive to address the problem the kitchen in the Sheridan Street home still can't be used. She has been told that there is no way of being rehoused in a property with a kitchen she can use or for the kitchen in her current home to be repaired.

"I desperately need suitable accommodation to bring a newborn baby in to," she said and wash the baby's clothes. I can cook, clean here. This is no place to bring up a baby."

She said her 10 month old daughter Carly has suffered from respiratory problems and her own baby.

"The Housing Executive have been and backyard trying to find out what the problem is that the kitchen is unsuitable. I have put a lot of my own money into trying to repair the kitchen but that all seems wasted."

Laura is on the transfer list and remains hopeful that she can be rehoused before her baby is born.

The HE say they hope to assist her with temporary rehousing in the near future as investigation of the problem of dampness in her home and subsequent remedy.

Child's whole life in hostel

BY KERRAN BROWN
k.brown@belfastmediagroup.com

CHRISTINE LAVERY has been living in the hostel in Grange House for three years with her three year old daughter Kaitlyn.

She wants to live in a real home and to be in a settled location before her daughter starts school next year.

Despite West Belfast MLA Sir Nigel Dodds writing to the Housing Executive on her behalf, she is still waiting to be rehoused.

"Nothing has changed since February," she said. "I have been told to change my area of choice but I can't. I have to be with my mum and my daughter is starting school next September and I have to know where to register her if I don't know where I am living."

She is also concerned about the conditions her daughter has been living in.

"Kaitlyn's whole life she has been living in a hostel, there's nothing but her, she needs somewhere to play, to go outside."



Christine Lavery with daughter Kaitlyn Reid Lavery

Making the issue visible

Inequality is more than numbers on a waiting list. It is the experiences of the families behind the waiting list who remain in damp, cold, cramped homes.

"We are the human face of the facts and figures contained in this report"

-Residents Foreword to Equality Can't Wait Report

Often though, this experience is not seen and not counted as *'official'* by those who make decisions about our homes.

The key to making the issue visible is to collect information about the impact on people. This is the only way to make sure that rights are protected, laws are implemented and change happens.

When government are the only people measuring their own performance, people's priorities and voices get left out. The only way we can make sure things are getting better for people, is if we decide what's important and we measure them.

The issues chosen for monitoring by the residents are human rights issues. Information will be collected by surveys with other residents in North Belfast to allow people to talk about their experiences and how government decisions are affecting their housing situations.

International human rights law states that the government must constantly be

taking steps to improve these issues and the residents have set targets for the government to meet over the next year to measure whether or not these steps are being taken.

Equality Can't Wait Report Findings:

How inequality is made invisible

- Since 2010, the Housing Executive North Belfast Housing Strategy Reports no longer publish information about religious inequality.
- In 2009 the Housing Executive changed the way religious background of people on the waiting list is recorded. The new system made it the tenant's responsibility and not the Housing Executive's to identify religious background. In 2009 the old system said that 73% of the people in housing stress in North Belfast were Catholic. The new system said that only 57% of people in housing stress were Catholic. The change in system made it look like things had gotten better, but the reality stayed the same.
- The Housing Executive changed the calculation they use to decide where and how many new social homes to build in 2010. This made it look like people spent a shorter amount of time on the waiting list. Instead of the average wait for a new house in the Catholic community being 23 months, for example, the calculation now said that they waited 16 months. There was, however, no change in how long people actually waited.

Failing to tackle the problem - the human impact

BECAUSE OF THESE FAILINGS BY GOVERNMENT...

The failure to tackle inequality, despite the opportunities to do so, is having a serious impact on people's lives. It is this impact that the residents' campaign is monitoring. Specifically over the next year information will be collected on the following impacts:

Equality Can't Wait Report Findings:

Missed opportunities & failures to tackle the problem - some examples

- £133 million spent in North Belfast between 2000-2007 - yet the waiting list continued to grow and inequality persisted.
- In 2011, the Housing Executive's plan for how housing will be allocated in Belfast City Centre was passed. The needs of those most desperate for housing in the areas surrounding the city centre will not be prioritised in the plan. The plan received cross-party political support on Belfast City Council.
- 20 acres of land is available at Belfast Harbour. Local housing groups suggested ways the land could be used to address the local housing problem. Their proposals were not used and the current plans will not put a dent in the problem.
- 27 acres of land is available at Girdwood Barracks. Seven years after the land became available, not one house has been built and the government's plans do not prioritise housing despite the growing waiting lists in the areas around Girdwood.

...PEOPLE ARE IMPACTED LIKE THIS...



...People are spending longer in unsuitable housing conditions

1. % of people living in homes with damp
2. % of people living in homes with poor heating systems
3. % of people who are unhappy with the response they receive from housing authorities when they report problems

...AND THIS...



...People are spending longer on the waiting list

4. % of people who say their housing conditions are affecting their health.
5. % of people who say their housing doesn't meet the needs of their family.

Hugh

Hugh lives in high rise flats in the New Lodge area of North Belfast.

His home is so unsuitable for his needs that he is considered homeless by the Housing Executive. He has been on the housing waiting list for five years.

His children come to his flat after school each day and stay with him a few nights every week. Since, like many families, Hugh's children don't live with him all the time, the Housing Executive does not accept that they should provide accommodation to meet his family's needs.

Hugh was so unsatisfied with his housing situation, he requested a copy of the Housing File held about his housing situation by the Housing Executive. Despite Hugh having a legal right to this information, the Housing Executive charged Hugh £10 for a copy of his file. Hugh found that some of his information had been withheld and that much of the information held about him was outdated or had been lost.

He wrote to the Housing Executive District Manager about his living conditions in May 2013.

Letters sent by Hugh two months later in July, show that no attempts had been made by the Housing Executive to deal with the serious damp and mould.

In September, Hugh, along with other residents, wrote to the Minister outlining his housing conditions and asking for the Minister's plan to tackle inequality.

The Housing Executive have made no reasonable offers of housing to Hugh and his family.

Following Hugh's letter to the Minister, Hugh was offered compensation by the Housing Executive despite the fact that he never requested compensation nor have the Housing Executive formally recognised the damp and mould in his home.

Hugh and his children are still waiting.

Hugh pictured in his flat with United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, Raquel Rolnik in September 2013.

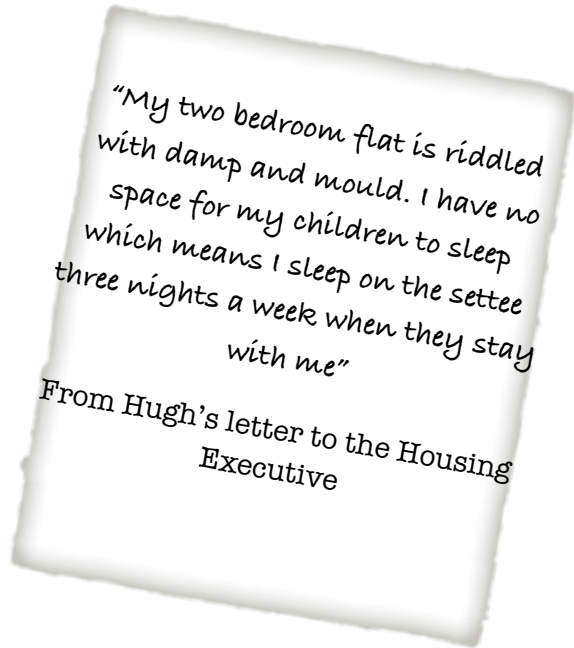


#1

People are living in homes with damp:

Hugh is not alone.

38% of people we spoke to told us they had damp.



The law says;

Human Rights Standard

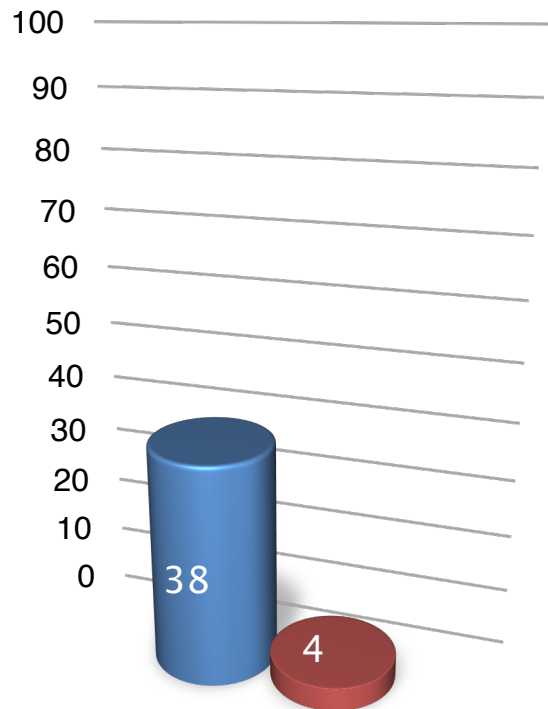
“Adequate housing must provide the inhabitants with adequate space and protect them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards and disease vectors.”

UNCtESCR General Comment 4, Paragraph 8 (d)

Local Policy Context

Housing Executive Decent Homes Standard applicable across all tenures – home must *“Meet the statutory fitness standard – be structurally stable; be free from serious disrepair; be free from serious dampness”*

In a year's time the government should reduce this to only 4%.



■ November 2013 Baseline
■ November 2014 Benchmark

Arlene

Arlene is pregnant with her third child. When she accepted her current accommodation in August 2013 she did so out of desperation having spent 7 months sleeping on a settee in her mother's house.

Her current flat is accessed by four flights of stairs. There is no lift and she struggles daily with her child's pram to get into her home.

Despite Housing Executive standards clearly stating that homes should be warm, when Arlene and her family moved into the property she realised she had been allocated a home which had no heating system or access to hot water at all.

When Arlene wrote to the Housing Executive in September, she was advised that on inspection her boiler did not meet present heating standards. Despite this she was told that she would have to wait on an asbestos survey to be carried out, and a scheme planned for her area being implemented, until her home would be fitted with a replacement. The Housing Executive informed her that the installation of a new heating system was programmed for early to mid-October.

She was also advised that owing to the conditions of the property she would not be liable for any rent or arrears that accrued on the property.

Despite the Housing Executive promises to install a new heating system, by November, with temperatures plummeting with the onset of the Winter season, work on the installation of a new heating system had still not begun.

Despite the assurances that she would not be liable for rent and arrears on the property, numerous letters from the Housing Executive were sent to Arlene notifying her that she was in rent arrears.

Arlene has been forced to move her family out of this accommodation while she waits for the Housing Executive to provide a suitable home.

Arlene and her children once again have had to resort to staying with other members of her family.

Despite receiving an apology from the Housing Executive for the distress caused to her family, Arlene has since had 50 points taken off her. Until the Housing Executive move Arlene's furniture into storage it remains in the cold damp flat at risk of moulding.

Despite work still not having started at her old flat to test for asbestos and to fit a new boiler, a family member of Arlene's who is also on the waiting list, has been offered the property.

Some of the photos of Arlene's busted boiler that she sent to the Housing Executive



#2

People are living with poor heating systems:

Arlene is not alone.

Only 11% of people we spoke to were happy with their heating system.

Most commonly people told us their heating system was too expensive, couldn't be controlled (Economy 7) and didn't produce enough heat to keep them warm.

The law says;

Human Rights Standard

"An adequate house must contain certain facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. All beneficiaries of the right to adequate housing should have sustainable access to natural and common resources, safe drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, means of food storage, refuse disposal, site drainage and emergency services"

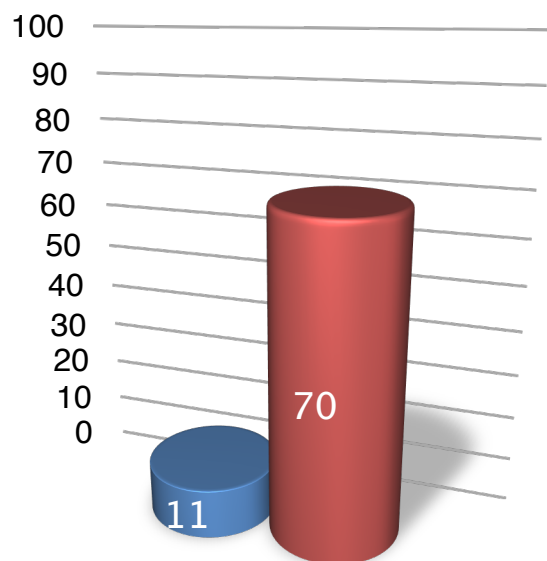
UNCtESCR General Comment 4 para 8 (b)

Local Policy Context

Decent Homes Standard, applicable across all social housing tenures– home should "Provide a reasonable degree of *thermal comfort*"

"The Department for Social Development remains committed to a society where fuel poverty is eradicated and everyone can live in a home which is free of cold and damp. Our hope is of a society in which people live in warm, comfortable homes and where they do not have to worry about the effect of cold on their health."

Warmer Healthier Homes; A new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, (DSD 2011) p.1



■ November 2013 Baseline
■ November 2014 Benchmark

In a year's time the government should increase this figure to 70%

Lisa

For 9 years Lisa and her son lived in a house allocated to them as 'temporary accommodation'. Her son had spent his entire life in temporary accommodation. In the spring of 2013, Lisa was allocated a permanent property. She looked forward to settling in her new home, but it was clear that there were a lot of problems. She found herself constantly reporting maintenance and repairs problems both outside and inside of the house to the Housing Executive.

Lisa asked that broken flag stones in the garden be fixed so that her son could play outside and that a fence be adjusted to make it safer. Instead of replacing the broken flagstones, the Housing Executive filled the holes with concrete. Only after Lisa persevered and argued her case was the garden fence adjusted.

The biggest problems in Lisa's new home concerned the heating and the gas, however. Lisa found the heating system to be so ineffective that it doesn't keep her family warm. Her son has asthma which is aggravated by the coldness. She recorded the temperatures and found that the temperature is below the acceptable level. She was told that the size of the radiators in her home meet the acceptable criteria and that no improvement schemes are planned in her area.

In May 2013 she asked the Housing Executive to fix the exposed gas meter in her living room. She was worried that it was dangerous to have an exposed meter in an area where her son plays. By October, when she wrote to them again, no action had been taken.

Lisa, with other residents, wrote to the Minister to outline her housing conditions and ask for his plans to tackle the inequality impacting her family.

The Housing Executive have since told her that they will fix the gas meter, but that it is not their responsibility.

Lisa's 'concrete garden' and the exposed gas meter at her New Lodge home



#3

When people report problems with their housing, they are unhappy with the response they get:

Lisa is not alone. Lots of people told us they have a problem with how housing authorities respond when problems are reported to them.

Only 12% of people we spoke to were happy with the response they got when they reported a problem.

Our monitoring has shown that the system is not meeting people's needs. In the same way that the system doesn't tackle inequality, people told us the system for getting problems with their housing conditions fixed doesn't work. People's priorities are not the housing authority's priorities.

The law says;

Human Rights Standard

"The right to an effective remedy need not be interpreted as always requiring a judicial remedy. Administrative remedies will, in many cases, be adequate and those living within the jurisdiction of a State party have a legitimate expectation, based on the principle of good faith, that all administrative authorities will take account of the requirements of the Covenant in their decision-making. Any such administrative remedies should be

accessible, affordable, timely and effective."

CESCR General Comment No 9, C paragraph 94

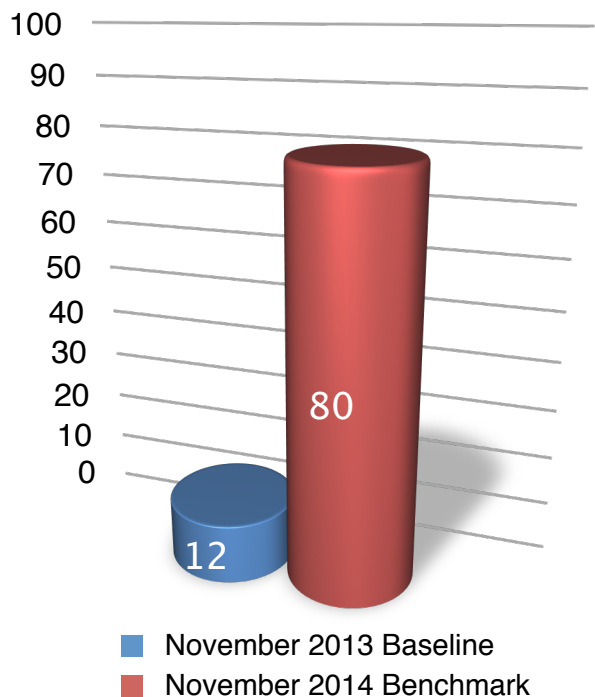
Local Policy Context:

According to the latest NIHE Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey 2011, 74% of tenants were satisfied with the Housing Executive's response to repairs.

Clanmill Housing Association 2012/2013 Annual Report states that 92% of tenants are fairly or very satisfied

"Since moving in, I have been plagued with difficulties for which I have found no remedy despite contacting your office on numerous occasions"

From Lisa's letter to the Housing Executive



In a year's time the government should increase this figure to 80%

McCausland fails to meet UN housing chief

BY PÉDRAIC CRANT
p.crant@belfastnews.com

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT Minister Nelson McCausland has denied snubbing a respected UN Inspector despite failing to meet her as she visited homes in his North Belfast constituency.

Raquel Rolnik, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Housing, arrived in Belfast last Friday and visited locations including the New Lodge and Marlborough Flats, and met residents and campaigners with the Participation and Practice of Rights group (PPR).

Rolnik is an architect and urban planner with 30 years of experience in the EU, holding the position of professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Sao Paulo. She has held the position of Special Rapporteur since May 2008.

As part of her tour, Rolnik also visited London, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

During her stay in England and Scotland she met with senior Ministers. The purpose of her visit includes an inspection of the British government's social housing policy, particularly amid a public outcry over the potential effects of the bedroom tax, which sees benefits



The housing minister on Adequate Housing, own constituency last

reduced for people who spare rooms in their homes. Critics have said that lead to either more forced moves into care, which they argue increase the benefit.

Speaking to the News, Rolnik said, "date was created by Rights Council in order for the implementation right to adequate housing is defined in law."

Mother of three

BY EVAN SHORT
e.short@belfastnews.com

A MOTHER of three living in the New Lodge has said she and her neighbours have "been forgotten" after a new build development on the Antrim Road was allocated to other families.

Margaret Griffin, who shares a house with her sons Liam (12), Jack (10) and Brian (8) says she's been hard done by as she has been waiting for years in her Hillman Street home for re-occupation, but nothing suitable has ever been offered.

Margaret says she is now speaking out on the issue after a development of homes on the lower Antrim Road by Oakley Housing Association were offered to others.

"The former Social Development Minister Margaret Ritchie stood outside my house seven years ago and told me I would get a new home so when I saw the new builds on the Antrim Road I requested about them," she said.

"I was told I'd be considered but when I heard the notifications had gone out this week I was sick when I found out I wouldn't be getting one."

"I am devastated. I live in this two-bedroom house with my three boys and there is no room. My five-year-old sleeps in a toddler's cot in with me and the other two have to share a room."

Margaret says they have



Margaret Griffin

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 be here 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 my son 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 offered accommodation, one subsequently refused.

"We will of course consider her for accommodation that becomes available in her area of choice in accordance with the Housing Selection Scheme."

The spokeswoman added: "Housing Executive policies 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 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 Practice of Rights, insisted the housing shortage which disproportionately affects Catholics in north

NEWS

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

Allison Morris

NORTH Belfast woman who has been living in a hostel for almost two years for her disabled son claims she is being discriminated against because she is a nationalist. Sammy Lavery's three-year-old son Connolly has spent most of his life in temporary accommodation in the Grange 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 sparse, furnished with wooden armchairs and tiled flooring. Residents are not permitted to change the decor or carpet.

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 182 points.

However, in the New Lodge and Cliftonville areas where she has applied to be housed 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 Ormeau and Tiger's Bay districts of north Belfast as a housing-based regeneration programme despite the majority of those on the waiting list being from the nationalist community.

society, we do site visits. We report back on what we've seen from a very independent point of view. There are specific situations in each city. In North Belfast segregation is one of the issues that I have been told to explore."

Last month the PPR published a report titled Equality Can't Wait. It detailed a litany of failures in the social housing sector including chronic inequality affecting Catholic families.

Preceding Rolnik's visit, the PPR's Kate Ward said, "Last month's Equality Can't Wait report evidenced the failures on the part of a range of public bodies to address housing inequality in North Belfast which

Rolnik, "The Minister was unable to meet the UN Special Rapporteur due to diary commitments, however officials from the Department did attend a meeting and provided background on the housing sector in Northern Ireland including the reform programme."

The OSO also said that it wished to address what it described as "inaccuracies." "The Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that social housing reform proposals will not impact on the allocation of housing and the principles of fairness, transparency and openness that underpin the current systems which has support across political parties."

"In its 42-year history the HE has never had a case of religious discrimination upheld as of yet."

Belief 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 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."

"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 £58 million in public money in north on new build since 2011. In new social homes have been provided, not only the best share of new social housing in the city but across Northern Ireland."



MONDAY NOVEMBER 11 2013

THE IRISH NEWS

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

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

"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."

- Sammy Lavery

...People are spending longer on the waiting list

Katrina, Sinéad, Sammy Jo, "S" and Eamonn's experiences



Damp in the New Lodge home Katrina and her three children lived in



Four years later and the promised play facilities at Sinéad's Pilot Street apartment still haven't been delivered

Equality Can't Wait Report Findings:

According to Housing Executive figures, on average, Catholics wait 23 months on the waiting list before being housed; Protestants wait 12.

Katrina

Katrina suffers from Sciatica which causes her great pain in accessing her high rise home. On a daily basis she carries her 3 young children up four flights of stairs to get into her home. She has reported anti-social behaviour and intimidation and the stress and fear this causes her and her family to the Housing Executive.

The damp and mould in her home affect the breathing condition of her 11 month old baby. Her doctor and health worker have attested to this in their letters to the Housing Executive on Katrina's behalf.

Her older children are unable to leave the house to play because of the levels of antisocial behaviour in Katrina's area. Katrina found drugs and used syringes and other paraphernalia on her doorsteps. After reporting this to the Housing Executive, she received threats and her door was kicked in twice.

Due to no suitable social homes being available, she has been forced to move back in with family members.

Sinéad

Sinéad and her son have lived in apartments in Pilot Street for four years. In this time, problems with anti-social behaviour, maintenance and repairs to her boiler and the lack of play facilities for her son have all contributed to the unsuitability of the apartment's for Sinéad and her family. All these problems have had a detrimental impact on Sinéad's life and that of her ten year old son.

Anti social behaviour is common at the apartments which is a constant worry for her as a single parent.

Despite visits from the NI Commissioner for Children & Young People, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing and the Clanmill Housing Association Chief Executive, no play facilities for children have been developed.

Sinéad is frustrated by the failures of Clanmill to regularly carry out the annual health and safety checks to her boilers. Twice the annual service has been cancelled without good reason. In an effort to discover what the underlying issues are with the boilers in the apartments, Sinéad has made requests under Environmental Impact Regulation legislation. Her requests for information have not been answered yet.

#4

Spending a long time waiting to be re-housed in unsuitable housing conditions is having an impact on people's health:

71% of people we spoke to told us their housing was having a negative impact on their health

Katrina and Sinéad are not alone.

The law says;

Human Rights Standard:

"Adequate housing must provide the inhabitants with adequate space and protect them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards and disease vectors."

UNCtESCR General Comment 4, Paragraph 8 (d)

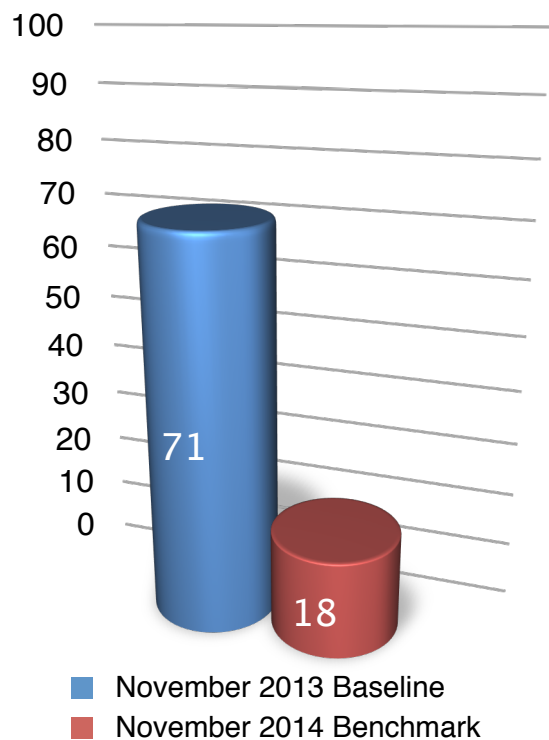
Local Policy Context:

"The Department for Social Development remains committed to a society where fuel poverty is eradicated and everyone can live in a home which is free of cold and damp. Our hope is of a society in which people live in warm, comfortable homes and where they do not have to worry about the effect of cold on their health."

Warmer Healthier Homes; A new Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, (DSD 2011) p.1

"I have chronic damp and mould... In the words of the NIHE contractor conducting work at the time - 'I would be as well putting an exhaust pipe in my child's mouth with that damp' even he expressed his concern that more should be done to solve the problem than merely washing it with a fungal wash cream."

From Katrina's letter to the Housing Executive



By next year, the government should have taken steps to reduce the number of people whose housing poorly affects their health to 18%.

Sammy-Jo

Sammy Jo and her three year old son have been housed in a Housing Executive 'temporary accommodation' hostel for almost two years. The Economy 7 heating in the flat is not only expensive to run for Sammy Jo, but the dry heat worsens her son's asthma.

Housing Executive hostel policy states that Sammy Jo is not allowed to redecorate her home, no changes are allowed to the floors, ceiling or furniture. This means that her home is sparsely furnished and that her son has to play on the cold, tiled floor. Her son recently fell on the tiled floor and had to be rushed to A&E; he received six stitches to his forehead and will be permanently scarred.

In almost two years she has only been made one offer of housing by the Housing Executive. The offer was too far away from her family support network and she was forced to turn it down. Despite the serious housing situation of Sammy-Jo and her son, they have not been made any offer of housing in their area.

Eamonn

Eamonn has been in and out of hostels for over a decade. He has requested sheltered accommodation suitable to his medical needs. His doctors have backed up his request for a home which meets his health needs.

He applied for a transfer from his current high rise accommodation two years ago and has been on the waiting list since then. Eamonn wrote to the Housing Executive and the Minister about his situation. The Housing Executive have responded by giving him 22 points which are unlikely to help him get rehoused. No offers of suitable accommodation have been made to him.

"S"

After renting in the private sector and becoming homeless, S joined the queue at 8am outside the Housing Executive offices to wait for a house. After a week she was allocated a place in a North Belfast Housing Executive hostel. She was told this accommodation, where she lives with her four year old daughter would be 'temporary'. Nearly two years later, her situation has not changed.

S's family and her daughter's school are in West Belfast, twice daily she must travel the 3.5 miles to her daughter's school. In the bad weather, she takes a taxi, spending money from her tight weekly budget. A further half of S's weekly income is spent heating her home in the winter. S notices her daughter constantly has chest infections and colds from the dry heating system and worries that the cramped space affects her daughter's development.

Her social worker has stressed S's need to be rehoused in West Belfast.

She has been made no offers of appropriate housing. After two and a half years on the waiting list and nearly two years spent in a hostel, S has been told that she is currently 135th on the list to be rehoused.

#5

It also means long periods of time in housing which doesn't meet their family's needs:

73% of people we spoke to told us their housing doesn't meet their family's needs

The law says...

Human Rights Context:

*"...requires states to recognise the right of every child to a **standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development**, including 'appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in the case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing'."*

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 27

Local Policy Context:

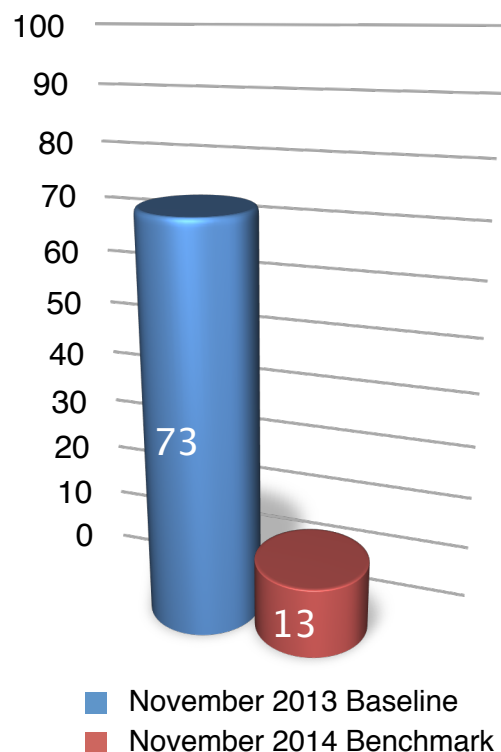
Housing is central to individuals well-being and quality of life, be it the ability to access social and affordable housing, either as a tenant or a first time buyer, or enjoying a warm well insulated home that helps tackle some of the causes of fuel poverty. Housing is central to family life and personal well-being..."

DSD Corporate Plan 2011-2015, p.18

By November 2014, the government should reduce the % of families living in housing which doesn't meet their needs to 13%.



The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People, Patricia Lewsley-Mooney visited homes in North Belfast in September 2013 - she said that that *"in the 21st century it was entirely unacceptable"* for families to live in such poor conditions.



What needs to happen next...



Our issues are human rights issues. As such, the government have a responsibility to progress them. Change is required and the residents will report on their monitoring over the course of the next twelve months.

Poor heating, problems with dampness & mould and prolonged stays in unsuitable housing directly impact people's health and their lives.

What's more is that these issues are symptoms of a bigger problem; a failure by government to meaningfully address the housing inequality faced by the Catholic community in North Belfast. this inequality means that more Catholics than Protestants are in housing stress and that they will spend longer on the waiting list waiting to be rehoused.

What is required is political will.

Equality Can't Wait Report Findings:

Equality Can't Wait is calling for:

A proper, resourced, timetabled strategy for addressing housing inequality in north Belfast developed with the meaningful involvement of residents

	NOW	IN A YEAR'S TIME THIS SHOULD BE...
Residents living with damp	38%	4%
Residents happy with their heating system	11%	70%
Residents happy with the response when they report problems	12%	80%
Residents whose housing negatively impacts their health	71%	18%
Residents whose housing doesn't meet their family's needs	73%	13%

