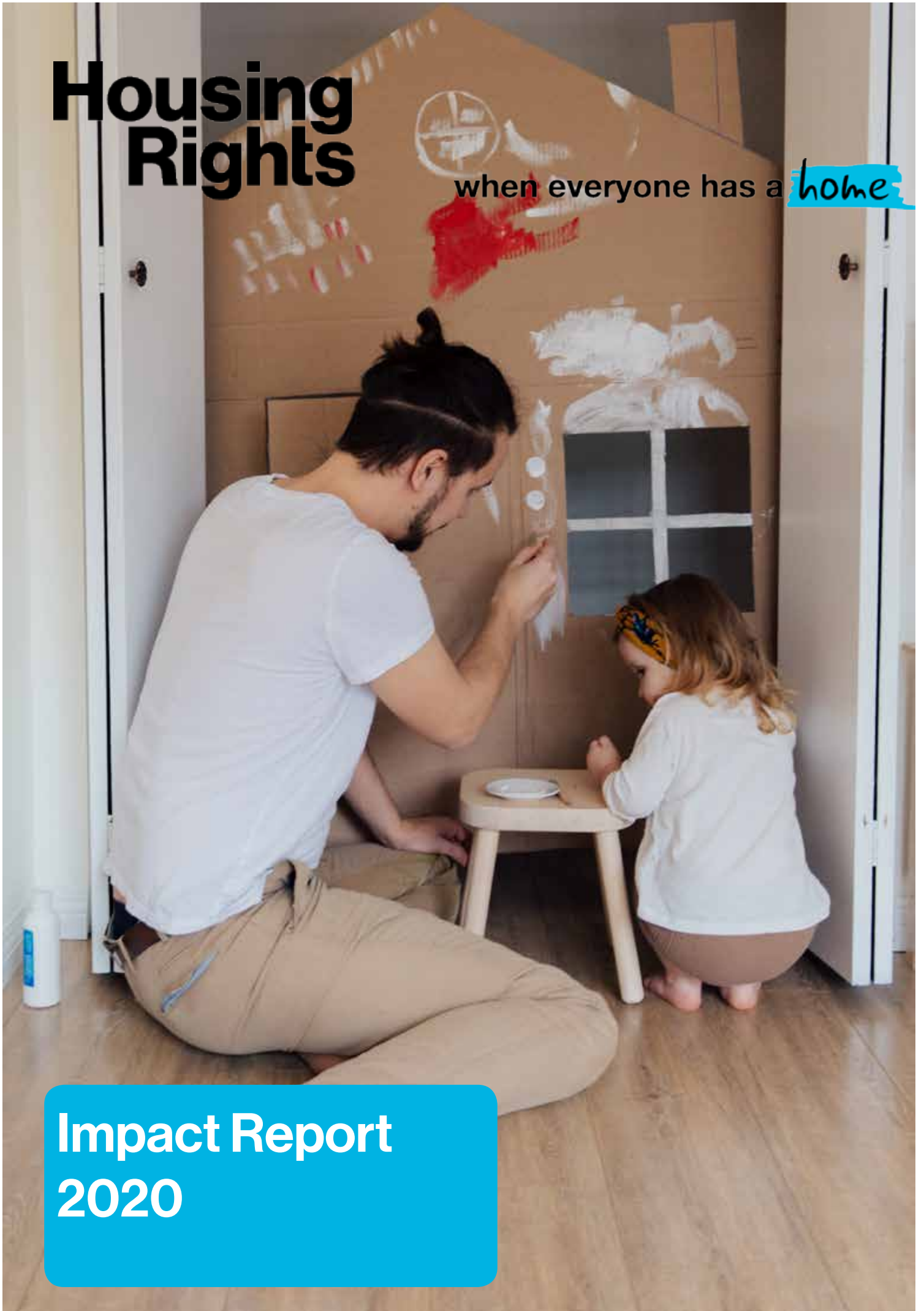


Housing Rights

when everyone has a home

Impact Report
2020



'It is sometimes easier to make the world a better place than to prove you have made the world a better place'.

Amos Tversky

With thanks

At Housing Rights we are proud of the difference we help to make to people's lives. This impact is only possible because of the leadership provided by our Board and the hard work and commitment of our staff and volunteers. Sincere thanks are also due to our funders in particular to the Department for Communities; Oak Foundation; NI Housing Executive; NI Prisons Service; Legal Services Agency; Nationwide; B&Q and Marks & Spencer, all of whom provide essential financial support to enable us to undertake our work.

Foreword

Increasingly third sector organisations are expected to demonstrate the impact of their work, to show what difference their work makes to the lives of individuals who may experience a range of barriers in their lives. All third sector organisations believe that they are doing a good job and make a real difference. It is much more difficult to demonstrate this with any objectivity.

Housing Rights have taken this challenge very seriously and adopted an Outcomes-Based Approach (OBA), which asks three fundamental questions:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?
- How were people's lives changed as a result?

The organisation then put in place a range of ways of robustly answering each of these important questions. The findings are outlined clearly in this report.

Housing Rights also decided to go to another level of objectivity in how it analysed and presented its findings. It appointed an Impact Reference Group, mainly made up of external agencies and experts to oversee the assessment processes to ensure they were robust and that there was real learning from the findings. The organisation has committed to learn lessons from the findings, both to continuously improve the work and its impact, but also to keep improving how the organisation collects and analyses data on how it is doing and the impact it has. It also welcomes any external comments on this report.

I would like to thank the members of the Impact Reference Group, who were as follows:

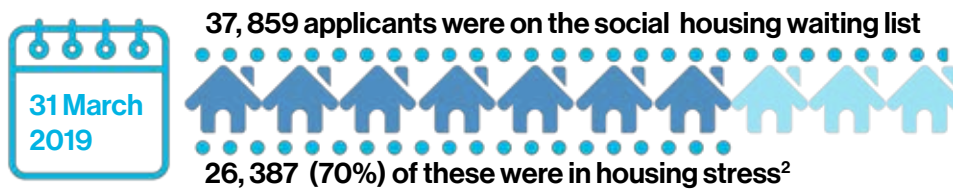
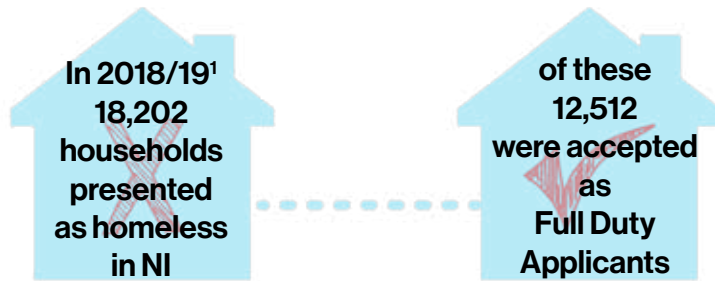
Donna Knowles, Gerard Rushe and Sharon McAleenon (DfC)
Caroline Connor (NIHE)
Com McDaid (Supporting Communities)
Valerie Hayes (NI Prison Service)
John McCord (DoJ)
Dr Alison Montgomery (The Centre for Effective Services)
Joanne Cartland (The Executive Office)
Samantha Stewart (Nationwide Foundation)
Jim O'Callaghan (Housing Rights)
Janet Hunter (Housing Rights)

We are grateful for the excellent work of Dr Martina McAuley, Research and Evaluation Co-ordinator at Housing Rights who carried out the analysis and prepared the content with great skill and diligence and to Taryn Robinson and Frances McGrath within the Communications Team at Housing Rights who have made it so accessible.

Dr Roger Courtney
Independent Chair of the Impact Reference Group

The context in which we work

Homelessness in Northern Ireland



The top three reasons for presenting as homeless in 2018/19⁴ were:

1. Accommodation not reasonable
2. Sharing breakdown family dispute
3. Loss of rented accommodation



Poverty in Northern Ireland

Approximately **350,000** individuals or 19% of the population in Northern Ireland were in relative poverty (before housing costs) in 2018/19.

The average (median) income in Northern Ireland fell from £491 per week in 2017/18 to £478 per week in 2018/19⁶.

It is estimated that **38%** of those living in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) in NI are in poverty⁷. Over half of PRS tenants rely on housing benefit support to meet their rent⁸. According to recent research by NIHE, **89%** of these tenants experience a shortfall between their housing benefit and market rents⁹.

In 2018 it was estimated that **43%** of households in poverty in NI were homeowners and **1 in 10** households with a mortgage were in poverty in NI¹⁰. This is a surprising statistic, but perhaps makes more sense in light of the higher proportion of marginal homeowners¹¹ and those with mortgages who were in negative equity in NI in 2014 compared to the rest of the UK¹². This should make for sober consideration, given the increasing pressures on households as a result of the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown.



Data on mortgage actions for possession showed that there were **300** mortgage cases disposed of between October and December 2019, a **140%** increase from the same period in 2018 (125) and the highest number of mortgage cases disposed during this quarter since 2014.

Furthermore, the total for 2019 was **809**, reversing a downward trend from the peak in 2012 (3,157) and representing an increase of **76%** on the previous year.

House conditions and fuel poverty

NIHE estimated that in 2016, **8%** of all dwellings (est. 61,000) failed the Decent Home Standard¹³. The majority of these were vacant properties but around **10%** of PRS properties failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard, compared to just **3%** of social houses¹⁴.

1 in 5 occupied properties which failed the fitness standard housed low income families¹⁵.

1 in 5 households experienced fuel poverty in 2016. Over half of these were low income households (earning less than £10,339 p.a.) and a third were in rural areas¹⁶.

Our Impact and Outcomes:

Why are we measuring our impact?

In 2017 Housing Rights produced a Strategic Plan for the period 2018-2023 which outlined a range of objectives which are aimed at delivering on the priorities for Housing Rights. This report aims to explore these objectives and to provide an evaluation of how Housing Rights has used its resources as well as to identify areas for improvement.

This Impact Report is structured around those objectives¹⁷, which are to:

- provide a reliable and independent housing advice service for the people of NI;
- prevent homelessness;
- alleviate homelessness;
- improve the housing circumstances of people who are in need;
- effectively demonstrate the impact of our work;
- expand our reach by enhancing our digital services;
- work collaboratively and develop effective partnerships with other voluntary, statutory and private agencies to provide the best outcomes for clients;
- promote good practice and encourage statutory compliance across all tenures;
- improve our reach to those in greatest need by involving them in the design and delivery of our services;
- secure positive change where existing laws/policy are negatively impacting on those living in poor or inadequate housing circumstances.

How We Measure Impact

At Housing Rights we have embraced an outcomes based accountability approach to measuring impact. Using this approach, we look at each of the objectives outlined above under three headings:

How much did we do?

How well did we do it?

Is anyone better off?

For all of our areas of work this means that we begin with a theory of change. This spells out what we believe happens or can happen, (i.e. the outcomes) as a result of our inputs and activities. Inputs can include staff time, knowledge and expertise as well as other resources and activities that we do on a day to day basis for each project or area of work.

The theory of change also includes the outputs, which are different from outcomes. Outputs largely refer directly to the level of activity, whereas outcomes refer to the effectiveness of that activity in achieving the aims and objectives of the project (i.e. the impact).

In terms of measuring impact, it is important that we are able to define those outcomes and decide how best to measure them. For example, the theory of change for our public helpline includes the outcome 'clients have the information they need to make informed and appropriate housing decisions'. In order to address this outcome, it is necessary to ask our clients if they feel that they have the information they need as a result of calling the helpline and in order to do that, we use a client feedback survey¹⁸.

Surveys are used to assess our clients' experiences of Housing Rights services. We aim to survey as many clients as possible and in 2019/20 our public helpline survey was sent to 2,924 clients (random sample of all clients) with 554 completed surveys returned (a response rate of 19%). For the example above, clients were asked directly if they felt they had the information they needed to make informed and appropriate housing decisions as a result of the advice which they received after calling the helpline and 88% of clients answered this positively¹⁹. The outcomes which are presented in this report are largely based on our survey data. Other sources are indicated as appropriate.

In order to approach the measurement of outcomes, it is important to provide clear definitions of terms. This is a work in progress for Housing Rights and there are challenges in terms of separating out the effects of Housing Rights advice and interventions (including policy work) from the support provided by other organisations or individuals who may be involved with our clients.

It is also important to acknowledge that some elements of outcomes are beyond the control of our clients or of Housing Rights (or anyone else). This means that in some cases, in spite of the best intentions of advisers and clients, some situations and issues are not resolvable and this inevitably impacts on how the advice or advocacy for our clients is evaluated by them. In spite of this, the feedback from client surveys (which is always provided anonymously) is overwhelmingly positive. Whilst this is appreciated, we are keen to improve our services and the outcomes for our clients and this is the reason that we have adopted an outcomes based accountability approach to measuring impact.

With that in mind, this is the first report we have produced which details our impact in a very systematic way. We hope that we will continue to learn from this process and use that learning to improve our services and to improve the outcomes for our clients and also to inform decision making on future service delivery in order to focus limited resources on more of what has been shown to be effective.

Throughout this report, the anonymity of Housing Rights clients has been protected and the names and images used do not refer to actual clients. All names have been changed unless stated otherwise.

Strategic Objective:

To provide a reliable and independent housing advice service for the people of NI

Housing Rights offers a broad range of interventions which are independent, quality assured, tenure neutral, client focused, timely and effective. They encompass web based self- help options, a housing helpline, advocacy, negotiation and legal work including court representation.

How much did we do?



Helpline provided advice to **8,435** clients in 2019/20²⁰.



Housing Rights clients with more complex cases are referred to our casework and legal team. In 2019/20 our advisers dealt with **1,037** complex cases.



In 2019/20 Housing Rights advisers provided support in over **1,235** cases via the practitioner helpline²¹.

How well did we do it?

93% of service users were satisfied with the service (across the organisation).

100% of practitioners surveyed said that they viewed Housing Rights as an expert in housing and homelessness.

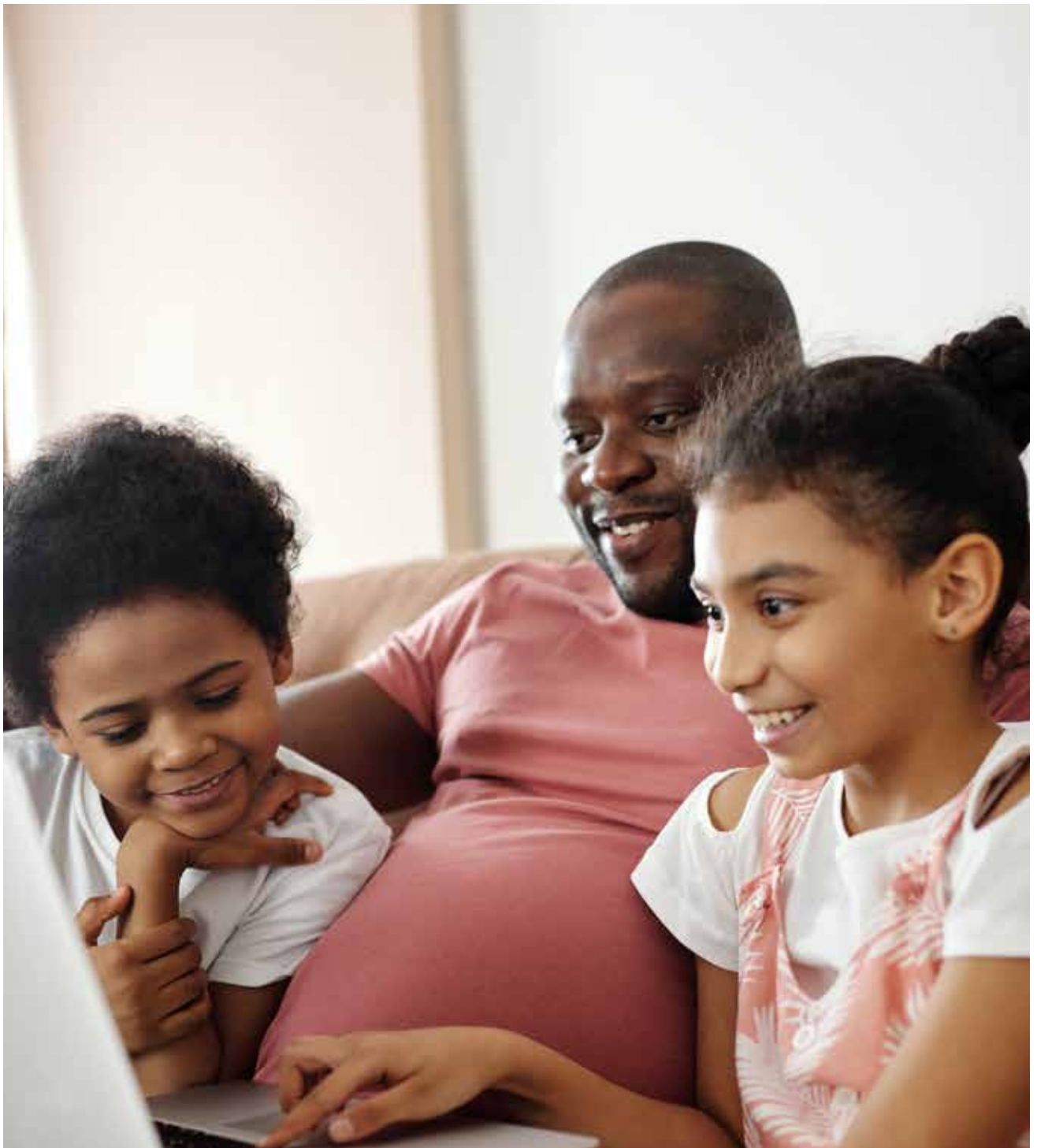
Is anyone better off?



Across the organisation, over **90%** of clients said that they felt better informed about their housing issues and better able to make informed and appropriate housing decisions as a result of the advice they received.



96% of practitioners felt that they were better equipped to help their clients with housing issues as a result of contacting our helpline.



Top issues for clients in 2019/20



1 in 10 calls related to **repair** issues.



1 in 5 clients contacted us regarding **accessing accommodation**.



15% of clients had issues related to **homelessness** (including threatened with homelessness).



Around a third of all our clients had issues related to **affordability**: (1 in 5 PRS clients / one third of social housing clients / 7 out of 10 owner-occupier clients).

Strategic Objective: To prevent homelessness

Housing Rights works to help those individuals and families who, if problems are unresolved, would be in danger of losing their home. We aim to help them either to remain in their current home or to obtain alternative suitable accommodation.

How much did we do?

Our advisers worked on **1,459** cases relating to the prevention of homelessness during 2019/20 including the following work:



594 cases relating to possession.



461 cases relating to a client's financial situation (including prevention of homelessness via Discretionary Housing Payments).



Our casework and legal service provided access to free legal representation in **403** cases.



Representing our clients at court on **541** occasions.

How well did we do it?

Respondents to our public helpline survey and feedback from our digital advice (email and live chat) were overwhelmingly positive about the advice they received, providing a satisfaction rating across all three services of **93%**.

Responses to our casework and legal survey were also overwhelmingly positive, providing a satisfaction rating of **92%**. In addition, **100%** of our Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme clients reported that they were satisfied with the service.

98% of our casework and legal survey respondents said that they felt that Housing Rights staff were courteous and treated them with respect and the same proportion also said that they felt that Housing Rights staff were knowledgeable about housing issues.

9 out of 10 clients who called the public helpline said that their call was answered in a timely fashion.



[Housing Rights adviser] made my experience very easy, put my mind at ease from the very first phone call. My only issue is that I hadn't contacted Housing Rights sooner - would have made for less undue stress.

Is anyone better off?

8 out of 10 clients reported that they were able to stay in their home as a result of the advice, advocacy and representation provided by Housing Rights²².

Our advice, advocacy and representation prevented **1,183** clients in Northern Ireland from becoming homeless²³ in 2019/20²⁴. The estimated savings to the public purse from these interventions is in excess of **£18m**²⁵. The work included the following:

541 successful cases relating to possession.

385 successful cases relating to client's financial situation (including Discretionary Housing Payments).

(it should be noted that there may be overlap between these categories as clients are often helped in several ways in order to prevent homelessness).

Gemma's story

Gemma was recovering from cancer and very ill. Although she was up to date on rent payments, her landlord was evicting her with one month's notice after 11 years as his tenant.

"The gentleman at Housing Rights explained all my rights, details of the legislation etc., told me how I was entitled to 3 months' notice and outlined how I could contact environmental health services if I had any problems. He also told me that I could consider applying to the Housing Executive for social housing.

I felt so ill and couldn't leave the house or research my rights at that time, so it was such a relief to be able to get this advice and the whole manner of the individual was so friendly and helpful."

Renting Rights

In September 2019 a new project for young people between the ages of 18-25 was launched entitled 'Renting Rights'. The aim of the project is to prevent homelessness for young renters and to help them to sustain their accommodation as well as supporting young people in meeting their housing costs.

Alison's story

Alison was 22, with 2 young children and a third child on the way when she made contact with Renting Rights. She was living in a ground floor social housing accommodation that had issues with damp and insects.

Alison felt that she was stuck in the unsuitable property and was worried about the impact it was having on her children. They had already been prescribed inhalers from their GP due to the damp in the property. When Alison made contact with us, we advocated on her behalf to her housing officer. We requested that she was awarded management transfer status given that the property required 'major repairs or improvements'. The status was granted and within 8 weeks she was rehoused permanently.

Strategic Objective:

To alleviate homelessness

Housing Rights works to help those already without a home to find a new home. This may include securing a temporary housing solution until a suitable permanent one can be found.

How much did we do?

Housing Rights advisers and caseworkers dealt with over **500** cases where clients were experiencing homelessness in 2019/20. In some of these cases, clients were roofless or in urgent need of temporary accommodation.

Many of these clients had complex needs which requires Housing Rights caseworkers to liaise with other voluntary, community and statutory organisations in order to access accommodation and ensure that clients are housed safely.

How well did we do it?

97% of survey respondents who said that Housing Rights had helped alleviate their homelessness were satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received.



"You were in my corner, thank you for all you did".

"I was a mess last time I came out of prison, I don't know what I would have done without you! Help with all areas: mental health, addiction, benefits, housing, GP".

Is anyone better off?

Housing Rights advisers helped to alleviate homelessness for **493** clients in 2019/20 (95% of homeless cases²⁶).

Darren's story

Darren suffers from serious health conditions as well as anxiety and depression and was in urgent need of accommodation but unsure where to turn to.

"I become frightened when I have to speak with people about serious issues. I found my case worker to be not only courteous and informative, but very patient and empathetic. Each time I was in contact with her she was fully up to date with my case and my needs. I couldn't recommend this service higher. It took a great weight off my shoulders and was of immense support to me".



Strategic Objective:

To improve the housing circumstances for people who are in need

Critical evidence for the provision of a reliable and independent housing advice service is provided by exploring the impact which our work has on the people who contact us for advice, advocacy and representation in terms of whether or not their housing circumstances have improved as a result of contacting Housing Rights.

Housing Rights applies the following criteria in determining whether clients have improved housing circumstances as a result of the advice, advocacy and representation which they have received:

- Clients have been helped to sustain their accommodation where appropriate.
- Clients have been helped to find suitable accommodation where appropriate.
- Clients have been helped to meet their housing costs.
- Clients have been helped to resolve a housing dispute with a landlord (private landlord / NIHE / Housing Association), a neighbour or a lender.
- Clients have been helped to access better quality housing or helped to improve their current accommodation (e.g. negotiating repairs) where appropriate/relevant.

How much did we do?

Across all Housing Rights services and projects, our advisers and caseworkers dealt with **12,156** cases in 2019/20. The help and support ranged from one-off advice on general housing matters to detailed casework and advocating on behalf of clients with statutory agencies, voluntary agencies and housing providers as well as providing legal representation.

Most cases involved clients with more than one issue (on average, clients presented with 3-4 issues which were independent of each other). Some of these issues were able to be dealt with by helpline advisers (including via email and online chat) and other issues were dealt with by the casework and legal team.



1/4 of all cases were primarily about affordability issues.



1 in 10 clients reported having a dispute with a landlord or neighbour and all reported being helped to resolve their dispute as a result of the advice which they received²⁷.



Around **1 in 10** clients reported having a repair issue and were helped to improve their accommodation as a result of the advice which they received²⁸.

How well did we do it?

The overwhelming majority of clients were satisfied with the service across the organisation (94%)²⁹, however undoubtedly some issues were not resolvable for clients.



The advisor spoke in plain English, clearly explaining each of the relevant points and patiently repeated anything I was unclear about.

Is anyone better off?

94% of cases resulted in improved housing circumstances as determined by the above criteria³⁰.

93% of clients who presented with issues related to their housing circumstances, reported being able to sustain their accommodation as a result of the support which they received through Housing Rights.

85% of clients who needed to access accommodation, reported that they were helped to do so as a result of the advice and support they received³¹.

Percentage of Clients - Improved Housing Circumstances



David's story

David fell into mortgage arrears as a result of losing his disability benefits. It went on to lead to his home being almost repossessed.

"If it weren't for the work of Housing Rights I would probably be dead. [Housing Rights caseworker] bought me more time and as a result I was able to find a private buyer who is now my new landlord. At the time all this was happening I was seriously depressed and was suicidal. Thankfully my mental state and my personal and financial life is a lot better thanks to the help Housing Rights gave me".



Strategic Objective:

To expand our reach by enhancing our digital services

Housing Rights aims to develop their digital services by increasing the use of digital technologies in providing advice, information, tools and support to help more people to make informed choices and resolve their own housing issues.

The majority of people who interact with Housing Rights do so through the website (www.housingadviceNI.org). It has the widest reach of any product or service which Housing Rights provides, with around **2,000** visitors each day. It directs people to appropriate sources of assistance whether they are in need of a simple answer or more intensive housing support.

The website contains information on homelessness, housing options and private renting as well as information on benefits, grants and schemes that may help people to afford or maintain their homes. It includes targeted sections for underserved groups, including young people, prisoners and their families and people who don't have English as a first language and is available 24/7 to anyone with access to the internet.

In addition, recognising that people are increasingly seeking support via online sources, Housing Rights has been providing advice via email and online chat facility for a number of years, accounting for between 8 and 10% of all initial contacts between 2017 and 2020. However, online contact was the preferred option for a quarter of our clients under 25 years old whilst only around 1 in 10 of clients over 25 preferred online contact via email and an online chat facility³².

Following the Covid-19 outbreak, the number of people seeking advice via digital means trebled compared to the previous quarter. The increased demand for our digital advice services (email advice and online chat advice) has been unprecedented and Housing Rights has responded to this by commissioning a review of our digital strategy to ensure that we can meet this increasing demand.

How much did we do?



2019/20 saw a **60%** increase in demand for our email advice and live chat from the previous year.



Our website (housingadviceNI.org) had **1.54 million** page views in 2019/20 with **720k** individual users³³.



1,425 advice sessions were provided via email / online chat in 2019/20³⁴.

How well did we do it?

9 out of 10 users rated their experience of using the Housing Advice NI website as 'good to excellent' and would recommend the website to others. In addition, **97%** were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the information they were able to access via the website.

99% of respondents to the survey reported being satisfied with the service and **100%** of respondents felt that Housing Rights staff were helpful, courteous and treated them with respect and reported that they felt that Housing Rights staff were knowledgeable about housing issues.

Is anyone better off?

94% of respondents reported that the information they accessed had helped them with their housing problem.

Some respondents took the time to provide more detailed feedback on their experience of using the website:



First time here and I do spend a fair amount of time on various Government websites, trying to find information in relation to work. I would say this is one of the more comprehensive tools I've accessed. Good Job!

99% of respondents to the email advice/online chat survey reported that the advice they received had helped them to understand their housing issue and 96% said that they had been signposted to relevant organisations, services or people.

Around 40% of respondents to the survey provided qualitative feedback and the overwhelming majority of this was positive, with only a few comments relating to potential improvements to the service (and this information has been taken on board - see section on 'Maximising Impact').



I have been so lost about my situation not knowing where to start to find answers and within a few minutes all my problems were solved, my stress is gone and I'm hopeful and more relaxed about the whole thing, thanks so much forever grateful!



Housing Rights launched a new digital service in 2019/20 - SmartRenter.org. Work is ongoing to develop SmartRenter into a tenancy management tool for private renters in Northern Ireland, which will help renters make informed decisions about making a home in the private rented sector.

In its current iteration, the site contains easily digested chunks of information on renters' rights and options and simple tools to help a SmartRenter navigate through the private renting journey, from renting for the first time through to moving out of a rented home.

Strategic Objective:

To work collaboratively and develop effective partnerships with other voluntary, statutory and private agencies to provide the best outcomes for clients

Housing Rights works closely with our colleagues in frontline advice agencies to support them to develop and maintain the skills and knowledge to provide housing advice within their own community. This includes the provision of resources and services to support housing practitioners (professional resources, practitioner helpline and training). Our partnership working enables the implementation of effective inter-agency referral processes for clients who need additional services. Housing Rights actively explores opportunities for partnership working which will recognise the unique contribution of each organisation towards achieving our shared goals, including our policy work (e.g. Cliff Edge Coalition – see below).

Practitioner Support

Housing Rights runs regular practitioner forums which bring together professionals from across the housing sector to focus on specific topics and issues. In addition, the team produces professional resources aimed at delivering accurate and up-to-date information to housing professionals. Housing Rights also maintains the only dedicated resource on housing law in NI, 'Housing Law In Practice NI (HLPNI)'. HLPNI is a unique publication, offered to Housing Rights' members only. The publication contains a wealth of information on a wide range of housing topics, e.g. homelessness, housing debt and owner occupation and is updated on a regular basis in order to ensure that members have access to the most up-to-date information on housing law, policy and practice in NI.

In addition, a practitioner helpline is available to housing practitioners who are providing advice and guidance to their client group and includes people across the voluntary, statutory and private sector e.g. solicitors, housing association staff, Housing Executive staff, estate agents, social services, probation, Environmental Health, MLAs and constituency office staff.

Housing Rights holds regular training courses and seminars which are aimed at enhancing the capacity of frontline practitioners (staff and volunteers) within other agencies with specialist support on housing and homelessness issues in order to meet the needs of their users and to keep housing professionals up to date with the latest developments in the sector. Training is in the form of scheduled training courses (including courses with OCN accreditation) and packaged training courses (bespoke training aimed at providing for the needs of partner organisations with regard to housing issues).

How much did we do?

Over the course of 2019/20, **57** practitioners attended Practitioner Forums and Housing Rights produced professional resources organised around the following issues:

- Social Sector Size Criteria ('Bedroom Tax')
- Housing Rights of Migrants after Brexit
- Accessing Discretionary Support and Financial Assistance

Advice and information was provided to practitioners via the practitioner helpline on **1,235** cases throughout 2019/20.

Over the course of 2019/20 **1,309** housing practitioners undertook training with Housing Rights on a range of subjects including the private rented sector, welfare reform, housing debt and financial capability, homelessness and housing options. In addition to training sessions on these and other issues, **70** practitioners achieved accredited training, including Housing Rights' flagship training course: Housing Advice Training Programme, which is a 4-day course accredited through OCN.

How well did we do it?



9 out of 10 practitioners surveyed had accessed the professional resources (including HLPNI).



97% of respondents to the practitioner survey were satisfied with the practitioner helpline service.



100% of housing professionals surveyed viewed Housing Rights as an expert on housing issues³⁵.



99% of training participants who completed a feedback sheet reported that they were satisfied with the training they received.



"Housing Rights training is always of the highest quality and up to date with cases and legislation".

"The training was comprehensive and well delivered, though I wonder if some of it could have been implemented online as taking a complete day out of work did put me under a little pressure³⁶".

It should be noted that in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the effect of lockdown measures on our ability to carry out in-person training, our training sessions moved to an online format.

Is anyone better off?



95% of survey respondents reported that they felt better informed about housing issues as a result of using the professional resources and 98% said that they felt better able to advise their clients.



97% of respondents to the survey reported that they felt that the advice they received had provided them with the information required to address their clients' housing problems.



99% of Housing Rights training participants reported that they had improved skills and knowledge as a result of the training they undertook³⁷.



9 out of 10 training participants felt that they will be better able to advise their clients as a result of taking part in the training.



9 out of 10 training participants also felt that they were better informed about relevant housing issues as a result of the training they undertook.



"Resources are informative, not complicated and accessible to all members, we are a small charity and the service you guys provide are invaluable to an organisation like us, we are able to access legalities around housing, training etc."

"You all do a fantastic job and without your service, I wouldn't be as confident in approaching housing issues with clients. You just give that little bit extra validation for me and it helps hugely"

"We always find HR training to be helpful / well-presented / good content. Trainers are always skilled and knowledgeable. As an experienced advice team, we are always looking for advanced level training across all areas of Housing Advice"

The following are exemplars of our partnership working.

Housing Advice in Prisons Service

The focus of the Housing Advice in Prisons and Beyond the Gate (BTG), is on preventing homelessness for those entering and leaving custody via the provision of timely, comprehensive housing advice, advocacy and representation. This maximises the potential for tenancy sustainment where possible, and ensures that appropriate housing solutions are identified on release.

Prevention of homelessness is at the heart of the Housing Advice in Prisons Project. Assisting prisoners to maintain stability with their accommodation can be the foundation for successful rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. Effective resettlement and reintegration into the community on release plays a critical role in preventing individuals from reoffending and returning to prison. This area of Housing Rights work would not be possible without effective collaborative working across organisations, both statutory and non-statutory.

How much did we do?

In 2019/20 Housing Rights provided advice, advocacy and representation on **947** prison cases and for **70** Beyond the Gate clients.

How well did we do it?

All of the BTG clients were satisfied with the service they received. In addition, **99%** of prison clients felt that they had the information they needed which would help them make informed and appropriate housing choices on release as a result of the advice from Housing Rights advisers.

Is anyone better off?

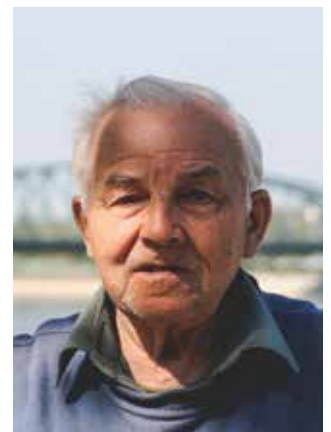
319 cases were identified where accommodation was secured for prison clients on release.

258 clients were supported to sustain their accommodation whilst in custody and **460** clients were prevented from becoming homeless through our work in prisons. This includes **9 out of 10** BTG clients who were prevented from homelessness as a result of taking part in the project.

John's story

John is an elderly man who has been in and out of prison for most of his adult life and suffers from mental and physical disabilities. John was being released as homeless even though he had been awarded FDA status by NIHE.

However, due to previous issues at various hostels, John had been barred from staying in them. John had also been refused a support package via his local Trust and so Housing Rights worked with a hostel in John's local area as well as with NIHE, NI Prison Service and a local healthcare provider to put the required support in place which would enable the hostel they approached to provide accommodation for John.





"I know I can ask to speak with Housing rights at any time. I am very vulnerable as I have a learning disability and they have helped me keep my home".

"I only received a short sentence and my home has been secured for my release. I will therefore not end up homeless and know that I can return home on my release".

Cliff Edge Coalition

Housing Rights is a co-convenor with the Law Centre NI of the Cliff Edge Coalition which was formed in early 2019 to campaign for the extension and strengthening of vital welfare reform mitigations which were due to end in March 2020. The Coalition has since grown to a group of over 100 member organisations and has been campaigning to ensure:

1. The current welfare mitigations (such as the bedroom tax and benefit cap mitigations) were extended beyond March 2020 when they were due to end.
2. The mitigations are strengthened to take account of new challenges such as Universal Credit, including the two-child limit, and cuts to housing benefits in the private rented sector.

To date the Cliff Edge Coalition has helped to influence major developments:

- The New Decade New Approach deal included a commitment to reviewing and extending welfare mitigations beyond March 2020.
- The Minister for Communities committed to bringing forward legislation to extend bedroom tax mitigations indefinitely.
- Department for Communities officials confirmed that necessary regulations will be amended to extend the other existing mitigations.
- To date, these existing mitigations have been extended through contingency arrangements and work is ongoing on the relevant legislation.
- The Minister also committed to a review to consider areas in which the mitigations could be strengthened, and to involving those directly affected by welfare reform.

Community Housing Advice Partnership

The Community Housing Advice Partnership (CHAP) supports generalist advice agencies throughout NI to deliver high quality advice on housing and homelessness in their community.

This is achieved by developing the skills and expertise of staff and volunteers in 43 CHAP partner agencies³⁸ providing frontline advice by providing relevant up-to-date training and information resources as well as direct access to Housing Rights staff who can offer specialist advice and consultancy support.



Strategic Objective:

To promote good practice and encourage statutory compliance across all tenures

Housing Rights works proactively to raise awareness amongst landlords in the social and private rented sector of their respective rights and responsibilities. This is achieved in part through the provision of a dedicated Landlord Advice helpline as well as a new Housing Mediation Service.

Housing Mediation Service

The new mediation service³⁹ focuses on the provision of specialist mediation for disputes between tenants and registered landlords in the private rented sector. The service aims to provide a means by which tenants and landlords can work towards a negotiated settlement of disputes through an experienced mediator.

Landlord Advice

The Landlord Advice helpline offers impartial advice, information and signposting to registered landlords in relation to the law in NI on matters relating to the private rented sector. This service helps landlords to be compliant with legislative requirements, manage tenancies in a responsible and professional manner, access specialist help when required and have the potential to prevent homelessness through unnecessary evictions.

How much did we do?

Landlord Advice helpline operates 25 hours per week, between 9.30 am and 2.30 pm Monday to Friday. In 2019/20 our advisers assisted with 1,617 cases via telephone and email advice.

After an increase in enquiries from landlords and rental agents who were confused about how Brexit would impact on the residency rights of European tenants, we wrote new content for the landlord section of our Housing Advice NI website and published a number of webinars to guide landlords through the complexities of Brexit.

How did well did we do it?

All of the respondents to our survey⁴⁰ were satisfied with the service and reported that Housing Rights staff treated them courteously and with respect. They also all reported that they would use the service again.



First time I've contacted the advice service and was most impressed with the quick response and informative info. Will definitely use it again, if needed and will be telling any other landlords I know about the service.

Is anyone better off?

Almost all of those who responded to the client feedback survey had a positive outcome (99%) and all of the respondents (including those without a resolution to their issue) felt that the advice and information they received had either helped to resolve their issues (88%) or had been pointed in the direction of support (10%).



"I found [Landlord adviser] extremely helpful & knowledgeable. I have an issue with a rental agent which has caused me a lot of anxiety. I refer to myself as 'a reluctant landlord', for reasons explained to [Landlord adviser]"

"She showed empathy & understanding of my situation & the e-mail she sent me is very informative. She was excellent in every way & is well suited to this job. I owe her a big thank you".



Strategic Objective:

To improve our reach to those in greatest need by involving them in the design and delivery of our services

Our peers and volunteers come from a wide range of community backgrounds and housing experiences, including those often overlooked and marginalised such as ethnic minority communities, young people and private rented tenants. We seek to ensure that they have an opportunity to (1) shape our services to help make them more relevant/accessible to their community and (2) influence/engage directly with policy makers.

BME Housing Champions Project

The project aims to build the capacity of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in NI in relation to their understanding and knowledge about housing issues and to raise awareness of advice services which they can access. The project recruits and trains peer volunteers from BME communities (BME Peer Housing Champions also referred to as 'BME Peer advisers'). Peers receive training in housing advice as well as interpreter training so that they can deliver housing advice to their local community.

In response to the housing issues raised by Brexit and Covid-19 and the possible implications for our clients, our advisers, caseworkers, policy, training and communications teams worked together to create training sessions, web content and provide professional resources to enable our advisers and those in our partner organisations to respond to the issues raised by Brexit.

How much did we do?

Our BME Peer advisers assisted in the delivery of advice at **57** 'housing clinics' across NI and provided advice and advocacy in **93** cases.

Our BME peers were also involved in translating text regarding 'Housing and Brexit' for our website⁴¹. This resulted in web content containing specific advice and guidance on Brexit and housing issues which was translated into 7 languages⁴² and this content has been viewed over **3,500** times.

Housing Rights staff developed Brexit related web content, professional resources and delivered 3 practitioner webinars which were attended by **564** people.

Housing Rights trained **13** peer volunteers from **7** different countries on Brexit related housing issues. Our peers then assisted Housing Rights staff to deliver **11** housing clinics where they provided information and signposting for people from a range of backgrounds. This information was provided for clinic attendees in their own languages by our peer volunteers.

How well did we do it?

All of those who responded to the BME client survey⁴³ were satisfied with the service and felt that they understood their rights and responsibilities better as a result of the advice and information they received.

Is anyone better off?



70% of our BME clients were able to access accommodation as a result of the advice and support they received from Housing Rights.



9 out of 10 clients felt that they had the information they needed to make good housing decisions and felt more confident in dealing with their housing issues.



94% of clients said that they would know which organisation to contact for housing issues in future.

Our BME Housing Champions have been involved in providing extensive feedback via taking part in in-depth interviews in order to improve on the design of the project going forward.



I enjoyed meeting people from diverse backgrounds. I didn't know much about housing before I started the project, but now I have quite a bit of knowledge and that has already benefitted my community.

Tifow and Fatuma (their real names) are Peer Housing Champions and founding members of the NI Somali Association (NISA). NISA is a charitable organisation established to support the integration of Somali people into established communities, whilst raising awareness of language and education barriers facing the Somali community. Successful completion of the BME Housing Champions programme coupled with their extensive working relationship with the Somali community since 2012, offered a meaningful outlet for their new founded housing knowledge and interpreter skills.

Working with our Peer & Volunteer Development Coordinator, Tifow and Fatuma established twice monthly advice clinics at NISA premises in South Belfast to provide a much needed confidential space for people seeking help with their housing issues in their own language. Close mentoring by our Housing Advice Development Officer enabled Tifow and Fatuma to provide ongoing housing advice to their Somali peers with the built-in pathway to refer more complex housing cases for specialist advice and advocacy.

Prison Peer advisers

Housing Rights' Prison Peer advisers are prisoners, who have undergone training with Housing Rights and are supported by our Peer Advice Coordinator to provide basic information and one-to-one advice on housing and homelessness issues to prisoners and can refer complex cases to Housing Rights advisers.

The Peer Advice service aims to meet the basic housing advice needs of all prisoners across NI on committal by providing committal induction sessions. It also offers follow up one-to-one appointments with Prison Peer advisers for prisoners and ensures that all prisoners upon committal are aware of the specialist housing advice service which is available to prisoners during their time in custody.

How much did we do?

Our Prison Peer advisers delivered **289** induction sessions to **2,393** people on committal to the three NI prisons and assisted **1,378** clients with housing issues via **1,533** one to one advice sessions. In addition, **804** complex cases were referred to Housing Rights prisons caseworkers.

How well did we do it?

100% of Prison Peer advisers' clients⁴⁴ were satisfied with the advice they received.

Is anyone better off?

99% of the Prison Peer adviser clients who needed to be referred to other services, organisations or people regarding their housing problems reported that they were pointed in the right direction as a result of the advice they received.

All of the Prison Peer advisers' clients said that they would know where to go for help with housing issues in future and reported that their stress regarding their housing issue was reduced as a result of the advice they received from our Prison Peers.

Renters' Voice



The Renters' Voice project commenced in November 2019 and is focused on engaging tenants more likely to face problems in the private rented sector due to low income and other factors. Its aims are to build a strong voice for private tenants in Northern Ireland and a culture of tenant participation in development of the Private Rented Sector.

Whilst the project is still at a very early stage and further development has been hampered by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, Renters' Voice has carried out two surveys of private renters, focused on their experiences during the pandemic.

The feedback from the first Renters' Voice survey was taken into account in formulation of the guidance by the Department for Communities when they were considering their response to Covid-19 and it is hoped that the views obtained will continue to inform the work of the Department as they manage their response to the pandemic.



Strategic Objective:

To secure positive change where existing laws/ policy are negatively impacting on those living in poor or inadequate housing circumstances

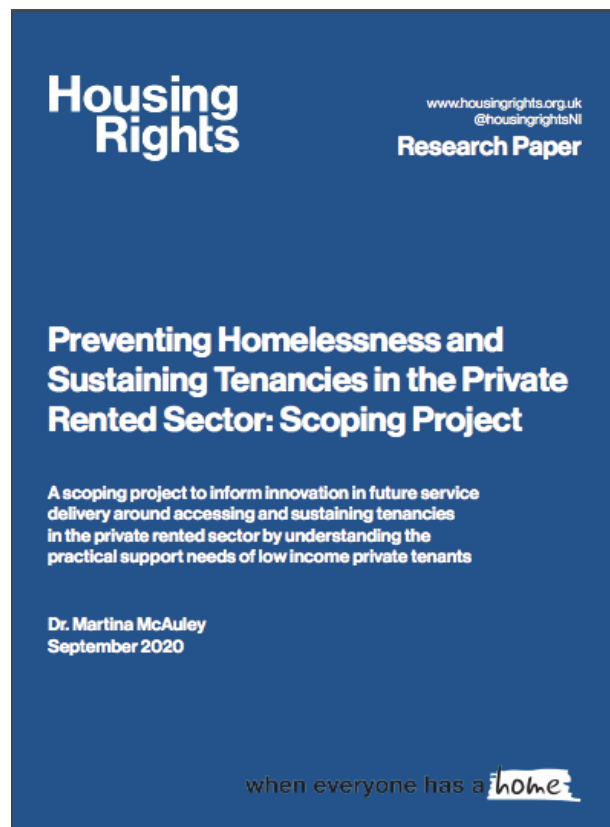
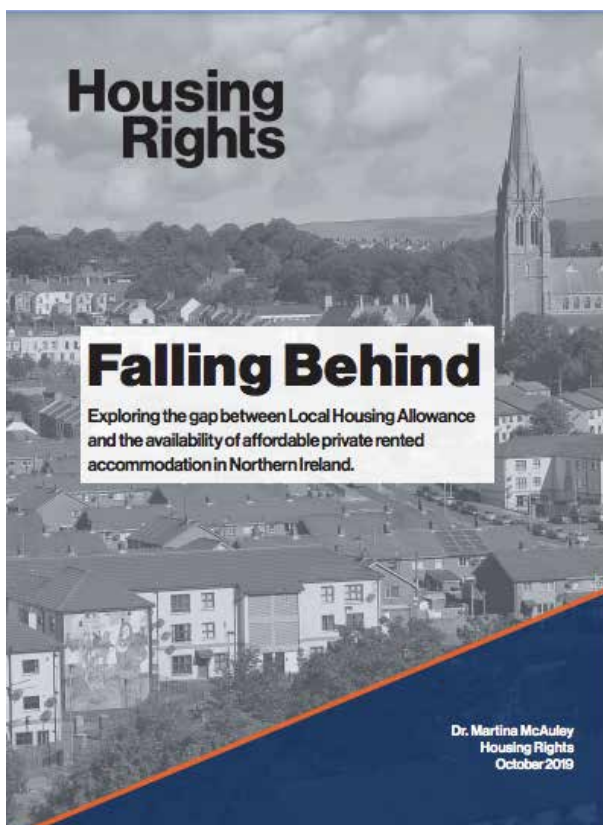
Housing Rights collates a range of data based on the experiences of our clients. We use this evidence to support our policy positions and to identify areas of concern for our clients. We also use evidence to offer independent input and analysis to inform the housing policy agenda in NI.

How much did we do?

In 2019/20 Housing Rights produced two major pieces of research: 'Falling Behind: Exploring the gap between Local Housing Allowance and the availability of affordable private rented accommodation in Northern Ireland' which was supported by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) and 'Preventing Homelessness and Sustaining Tenancies in the PRS: Scoping Project'.

Both reports were accompanied by policy briefing papers based on the evidence presented in the research.

In addition, our policy team has achieved **55** opportunities to influence change through responding to consultation papers, providing evidence to government through submitting written and oral evidence to enquiries and attending meetings/briefings with key stakeholders and decision makers.



How well did we do it?

17 of Housing Rights' policy recommendations were acted upon, including:

- The commitment in the New Decade New Approach Deal to include housing as a standalone housing outcome in forthcoming Programme for Government.
- A number of additions made to the NIHE's Homelessness Strategy Year 3 implementation plan following Housing Right's recommendations such as a commitment to defining homelessness prevention for use within NIHE and involving partner agencies to ensure a common definition.
- The Joint Westminster Committee's report into Welfare Policy in NI included recommendations made by Housing Rights through both oral and written evidence, including the extension of the bedroom tax mitigations and a call for the Department for Communities to outline its work to address issues with the payment of UC Housing Costs.

Is anyone better off?

10 positive changes to legislation policy or practice were influenced by our policy work including:

- The announcement by the Minister that primary legislation will be brought forward to extend the bedroom tax mitigations and the subsequent inclusion in the Budget Bill 2020 of clauses to enable the Executive and DfC to continue with these payments until the primary legislation can be passed.
- The Department for Communities removed the requirement to take out a Universal Credit (UC) Advance Payment loan before people can access the Contingency Fund grant.
- A number of the emergency measures introduced to help protect tenants and home owners during the pandemic e.g. the extension of NTQ periods to 12 weeks for those living in the private rented sector; the announcement that any social tenants facing difficulties paying rent during Covid-19 will not be evicted; access for new UC claimants to Discretionary Housing Payment to cover their full rent for a 13- week period.



Maximising impact

This section explores the lessons that can be learned from the process of preparing this report which can be used to improve our evaluative work going forward. We explore how well we are measuring impact and how this could be improved in the future.

Definitions

Housing Rights has made a significant effort to provide clarity with regard to definitions (e.g. what constitutes 'positive outcomes' for our clients). The process of preparing this report has raised some substantive issues in relation to definitions which will be addressed over the coming year. In addition, there is now a process of annual reviews of all of the theories of change and outcomes based accountability report cards across the organisation.

Improving data / evidence

Case records

Housing Rights' case recording system is used primarily by advisers and advice service managers to track clients' cases. It is not necessarily a tool which lends itself to evaluating the experiences of our clients, but by necessity it has been used to do so as it is the most comprehensive tool available. The preparation of this report has enabled Housing Rights to see the value of addressing the shortcomings of the case recording system for researching our clients' experiences and to this end, a review of the data input to the system (variables and categories) is now underway.

Surveys

Survey data is used extensively throughout this report and whilst every effort is made to ensure that as many of our clients as possible have an opportunity to provide feedback via surveys (which is always anonymous – no identifying information is asked of clients completing surveys), response rates are still not as good as they could be. Whilst innovations in survey distribution were introduced during 2019/20 for some surveys (website, helpline and Casework), it is accepted that there is still much work to be done to improve survey response across the organisation.

Qualitative data

In many cases, what can be measured easily is all that is measured and often this alone forms the basis of the evidence of impact. However, Housing Rights is committed to presenting evidence not only in the form of numbers, but also in the form of the stories of our clients' experiences and the impact which they report to us via surveys and case studies. These form an important part of the evidence of the impact of our work on our clients' lives.

Whilst space is provided in all surveys for our clients to give written feedback, some of the surveys used in 2019/20 asked clients to expand only on their negative responses or experiences, which is good for service improvement, but some clients used this space to provide positive feedback, which highlighted the importance of allowing this useful function to be used in whatever way the client wished to use it.

End user experiences

One of the major issues raised in exploring the impact of Housing Rights' work is the process required to gather data from end users in projects where Housing Rights provides information and training for organisations and therefore do not have direct access to end users in order to gather evidence of impact. For example, the CHAP project is one where Housing Rights works with partner agencies in helping them to deliver housing advice and support for their clients. The clients therefore are not directly helped by Housing Rights and this poses particular issues when gathering evidence of our impact in this project. However, a review focused on measuring impact on end users this project is now underway. This presents a significant challenge in that support by Housing Rights is provided indirectly via the staff and volunteers working in the agencies. Therefore, any consideration of measuring impact on both the agencies and on end users (who will be unaware of Housing Rights involvement) will need to be proportionate.

Case studies

Whilst case studies are often used to illustrate the difficulties faced by our clients (e.g. in preparing evidence for government and statutory bodies), less importance has been placed on case studies which evidence the successful stories where our advice, advocacy and representation has had a positive impact on outcomes for our clients. This evidence gap was highlighted in the preparation of this report and is now being addressed by a working group within Housing Rights which will aim to improve the collation of appropriate case studies for a range of uses and to ensure that any data collection meets GDPR standards.

Feasibility study – data limitations

Housing Rights benefited from a Pro Bono Economics (PBE) feasibility project which was delivered under the Capacity-Building Programme funded by the Oak Foundation. The aim of the project is to advise grantees on measuring and evaluating their impact. Housing Rights chose their work in prisons as a case study for the project. The PBE feasibility study concluded that there is not currently sufficient, robust evidence available to support a full cost benefit analysis of Housing Rights work in prisons. Whilst this was disappointing, the report was hugely beneficial in terms of highlighting the issues with data collection which are largely beyond Housing Rights' control. The report also addressed the wider issue regarding the feasibility of tracking clients on a longer term basis in order to assess the impact of our projects.

Collaborative working

An external review of the Cliff Edge Coalition is underway at the time of writing and it is anticipated that the learning gleaned from this will inform our collaborative working on policy issues across the organisation and with other organisations going forward.

In addition, the need to more effectively involve external stakeholders in our feedback on projects which involve collaborative working has been highlighted in the process of completing this Impact Report. Whether this feedback is in the form of survey data or a more in-depth qualitative approach is yet to be determined, but the importance of involving stakeholders has been recognised.

In conclusion...

The process of undertaking this impact report has enabled Housing Rights to review our data collection and evaluate our data requirements going forward. Whilst the groundwork had already been in place in terms of devising a theory of change and Outcomes Based Accountability report cards for all projects and areas of work, this impact report has allowed us to pull all of this information together and has provided the bridge between our Strategic Plan (which outlines our objectives) and our Business Plan (which outlines our activities and outcomes), giving us a bird's eye view of what we do which has illuminated how we can do it better in future in order to improve our impact.

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Endnotes

1. Latest full year figure available.
2. Households on the waiting list with 30 points or more are classified as being in 'housing stress'.
3. Source: The Homelessness Monitor 2016 and The Homelessness Monitor 2020
4. Source: Northern Ireland Homeless Bulletin July to December 2019
5. Source: NIHE 2018 <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Homelessness/Rough-sleeping>
6. Source: Poverty Bulletin: Northern Ireland 2018/19 – latest figures available
7. Defined as households with income after housing costs (and adjusted for household size and type) which are below 60% of the median income. Source: JRF Poverty in NI 2018.
8. Equality Commission (2016) Equality Commission response to the Department of Social Development's review into the role and regulation of the private rented sector
9. NIHE (2019) Northern Ireland Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMAs) Scoping Study and Impact Assessment. Economic Research and Evaluation for NIHE
10. Poverty in Northern Ireland 2018.
11. This term refers to homeowners who are just about managing to maintain the cost of their mortgages, see for example Wallace et al (2014), NI has a higher proportion of homeowners on lower incomes and in lower occupational classes than the UK as a whole.
12. DSDNI (2014) Repossessions Taskforce: Initial Evidence Paper – negative equity, arrears and possessions in NI.
13. This is not the same as the NI 'Fitness Standard' which is the statutory minimum standard set out in legislation. The Decent Homes Standard was adopted in NI in 2004 and includes the fitness standard as the first component but also includes three additional criteria related to state of repair, facilities and services and thermal comfort.
14. NI Housing Condition Survey 2016, NIHE 2018
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*
17. These strategic objectives are expanded upon in the remaining sections of this report.
18. The survey and the approach were peer reviewed in 2018 by academics specialising in evaluating outcomes.
19. This represents a margin of error of +/- 4 and confidence level of 95% based on total number of cases over the year.
20. Including 1,425 clients via digital services (email, live chat and digital advice – see section on Digital Services).
21. Included in figure for helpline cases (8,435).
22. Data from Housing Rights Casework and Legal survey 2019/20.
23. This represents 81% of the cases relating to homelessness prevention which were carried out and is very close to the 80% recorded on self-reported surveys, which speaks to the robustness of the survey data.
24. 136 of these cases relate to the HPCDS scheme. In these cases, clients were first contacted at court by Housing Rights caseworker, who is a qualified solicitor. The Scheme is designed as an emergency intervention, offering free independent expert advice and representation, to people at the point of crisis where they are facing the immediate prospect of losing their home.
25. Cost of homelessness in NI estimated to be £15,470 in 2015 (Boyle, 2015).
26. 28 cases were recorded as either 'assistance no longer required' / 'case unsuccessful' / or 'client not contactable' as is sometimes the case when a client is no longer able to be contacted in order to progress a case (this was true for 10 cases).
27. Source: client survey data.
28. Source: case records.
29. Total number of clients who completed surveys 1,519 across all services. Includes 316 surveys relating to the Housing Advice website.
30. This figure is based on self-reported survey results for helpline, casework and legal, CHAP clients and matches data extracted from the Case Recording system, which speaks to the robustness of the survey data. Data for Beyond the Gate clients and HPCDS clients was taken from Case Records and therefore based on information provided by caseworkers on case outcomes.
31. Source: client survey data.
32. Source: case recording system.
33. Source: website analytics.
34. During 2019/20 only one part-time member of staff was dedicated to providing online chat and email advice, however, the service has since been fully adopted into mainstream services.
35. Source: Annual Practitioner Survey
36. This feedback has been taken on board – see section on 'Maximising Impact'.
37. Based on Training feedback sheets issued to all training participants with >30% return rate.
38. N=167. Although the number of staff and volunteers in these organisations fluctuates, there are estimated to be around 200+ staff and volunteers altogether.
39. Since the Mediation service is new for 2020, no quantitative data is available.
40. There were only 59 responses to the 2019/20 survey and so this result should be treated with some caution. Based on 1,617 cases for the year the number of survey responses which would be representative would be between 90 (for 10% margin of error) and 306 (for 5% margin of error).
41. Since March 2020, our peers have also helped to translate information on Covid-19 for our website.
42. Bulgarian, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak
43. BME project staff had the survey translated for clients who did not speak English.
44. Based on 116 survey responses, which is representative of 1,378 clients at a margin of error of 8%. Therefore, we can be confident that if all clients had responded, at least 92% would return this satisfaction rating.

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