

"We came here for sanctuary" Syrian refugee families' experience of racism and substandard housing conditions in West Belfast

Executive summary

Six Syrian refugee families have overcome their fear and vulnerability to recount the intolerable housing conditions and, for some, recurrent experiences of racially-motivated abuse that are affecting their physical and mental health and impeding their children's development.

These families were selected for resettlement after exhaustive vetting by United Nations and UK authorities, and placed in the responsibility of local authorities in Belfast. While they highlight the support received from key workers and other local individuals and organisations, a review of their experiences reveals a worrying lack of commitment on the part of officials and responsible parties to addressing the extremely serious issues they have repeatedly raised to date, and to finding effective remedies.

Indeed, a close look at their situation raises substantive questions about whether authorities in Northern Ireland are fully exercising their duty of care towards these families, brought here out of conflict and displacement so that they could raise their children in peace.

The families have already endured hardships unimaginable to most of us during the conflict in Syria and in their country of first asylum; they were selected and sent here for their protection, and they deserve better than what their experiences testify to in this report.

These families have not, contrary to the accusations they recount hearing from some members of the public, 'jumped the queue' for social housing in an area



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of high demand and long waiting lists. They are not 'a drain' on the public purse in Northern Ireland: the funds that support them come directly from the central UK government, which fully funds the cost of their first 12 months and carries on paying a substantive contribution throughout the five years of their projected stay.

Despite some of them having been here for years, they remain in the 'temporary accommodation' into which they were placed upon arrival, despite requirements under the VPRS that they be moved to permanent homes. They have not been informed of the timeframe or processes around finding permanent homes; instead they describe living in a sort of indefinite limbo that damages the integration into the community which the authorities and they themselves so want to achieve.

The conditions in their homes appear to fall well short of international standards and of the Decent Homes Standard applied by the Housing Executive to all homes. However when they and their key workers raise concerns, the bodies responsible for processing and resolving issues - namely the Housing Executive, Homecare (the private property management company) and the landlords - have repeatedly failed to do so. They describe feeling under pressure to "accept the status quo" and stop demanding adequate and appropriate housing that meets the needs of their families - something that every human being should have a right to enjoy.

Worryingly, the most vulnerable among them recount increasing exposure - for themselves and the children - to incidents of racially-motivated abuse and even attack. They have repeatedly reported these to the police, yet nothing appears to have changed. They describe feeling increasingly isolated and unsafe in their homes and communities, and recount the damaging impact these stresses are having on their children's growth and development.

This report provides examples, including photographic evidence, of some of the issues they face, and measures those against the relevant international and local standards. It concludes with a range of recommendations for UK authorities, for Northern Ireland authorities and others with power and responsibility to act decisively to end the experiences outlined in this report and meet the duty of care to these families.

"We came here for sanctuary"

Syrian refugee families' experience of racism and substandard housing conditions in West Belfast

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Introduction

In a 21 June 2018 press release from the Northern Ireland Executive Office marking the arrival of the 1,000th Syrian admitted to Northern Ireland under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, the Head of the Civil Service praised the scheme:

“over the last three years, organisations and people across Northern Ireland have played our part in this humanitarian effort and I am proud of everything we have achieved together to welcome these families into our society and offer them a new future. Today we are recognising the considerable effort which has helped to ensure the transition has been as smooth as possible¹.”



The experiences of the six families detailed in this report, currently living in West Belfast, contrast sharply with this statement. These families have overcome their fear and feelings of vulnerability to recount their ongoing experiences of racism and substandard housing conditions affecting their physical and mental health.

While they highlight the positive support received from key workers and some others, a review of their collective experiences reveals a worrying lack of commitment on the part of a range of local authorities to addressing the issues they raise and finding effective remedies. These families have already endured hardships unimaginable to most of us during the conflict in Syria and in their country of first asylum; they have undergone exhaustive vetting procedures by both international and UK authorities in order to be selected to come here. They deserve to be met with better.

¹ Executive Office, 21 Jun 2018 at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-welcomes-over-1000-syrian-refugees>.

The Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

This Northern Ireland scheme, set up under the auspices of a wider collaboration framework between the UK Home Office and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees known as the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme², was intended to target the most vulnerable amongst the Syrian refugee population. In the words of the Department for Communities, it

“prioritises those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence³.”

Participants were assessed and vetted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Home Office, and were granted humanitarian protected status for five years by the UK government. Like other refugees, they have been given access to public funds, the right to work and the right to family reunion. If they are not able to return to Syria at the end of the five-year period, they may be eligible to apply for resettlement in the UK⁴.

The first 12 months of a refugee’s resettlement costs **are fully funded by the central UK government** through its overseas aid budget. In subsequent years it carries on helping local authorities meet the costs of the scheme, with a minimum of £5,000 per person in the second year in the UK, tapering to a minimum of £1,000 per person in year five; particularly vulnerable refugees receive additional support. Finally, the central UK government also funds English language training to help participants integrate into their local areas and enable them to seek work.⁵

The Department for Communities heads a Reception and Resettlement Group tasked with meeting the practical needs of those who arrive; the group includes representatives of the public agencies providing services, local authorities and voluntary sector organisations working in the field. The Department for

² See Home Office, Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS): guidance for local authorities and partners, July 2017 at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/631369/170711_Syrian_Resettlement_Updated_Fact_Sheet_final.pdf

³ Department for Communities, Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme Briefing Document, June 2018 at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/syrian-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme> p. 5.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵ Op. cit., Home Office, p. 5.

Communities also leads an Integration Group to support longer term integration into Northern Ireland.⁶

The first arrivals to Northern Ireland under the scheme were in December 2015. Under the procedures established, families moved into temporary accommodation within one week of arrival in Northern Ireland. Each family was allocated a Key Worker from a consortium of local voluntary organisations. According to the Department for Communities,

“the private rented sector will provide the temporary housing solution for when the refugees arrive in Northern Ireland. The NIHE will assist the refugees to identify appropriate permanent housing solutions as they would for any other homeless household. Some of the families from the first groups to arrive in Northern Ireland have now moved from their temporary accommodation into permanent social housing⁷.”

VPRS and housing in West Belfast

This is not the case for the families interviewed for this report; **they remain in the temporary accommodation in Belfast that they were assigned by the Housing Executive upon arrival.** That housing is provided from private landlords through the private company Homecare, which

works in partnership with the NI Housing Executive providing fully furnished, self-contained accommodation to those in our communities who are experiencing a housing need.⁸

Family A, with four children, arrived in 2015. Three more – families B and C, both with two small children, and family D, a single mother with two children – arrived in 2016. Family E, with four children, and family F – another single mother with three children – have been here a year or less.

All six families have documented photographic evidence of the appalling conditions in which they are living, which appear to **fail to meet the Department for Communities' own Decent Homes Standard.** They all spoke of their frustration at **repeated and unsuccessful attempts** to get problems rectified in the face of inaction and apparent lack of concern on the part of the authorities involved. They spoke of the impact of the substandard conditions

⁶ Op. cit., DfC, p. 10.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸ <https://www.homecarehousing.com/?%2F>

and accompanying lack of care on their **physical and mental health** and on that of their children.

The most vulnerable amongst them, women living alone with children, spoke in particular of their families' exposure to **racist abuse and attack** in and around their homes.

International and domestic housing standards

The internationally-recognised right to adequate housing is a key component of the right to an adequate standard of living⁹. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights fleshed out what adequate housing means in its General Comment 4 of 1991¹⁰, identifying seven key elements: security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; and cultural adequacy. Other General Comments address the way in which the right to adequate housing interconnects with, amongst others, the right to the highest attainable standard of health¹¹. For its part, in 1989 the World Health Organisation set out eleven basic Health Principles for Housing¹².

Locally, the Department for Communities offers guidance around the criteria required for a home to meet the required Decent Homes Standard in Northern Ireland¹³. First, it must meet the **statutory minimum fitness standard** for housing per schedule V of the Housing (NI) Order 1992¹⁴:

⁹ The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. ICESCR article 11.1 at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf>.

¹⁰ (E/1992/23), available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CESCR/.../1.../INT_CESCR_GEC_4759_E.doc.

¹¹ CESCR General Comment 14 on the right to the highest attainable standard of health (E/C.12/2000/4), 2000 at www.refworld.org/pdfid/4538838d0.pdf, para. 3: "the right to health is closely related to and dependent upon the realization of other human rights, as contained in the International Bill of Rights, including the rights to food, housing, work, education, human dignity, life, non-discrimination, equality, the prohibition against torture, privacy, access to information, and the freedoms of association, assembly and movement. These and other rights and freedoms address integral components of the right to health".

¹² Available at http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/39847/9241561270_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹³ Available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/decent-homes-standard>.

¹⁴ Available at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1992/1725/schedule/5/made>.



Damp on bedroom wall

- structurally stable
- free from serious disrepair
- free from dampness prejudicial to the health of the occupants
- with adequate provision for lighting, heating and ventilation
- with adequate piped supply of wholesome water
- with satisfactory facilities for the preparation and cooking of food
- with a suitably located water-closet, fixed bath or shower and wash-hand basin with a satisfactory supply of hot and cold water
- with an effective system for draining foul, waste and surface water

Second, the home must be in a **reasonable state of repair**. This means that none of the key components (including external walls, roof, windows, doors, chimneys, boiler, gas fire, storage heater, electrics), and no more than one of the other building components, are old and, because of their condition, in need of replacing or major repair.

Third, the home must have **reasonably modern facilities and services**¹⁵.

Fourth, the home must provide a **reasonable degree of thermal comfort** through effective insulation and heating.

Testimony from the families concerned indicates failures in all four of these areas.

The families are also protected by international and domestic law around issues such as **the rights of the child, effective remedy** and **protection from hate crime**.

¹⁵ This is defined as having at least three of the following: a reasonably modern kitchen (20 years old or less); a kitchen with adequate space and layout; a reasonably modern bathroom (30 years old or less); an appropriately located bathroom and WC; adequate insulation against external noise; and adequate size and layout of common areas for blocks of flats.

Housing conditions of Syrian families under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme

3.1. Do the homes meet the statutory minimum fitness standard?

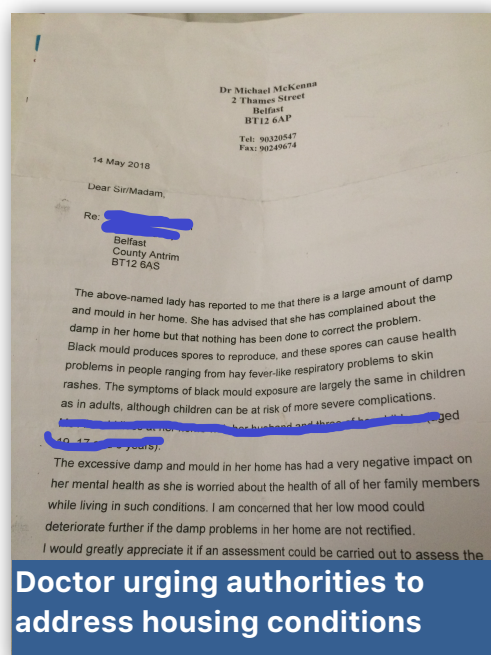
A look at the local standard around 'dampness prejudicial to the health of the occupants'¹⁶, for instance, shows that the homes these families are living in fail to comply with this as well as with the above international standards.

All six of the families are living in accommodation provided through the private company Homecare.

All of the families have reported problems of serious damp and mould in the properties, affecting their families' health. Several families reported that their homes had a bad smell due to the pervasive damp. Parents of several families reported that officials had been to their houses with appliances that they said were damp meters; they were then told that the damp was limited to the bathroom, despite clear evidence of it elsewhere throughout the houses.

The pre-school age young daughter in Family C suffers from chest and breathing difficulties. The family and, significantly, their doctor feel that the conditions of damp in the home exacerbate her breathing difficulties. Her father said:

"From the day I arrived I noticed rising dampness in all of the rooms in the house. My daughter was born prematurely at seven months and has serious ongoing health issues – especially with her breathing and chest. When my daughter was born she had a haemorrhage in the lungs. She takes an inhaler daily. The doctor has stated that she cannot continue to live in these conditions... I have reported the problems to Homecare many times and they are aware that the situation is making my daughter sick."



3.2. Are the homes in a reasonable state of repair?

¹⁶ Op. Cit., Housing (NI) Order 1992, Section V, 46(1)c.

Again, conditions experienced by the families appear to meet basic international standards. Family A reported features such as rotting door frames and unsafe stairs, while Family B has repeatedly told the Housing Executive about water leaking through their ceiling, to no avail. The lock on the front door to their temporary house remains broken despite repeated requests that it be repaired; the father commented,

"they don't seem to care that my children have to walk through the bins at the back entrance every time we come in or go out."



**Glass on bathroom floor:
unresolved faulty shower door**

According to Family C,

"the floors of the property are damaged and unsafe, there are loose tiles, the grouting needs replaced and there are worms crawling in the cracks between the tiles. The water tank in the attic leaks in the upstairs corridor through a hole in the wall... in the bathroom there is mould. None of these issues have been solved. They are making my family sick."

The mother of Family D reported that in her house,

"everything is in very bad condition. I reported that the glass shower door is unsafe and housing did nothing. Then it broke when my daughter was taking a shower. They have still not fixed the shower door."

According to the mother of Family F, in her house

"the kitchen walls, bathroom walls and living room have holes in them and there are worms coming out of the holes... The house is riddled with damp... There is only vinyl flooring in the house and that is not in good condition. There are nails coming up from the stairs – one of my sons sleepwalks and has injured himself many times... the stairs are very steep and my children often fall. The fire place is coming away from the wall and nearly fell on my child. Almost all of the furniture is broken. There are holes in the skirting boards."

3.3. Do the homes have reasonably modern facilities and services?

Based on the information available, there are doubts about the extent to which the homes meet this criterion under local standards, as well as international

standards around safety and hygiene. Family F, for instance, describe their house as follows:

“There are frequent gas leaks. The gas leaks are affecting the cooker and now it does not function. The washing machine is rusty, dirty and smelly and leaks water in the bathroom.”



Other testimonies point to issues with gas and water leaks and faulty equipment.

[3.4. Do the homes provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort?](#)

In at least one home, that of Family E, the heating reportedly does not work and there are frequent gas leaks. This clearly contravenes international health and safety standards for housing.

The impact of substandard housing on children

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the “inherent right to life”¹⁷ of every child and requires states to “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”¹⁸. It also recognises “the right of every child to a **standard of living** adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development”¹⁹. The text says that parents / guardians have “primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the **conditions of living** necessary for the child's development²⁰”, but imposes a duty on states to assist parents in this. This duty explicitly mentions housing:

“States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others

¹⁷ Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 6.1.

¹⁸ Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 6.2.

¹⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 27.1.

²⁰ Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 27.2.

*responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and **housing**²¹.”*

All of these families have children, and all of the parents reported that their children’s health and wellbeing was being harmed by the conditions in which they are being forced to live. According to the husband in Family E,

“my wife is being treated for depression because of the stress the house is causing my family. My oldest daughter’s health is getting worse, and she is crying day and night asking why we brought her here. The mental health of everyone in my family is suffering. Nobody is listening to us.”

The mother of family A has suffered repeated miscarriages, one after a fall on the home’s steep stairs.

For Family C, whose young daughter has suffered from chest ailments since birth:

“Every day my daughter’s health conditions are worsening. She is refusing to eat. All we want is a suitable and safe home for my family.”

According to the mother of Family F,

“My family are frustrated and it is affecting my family’s mental health. My children are on summer break but are confined to the house, too scared to go out. They are all depressed.”

The single mother in Family D reported,

“I often sleep at my friend’s home because myself and my children cannot bear to be at home. My children are depressed and have no confidence. The condition of the house causes me stress and worry. All of us are suffering.”

Other families reported that teenage children of different genders were being forced to share a bedroom due to lack of space.

Exposure to racist abuse and attack

This situation is exacerbated by safety concerns. International standards stipulate that for housing to be habitable, the physical safety of occupants is

²¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 27.3.

paramount²². Contrary to this, however, both of the single mothers amongst the Syrian families, as well as some other families, described being subjected to racist abuse in their neighbourhood, and the impact of this on themselves and their children. The mother of Family F reported,



Racist attacks

"My family suffer from frequent racist attacks in the area. Every time we leave the house everyone stares at us – some people in the neighbourhood insult and beat my children and shout racist remarks about them. They are too scared to leave the house. One of the neighbours spat in my face. Sometimes at 2 am or 3 am people bang on my door and shout. People from the neighbourhood throw things at my house. This information has been told to the housing [authorities] many times. In five months nothing has been done to help any of these issues."

The single mother in Family D recounted,

"We are suffering from frequent racist attacks. Every time my nine-year-old son leaves the house people beat him or insult him and say provoking things to humiliate him and make him cry. Peoples throw eggs and rubbish at the windows and doors. Every time I put recycling bins out people empty them at my door. People throw glass bottles through my skylight – my sofa is under the skylight and I am worried that if my children are sitting on it they will be killed by one of these glass bottles.

I cannot open the kitchen windows because people throw things in or try to climb in. Also when I leave the house people in the street insult me. Drunk people come to my house around 3 am."

She also said she found a twisted knife in her letterbox. She has reported these events to the police and to housing authorities, but nothing has changed and she feels no safer.

²² Op. cit., General Comment 4 para. 8(d) and WHO Health Principles of Housing, principle 2.1, 'Structural features and furnishing.

Hate crime is described by the Northern Ireland Public Prosecution Service as

“Any incident which constitutes a criminal offence perceived by the victim, or any other person, to be motivated by prejudice or hate towards a person’s race, religion, sexual orientation or disability²³.”

It adds,

“In adopting this definition, the PPS is seeking to build upon the perception based approach which has generally been accepted in recent years in relation to the definition of hate crime, as set out in the MacPherson report arising from the murder of Stephen Lawrence. This is known as the “Lawrence” or “MacPherson” definition. This means that once an offence is perceived by the victim or any other person to be motivated by hate or prejudice towards a person’s race, religion, sexual orientation or disability then it is a hate crime²⁴.”



Certain hate crimes are also “offences aggravated by hostility”²⁵. Both types are criminal offences subject to prosecution under the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Order 2004 and the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987.

²³ Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, Hate Crime Policy at <https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/SiteDocuments/PPSNI%20HATE.pdf>, para. 2.1.1.

²⁴ Ibid., paras. 2.1.2-2.1.3.

²⁵ Ibid., para. 2.2.1.

Additional housing issues covered by international standards

General Comment 4²⁶ and the WHO Health Principles of Housing²⁷ stipulates that habitable housing protects inhabitants from **disease vectors**. However, all six of the families reported various types of vermin, ranging from worms and slugs to rats, in their homes.

The kitchen of the house in which Family E have been placed has worms, slugs, flies and other insects living in the wood; this contributes to skin conditions and itch in the family. He also reports rats in the house coming from the back door.

In Family C's house, *"the floors are the property are damaged and unsafe, there are loose tiles, the grouting needs replaced and there are worms crawling in the cracks between the tiles."*

Family D reported, *"there is a hole in the kitchen and spiders come out of it"*.

Family F's house came furnished with a sofa but they had to move it out as there were rodents living in it; the reaction of housing authorities, they said, was to threaten to fine them if it were stolen from outside the house.

General Comment 4²⁸ recognises the **special housing needs of disadvantaged groups**, including people with persistent medical problems. The husband in Family E reports, *"my wife has a slipped disc in her back and numerous other medical issues which means she must have a bedroom on the ground floor"*. However, the family have been placed in a house with no available sleeping space on the ground floor other than the living room. In addition, the upstairs bedrooms are too small to fit more than one child. As a result, three of the children sleep upstairs, and the family have divided the downstairs living room to form a makeshift bedroom for the parents and the youngest child, a five-year-old girl.

²⁶ Op. cit., General Comment 4, para. 8(d).

²⁷ Op. cit., WHO Health Principles of Housing, Principle 1.7 on 'Structural safeguards against disease transmission' and 2.1 on 'Structural features and furnishing'.

²⁸ Para. 8(e).

Duty bearers' obligations to the families

General Comment 4 outlines that the right to adequate housing is consistent with the provision of **domestic legal remedies** against landlords for unhealthy or inadequate housing conditions or in cases of racial or other discrimination, amongst others²⁹. Family E have reported the various issues with the home they have been allocated to the Housing Executive repeatedly over the last year. They also went to the political representative, who reportedly wrote a letter on their behalf. They described the response to the complaints: *"they came to the house to see the situation, they did nothing and told us to open the windows for the damp"*.

Other families reported that in response to complaints, officials arrived unannounced at the home, without interpreters, making it impossible for the family to communicate their concerns. At times the officials failed to present any identification, making them feel unsafe and leaving them with no idea who to hold accountable for any assessment or work done. In these circumstances, families were left feeling that their complaints were not taken seriously and that they were treated with disrespect.



Several reported feeling pressured into signing documents in English without having any idea what they were signing.

The father in Family C, whose young daughter has breathing difficulties and who has serious problems with damp in his house, reported

"I went to the Housing Executive over 30 times. Every time they tell me that they will speak to the landlord and fix the problems, but nothing ever happens. We called the council and they completed a report – they said that we are the cause of the problem. My windows are open 24 hours a day. They always tell me that they will speak to Homecare, but nothing ever happens."

²⁹ Op. cit., General Comment 4, para. 17.

He continued,

"I have reported the problems to Homecare many times and they are aware that the situation is making my daughter sick. They have come to the house many times. Three weeks ago someone from the Housing Executive came and put a plastic board in the ceiling – now we cannot see it but we feel it. The damp is coming from underneath the plastic sheet."



The single mother in Family D, who was placed in her house by the Housing Executive one year and nine months ago, said that she informed police and housing authorities about racist abuse and attacks against herself, her children and their home, but that nothing has happened:

"I have been to the police and complained but nothing happened. I have informed housing many times about what has been happening... I have reported everything to housing and the police. Nothing has been done. I have asked to be moved and nothing has happened."

Similarly, Family F reported

"I have told my key worker many times about these problems and they have been passing these on to Homecare. I have also been to my GP but he has not written anything yet."

When asked how the authorities' responded, the mother in this family said simply, "nothing".

The stress and anxiety this causes is profound, not only on the parents but on the children. Some of them refuse to play outside or to engage in activities outside the home. Even inside the home, they are fearful, due to experiences of people banging on their doors, peering through their windows and throwing rubbish at or defacing their house. The women report taking it in turns with their older children to stay awake through the night as a precaution; when they

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feel particularly unsafe the one family will leave the house altogether and stay over with the other, for greater safety in numbers. Recounting these 'coping mechanisms,' one of the women commented,

"I can't go outside, and I can't feel safe in my own house. I left my country as it was unsafe – I came here, and I still feel unsafe."

Conclusion and recommendations

The Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme in Northern Ireland, like the wider UK effort of which it forms part, was clearly motivated by a desire to help improve the lives of people who had lost their livelihoods, their homes, their communities and much more due to a conflict that was beyond their control. The spirit behind this is commendable. However, in Northern Ireland at least, this report demonstrates that this spirit is not being matched by basic levels of services and care provided by either public authorities or private companies funded by the public.

The families interviewed here were all happy with important aspects of their new lives, including their children's schooling and their access to health care. However, in terms of housing the situation is radically different. The families have been left languishing, at times for years, in temporary housing, with no process or timeframe in place – that they are aware of at least – for moving them to the permanent homes that they were promised under the VPRS. The conditions in the temporary houses appear to be well below both domestic and international standards, and clearly exacerbate physical and mental health issues faced by both parents and children. In some cases, the housing allocated is also unsuited to the family's particular health needs - all of which would have been known to the authorities prior to allocation.

When, reluctantly – yet commendably, after having gone through so much – families raise their voices to complain about their conditions and ask that their rights be respected, they are all too frequently ignored or even treated, as they see it, with disdain. Concerns raised repeatedly about their living conditions by their key workers in supporting agencies also seem to fall on deaf ears, undermining their confidence in the structures set up to offer them support and protection. The feeling the families repeatedly communicated is that they are being pressured to keep quiet and accept the status quo.

Worryingly, the families – and in particular the women-headed families – have been subjected to racially-motivated abuse and attack in their community. They recount how rubbish, eggs and stones have been thrown at their homes; their property has been defaced; strangers have repeatedly tried to enter their homes; and their children have been shouted at, harassed and even beaten on their way to the shops or when playing outside. The families report that aggression and violence towards them has been growing in recent months, and they feel that their efforts to get help and protection are not being met with a robust response by either the police or those who they report to. They are afraid, for themselves and for their children. The children are afraid to leave the

house, and some are even afraid inside the house. They have lost self confidence and trust and have begun to withdraw from friends and activities. As one mother put it,

"We left a war and came here to be protected. We came here for sanctuary. We didn't come here to be abused."

Recommendations to the Housing Executive:

- Immediately provide, in line with your obligations under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, **permanent homes** that **fully meet every aspect of the Decent Homes Standard and international standards** to these six Syrian families and to the others in Northern Ireland who are still – sometimes years after their arrival – in temporary quarters. So as not to jeopardise the level of integration that the families have achieved despite the prolonged temporary arrangements, **ensure that this process occurs with the full participation of these families and guarantees certain provisions, such as new permanent homes being located near their children's current schools.**
- Investigate all private rented **temporary accommodation** to which any VPRS families have been assigned and take immediate steps to ensure that the accommodation fully meets the Decent Homes Standard and international standards.
- Fully inspect all homes to be used as temporary accommodation for any **future arrivals** under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme to bring it fully in line with the Decent Homes Standard and international standards, and immediately suspend allocations to properties that fall short until such time that they are brought up to standard.
- Where private landlords' and/or management companies' accommodation has been found to fall short of the Decent Homes Standard and international standards, ensure that **no further allocations and no further expenditures of public money are made** to these landlords / management companies until such time as their properties are made fully compliant with the standards.
- **Clarify and clearly communicate time frames, procedures and responsibility for permanent allocations** so that no new arrivals fall into the same limbo of prolonged, indefinite temporary accommodation,

which adds to the stresses they are facing and undermines their integration.

- Ensure that Housing Executive officials, any management company staff and private landlords are given, and are made to follow, **clear guidance on carrying out site visits to families' homes** to guarantee that families are treated decently and with respect – including in terms of pre-arranging visits, presenting identification, using interpreters if required and **signing families' visitor log books with clear contact details to ensure accountability**.

Recommendations to the UK Home Office and Department for International Development (DFID):

- Take immediate steps to ensure that **central funds are not allocated to pay for housing that does not fully meet all of the provisions of the Decent Homes Standard**.
- Commission an **independent investigation into the implementation of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme** in Northern Ireland, to determine:
 - i. the nature and extent of of housing rights abuses currently experienced by families;
 - ii. systemic failings: how the myriad of public authorities (e.g. NIHE), private companies (e.g. Homecare), voluntary organisations (e.g. Barnardos, Extern) and other structures (e.g. Integration Group) failed to act on the repeated concerns and complaints reported by the families
 - iii. produce a time-bound strategy to address existing issues and develop measures to ensure non-recurrence
- Develop a pro-active **human rights-based monitoring of funds disbursed in Northern Ireland under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme** to ensure that the families on whose behalf central UK monies are being spent are being treated with dignity and are accessing the full range of rights to which they are entitled under international and domestic law.

Recommendations to the Department for Communities:

- **take a more proactive oversight role** of the working of the scheme in the post-arrival stages. Pay particular attention to the work of the agencies tasked with housing responsibilities to these vulnerable families, to ensure that they are fully carrying out their duties and responsibilities, as **housing is cited alongside security as the area causing the most difficulty and distress** to families as they seek to integrate.
- Clarify – with the families, with state bodies, with participating key support organisations and with any private companies and landlords involved – the **chain of responsibility and accountability between the different actors**, to ensure that issues raised by key workers and families are taken seriously and dealt with responsibly.

Recommendations to the Police Service of Northern Ireland:

- Fully **investigate** to the utmost of its powers any report of racially-motivated or other abuse or hate crime against these particularly vulnerable families.
- In line with Policing with the Community branch guidelines, take steps to **reduce the vulnerability** of the Syrian families, and in particular of the women-headed households among them, and encourage **community planning and engagement** to ensure that they are **protected** from further abuse and violence.

Recommendations to the Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland:

- Take steps to ensure accountability for abuse and violence committed against these vulnerable families by **prosecuting those responsible** to the full extent of the law.

Recommendations to elected officials, community leaders and concerned residents in West Belfast:

- Build on the strong foundation already laid by key workers, schools and some women and children's support groups to build relationships with such migrant families, so that they do not feel so isolated and abandoned in the face of racially-motivated aggression from some elements of the community.

Recommendations to the Northern Ireland Equality Commission, Human Rights Commission and Commissioner for Children and Young People:

30 July 2018

- Building on existing work in this area and using the full extent of your mandates, undertake a review of the situation of the VPRS families in across Northern Ireland with particular regard to the issues of housing and safety.



*The families in this report have been supported by Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR),
Equality Can't Wait (ECW) and Housing4All (H4A)*