



## PPR's input to the Civic Initiative's Call for Evidence

### for a community-led examination of socio-economic and cultural rights

#### by a 2024 Northern Ireland Citizens' Assembly

1 July 2024

#### Education

1. How can we provide an educational experience for everyone which is inclusive, equitable and provides beneficial outcomes?

In mid-2021, amidst an increase in the number of people seeking international protection in Northern Ireland, the Home Office (through its contracted asylum accommodation provider Mears Group) began placing people in hostels set up in hotels. PPR, following on from years of work with refugees and asylum seekers, began [working](#) directly with this particular set of people in early 2022.

People placed in these hostel settings [reported](#) being largely deprived of interaction with local neighbours. The isolation and controlled conditions -- which for some, could last for up to a year and more -- risked causing additional harm to people who already traumatised on their journeys or by the events and environments from which they fled.

To make things worse, many children were [denied a school place](#), in what for primary age children was a violation of even the 'minimum core' of the right to education, and felt acutely the lack of contact with other children, structure and a daily routine. In autumn 2022, while noting some progress in Education Authority efforts (supported by [Anaka Women's Collective](#)) to enrol smaller children, parents [raised concerns](#) about blockages in placing older ones: *'my son, a seventeen year old, has depression issues because he was not able to go to school since last year'*, said one parent. Young people who managed to secure highly sought after places at 'College of Sanctuary' Belfast Met were blocked from attending by the lack of [transport assistance](#), given their very minimal Home Office allowance (now [£8.86/week](#)). (The transport situation improved markedly in 2023 with the advent of the Department for Infrastructure's public transport [travel card scheme](#); the current round of passes expire in October 2024.)

All children, without discrimination, have the legal right to an education ([Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) article 28), which is integral to [promotion and protection](#) of many other rights. Yet the specific barriers facing these young people are poorly understood in NI and the current budget cuts are often used as justification for failings in this area (despite the fact that international law obliges states to spend the maximum available resources to ensure access to education and similar rights).

The Education and Libraries (NI) [Order 1986](#) (para. 46) sets compulsory school age at 4 years, continuing up until the end of the school year in which the child turns 16. The reality for asylum seeker children is different. Key stage 4 (years 11 and 12, so 15- and 16-year-olds) are by far the most [unlikely to find a place](#), though even some 13 and 14-year-olds struggle. (This issue features in recent [research](#) from QUB and the Nuffield Foundation (p. 27, 64, 65).) The [Department for the Economy](#) has responsibility for employment and skills training, including apprenticeships, for 16+ young people; but has not adequately responded to the needs of this group.

A 2023 survey carried out by PPR and Anaka amongst 35 Belfast asylum seekers aged 16-25 who were out of education during term time revealed that 40% had attended high school before coming to NI, and another 40% had completed it. These young people have high aspirations and described themselves as working towards a wide range of professions and roles. But they need help in getting there: only 30% reported attending English classes (despite the fact that over half had been here for six months or more). Two thirds of them described their level of English as beginner or pre-intermediate.

In response, beginning in the summer of 2023 Anaka and #KindEconomy partners organised a network of volunteer teachers from the local community and from amongst people seeking international protection here, to set up and provide classes in a range of subjects for young people unable to access what should be theirs by right from the State. Resources were very limited and yet people from Belfast and from within the international protection system volunteered their time and effort to fill the gap and invest in these children and young people's futures.

This was followed by a 2023-24 project with Queens University Belfast for the 16+ age group, linking them with trainee English as a Second Language teachers at the university. These classes led on to a participatory research project, the 16+ Education Equality Campaign (described more in detail below).

2. How should all stakeholders in the area of education including all bodies with responsibility for education policy, management, or who represent a different section of the education system, contribute toward an inclusive, equitable education system?

England, Scotland and Wales all offer [examples](#) of innovative and effective programming to meet the particular needs of young people seeking international protection that could serve as a model for efforts here to meet the needs of the 16+ group in particular.

As pointed out in recent [research findings](#) compiled by Queens University Belfast and Anaka together with the young people of the 16+ Education Equality Campaign, Northern Ireland (NI) is the only devolved region of the UK without an ESOL policy or an integration policy for people seeking international protection. The group found that

the closer a young person from refugee or asylum seeker background is to 15 or 16 – the longer the wait or more difficult to enter traditional education routes. All too

often, the only recommendation for these young people are English classes – the same ones adults are in.

Young people recommended more flexibility for new arrivals so that they can enter education more quickly and easily, and for their right to education to be extended from 16 to 18 years of age. They called for improvements to the system for recognising qualifications they have achieved outside of NI, and for creation of more formal English language training opportunities as an entry to ongoing education in a wider range of subjects. (For more detail on their findings and recommendations see their report [here](#)).

3. Do you believe there are any benefits to greater cross border cooperation and shared learning in the area of education, if so, how can these be better promoted?

Yes, for instance by focusing on this cohort of 16+ young people in and from the asylum system on both sides of the border, and building on examples of best practice elsewhere (Leicester, Glasgow, Wales).

### **Housing**

4. The latest housing bulletin from the Department for Communities, as of March 31, reported 47,312 households on the social housing waitlist. What factors have contributed to the low levels of adequate and affordable housing, in both the public, and private sector? Would you support for the creation of an independent Housing Commission?

To start, it's important to look more closely at the figures. Those 47,312 waiting list households mentioned in your question include [over 27,700 children](#) under 18. For many of them, their living conditions mitigate against their ability to realise their internationally-recognised [right](#) to develop to their full potential. Moreover, more than 28,600 of the households on the waiting list are recognised as Full Duty Applicant homeless by the Housing Executive, including [nearly 19,000 children](#). This constitutes a rise of two thirds on the March 2018 figure of 11,300 children in homeless households.

Analysis of the waiting list, housing stress and homelessness figures year on year show that not only is the waiting list continually growing, but so are the [proportions](#) of waiting list households in housing stress or homeless. In this way, housing need is not only growing but becoming more acute.

Individuals and families who are in housing stress or homeless clearly have the highest levels of objective need in housing of anyone in our society: yet in recent years NI's housing policy development has focused not on them, but on mechanisms for [providing 'intermediate' housing](#) for families with more resources and in less objective need. This is back to front, and it needs to change. Households coping with housing stress or homelessness need a greater supply of housing that is within their financial reach – social homes, not 'intermediate' ones.

In the wider picture, households across the north face an ever-deepening struggle to keep a roof over their heads. Rising rents, particularly in the private sector, play a part, as does the

[gap](#) between those rents and housing benefit levels. Department for Communities [figures](#) (table 1.3) indicate that more NI households (around 129,600) now rent privately than rent socially (around 124,300). This is not a matter of choice – after all, NISRA [data](#) from 2022/23 put social rents at on average £27/week cheaper than private ones, and social tenancies offer greater security of tenure than private ones. It's necessity, given the over 47,000 households already in the queue, with relatively very little movement to be seen in terms of allocations.

Things were not always this grim. [Analysis](#) by the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) shows that in 1981 the percentage of NI households in Housing Executive social homes was **over 39%**. This dropped markedly over each of the next two decades, falling to just 11.5% in 2011; today [just one in ten](#) households are Housing Executive tenants, with an additional 4% in housing association social homes. (Housing associations were recognised in NI [law](#) in 1976).

This begs the question: if two out of every five households here lived in a Housing Executive home four decades ago, why is it only one in ten today?

The answer is, in large part, 'right to buy'. The name is a marketing gimmick – there is no such right – but the Conservative policy aim of shrinking the public sector through encouraging private ownership of previously social homes was very real. Rolled out across the UK in 1979 shortly after Conservative Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, the scheme began as voluntary and became law here in 1993.

According to the Housing Executive's 40-year [review](#) (p. 40), a 1974 housing survey here identified **153,500 social homes**, nearly all Housing Executive-owned, making up more than a third of all housing stock in the north.

However, the review reported, over the decades the House Sales Scheme saw nearly 120,900 Housing Executive social homes (and, between 2003 and 2020, 3,000 housing association ones) sold to tenants at a discount (pp. 22, 52). In response to a recent Freedom of Information request the Housing Executive reported the figure at the end of May 2024 to be **122,733 Housing Executive social homes sold under the scheme**.

And sales continue, albeit at a slower pace; in April 2024 Communities Minister Gordon Lyons [said](#) he had 'no plans' to close the scheme - this despite the breathtaking gap in provision for people in housing need.

Already in 2020 the Housing Executive review's authors flagged that NI's social housing stock "**remains lower numerically - and substantially lower proportionately - than in 1974**" (p. 91). By 2023 Housing Executive [stock](#) would drop still further, to about **83,225 homes**. The main driver of the decline in social housing stock was identified as the House Sales Scheme -- alongside, to a lesser extent, a 2001 policy change making housing associations responsible for building all new social homes going forward. Their pace of doing so has always lagged behind need: [NISRA data](#), for instance, indicate that on average 941 new social homes were built each year between 2010 and 2021 ([analysis](#) of the Housing Executive's own figures for new build social housing showed an average of 1,046 new build social home completions per year over the same time period, while its overall 'completions'

figures – which include ‘rehabilitation’, ‘re-improvement’ and other categories – are significantly higher again).

Already in 2004, researchers into the impact of the House Sales Scheme -- though noting some positive ‘first wave’ effects -- judged the ‘second wave’ to be “more complex and ambiguous”, particularly around “the changing shape of neighbourhoods, and the resources available to those in housing need” (p. 9)

The review makes plain that the impact on the waiting list and on the overall housing system of this loss of social housing stock was not felt immediately, but rather would be delayed until the point when those tenancies would have naturally been coming to an end and the property again would have been becoming available for re-let (p. 19). This is why, twenty or thirty or more years on, **there are ever fewer social homes coming free and able to be re-let to new tenants.**

In this context, the reported 26,000 homes built by housing associations as of 2018 (p. 12) have not even come close to keeping pace with ever-growing demand.

The review includes reflections from a 2004 evaluation, about the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the scheme over time. The winners were identified as those social housing tenants who managed to buy their publicly-built homes at a discounted rate, get onto the property ladder and see the value of their investment increase over time. The losers were “the public sector tenants for whom the decline in the size and quality of the residential social rented sector had reduced options and opportunities” (p. 29).

This would presumably include today’s [nearly 29,000](#) NI households recognised as ‘Full Duty Applicant’ homeless and still on the waiting list.

To rub salt into the proverbial wound, according to the review a sizeable proportion of the sold homes have since ended up in the hands of private landlords. A bespoke survey it carried out found that:

just over a quarter of the dwellings sold by late 2018 [[equating, by the surveyors’ estimate, to around **31,620 former Housing Executive properties** (p. 83)]] were being rented in 2019. We have no evidence on whether the rented properties in the survey sample were purchased *for the purpose of letting*, or whether original or subsequent owner-occupiers moved on and retained the property for letting.

In response to a recent Freedom of Information request the Housing Executive said that number of former Housing Executive homes being rented out in the private sector had not been updated since that 2018 estimate.

5. What could the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, as well as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive do to address ongoing housing issues including

- Social housing provision
- Housing inequalities

- Segregated housing
- The private sector

Duty bearers must, firstly, build more social housing – the only form of housing within the means of people with the greatest objective need. In this context, it is welcome that the Housing Executive have [begun building](#) its first homes since the 2001 policy shift -- albeit not in an area of particularly high housing need.

For its part PPR are campaigning with homeless and economically marginalised families (including some of the [growing number](#) of recently recognised refugees) for an increase in the number of social homes through using publicly-owned vacant land for residential development. Our '[Take Back the City](#)' Campaign, organised by a diverse coalition of families in housing need and professionals, focuses on the 25-acre Mackie's site owned jointly by the Department responsible for housing, the local council and the NI investment body.

The coalition's plans for homes and businesses at the Mackie's site are the result of many years of community engagement and participation, culminating in an international design [competition](#). Reflecting the extensive input from the design competition itself and from subsequent consultation, the plans feature a city farm, sustainable energy, homes, biodiversity promotion and ample employment space. They already enjoy the support of over 900 individuals and organisations, and are progressing through council's planning process (you can review them [here](#) and support them [here](#)).

We believe that the model developed at Mackie's - of engaging directly impacted families in building a vision of what they want to see and supporting them with global experts in planning, architecture, permaculture, biodiversity and equitable housing development – is one that has huge merit in addressing acute housing need equitably.

Another step the authorities must take is to raise housing benefit / Universal Credit housing component in proportion to recent increases in market rents to mitigate the [significant gap](#) between the two.

6. Are there any lessons to be learned on a cross border/ East-West basis to address housing inequalities?

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## Healthcare

7. Do you think it would be possible to provide local access to healthcare services in the context of a smaller number of specialist hospitals, if so how?

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8. How can cross border/all-island healthcare cooperation and services be improved, and maximised?

It is widely recognised that mental health services, [north](#) and [south](#), need radical reform. The existing models are largely based on an outdated, medicalised model that pathologises human distress and invalidates people's firsthand experiences.

This dominant biomedical model of mental healthcare has led to over-reliance on psychiatric drugs and neglect of effective social, community and relational approaches.

The current system is also causing iatrogenic harms to patients accessing services to their families and carers. Families across the island who have been failed by mental health services and who have experienced devastating losses because of preventable deaths, are further harmed by institutionalised cultures of defensiveness and cover-up at the highest levels within the health services.

However, these harms are not only being experienced by people accessing services and their families/carers. Staff working in mental health services across the island, including social workers, psychologists, paramedics, registered mental health nurses, community mental health nurses and many people employed in the community and voluntary sector, are experiencing moral distress and moral injury at emotional, psychological and even spiritual levels. This happens when staff are forced to act against their core values and moral code in a way that harms their conscience and sense of integrity.

Too often, staff are not enabled or supported to bring their professional skills and expertise to bear in the treatment and care of patients, in a holistic and compassionate manner. Instead, they are forced to operate within a narrow, medicalised, fragmented and paternalistic model of care

The approach described above is out of step with the latest research and models of care, as articulated by the [United Nations and the World Health Organisation](#). There is growing evidence to demonstrate that they are also not effective. The rate of readmission to psychiatric care, standing at [66% in the south of Ireland in 2022](#), is just one indicator of the need for new thinking and approaches.

[New Script for Mental Health](#), a progressive and inclusive social movement that is supported by PPR, is campaigning for a better approach to mental health. It has built links with other grassroots campaigns and organisations, including [Mad in Ireland](#), to collectively campaign for the radical, human-rights based paradigm shift called for by the UN and the WHO. These approaches must be grounded in the direct experiences of individuals, families and carers. Inspiring and innovative models of mental health care such as [Kyrie Farm](#), a therapeutic and healing environment, provide practical, evidence-based examples of alternatives to the narrow 'pills and a bed' approach.

There is a real need for shared conversations across the island around all the above, conversations that involve people with direct experience, front line staff in mental health services, researchers, trade unions, the community and voluntary sector and others. Human rights compliant and trauma informed approaches across a range of areas including therapeutic models, data collection, regulation and oversight and the promotion of a culture of openness and learning, should be identified and shared between the two health services on the island. There is scope for pilot projects, similar perhaps to the Kyrie Farm model, located possibly in the border region, to be developed.

9. How can we better use technology to increase access to public healthcare services?

Profoundly serious issues exist in relation to mental health data. These issues have been highlighted by both the [Office for Statistics Regulation in 2021](#) , by the [NI Audit Office in 2023](#) and most recently by the [NI Assembly's Public Accounts Committee in June 2024](#). The issues highlighted reflect the experience of PPR and New Script for Mental Health. Indeed, activists have been highlighting these issues for many years now.

[The Health Research Board](#) in the south of Ireland publishes data sets on in patient activity that aren't available publicly in the north of Ireland, for example, the readmission rate to psychiatric units.

Without the availability of timely, accurate, reliable, coherent, and comparable data, it is impossible to plan services effectively. It is impossible to assess outcomes. It is impossible for politicians and the public to hold the Department of Health and the Health Trusts to account for how public money is being spent. This is the current situation regarding mental health data.

The Department of Health's [award winning Covid-19 dashboard](#) demonstrated that the capability exists to develop, at unprecedented speed, technological systems to deliver data, evidence, analysis, research and evaluation, vital to make critical decisions in relation to health services. Systems that allowed the data to be fully accessible to citizens. This capability must now be harnessed in the service of mental health data.

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### General Question

10. How can government departments work together more effectively to address all of these areas through a whole of government approach?

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11. Would you be willing to pay income-related higher taxes or additional charges so that everyone can benefit from better quality public services? If so, is your preference to do this through a taxation or a charging system.

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