

Belfast Telegraph 11/8/17
Stormont's £1m
loss in needless
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Stormont under fire
for losing £1m buying
social housing land

CHASING HOMES

NOT POINTS!

A Critique
of the Fundamental Review
of Social Housing Allocations



Inequality as policy deprives people of homes

“The Committee is concerned about the chronic shortage of housing, in particular social housing, for the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups...”

Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, May 2009



The Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) organisation provides tools and support to marginalised groups actively asserting their right to participate in economic and social decisions which affect their lives. In 2012, the model developed and used by PPR groups to make change was cited as best practice by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.



The Equality Can't Wait (ECW) campaign is led by people on the waiting list, in hostels and in poor housing from all over Belfast. Since 2006 ECW, supported by human rights organisation PPR have monitored human rights abuses experienced by residents and have pushed for real change in peoples lives.

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Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)
Ground Floor, Community House, Citylink Business Park
6a Albert Street, Belfast, BT12 4HQ

Tel: +44(0) 2890 313315

www.pprproject.org

“CHASING HOMES, NOT POINTS”

A Critique of the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations

“Meeting housing need is the main priority. New social homes are of course needed, but the measures proposed in this document would give applicants more choice and help the waiting list move more effectively.” – Leo O’Reilly, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities, p. 7

“Social housing may not always be the most effective way to meet an individual’s housing needs or the most efficient use of resources” – Department for Communities, p. 34

PPR is deeply concerned that the proposals contained in the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations **focus on *reducing the appearance of housing need, rather than resolving the housing crisis*** through building social homes and allocating these in line with objective need.

These proposals are merely short term, stopgap measures that restructure waiting list processes and procedures. The NIHE’s refusal to support the urgent building of more social housing, as evidenced by the contradictory statements of policy quoted above, will mean that the waiting list will always be bloated which no artificial shifting or removing of points can realistically fix.

We have examined the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations and our main points of contention are that the proposals and, ultimately, the main thrust of the policy itself does the following:

- 1. Removes points for homelessness**
- 2. Abolishes intimidation points**
- 3. Promotes private rented housing**
- 4. Applies a punitive approach**
- 5. Subverts the principle of objective need**
- 6. Restricts “reasonable” offers**

Key Point #1 REMOVES POINTS FOR HOMELESSNESS

Rather than “meeting housing need being the main priority”, an aim identified by the Department for Communities (DfC) and the NI Housing Executive (NIHE), proposals such as the removal of interim accommodation points (**Proposal 9**) from the selection scheme merely reduce the appearance of need. These proposals do not actually alleviate the root of NI’s housing crisis which is the shortage of decent accommodation needed to support Northern Ireland’s growing population.

- Every single point matters in terms of social housing allocation. Therefore, there is no substantive purpose to remove interim accommodation points awarded to homeless applicants who have been in NIHE-arranged temporary housing for at least six months because data shows that people are waiting for up to two years before finding permanent accommodation.
- Surveys carried out among more than 100 residents in Simon Community hostels in 2015 found that 62% had been homeless for more than six months. The proposed policy change will impact these people. Rather than remove interim points, the DfC and the NIHE should revise and reform the way in which points are awarded to ensure housing need is captured accurately, and address the shortage of homes which is at the root of the DfC and NIHE’s attempts to mitigate the appearance of need.



Rathcoole residents presented 1,000 petitions from people in the community demanding that the NIHE and Minister act immediately to open up and rent out approximately 100 publicly owned flats which have been available yet vacant in their estate for around 4 years. Read more here: <https://www.pprproject.org/open-up-the-100-flats-now-rathcoole-residents-score-first-success-in-fighting-for-right-to-housing>

ABOLISHES INTIMIDATION POINTS

The DfC's justification for the proposed abolition of intimidation points (**Proposal 7**) rests on their assessment that the "number of households awarded intimidation points is *relatively small*" despite the fact that data shows that the numbers are "small" due to NIHE's reticence to award interim points in cases where the threshold is met. The number of intimidated households is significant and should not be dismissed through the removal of points.

- According to the Detail, 1,842 cases where people presented as homeless due to various forms of intimidation from 2012 to 2015: There were 1,292 cases for paramilitary intimidation; 214 for anti-social behaviour; 48 for sexual orientation; and approximately 10 for disability. In 2014/15, Base 2, a Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) funded project which "provides support and mediation services to individuals and families at risk of violence or exclusion from their community" sent 697 intimidation reports to NIHE but only but only 590 were received and intimidation points were awarded only in 383 cases.
- PPR is concerned by the implication that those presenting as homeless due to intimidation are "points chasers." PPR's experience of assisting people made homeless through intimidation is that the process of assessment often leads to individuals not receiving intimidation points despite reaching the required threshold of risk.



Adam Ahmed Taha and his five year old daughter, Amira, were living peacefully in a NIHE property for almost two years when attackers smashed in through the windows in the rear doors of the home; ransacked every room; destroyed furniture; used knives to cut up beds and clothing; stole important legal documents wrote 'heiron' (sic) on the wall; tore up the Qur'an; and, finally, robbed the property. They were not awarded intimidation points.

Read more here: <https://www.pprproject.org/racist-attacks-are-intimidation>

Key Point #3

PROMOTES PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING

The proposals for instituting an “independent, tenure-neutral” housing advice service (**Proposal 1**) and allowing the NIHE to meet its statutory duty to homeless applicants by further utilising the private rented sector (**Proposal 4**) is problematic given the lack of security of tenure and rent control together with poor property conditions and management standards often encountered in this largely unregulated sector. Moreover, while advice can help people navigate a complex allocation system, it does not result in the building of houses.

- A 2016 report by the Equality Commission NI entitled “Statement on Key Inequalities in Housing and Communities in Northern Ireland” found that households living in the private rented sector experience greater vulnerability, particularly in terms of substandard housing and the likelihood of increased poverty after the deduction of housing costs.
- A 2016 publication by Housing Rights Service entitled “Review of the Private Rented Sector” highlighted that there are various concerns surrounding the sustainability of relying on the private renter sector “principally because of the short (often 6 months) and insecure tenancies offered by private landlords.”



Housing & Homeless campaigners, comprised of homeless families, call on City Councillors to reject flawed plan and back alternative vision capable of reducing housing need by 14%. Read more here: <https://www.pprproject.org/the-future-for-hillview-in-north-belfast-a-tale-of-two-cities>.

Key Point #4 APPLIES A PUNITIVE APPROACH

The DfC proposes making more people ineligible for social housing based on “unacceptable behaviour at any time” before allocation of a social home (**Proposal 2**), while proposals based on the perception of those in need of social housing being “points-chasers” is evidenced by the recommended removal of the award of intimidation points (**Proposal 7**) from the selection scheme. This punitive approach also underlies the proposals abolishing interim accommodation points (**Proposal 9**), affecting policy succession (**Proposal 17**), and the proposed set of vaguely worded circumstances which a social landlord may rely on to withdraw an offer (**Proposal 16**).

PPR’s experience is that people often receive less points than they are entitled to, and should not therefore be penalised for claiming any entitlement provided by law or policy.

- In 2014, a group of 13 long-term homeless people took their cases to the NIHE when launching the Homeless Action Charter. Each of them had spent between 6 months and 30 months in cramped hostel accommodation where they had fewer than 80 housing points each. Since the action, the NIHE have reviewed their erroneous allocation of points. The “priority need” status was immediately granted in two cases where it had previously been denied. Moreover, additional housing points were awarded in 5 cases.
- In 2016, PPR supported people in poor housing through the use of human rights appeal letters to review their housing points. 699 extra housing points were awarded to 32 families, 28 were given new offers of housing, 22 were rehoused, and the long-standing maintenance issues of 17 families were finally addressed.

The group of 13 long-term homeless people took their cases to the upper levels of housing provision when launching the Homeless Action Charter on 16th September 2014.

Read more here:
<https://www.pprproject.org/rapid-improvements-for-hostel-residents-asserting-their-right-to-a-home>



Key Point #5

SUBVERTS THE PRINCIPLE OF "OBJECTIVE NEED"

Proposals that allow landlords to multi-offer "difficult to let" properties to a number of applicants regardless of their points allocation (**Proposals 12-14**), it also encourages acceptance of properties that are likely to be in poorer condition which subverts the principle of "objective need."

- The NIHE was established in 1971 following the Cameron Report into the civil disorder breaking out in the 1960s, which concluded that inadequate housing provision and unfair allocation contributed to a "rising sense of continuing injustice and grievance" and pointed to a "misuse in certain areas of discretionary power of allocation of houses in order to perpetuate Unionist control of the local authority." As such, the principle of awarding housing in accordance with need lies at the very heart of the NIHE's creation and existence, and should not be breached.
- Despite this, people already suffer what the Equality Commission NI have called "differing experiences of waiting lists for social housing, with a particular impact upon Catholic and other religions." This is particularly the case in locations where there is a shortfall in new social housing supply such as North Belfast. The NIHE should be endeavouring to improve their record on awarding housing according to need, not seeking to abandon the principle altogether.



There are over 12,000 on the social housing waiting list in Belfast. Over 6,000 are in 'housing stress'. Yet, only 542 homes were completed in 2015. The families, from all over the city, have identified empty land at Dunnes/Hillview, Mackies, Monagh Bypass, Sirocco Quays, and Belfast Harbour which could be used to build at least 1,000 homes.

Read more: <https://www.pprproject.org/equality-cant-wait-where-are-we-and-where-to-next>

Key Point #6 RESTRICTS "REASONABLE" OFFERS

The policy states that if the two offers are refused, no further offers will be made for one year after the date of the last refusal (**Proposal 15**). A one year suspension from the waiting list would be applied if an applicant refuses two reasonable offers. Not only does this proposal fail to consider refusals based on substandard housing, issues regarding what the NIHE deems as "reasonable" have historically been a point of contention.

The negative impact of this change on applicants WILL NOT be balanced by the increase of choice they will have over the areas where they would wish to live (**Proposal 5**).

- PPR has assisted residents who are allocated housing deemed "reasonable" by NIHE which are in very poor conditions, e.g., pigeon waste from communal landings, sewage systems which frequently overflowed through baths and sinks; as well as campaigned for changes in multimillion pound plans which ignored residents' needs and the rehousing of the majority of families into more suitable accommodation. Unless the current practice around what constitutes "reasonable" or "unreasonable" then current issues surrounding due process will continue to arise.



In 2007, Kerry Haddock was living in the Seven Towers high rise development, north Belfast, with her twin 5-year old daughters. She remembers the time as being very lonely. The housing conditions were poor and she experienced both dampness and raw sewage regularly coming up her bath tub and sinks. When Kerry reported the problems to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive – her landlord - the problems never seemed to get sorted.

Read more: <https://www.pprproject.org/ppr-group-member/kerry-haddock>

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H.E. rejects calls to vest land for Catholic homes after £1.1 million spent in loyalist areas

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Car boot sale used to support retail plans

PICTURE: Hugh Russell

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In north Belfast, people were sidelined and councillors voted along political lines rather than on housing need

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