

Renters' Voice Response to the draft Housing Supply Strategy:**February 2022**

Renters' Voice is a project for people renting from a private landlord or letting agent who want to improve things for private tenants in Northern Ireland. We are supported by Housing Rights and funded by the Nationwide Foundation but our voice is our own.

In 2021, we submitted detailed responses to the Calls for Evidence on the Housing Supply Strategy and Private Tenancies Bill. We have drawn from these, in this shorter response, to highlight particular areas of the draft strategy that we feel need to be strengthened. Our response has also been shaped by our ongoing discussions as a group on issues for private renters.

Engagement with private tenants & commitment to co-design

Renters' Voice welcome the Minister's statement in the foreword of the strategy that the approach to housing supply is 'built on the principle that those who are most affected by poor housing are best placed to help design or redesign it.' However, we feel that this approach is not carried through into the main body of the strategy. Besides being referenced as an enabling principle on pg. 18, '*the lived experiences of those in the system need to help us shape the solutions,*' the strategy lacks any detail on what participation would look like or how it would be achieved. We believe that without this detail, the strategy lacks substance in this area. We note that Housing Rights have called for the involvement of people with lived experience to be a 6th objective of the strategy and we support and echo this as it would allow the correct level of focus and resources to be placed on such an important aspect of a successful strategy.

Meaningful change can only be achieved by recognising and seeking the 'expertise by experience' of people affected by the issues that any strategy seeks to tackle. In the case of the Housing Supply Strategy, people living in the private rented sector in Northern Ireland are some of the relevant experts. In September 2021 some of us in the group took part in training which centred on tenant participation. During this training we learnt about the different levels of participation, starting with education and informing and leading to co-design and co-production. We believe the strategy needs an explicit commitment to co-design and co-production processes and believe the 15-year timescale of the strategy allows time for effective processes of this nature. We strongly believe in participation at the highest levels as we know that if private renters like ourselves were involved in the design process of housing supply, it would help ensure that the outcome meets our needs.

In the spirit of meaningful engagement or co-production, thought must be given to:

- engagement at each stage of the development of the strategy, to ensure that stakeholders are part of decision-making processes, rather than being consulted after the fact.
- the support and information that different stakeholders (including private tenants) will need in order to have an equal footing in discussions.

Renters' Voice are keen to discuss this and any other issues to do with engagement further with the Department.

As was recognised in the Call for Evidence document, nearly one fifth of households in Northern Ireland now rent privately but there is a gap when it comes to engagement of private tenants in policy formation. Renters' Voice was established in November 2019 to work towards closing this gap and has, to date, supported private tenants (both our core group through regular meetings and involved activities and a wider group through engagement with our mailing list, surveys etc.) to engage at a policy level. When we spot areas of potential policy involvement, we want to act on this, and so would ask the Department to continue involving the group, and other people with lived experiences of poor housing, in the development of this strategy.

Key points:

The points below highlight further areas that we feel need to be strengthened in the strategy by adding detail and outlining relevant action points. Some of these points have been mentioned once or twice in the foreword or in the body of the strategy, but nothing beyond this. Renters' Voice would like to see more concrete examples of how these areas or issues will be tackled.

- **Availability of suitable options for older people and people with disabilities**
- **Improve housing quality by starting with the housing Fitness Standard**

We strongly agree that the current legal threshold 'falls short as a means of dealing with modern housing challenges' and expect that tenant engagement will accompany the 'comprehensive review of fitness standards.'

- **Improve housing quality in the Private Rented Sector.**

Further on this theme:

- We feel that further attention needs to be paid to energy efficiency and energy affordability, especially in the light of the recent energy price hikes. Private Tenants have no choice in the heating system they have to live with, and these are often costly and not very effective. There needs to be a higher standard of what is considered good heating systems/provision.
- Similarly, a lack of good quality insulation can inflate heating costs for tenants as well as being harmful to the environment. Proper insulation applied in walls, floors and roofs will make homes more comfortable, affordable, and environmentally friendly.

- There should be a strategy to retrofit houses that do not meet the standards (also in line with our carbon reduction targets) – for example, with grants available for private landlords.
- Reporting repairs and waiting for landlords to address them can be a major stress for tenants. This can have a knock-on effect on tenants' mental health and general quality of life. Building homes which are of good quality or investing in properties to bring them up to a good quality standard can reduce the likelihood of tenants having to worry about repairs (damp, leaks, insecure windows/doors) in their home. Likewise, property owners who buy good quality homes to let out, can be assured that they will not be out of pocket for expensive repairs.
- **The importance of home environment / The links between housing and health / The importance of green space that people can access from their homes**

As with many of the issues we have commented on, housing quality and lack of green space are particular issues for people renting at the lower 'more affordable' end of the private rented market. The mental health benefits that are derived from having access to green/outdoor space should not be limited to those who can afford to live in the higher end of the market. The significance of the home environment and access to an outdoor space should also be considered when housing people with disabilities or who have mobility issues.
- **Housing equality and lack of adaptability to disability need**
- **Improve housing security in the Private Rented Sector**
- **Affordability & how we define/measure it**

As a group we addressed the issue of affordability in our response to the Call for Evidence. We also looked at the current definition of "Affordable Housing" used by the Department and felt strongly that it was not meaningful to us as private renters and will not be meaningful to other individuals and their financial/living situations – it sees affordability as relative to the housing market and not to what people can actually afford and what will leave us with a good (or even just acceptable) quality of life. Therefore, we really welcome the commission of work aimed at evaluating the current measures of affordability.

Please refer to our responses to the Calls for Evidence on the Housing Supply Strategy and Private Tenancies Bill for our detailed representations so far with respect to the above points.