

Policy Priorities for a new NI Assembly Mandate 2022 - 2027



**Housing
Rights**

when everyone has a **home**

Housing Rights is Northern Ireland's leading independent provider of specialist housing advice. For over 50 years we have been helping people to find and keep a home. Housing Rights' policy work is informed by the views and experiences of the people who contact us for advice and aims to support the identification of evidence based, user informed solutions.

In addition to our policy work we provide a range of services for both the general public and practitioners working in the housing sector.

Support for the public

We help ensure people in Northern Ireland live in safe, suitable and affordable homes through:



A housing advice helpline and online chat service



Advocacy and legal representation work



Emergency legal representation at court for homeowners facing repossession



Specialist housing advice services within the three prisons in Northern Ireland



Beyond the Gate, a service aimed at helping ex-offenders access and sustain accommodation to help ensure their rehabilitation into the community



A housing mediation service offering a means to help resolve disputes between tenants and landlords in the private rented sector



A specialist service aimed at younger people that helps to prevent homelessness as well as enabling younger people to remain in the family home, access suitable accommodation, sustain current living arrangements and meet housing costs



Up-to-date information and advice on our public advice website



A specialist service helping landlords understand their legal requirements and promoting good practice in the private rented sector. The service is available to registered private landlords as well as estate and managing agents

Support for practitioners

We help ensure housing practitioners are equipped with the information, knowledge and skills to provide advice and support to their clients through:

- A [housing helpline for practitioners](#)
- The delivery of a broad range of high-quality specialist [training courses](#) (both accredited and non-accredited) on housing and welfare related issues. Each year over [800 trainees](#) attend our courses.
- Delivery of a [practitioners' forum](#) 3 times a year to keep our members up to date with the latest information on housing legislation, policy, and practice
- [Professional resources](#) containing comprehensive information on specific housing issues
- '[Housing Law in Practice NI](#)', a unique publication containing a wealth of information on a wide range of housing topics
- A '[community housing advice partnership](#)' providing advice to generalist advice agencies across all 11 Council areas



As we look to a new assembly mandate, Housing Rights have identified a set of **key policy asks** necessary to deliver good quality, affordable, sustainable homes for people across Northern Ireland over the next five years. These key asks are informed by the experience of people using our advice services.

With the ongoing impact of the pandemic continuing to be felt alongside the devastating impact of the cost of living crisis on people living on low incomes the need to address housing problems and homelessness is more important than ever.

Cross-tenure priorities

Welfare Reform Mitigations



As co-convenors of the Cliff Edge Coalition, Housing Rights are calling for the independent advisory panel's report and recommendations regarding strengthening the welfare reform mitigations package to be published without delay. We continue to call for a strengthened package to address new challenges such as the Universal Credit 5-week wait, the two-child limit, and cuts to housing benefits in the private rented sector.

Standalone Housing Outcome



It is crucial that the Government honour the commitment made in 'New Decade, New Approach' to include a standalone housing outcome in the programme for government, namely "Every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs." The inclusion of a specific housing outcome is vital in ensuring the cross-departmental commitment needed to tackle our unacceptably high homelessness levels and growing housing need.

Participation



The expertise of people with lived experience of housing problems and homelessness is key in identifying policy solutions and delivering effective services to prevent and alleviate homelessness. It will therefore be crucial that a co-design approach is prioritised throughout the mandate; meaningfully involving people with lived experience in the development, design and delivery of housing and homelessness policy.

We welcome the [Northern Ireland Housing Executive's commitment in the 2022-27 Homelessness Strategy](#) to involving people with lived experience of homelessness in all aspects of design and development of the strategy, and to developing a homelessness lived experience programme. We further welcome the Department for Communities' recognition of the importance of involving those with lived experience as referenced in the draft [Housing Supply Strategy](#). Housing Rights have long been committed to this work and recently commissioned research which we hope will support NIHE and the department in developing their policy and practice in participation and co-production.

Private renters



Private renters continue to make up a disproportionate number of calls to Housing Rights helpline and their experience highlights the sub-sector within the private rented sector (PRS) which is characterised by poor standards, insecurity of tenure and affordability issues.

19% of households in NI now live in the private rented sector, and almost half receive support with rent through Housing Benefit or Universal Credit. Given the increasing reliance on this sector by low income households, and the fact that loss of rented accommodation continues to be one of the top three causes of homelessness in NI, it is crucial that reform of the PRS and support for private renters is prioritised in the coming mandate.

To this end Housing Rights are calling for:

The timely implementation and maximisation of the Private Tenancies Act 2022:

- We strongly welcome the introduction of the Private Tenancies Act as the first in a series of legislative reforms to improve standards, security of tenure and affordability in the PRS
- We are calling for the provisions in the Act to be commenced as soon as possible and for the regulations under the Act to be developed with input from tenants and representatives of tenants
- We are further calling for resources to be ring-fenced to support the information and training needs of all stakeholders to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions in the Act

Further legislation to be brought forward in order to:

- End 'no fault evictions' through the introduction of indefinite tenancies which can only be ended on prescribed grounds
- Improve fitness standards
- Introduce landlord licensing for all private landlords
- End 'No DSS' discrimination
- Ban letting fees in all but prescribed circumstances

Steps to be taken at a local and national level to address affordability issues by:

- Addressing operational issues with the payment of Universal Credit housing costs directly to landlords
- Increasing the discretionary housing payment budget, and expanding its use, to maximise its impact in preventing and alleviating homelessness
- Ensuring local housing allowance rates do not fall below the 30th percentile of market rents and increase this in stages to its original 50th percentile value
- Abolishing the shared accommodation rate

Homeowners

In the aftermath of the pandemic, Housing Rights is concerned about the threat of an economic downturn for homeowners in Northern Ireland where we have a higher percentage of marginal homeowners, and a remaining legacy of higher levels of negative equity.

We are therefore calling for:

- A reversal of the changes to support for mortgage interest to reinstate it as a non-repayable grant that can be accessed after 13 weeks and which is accessible to people in work who are in receipt of Universal Credit.
- The introduction of a mortgage rescue Scheme in NI to enable homeowners facing repossession to stay on in their homes either as tenants or shared owners.

Social renters

By March 2022 there were **44,426** households on the social housing waiting list, a rise of **18.2%** over the last five years. Over half of these households, **23,978** were full duty applicants found to be statutorily homeless by NIHE. With the ongoing issues with supply of social housing, and proposals to revitalise NIHE, there are a number of key priorities which Housing Rights believes should be addressed in this mandate.

We are calling for:

Tenants to have the final say on the plans to revitalise the NIHE through a tenant ballot



An end to the NIHE house sales scheme



In terms of the proposals due to be brought forward under the fundamental review of social housing allocations, Housing Rights recommends with regard to:

Proposal 1: An independent tenure-neutral advice service delivered by Housing Solutions
This service should include a pathway for people to access independent advice if required.

Proposals 2 and 3: Ineligibility for social housing or full duty homelessness status based on unacceptable behaviour

These proposals should be further reviewed, particularly given the commitment to a housing first approach to tackling homelessness. It is crucial to avoid excluding those who are most vulnerable from accessing a stable home and any support needed to address complex needs.

Proposal 4: Discharging Homelessness Duties to the Private Rented Sector

Given the multitude of issues with regulation, standards and affordability in the private rented sector, we believe it is not appropriate at this time to enable NIHE to meet their duty to homeless applicants by housing them in the PRS.

Proposal 7: Reform of intimidation points

'Intimidation points' should be renamed, creating a new award for example 'trauma points' for applications experiencing a trauma which poses risk to life or serious injury. Such an award should encompass a wider range of specified groups such as domestic abuse or human trafficking victims.

People experiencing homelessness

The inter-departmental response to support people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic showed the strength and importance of collaboration across departments in supporting this group. This learning should be built upon in this assembly mandate with priority also given to:

Introducing a **statutory duty to co-operate** on relevant bodies across housing, communities, education, justice, health and social services to prevent and alleviate homelessness



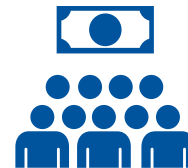
Extending the period during which people are considered to be 'threatened with homelessness' to reflect the extended **Notice to Quit periods in the Private Tenancies Act**



Adopting a **'housing first approach'** to chronic homelessness



Building upon the **'everyone in'** approach during the pandemic to provide longer-term solutions for people with no recourse to public funds



Private Rented Sector

Find out more about our conferences and events at
www.housingrights.org.uk

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