



Submission by Participation and the Practice of Rights to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

I. Why visit Northern Ireland (question 6) and who to talk to (question 7)?

It is imperative that you include Northern Ireland -- in transition from decades of conflict, displaying multidimensional impacts of persistent poverty and child poverty, with higher levels of disability and rates of mental ill health and suicide than other UK jurisdictions – in your visit. The communities most directly affected by conflict continue to have the highest rates of poverty, long term unemployment and mental and physical ill-health in NI.

Under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, significant legislative powers –over immigration, taxes and (in part) social security -- remain with Westminster, as does control of NI's block grant. Our economy has lower rates of pay, higher levels of economic inactivity, a dearth of affordable childcare, and a heavy reliance on public sector jobs -- 30% compared with 18% in England. Trade and a land border with the EU sharpen the effects of Brexit here.

The full impact of austerity measures -- including public spending cuts of £1.5billion by 2020, with 20,000 public sector job cuts forecast -- have still to be felt, but given NI's disproportionately large public sector is likely to be severe. The stop-start nature of government and the current prolonged period of quasi direct rule (with the Westminster government allied to only one of the local parties) have seriously weakened political scrutiny and accountability around the impact of austerity.

On the positive side, local groups are actively using human rights tools to build grass roots campaigns addressing impacts and underlying causes of poverty and inequality. PPR supports communities to use a Human Rights Based Approach to tackle homelessness, poor housing, removal of social security protections, inadequate mental health services and destitution among asylum seekers. In 2012 PPR's approach was recognised by UNOHCHR as an *'example of how people can effectively use indicators to claim their rights'*.

Campaigns have developed innovative solutions including the commitment of public procurement spending to create jobs for the long term unemployed; the use of indicators on poverty to track government progress in fulfilling people's right to social security; and the identification of land for desperately needed new social housing. PPR's approach is gaining recognition internationally, and the model is being replicated in Scotland and the south of Ireland.

A visit here would enable you to meet directly with people dealing with the impacts of poverty on their daily lives and hear from them about their human rights based campaigning for concrete, measurable change.

II. The intersection of poverty with ESC rights in a context of austerity

A. Right to adequate housing – including children's rights (questions 5, 11, 26)

PPR support the Equality Can't Wait / Build Homes Now! group in their campaign to access their right to adequate housing.

Recently the group has chosen to spotlight the situation of the nearly 21,000 children on NI's social housing waiting list. NI's Housing Executive judges over 13,600 of them to be in 'housing stress', and 11,300 of these to be homeless (03/2018). Some of these children and their families made a film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xL-Za0IU-IM>) about what being denied their CRC and ICESCR rights feels like to them, with interviews of teachers and other professionals about the impact of housing stress on children's learning and development. The film was aired at a Belfast festival in August; in September the group held a private showing for the Housing Executive chief executive and board, directly demanding concrete change.

Over the years the group has used surveys of people living in social housing to monitor standards using the seven GC4 components of the right to adequate housing, highlighting linkages to the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, children's right to play and others. PPR has recently helped document the substandard housing conditions of Syrian families in NI under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, pressuring local duty bearers to provide adequate housing.

The group have identified key blockages. To address one -- the availability of land -- they used innovative methods such as photomapping to identify large sites where housing is being / could be built. Another -- religious inequality in the provision of social housing -- is an issue pre-dating the conflict that persists today in some areas of high multiple deprivation: at end March 2018, the predominately Catholic 'North Belfast 1' area had a shortfall of 1,046 homes, while adjacent -- and predominately Protestant -- 'North Belfast 2' had a shortfall of only 61 homes. The campaign continues to use a range of tactics to push for more social homes in areas of high need.

B. Right to the highest possible standard of health -- mental health

(questions 5, 11)

For many people in NI, traumatic experiences during the conflict have led to higher levels of specific mental health disorders and to poorer overall mental health than elsewhere in the UK. Within families, the impact of conflict loss and trauma has been found to carry on to younger generations; high levels of unemployment and deprivation here, particularly given austerity, have exacerbated these pressures. NI's public health strategy says mental illness is 25% more prevalent here than in England, and one in five adults here has a mental health condition at any one time.

Suicide rates have risen drastically since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and are currently higher in NI than elsewhere in the UK. Moreover the problem is escalating: the number of deaths by suicide here rose 18.5 per cent between 2014 and 2016, against a 3.8 per cent rise for the UK as a whole. Like conflict violence, mental health generally and suicide rates in particular are worse in poorer areas: in 2016 in NI, the number of suicides amongst the most deprived ten per cent was over five times greater than in the most affluent ten percent.

People bereaved by suicide are three times more likely to attempt to take their own life. PPR supports the SAFER campaign by people concerned about and affected by suicide, to push for improved services for bereaved families. The campaign seeks to improve uptake of the official offer to refer families for support in the aftermath of a suicide, by making the initial approach more acceptable and accessible.

PPR also support the #123GP campaign, by a group of mental health service users and carers, for improved access to mental health services at primary care level. The campaign has used the GC4 components of the right to health to highlight how to improve mechanisms for accessing mental health care at GP surgeries. The group have used surveys, petitions and public actions to highlight woefully inadequate funding -- around 5% of the Department of Health's overall expenditure annually -- for mental health care.

C. Homelessness (questions 5, 11)

A new project with residents of Simon Community hostels across NI has accumulated surveys with 100 homeless people to provide a baseline around hostel residents' rights to an adequate standard of living, housing, health, work, leisure and participation, among others.

Survey results have so far highlighted a worrying trend of long-term stays in what is meant as temporary accommodation. Some residents have reported developing mental ill health or addictions that they did not have when they initially entered the hostel setting. A significant contributing factor to long-term stays is the denial by the Housing Executive of 'homeless points' to patently homeless shelter residents.

D. Asylum-seekers (questions 5, 11)

PPR support Housing4All (H4A), a group of asylum seekers and supporters campaigning to ensure that people seeking refuge in NI can lead dignified and secure lives. One focus of the campaign is enforced destitution caused by the Home Office's withdrawal of housing and financial support from people whose claims are refused, even if they are in the process of compiling an appeal or waiting for travel documents.

Research by H4A among destitute asylum seekers in Belfast in 2015 found that 63% had been homeless on more than one occasion since seeking asylum in NI, while half of those had been homeless over three times. Enforced destitution comes as an additional blow to people who have already had to leave their countries under extreme duress and who may have suffered trauma during their flight: in 2016, 87% of destitute asylum seekers surveyed by H4A reported that their living situation negatively affected their mental and physical health.

Women in this situation find themselves at very real risk of abuse and exploitation. In response, H4A proposed a partnership project to house destitute women asylum seekers in Belfast. The Housing Executive blocked use of a housing association property from the social housing stock; a housing association generously provided two flats which would otherwise have been privately rented, and four women moved in in September 2018.

The H4A group is currently developing a survey of asylum seekers' ability to access a wide range of rights including adequate standard of living, housing, health, work, education and family life.

III. Right to Work: Right to Welfare (R2W) campaign for the People's Proposal (questions 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 26)

The R2W campaign is comprised of people who are unemployed, sick and disabled. They have been campaigning since 2012 -- prior to the introduction of Universal Credit¹ -- for the introduction of human rights protections into the social security system (the People's Proposal), as well as for the creation of real jobs through the use of public procurement by government (Real Jobs Now).

A social security system that causes, instead of protects from poverty

The social security system is currently not compliant with international human rights standards on the right to social security, notwithstanding [repeated recommendations from international](#) and [domestic](#) human rights bodies. It can be characterised as a

¹ Northern Ireland has parity with Great Britain in the area of social security; while policy in this area is technically devolved, in practice the Northern Ireland Executive has followed policy set by the Westminster Parliament to provide consistency across the UK. As was the case following the passage into law of Westminster's Welfare Reform Act 2012, the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015 gave the green light for introduction of Universal Credit from September 2017, alongside a harsher benefit sanctions regime, with the potential for benefits to be withdrawn for up to eighteen months.

‘sanction first, investigate later’ approach, with thousands of vulnerable people having their sole income reduced or removed each year, without any recourse to due process or any impact assessment being carried out. The rampant privatisation of many aspects of this system under the guise of ‘welfare reform’ -- including [sickness and disability assessments](#) as well as [employment programmes](#) -- has [greatly exacerbated the harm being caused](#).

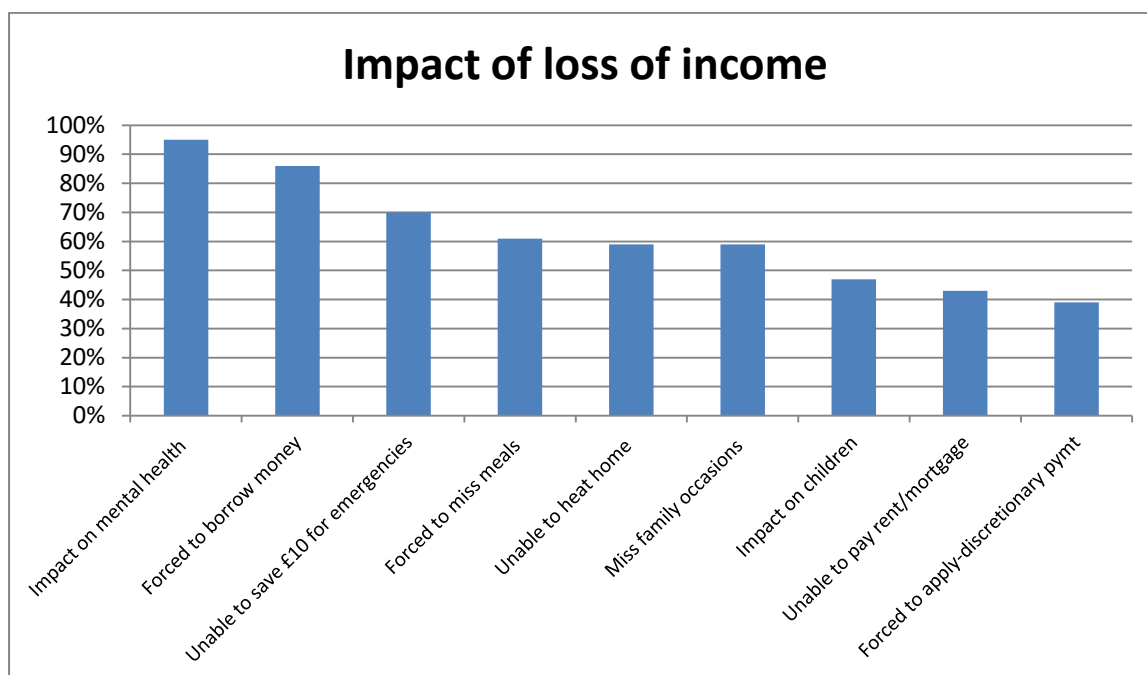
The current level of benefit payments has been described by the Council of Europe as ‘manifestly inadequate’. The median wage in NI is circa £21,800, so [the 60% poverty threshold](#) would equal £13,080. Unemployment benefit, including housing costs, amounts to £9,100 a year, or 42% of the median i.e. very severe poverty.

Evidence gathered directly by R2W campaigners from people who are unemployed, sick and disabled demonstrates the real impact that welfare reform, universal credit and the ongoing lack of human rights protections in the social security decision making system is having on poverty and people’s lives.

A survey of 101 benefit claimants carried out by R2W campaigners in late 2017-early 2018² found that:

- 59% had money stopped, reduced or delayed
- 46% had money taken away due to a sanction
- 88% reported that they were not given enough money to keep them going

A closer look at the impact of this removal of income, without any due process or impact assessment, vividly illustrates the effect of people’s daily lives, on family relationships, on mental health and their overall sense of dignity and well-being.



² The findings of this survey along with the set of four human rights indicators developed from it, will be launched at an event in Belfast on 17 October 2018, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

Individual testimonies from respondents included *'I lived on crackers and water for a week'; 'I attempted suicide two times this month'; '(lack of money) causes problems with the family, fights and stress, can't afford to buy things'; and 'cold, can't function right, no concentration'.*

Incorporating human rights protections into the current social security system

The R2W group has developed a model for a human rights compliant decision making process, based on direct evidence as outlined above, coupled with international human rights standards, in particular ICESCR Article 9 and General Comment No 19 on the Right to Social Security.

The People's Proposal outlines the specific steps the government should be required to undertake prior to any interference with an individual's right to social security. Its central tenets are the right to due process and to impact assessment, thus ensuring that nobody falls below the minimum essential level. The Department for Communities has confirmed that it [currently does not carry out any impact assessment](#) of its decisions on claimants [or on their dependents](#), in breach of its international human rights obligations. It was also unable to provide any information on how it complies with [due process](#) requirements as per General Comment 19.

The People's Proposal commands widespread support, including from a majority of the 11 local Councils, all of the political parties with the exception of the DUP, major trade union bodies including NIC-ICTU, the representative body for 34 trade unions, NISPA which represents social security staff, the community, voluntary, advice and human rights and equality sectors.

REAL JOBS NOW– a model for tackling long term unemployment

While the official narrative is one of a recovering economy, rates of long term unemployment in the north continue to rise, with almost two thirds of all those unemployed being classified as long term unemployed i.e. for one year plus. The [long term unemployment rate](#), at 63.1%, is almost 2.5 times those of the UK as a whole (26.7%), with twice as many Catholics (69%) as Protestants (31%) being long term unemployed.

The Right to Work: Right to Welfare group has developed a solution focused model of job creation for the long term unemployed which uses public procurement as a tool by which the Northern Ireland Executive can deliver on its obligations under Article 6 of ICESCR on the right to work. The 'REAL JOBS NOW' model requires public authorities to use social clauses to ring fence 'real jobs' (as opposed to 'back to work' schemes) as well as apprenticeships for the long term unemployed in their public procurement contracts.

However, despite the adoption by Belfast City Council in 2014 of the REAL JOBS NOW model, there has been resistance to the actual implementation of the model. In 2017-18,

Belfast City Council spent over £17million on public contracts. Only 4 out of a total of 40 contracts had social clauses inserted, delivering only 9 jobs and 13 apprenticeships.



September 2018

Annex of supporting documentation for PPR's submission to the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Right to adequate housing/homelessness (including children's right to adequate housing)

1. Media coverage of child homelessness documentary film ["Waiting on a Childhood"](#), August 2018.
2. Media coverage around ["We Came Here for Sanctuary": Syrian refugee families' experience of racism and substandard housing conditions in West Belfast](#), 30 July 2018.

Right to the highest possible standard of health: Mental Health

3. SAFER campaign for support to families bereaved by suicide: [Families Bereaved by Suicide: the right to timely and appropriate support](#), Sept 2016. [SAFER briefing: SD1 Evaluation Workshop](#), 14 May 2018.
4. #123GP campaign for improved access to mental health services at primary care level: [Beyond a Spin of the Wheel: ensuring timely and appropriate mental health care from GPs](#), June 2017. *Counselling and GPs: Your Rights* leaflet, May 2018.

The rights of asylum-seekers

5. [A Place of Refuge? A monitor of homelessness among destitute asylum seekers – proposal for action](#), April 2016. *Pilot Project for Accommodation for Destitute Asylum Seekers*, May 2018.

Right to work, right to social security

6. [Briefing by the Right to Work: Right to Welfare Group on the Northern Ireland Executive's compliance with ICESCR's Article 9 on the right to social security](#), 2016.
7. [Briefing by the Right to Work: Right to Welfare \(R2W\) Group on the Northern Ireland Executive's compliance with ICESCR's Article 6 on the right to work](#), 2016.

Homeless film launched by children on the front line

Kids tell of their fight for a place of their own

BY MICHAEL JACKSON
m.jackson@belfastmediagroup.com

CHILDREN in search of a permanent home have helped launch a hard-hitting new documentary that highlights the plight of kids on the housing waiting list.

Supported by human rights organisation Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), children living in temporary accommodation throughout

Belfast launched the film as part of Fells at Conway Mill.

The documentary shows the damaging impact of homelessness on the youngest in our society and highlights the campaign to build social housing.

The children and their families have been campaigning for public officials to move to build homes on a number of sites in Belfast including the Hillview site in North Belfast, the Gasworks fringe site in South Belfast and the Sirocco site in East Belfast.

According to the latest figures from the Housing Executive, there are over 20,000 children on the housing waiting list. It is also estimated that there are 11,276 families on Belfast's social housing waiting list, with over 8,000 deemed to be in housing stress.

Speaking at the documentary launch, Caoimhe Owens said her mum had searched for a house for 12 years.

"The families with PPR campaign and the Homes Now campaign have worked extremely hard on this documentary to let people know that it is not just adults who have been affected by the housing crisis, but also children," she said.

"It's not fair that children living in hostels and sleeping on friends' sofas are calling this home. I can speak from

experience as my mum searched for a house for 12 years as our house was damp and had no heating for one and a half years."

She added: "I know what families and children are going through and I want to help them."

Another of the children, Shimous Aldarous, said: "I just wanted to say thank you to all of the people who helped to make this film. Whoever has the power to change this needs to act fast because this is a big problem and we are going nowhere until they give us our homes."

"The families and I have been working with PPR

campaign and the Homes Now campaign and have worked

extremely hard on this documentary to let people know that it is not just

adults who have been affected by the housing crisis, but also children."



PREMIERE: Caoimhe Owens and Shimous Aldarous at the launch

Working families

be gorgeous!
with
**Slimming
World**

Tuesdays • 5.30pm & 7.30pm

Church Hall (Facing Heaton) 246 Antrim Road
Contact Tracy 07773327898

Tuesdays 5pm & 7pm

Sacred Heart Chapel, Glenview Street Belfast
Contact Shireen 07766298680

Tuesdays 5.15 & 7.30pm

Fortwilliam Golf Club, Downview Avenue, Belfast
Contact Winifred 07724420734

Wednesday at 9.30am, 11.30am, 3.30pm, 5.30pm
& 7.30pm, Thursday at 9.30am & 11.30am
Macron Church, Duncraig Gardens
Contact Dolores 07698944857

Wednesdays 5.30 & 7.30pm

Fortwilliam Golf Club, Downview Avenue, Belfast
Contact Winifred 07724420734

Thursdays 5pm

Houlsen Centre, Holy Cross Gurnin Road
Contact Tracy 07773327898

Campaigners highlight concerns over Belfast's 'homeless crisis'

Suzanne McGonagle
s.mcgonagle@irishnews.com

CAMPAIGNERS gathered in Belfast yesterday to highlight their concerns that the city is "suffering from a homelessness crisis". Homeless families, asylum seekers and refugees joined campaigners to call for action to tackle issues surrounding homelessness in Belfast. The 'Build Homes Now' campaigners delivered letters of protest to the offices of Belfast City Council, the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities yesterday "demanding accountability and action from the city's most senior public servants".

The three public bodies are jointly responsible for planning, funding and development of social housing. In their letters, they asked for the public bodies to "use their existing powers to transform empty land and property into housing". It is estimated around 11,000 families are on Belfast's social housing waiting list, with more than 8,000 deemed to be in housing stress. Linda Casey, from the 'Homes Now Campaign', has been on the housing waiting list for seven years. "Belfast is suffering from a homelessness crisis," she said. "This is intolerable in a city as wealthy as ours. The money is there. The land is there. Most importantly, the homeless families are there." Geraldine Owens, a mother-of-three from north Belfast, also said she had attended the rally as she wants "more action to tackle the ongoing homeless crisis".

"I waited over 15 years for a house for my family," she said. "And we only got a home after going public to tell our story. The stress my family has gone through because of our homelessness has caused irreversible mental and physical issues for all of us. "No-one should go through this." Sinn Féin's Caral Ni Chuilin said people had come from all over the city to "support the demand for the construction of new social and affordable homes". "We are in the midst of a housing crisis right across Ireland," she said. "Families are calling home, a hotel or hostel, this is degrading and unacceptable."



■ **'DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY':** The 'Build Homes Now' campaign delivered letters of protest to the offices of Belfast City Council, the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities yesterday. Below: Housing Executive chief executive Clark Bailie accepts letters calling for more action on homelessness in Belfast



Over 20,000 children in housing stress

Market area picked out as suffering very badly

BY CAOIMHIE QUINN

caoinieq@belfastmediagroup.com

A FREEDOM of Information request has revealed that there are at least 20,950 children on the housing waiting list here with at least 13,636 of these children deemed to be in 'housing stress', effectively a state of homelessness.

As of the end of March 2018, a total of 36,198 households were on the social housing waiting list in NI, of which 24,148 were in housing stress, previously called 'urgent housing need'.

Pádraig Ó Melscill, a member of the Homes Now

campaign, claimed families in housing stress are typically forced into emergency accommodation such as single-parent hostels, share cramped accommodation with relatives or sofa surf on a nightly basis.

"In areas of Belfast such as the Market, the New Lodge and the Short Strand, there are hundreds of families who have spent, collectively, tens of decades on the housing waiting list with no end in sight while commercial developments such as hotels and multi-storey car parks are given precedence," he said. "For example, as of March 2018, there were 101 households in the small Market area of Belfast on the housing waiting list, with 82 of these in housing stress."

"It took an FOI, by Participation and the Practice of Rights, to get these figures as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had responded to all previous requests by replying that they

did not keep such details," he slammed. "This is despite the fact that bodies such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in the North and the United Nations have previously expressed concern about the rates of child homelessness here."

Campaigners from Homes Now and Equality Can't Wait have worked with children and families on the housing waiting list to make the documentary *Waiting on a Childhood*, which launched in Conway Mill on Thursday evening.

The film gives a voice to the children living through this crisis. The documentary has been led by them and their families at all points.

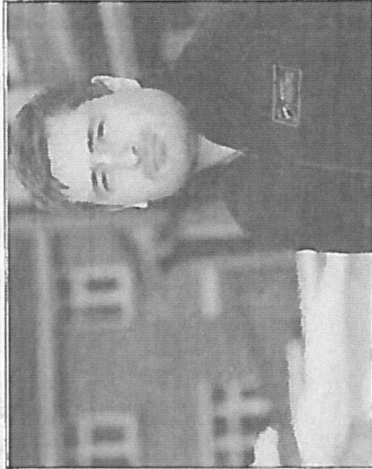
"The Housing Executive, whose job it is to ensure there are adequate numbers of housing units built, Belfast City Council, who can zone land for housing, and the Department for Communities, who can vest land for housing, are complicit in this crisis,"

added Pádraig. Commissioner for Children and Young People Koulla Yiasouma, the Director of Barnardo's Lynda Wilson, the Director of Homeless Services with the Simon Community Kevin Bailey and a number of prominent politicians have all agreed to attend last week's launch.

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral," Pádraig added.

A Housing Executive spokesperson confirmed as of the end of March 2018, 36,198 households were on the social housing waiting list in NI, of which 24,148 were in housing stress.

"Housing stress applies when an applicant has 30 or more housing points through the Common Selection scheme assessment," they explained. "This differs from homelessness, which is when an applicant meets the four statutory tests under



FIGURES: Pádraig Ó Melscill of the Homes Now campaign

homelessness legislation (homelessness, eligibility, priority need, intentionality).

"We have a statutory duty to assess and to strategically target housing need, focusing on new build social housing programmes in those areas of

most housing need.

"In terms of new housing supply, we continue to provide, on average, 2,000 new homes per annum, in partnership with housing associations, in line with Department for Community targets."

Riir Fáila audiance oooo

Shocking reality of life on housing list laid bare

'Commercial development prioritised ahead of us'

BY CAOIMHE QUINN
caoimheq@belfastmediagroup.com

A FILM capturing the shocking reality of local people in 'housing stress' is to be shown in Conway Mill tomorrow as part of Feile 30.

'Waiting on a Childhood' is an important piece of work that gives a voice to the children living through this crisis. Families in housing stress are typically forced into emergency accommodation such as single-parent hostels, share cramped accommodation with relatives or sofa surf on a nightly basis. They and their families, including local mother of two Eleanor Mulligan, have told their stories.

"Over 20,000 children are on the waiting list here, with 13,000 of them deemed to be in housing stress – those figures are an absolute disgrace," she said. "The documentary looks at kids, many of whom are in the same situation as my own kids, who are on the housing list and nothing is being done to help change that."

"The kids asked why they are on the housing list and the Housing Executive told them on it." Sharing her first hand experience, touched on in the documentary, Eleanor revealed:

"My teenage daughter has the experience first hand having been on the housing list since the day

and hour she was born. We've never had a home to call our own, even this house has been someone else's as are the possessions in it.

"We have moved from the city to the country, we have stayed in B&Bs and hostels where I lay awake fearing for my children's safety. I've slept on sofas whilst my kids had to live in their prams. Social Services get involved and threaten to take your children away if you are without 'stable accommodation' and yet people are still left in that hopeless situation."

"I tried to private rent over 10 years ago but six months in I couldn't afford the rent and we were evicted. People say 'You should have gotten a cheaper place' or ask why I did it but I was homeless. I had no option but to take it because it was a roof over my family's head."

Hoping the documentary will raise awareness Eleanor said her main hope is for the point system to be readdressed.

"The system hasn't been changed since the day and hour it was put in place, its outdated and isn't fit for purpose," she says. "It was supposed to help with housing and equality and it's safe to say it hasn't worked. Housing points include toilets outside and other outdated situations that need to be re examined and re written."

"They also need to stop building developments in areas housing is not needed, and stop giving hotels and businesses first dibs on land and funding. We do not need more hotels, we do not need more shops what we need are homes for families."

"We have found land in the past, we have presented a booklet of possibilities and done the ground work but those in charge don't want to know. The likes of the Colin Transport Hub is a prime example of money and land that could have been put to good use tackling the housing crisis in Belfast. They just don't care."

Pádraig Ó Meiscill of the Homes Now campaign worked with children and families on the housing waiting list to make the documentary. He said there are hundreds of families who have spent, collectively, tens of decades on the housing waiting list with no end in sight while

commercial developments such as hotels and multi-storey car parks are given precedence.

"The Housing Executive, whose job it is to ensure there are adequate numbers of housing units built, Belfast City Council, who can zone land for housing, and the Department for Communities, who can vest land for housing, are complicit in this crisis," he said. "Our basic ask is that they build the houses needed to meet the demand. Anyone working in the sector doesn't think is an unreasonable demand. This is a housing crisis, and it needs to be treated as such as salvaged by building houses people need."



ABANDONED: Pádraig Ó Meiscill of the Homes Now campaign with Eleanor Mulligan and her daughter Caitlin

Waiting on a Childhood will be shown in Conway Mill, Belfast on Thursday, August 2 at 7pm. All are welcome.

caption here



Balmoral Hotel Belfast

Danny Millar



PRESENTS

PROFESSIONAL

Master Chef

#WeAreFeile30

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Féile documentary highlights concern over rates of child homelessness in the north

Allison Morris
Security Correspondent
a.morris@irishnews.com

THERE are at least 20,950 children on the housing waiting list in Northern Ireland, of which 13,636 are deemed to be living in 'housing stress' – either temporary or unfit accommodation.

Among the thousands of children in temporary accommodation is 10-year-old Shimous Aidaroos, who has lived in five different locations in the last two years while her family wait for a permanent home.

She is one of four children who feature in the documentary *Waiting on a Childhood*, which will get its first screening tonight as part of Féile an Phobail.

Families in housing stress are typically in emergency accommodation such as single-parent hostels, sharing accommodation with relatives or in some cases 'sofa surfing', moving around on a nightly basis.

Figures on homeless children are not routinely collated but were gathered by Participation and the Practice of Rights, a campaign group who work with families in severe housing need.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, and the United Nations have previously expressed concern about the rates of child homelessness in the north.

Shimous is living in temporary accommodation in the Cliftonville area



■ **HOUSING STRESS:** Tawsul Aidaroos and her children, Shimous, right, and Basel, have lived in five different locations in the last two years while waiting for a permanent home
PICTURE: Mal McCann

of north Belfast with her seven-year-old brother Basel and parents Tawsul and Imaderdin Aidaroos.

Both parents are IT engineers who were forced to flee their home in Sudan due to political persecution and have been granted refugee status in Northern Ireland.

Shimous's mum said since arriving in Northern Ireland, and despite having 10 years' experience and a Masters degree, the only jobs she has been offered are low-paid entry level positions, with wages that will not cover the 'extortionate' rent on hostel accommodation and childcare costs.

"The one job I did get wanted me to work shifts and I'd no-one to mind the children. I want to work but it seems strange that people are being financially penalised for going to work."

The family, who have 120 points on the housing list, have been told they'll

need at least 160 to be housed anywhere in north Belfast.

"The children have had to move schools and I've now settled them in a school they like and where they are doing well. We'd like to stay in north Belfast so they don't have to move again," Mrs Aidaroos said.

"Being in temporary accommodation is unsettling – we never know when we might have to move, you can't make improvements or make it a home for the children."

"Shimous is very academic, very smart, she wants to do well at school. Basel is into sports and wants to play and make friends. I just want my children to be settled and have some stability, a safe place they can call home."

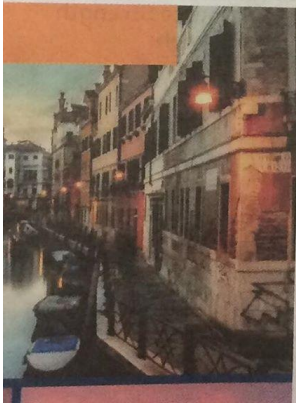
Campaigners from Homes Now and Equality Can't Wait worked with children and families on the housing waiting list to make the documentary, with

6 I just want my children to be settled and have some stability, a safe place they can call home

– Tawsul Aidaroos

the children interviewing senior public figures as part of the film.

■ *Waiting on a Childhood* will be launched tonight in Conway Mill in west Belfast at 7pm. Organisers say as it is not a ticketed event, early arrival is advised.



Syrian family's nightmare is nearly over

HE says new home found and move is imminent

BY BRÓNACH NÍ THUAMA

A SYRIAN family living in West Belfast are calling on the Housing Executive to house them with "dignity."

Abed Elzohby, his wife Sakina and their four young children aged 8, 11, 13 and 14 fled Syria two and a half years ago and made a home for themselves in West Belfast.

The Elzohby family were among the first batch of Syrian families to arrive in Belfast on December 15, 2015 when they were housed in Earls court Street, a home which they say is in a state of advanced disrepair.

Rotting door frames, mould and slugs are all daily features

in their home. As well as this Mrs Elzohby and her children have had multiple falls on the steep stairs.

Speaking to the Andersonstown News in their Earls court Street home through a translator Mr Elzohby said: "We were promised before we were brought here that we would be given a dignified life in a safe place."

"This is a lovely community with wonderful people but this house is not good. We were told this was a temporary house for three months, my wife signed a contract but no one explained what was in it, she didn't understand."

"The sheets and the bedding were filthy, the smell is bad, the door frames are rotting, some have been filled with Blue Tack."

"The stairs caused my wife to fall many times, she has miscarried three times I believe as a result of falling, all of my kids have also fallen on



DANGEROUS:
Abed Elzohby
with his son
Ahmad on the
steep stairs

the stairs. My youngest baby is always coughing because of the dampness. This house is so damp that we have had to keep our clothes in suitcases for the past two and a half years."

"There are slugs everywhere, at night time the place is covered in them, this is not safe and this is not dignified."

Mr Elzohby says as well as the many health and safety problems in the property the house is also too small.

He said: "The house is so small that there is no room for my children to do homework or study, I have hired a tutor for them but had to stop because there is no space here in this house. They don't even

have a garden to play in, I want my children to have a good life. They have made friends in the area and they are settled in school, I don't want to take them out of West Belfast but I want them to have a good home. There are many families like mine who are afraid to speak out for fear of losing their accommodation."

Elfie Seymour of Participation and the Practice of Rights said: "This family are only one of thousands on the waiting list in West Belfast and are indicative of the housing crisis felt here and other areas of the city. The response to this crisis from the state and its actors in the DfC, Belfast City Council Planning Dept and Housing Executive is extremely poor and lack the political will and determination needed by the families who have been waiting for years."

"The solution is on our doorstep, in March 2015 families in the Equality Can't

Wait group went out in Belfast taking pictures of vacant land sites in their communities which could be used to tackle the housing crisis. They called for the Department of Communities to vest two sites in West Belfast: Monagh Bypass and the former Mackies site. Equality Can't Wait secured the support of five political parties and even the UN has called for action - twice - but the NI executive has done nothing. Only last week these families, on behalf of Equality Can't Wait, met with the Department of Communities and the housing executive and asked again for them to use their vesting powers to buy the land at Monagh Bypass and the Former Mackies site for social housing."

A Housing Executive spokesperson said: "More suitable accommodation for this family has been sourced and we will be moving them soon."

Counselling and GPs

Your Rights

**The right to the highest attainable standard
of both physical and mental health
is a fundamental human right
(World Health Organisation)**

For more information or to sign up to support:

Sign the petition: <http://bit.ly/onetwothreeGP>

Email: sara@pprproject.org

Tel: +44(0) 2890 313315

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) Community House,

Facebook: MentalHealthRights

1. You have the right to be treated as an individual and with dignity and respect.

2. You have the right to the same standard of care from your GP as patients with physical health problems.

3. You have the right to ask your GP to be referred to counselling.

4. You have the right to discuss options with your GP so you can make choices and decisions about your care.

5. If you decide not to take up the offer of counselling, or if your GP thinks you might get better without it, you must be offered another appointment within two weeks to see how you are. The GP should contact you if you miss this.

6. You have the right to receive counselling on its own or along with medication.

7. There is no target waiting time for an initial appointment. MIND recommends you should be seen within 28 days; in the case of a mental health emergency it should be sooner.

10. The counsellor should be trained with appropriate

qualifications and experience. They should be registered/ accredited or working towards it, and should have appropriate supervision in place.

11. You have the right to be told if the counsellor is a student.

12. Your GP should regularly assess your physical health

needs alongside your psychological needs.

13. If you have mild to moderate depression you have the right to annual physical and mental health checks.

14. You have the right for your personal health information to be kept confidential and to know how it is used.

15. You have the right to request a copy of your GP records; be aware there may be a fee.

16. You have the right to complain if you are not happy with your treatment. Your GP

ACCOMMODATION FOR DESTITUTE ASYLUM SEEKERS.

A SIMPLE SOLUTION

Background.

An **asylum-seeker** is someone who has left their home country and applied for asylum in another country, because they have a well-founded fear of persecution at home and cannot return. Asylum seekers who live in Northern Ireland have asked the UK government for refugee status and are waiting for a decision on their case.

Asylum is an 'excepted matter', meaning that decisions on applications to be accepted as a refugee cannot be made within Northern Ireland, so claims are decided by the Home Office. The entire process can take years.

In 2016, the Home Office refused 68 per cent of initial asylum applications. A majority of the people whose claims were refused chose to **appeal**, and many appellants -- in 2016, 42% -- were ultimately successful in being granted asylumⁱ.

Asylum seekers are barred from working in the UK and do not receive social security benefits. If their initial claim is rejected, the Home Office withdraws their housing along with the £37 per week financial support it had been giving them. They are even ineligible for emergency accommodation in hostels. The result is **enforced destitution**, which risks exacerbating the physical, emotional or mental trauma already suffered by many in the course of their flight.

Housing4All (H4A) is a group of asylum seekers and supporters campaigning to ensure that people seeking refuge in NI are given the opportunity to lead dignified and secure lives, free from enforced destitution. H4A's work is supported by Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR).

Research carried out by H4A among destitute asylum seekers in Belfast in 2015 found that 63% had been homeless on more than one occasion since seeking asylum in Northern Ireland, and 50% of these individuals had been homeless on more than three occasions. Furthermore, there are wholly inadequate support mechanisms in place for destitute asylum seekers. The same research asked destitute asylum seekers about their attempts to get support from statutory and voluntary service organisations:

- 77% had approached social services for assistance and not a single survey respondent said that the advice or support provided was sufficient to meet basic housing needs
- 93% had approached local charities and only 5% said the support provided was sufficient to meet their housing needs

Accommodation for Destitute Asylum Seekers.

The problem being addressed: Unlike in many European states, in the UK if an asylum seeker's initial claim of refugee status is refused, Home Office housing and financial

support is withdrawn after 21 days and they are deemed to have 'no recourse to public funds', despite the fact that they may be in the midst of compiling an appeal. The same is true for rejected asylum seekers who are waiting for travel documents to return home or who are from a country judged by the Home Office or the courts to be unsafe for return. If their claim is rejected they are no longer even eligible for emergency accommodation in homeless hostels.

- According to the Refugee and Asylum Forum, in Northern Ireland in 2015/16, roughly 100 rejected asylum seekers suffered enforced destitutionⁱⁱ.

The human impact: Enforced destitution comes as a crippling blow to people who have already had to leave their countries under extreme duress and who may have suffered additional physical, mental and emotional trauma in the course of their flight. Many will have arrived in the UK with serious physical and mental health needs as a direct result of their experiences. These are if anything exacerbated by the stress of being evicted and cut off from support. Women in this situation find themselves at very real risk of abuse and exploitation.

- In 2016, 87% of destitute refused asylum seekers surveyed by H4A in Belfast reported that their living situation negatively affected their mental and physical healthⁱⁱⁱ.

The Approach: A partnership project concept has been developed by H4A and PPR, with the hope of linking with a housing association and other charitable organisations in Northern Ireland. The aim is to develop a model of accommodation provision for destitute asylum seekers who, unlike in many other European states, currently have 'no recourse to public funds' in the UK and are denied basic fundamental human rights to accommodation, employment and social security. As such, established approaches to dealing with such homelessness through emergency/temporary accommodation and related support are denied, in law, to destitute asylum seekers. Schemes are up and running in other parts of the UK to provide accommodation for destitute asylum seekers, and research and a legal opinion commissioned by the Rowntree Foundation^{iv} demonstrates that the model being used in other parts of the UK does not fall foul of the rules regarding people who have 'no resource to public funds'. Some progress has been made with one housing association generously looking at providing one of its properties which would otherwise be privately rented. We are pleased with this progress.

However, the original aim had been to utilise a housing association property from the social housing stock (the particular property was scheduled for demolition and could not therefore be used for permanent tenancies). This approach has been blocked by NIHE. This causes a problem in that, if the pilot of one property is to grow to a number of properties, which would be needed to address the need (which is at any one time around 100 people), then social housing stock being blocked from use would be a problem.

The obstacle: Permission was required from the **Northern Ireland Housing Executive** to take any property out of the Common Selection Scheme. This is because Housing Associations in Northern Ireland must make all their properties available for tenants on the common waiting list, unless they have a good reason to use them in some other way. There are agreed exceptions. However, the NIHE refused to back the plan – despite the fact that this approach asks nothing of the NIHE (no funding or support) and could make an enormous practical difference to the lives of vulnerable asylum seekers. Further, as stated above, the approach follows a model that has been reviewed and found *not* to fall afoul of restrictions on public funds used for Immigration Rules purposes^v.

Considering the response of NIHE, H4All is now asking the Department for Communities to give its permission for this model of accommodation for destitute asylum seekers to be taken forward. We are merely asking for parity with the rest of the UK.

We are asking the **Department for Communities to give its permission to housing associations to provide properties which can be used to accommodate destitute asylum seekers through partnerships with other charitable organisations.**



ⁱ University of Oxford Migration Observatory at www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migration-to-the-uk-asylum/.

ⁱⁱ Refugee & Asylum Forum, *Preventing destitution within the asylum process: urgent action required*, Jan 2017 at <http://lawcentreni.org/Publications/Policy-Briefings/Preventing-asylum-seeker-destitution-RAF-Jan-17.pdf>, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ PPR, *A Place of Refuge: a monitor of homelessness among destitute asylum seekers*, Apr 2016 at <https://www.pprproject.org/sites/default/files/A%20Place%20of%20Refuge.pdf>, p. 12.

^{iv} See *inter alia* The Housing and Migration Network, *Housing associations and provision for destitute migrants: a practice pack* at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/housing-destitution-pack.pdf>; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *How to Improve Support and Services for Destitute Migrants*, Jul 2015 at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/how-improve-support-and-services-destitute-migrants>, pp. 6-8 and 40-44; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Guide to housing and*

support services for refugees and asylum seekers, 2005 at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/guide-housing-and-support-services-asylum-seekers-and-refugees>.

^v *In the matter of an opinion requested by the Association of Charitable Foundations, the Joseph Rowntree Trust and the Rowntree Housing Trust: Opinion*, 13 Jul 2015 at https://www.acf.org.uk/downloads/member-briefings/Legal_Opinion_-_Improving_support_for_Destitute_Migrants.pdf, paras. 13, 87(ii), 93. The Opinion concludes that “the meaning and use of the term ‘public funds’ is far narrower than might be thought. It does not block charities from providing accommodation to persons subject to a NRPF [‘no recourse to public funds’] restriction but raises the question of how such accommodation is to be funded.” The potential ramifications of this opinion are briefly discussed in Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service Briefing Paper, *Support to Appeal Rights Exhausted Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland*, Mar 2017 at www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2017/executive-office/2617.pdf, pp. 11-12.