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UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing - [Call for Input](#): Localizing the right to adequate housing: How local governments and community-led initiatives can contribute to the realization of the right to adequate housing

Input to questionnaire:

A. Local authorities implementing the right to housing

1. Can you provide examples of good and impactful practices by local authorities in the form of successful policies aimed at making the right to housing real and effective at the local level? What makes them 'good' and 'impactful'?

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2. What problems, gaps and challenges do local authorities experience in the delivery of effective housing policies at the local level (for example, in terms of lack of material resources, limited competences of local authorities, contradictory policies by national governments, international constraints, etc.)?

While financial, physical and other constraints unquestionably play a role, the main unacknowledged factor underpinning unmet social housing need is the failure to tackle the historical framework of segregation that defines Northern Ireland's social housing system to this day.

Northern Ireland (the island of Ireland's northeast corner) was founded in 1921 as a residual part of the United Kingdom following a peace settlement codifying the rest of Ireland's successful war of independence from Britain. Its population remained divided between loyalists dedicated to the union with the UK (predominantly Protestant) and descendants of the island's native Irish Catholic inhabitants. Under unionist dominance, allocation of homes and jobs favoured supporters of the status quo. Even after the second world war, voting rights remained restricted to those paying property tax; particularly in areas with slim electoral margins, housing allocations (managed by mainly Protestant-dominated councils) were used as one means of ensuring continued unionist political dominance.

Unequal access to housing was unsurprisingly a foundational issue for Northern Ireland's civil rights movement in the 1960s; a 1969 inquiry into civil rights marches and the violent reaction to them identified at their root "a rising sense of continuing injustice and grievance"

amongst Catholics, over inadequate housing and misuse of allocations “to perpetuate Unionist control of the local authority” ([Cameron Report](#), para. 229(a)).

In 1971, amidst rising conflict, the authorities established a new centralised body, the NI Housing Executive (NIHE), to build and allocate social housing. It operated a points-based allocations system within the framework of a highly segregated ‘map’ where physical boundaries frequently separated streets populated by opposing communities. This structure remains virtually unchanged today; an estimated [90%](#) of NI’s social housing remains segregated along religious lines. Physical ‘peace walls’ and lockable gates, as well as invisible but tangible barriers, are a feature of daily life in parts of the city; territory perceived to ‘belong’ to a particular group is often marked by murals, flags and memorials. The claims made to specific territories and social control over who is and who is not permitted to live and move between these areas is often tacitly and sometimes overtly supported by the state in the interests of maintaining ‘good relations’ and enabling cultural expression, often at the expense of equality, justice and state obligations towards the realisation of rights. Northern Ireland’s specific context is often cited as the reason why rights realisation must be deferred to some undefined point in the future, when everyone is ready: what PPR’s founder Inex McCormack referred to as ‘the doctrine of unripe time.’

Over time, the failure to challenge, or even to question, spatial segregation in the social housing system has perpetuated divisions between communities, particularly in urban working-class areas. (As far back as 1994, [researchers](#) raised “the possibility that the policies and practices of the Housing Executive are a factor contributing to residential segregation between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.” They noted that Catholics and Protestants tended to “be more segregated from one another in the public [housing] sector than in the private sector”, with building concentrated in areas already defined as belonging to one group; and that without a policy promoting integration, “the status quo persists and the segregation of Protestants and Catholics becomes the norm”.)

Segregation has meant that the system is incapable of evolving to meet emerging demographic changes linked to population growth and to immigration. Moreover, [analysis](#) of census data shows that social housing stock is not proportionate to deprivation, meaning it does not appear to have been built over the years in response to actual need (some of this may be the impact of the several decades-old ‘right to buy’ scheme, continuing today for Housing Executive homes). Today’s social housing map is extremely non-uniform in relation to deprivation and need.

Meanwhile acute housing need is rising inexorably; the social housing waiting list recently [topped 50,000 households](#) for the first time. By end March 2026 Belfast alone has 14,196 households waiting for a social home, over three quarters of them officially recognised as homeless. Social housing need remains most highly concentrated in predominately Catholic areas. Nearly 60% of Belfast’s homeless households live in North or West Belfast; three

quarters of North Belfast's homeless households, and nearly nine out of ten of West Belfast's, come from predominately Catholic areas.

The historical excuse for failing to build adequate social housing in these (predominantly Catholic) areas of high need is that there is 'no land' left undeveloped there. In practical terms, when officials tell people with nowhere to live that there is no land, they understandably look to vacant spaces at the margins – frequently, interfaces with neighbouring, predominantly Protestant areas – as alternatives. Here they hit a blockage, as housing authorities resist challenging existing boundaries out of fear of a violent loyalist reaction against perceived 'encroachment' by Catholics or others. Yet the Independent Reporting Commission tracking paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland has repeatedly [called](#) for "ambitious targets" to reduce segregation in housing and education, considered "vital in addressing the contextual factors" behind enduring paramilitarism (p. 66).

In recent years housing authorities have made greater efforts to build 'shared' social housing but all too frequently these have seen families from the 'minority' group [intimidated out](#), with little or no repercussions. In a step further, during the summers of [2023-2025](#) some ethnic minority residents and business owners suffered [targeted violence](#), predominantly in loyalist areas. In June 2026, numerous loyalist areas of Belfast saw racist and Islamophobic pogroms in which masked men and boys [attacked](#) and set fire to the homes of people of colour in an overt attempt at ethnic cleansing; the Chief Constable of the police [reported](#) that members of loyalist paramilitaries were present, and that some were involved in directing the violence, at a number of locations including in east Belfast.

While ferocious and traumatic, the pogroms merely marked a higher than usual intensity of the daily coercive control of specific communities. Over the years PPR has supported many Black and Brown families [threatened, intimidated and burnt out](#) after unelected and often violent arbiters decided that they did not belong. Rather than being able to rely upon the support and protection of the state, these families often find they are directed to negotiate their place with those who have injured them or are simply and unquestioningly moved on, thus confirming the success of the approach in the eyes of the perpetrators.

3. How are people with relevant lived experience of housing exclusion, homelessness, poverty or human rights abuses actively involved in the design, implementation and assessment of local policies and practices in relation to the right to housing?

They generally are not – with the exception of the Take Back the City campaign for social housing at the publicly-owned Mackie's site in West Belfast.

Following only partial success in seeing social homes built on former interface areas at Girdwood and Hillview in North Belfast, activists turned their attention to Mackie's – a vacant

25-acre former foundry along an interface, owned by the department responsible for housing, in an area of high housing need. The land – half the size of Belfast’s city centre -- has been left vacant and derelict for two decades; it is zoned for employment but in 2019 the authorities announced plans to make part of the site – already located between two parks-- a greenway (in effect, a permanent ‘green’ interface). During Covid, PPR brought families in housing need, academics, planners, developers and other experts together in a new coalition, **Take Back the City**, to formulate an alternative.

Since then, TBTC have [steadily built](#) a broad coalition of support for social housing on the Mackie’s site, in the face of (at best) official indifference. In the summer of 2022 TBTC opened a £10k international [design competition](#) for mixed-use development of the site, with a brief crafted by people in acute housing need. Over 70 architecture firms from around the world submitted expressions of interest. Eleven shortlisted designs were presented for public vote, online and in public events. A panel of experts including activists with experience of homelessness chose the [winning design](#): an ecovillage with up to 725 new homes, a city farm, arts centre and 18,000m² of employment space.

Activists worked to build relationships with a local community centre and schools, resulting in weekly termtime visits to the site by local schoolchildren, many from families in housing stress. Campaigners have regularly stepped in to support families in need through housing clinics, eviction resistance and demonstrations. As part of pre-application masterplan discussions with Belfast Council, TBTC ran a public consultation: 91% of participants agreed that Mackie’s should be developed and 86% agreed the site should address housing need. Another 2,500 people signed a Take Action petition on TBTC’s [website](#).

During 2024/25 activists worked with Queens University Belfast Masters students on their designs for the Mackie’s site; over the summer of 2025 the group co-curated (with Belfast’s Metropolitan Art Centre, the Tate Foundation and the Grenfell Foundation) an exhibition of the plans seen by 6,000 visitors.

In 2026 the TBTC coalition submitted a pilot planning application for 35 homes on part of the site. The Housing Executive expressed support in writing and a housing association has expressed interest in furthering the plan. The campaign continues.

4. What recommendations do you have to make local governments better equipped to deliver effective policies in relation to the right to housing?

As explained above, the historical experience of Council control of public housing in the north saw it used by predominately loyalist councils to maintain political and electoral control of their areas. To change this, the central NI Housing Executive was established in 1971,

ostensibly to provide and allocate social housing solely on the basis of objective need. It sits under the Department for Communities. In 2015 however a range of powers – from development of local plans to decisions on planning applications – passed in the other direction, from central government control to local elected officials and council staff.

There is a significant disjuncture between the policy aims of councils and the needs and rights of homeless people. For instance, the impetus behind Belfast's [local development strategy](#) (p. 34) is the reinvigoration of the City Centre through attracting business and young professionals, who will need accommodation. However, the plan is virtually silent on the [over 10,000](#) households across the city who are Full Duty Applicants (legally homeless) and 'sofa surfing'; in overcrowded accommodation with family or friends; or stuck in poor quality temporary accommodation such as hostels, private rentals funded by the state and hotels. Many of these families are based in the north and west of the city, and due to the spatial segregation of social housing and unaffordable, rising rents in the private sector, they have few practical options.

NI needs robust requirements on local authorities to proactively work with the Housing Executive to tackle existing social housing need in their Local Development Plans rather than addressing it as an afterthought, if at all. Belfast planning regulations have recently come to include, under its LDP, a requirement (policy HOU5) that at least 20% of any new residential development over five units is 'affordable' housing (where 'affordable' may, but may not, mean social housing). The outcomes have been unclear; developers can make other contributions to offset the requirement or can deliver it by building altogether separate accommodation ('poor doors') elsewhere, creating new patterns of class- and income-based segregation.

NI housing authorities must

- Develop a plan of action with concrete, timebound steps to dismantle segregation in social housing (per the recommendation of the Independent Reporting Commission on paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland)
- Build and allocate social housing on the basis of existing objective housing need, irrespective of religion and ethnicity;
- Take concrete steps to protect residents and enforce their right to adequate housing
- Based on the grassroots effort for social homes on the Mackie's site, take advantage of the campaign to pilot a new, inclusive, community-based, participatory approach to social home building

B. Community-led initiatives

5. What legal, institutional or material conditions allow civil society, non-for-profit and community-led initiatives to deliver socially and environmentally conscious housing solutions?

The campaign for social housing at the Mackie's site in West Belfast came about in response to people's unmet housing need. People in housing need have pursued the campaign, through their own dedication and energy, despite a lack of support or, up until quite recently, positive engagement from duty bearers.

6. What obstacles or restrictions do they face?

In addition to the already-discussed impact of duty bearers' reluctance – in the nearly three decades since the Good Friday Agreement – to tackle segregation of social housing, there is a deeper issue: a lack of concern or prioritisation of homeless people or people in housing stress by duty bearers. Housing authorities seem to be moving ever farther away from the principle of providing social homes strictly on the basis of objective need. The Department for Communities' Housing Supply Strategy, issued in 2025, cut measures outlined in the 2021 draft for ringfenced funding to build homes in areas of acute housing need. In fact, all references to the wide variations in levels of unmet social housing need across the north – a defining characteristic of the housing landscape, in which the two largest cities Belfast and Derry have acute housing need disproportionately concentrated in the predominately Catholic areas, and hardly something to gloss over – [were cut](#). The final version of the Housing Supply Strategy refers repeatedly to 'housing needs', with no reference to the existence of areas of acute and concentrated housing deprivation.

Other measures – for instance a plan announced by the Department for Community to ['band' the waiting list](#) – would see homes no longer allocated solely on a points-based system. Instead it would potentially raise certain categories of households (such as downsizing couples; or people with relatively fewer points but with longer waits on the waiting list) to a higher 'band' or priority level.

In another example, explained more fully above, Belfast City Council's [local development strategy](#) (p. 34) set ambitious targets for new housing aimed at new residents – without explicitly addressing the acute housing need of the city's new high of [over 10,000](#) homeless households. The would-be focus is on 'growth' and 'progress' – without reckoning with those who are being failed by the system as it is.

7. What recommendations do you have in relation to community-led initiatives (for instance, in relation to their legal recognition, security of tenure and protection of land use irrespective of legal title, training, technical or material/economic support from public authorities, etc.)?

Take Back the City campaigners for social housing on the Mackie's site have for years been swimming against an apparent tide of official stasis and indifference. Duty bearers and the housing sector – adept at making statements about the housing crisis without doing anything concrete to help those suffering its consequences – must break out of their inertia and show the political will to do something different by **endorsing and actively supporting a pilot participatory, co-design social housing project at the Mackie's site, to be allocated solely on the basis of objective need.**

There is a significant gap in power and resources between community-led initiatives and the local and regional government bodies capable of making decisions about them. Few community organisations committed to equality and rights have the requisite resources to undertake the surveys, assessments and design processes which are necessary to achieve planning approval, and there are difficulties in identifying who is the developer for planning purposes. One useful step would be legislative approaches that **facilitate community-led initiatives (such as community land trusts) in acquiring land** – something that exists elsewhere in the UK but not in Northern Ireland. Another would be moves to allow community groups **to bring outline planning applications** (with appropriate protections from vexatious use) where they can show that there would be a significant public and social benefit via social home provision, without needing to fulfil what are sometimes very costly requirements. This would enable community-led initiatives to test power on the seriousness of their commitment to provide social homes and also provide community bodies with time to build coalitions capable of actually delivering homes.

C. Localization of human rights

8. What are the benefits and risks of adapting international law on the right to adequate housing to the local context? For example, could localization make human rights more relevant and relatable for local communities? On the other hand, could, in your view, certain local expressions of human rights undermine the universality of global standards?

Northern Ireland is an example of how much local history and context can impact people's access to adequate housing in the present. Universal human rights standards have been an important support in campaigners' work to access their rights here.

9. What concrete examples can you provide of housing-related policies or practices that have been implemented (or stopped from being implemented) as a direct result of a city/town declaring itself formally as a human rights city, a city for adequate housing, a city working towards ending homelessness, an inclusive or accessible city, a child or age friendly city, a gender equality city, or equivalent formulations? How do you identify the causal link between such a declaration and the policies/practices?

n/a