



**Briefing on housing in Northern Ireland
for Mr. Balakrishnan Rajagopal,
UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing**

14 May 2024

Homelessness and housing stress have risen significantly over recent years, within a context of social housing shortage; now capacity has been exceeded even in the pool of temporary accommodation available, leaving the Northern Ireland Housing Executive increasingly reliant on expensive hotels to meet its duty to house the growing number of homeless households. Many asylum seekers are also living their lives within the four walls of a hotel room, placed there by the private company Mears Group, who are contracted by the UK Home Office. As we hear in our [housing clinics](#), eviction, the threat of it and poor conditions cause many tenants physical and mental harm and keep their children from developing to their full capacity. **This year alone, 45 people attending the clinics have submitted their complaints directly to the Department for Communities, including 23 facing eviction; 7 coping with homelessness; 4 living with extreme mould and damp affecting their and their families' health; four suffering intimidation; and 3 living in overcrowded conditions.** In some cases, duty bearers respond to public pressure and find solutions for individual families – but they are failing to respond meaningfully to the structural roots of our ever-deepening housing crisis, in direct contravention of the obligations placed upon them by Article 2 of ICESCR and the requirements of General Comments 3,4,7 and 20.

Social housing - endemic shortage, most acute in predominately Catholic areas.

Over 25 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, social housing (especially in large cities) remains overwhelmingly divided by religious community, and the areas with the highest concentration of homelessness and housing stress are predominately Catholic areas including North and West Belfast¹ and Derry. PPR is supporting the [Take Back the City](#) coalition of housing, architecture and planning professionals and families in housing need to campaign for social housing to meet need on the 26-acre publicly owned **Mackie's site** in West Belfast; the site is currently owned by the Department for Communities, responsible for housing and homelessness, the Department for Economy/Invest NI, responsible for investment and growth and Belfast City Council responsible locally for planning. In the week of your visit to Northern Ireland, Take Back the City submitted a Proposal of Application Notice to Belfast City Council with [plans](#) for up to 725 new homes.

¹ [Analysis](#) reveals that of Belfast's 8,725 homeless households at end 2023, 2,131 were in North Belfast, 78.3% of them in predominately Catholic areas. Another 3,141 were in West Belfast, 89.7% of them in such areas.

Across the north, around [124,300](#) NI households live in social homes – around seven out of ten of them in Housing Executive homes, and the remainder in social homes managed by housing associations. ²At the end of 2023 there were an unprecedented 46,461 households on the waiting list for a social home, including at least [27,233 children](#) under 18.

Overall, 28,614 households, including at least [18,496 children](#), passed the Housing Executive's four tests for **homelessness**, known as Full Duty Applicant or FDA, at end 2023 - a 33% rise in under three years.

At the current average rate of new build construction, according to NI Statistics and Research Agency data, **it would take around fifty years to house all the households on the waiting list**³.

In terms of the **accessibility** of adequate housing, it is important to note that the current social housing crisis is in part a legacy of the UK's right-to-buy scheme, introduced in the 1980s and still running today for Housing Executive homes. It saw over 120,000 NI properties sold at a discount rate to tenants in a bid to encourage home ownership (though a [substantial proportion](#) of these homes are now part of the private for-profit rental market. The Housing Executive's current stock stands at around 86,000 homes.) From 2001 until very recently, responsibility for all new build social housing transferred to housing associations. This year the Housing Executive has started 6 new homes in the Ballysillan area of Belfast.

Privately rented accommodation – lack of oversight of conditions, rising prices and evictions.

Overall, [13%](#) of NI households (around 129,600, according to Department for Communities statistics) are in private rented accommodation. Housing quality, and thereby **habitability**, are not guaranteed - there is no active enforcement mechanism for the DFC's [Decent Homes Standard](#), and low-income private tenants – as well as social housing tenants -- can face issues such as serious damp and mould, insufficient heating, vermin infestation and maintenance and repair needs – all too often, with unresponsive landlords.

In terms of **affordability**, rents in this sector are higher than in social housing: the most recent [data](#) indicates that in the private rented sector the average weekly rent across the north was £109, while in social housing it was £82. There is a significant **gap** between these elevated private rents and the amount of [housing benefit](#) that low-income households receive, with many cash-strapped families struggling to make up the difference. Additional factors such as the rising cost of energy, fuel and household essentials have increased the financial pressures people are juggling, pushing some, ultimately, into homelessness. NISRA [data](#) (table 3.8) indicates that in 2022-23, the number of households presenting as homeless due to '**loss of rented accommodation**' was 2,892 – an increase of over 70% in

² See Table 1.3 of Department for Communities '[Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin: October-December 2023](#)'

³ Since 2010, according to Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [data](#) ('Households' file, Housing 5 tab), an average of only 941 social homes have been completed every year. Housing Executive data – which includes, in addition to new build social homes, completions of rehabilitation works, purchase of existing homes and more, paints a picture which is marginally less stark. See [here](#) for more information.

three years, and the highest seen since 2007-08, in the wake of the global financial crisis and recession.

Housing Executive temporary accommodation – increasing reliance on private hotels.

In addition to the caseload of households unable to afford their private rents, there is a new cohort of people being made homeless here. Last summer, to meet the Prime Minister's aim of 'clearing the asylum backlog' by end 2023, the Home Office issued an unprecedented number⁴ of **asylum decisions** over a short time. It also sped up the process of ending people's asylum accommodation and support -- handing them on to a NI Housing Executive already struggling with huge gap between need for social homes and supply.

With no job or savings, the private rental sector is **inaccessible** to new refugees. People report that, despite repeated enquiries and requests for helping in planning and preparing for their move, both the Housing Executive and the Home Office's contracted asylum accommodation provider, Mears Group, have simply advised them to turn up at Housing Executive offices on the day of their eviction, with their families and belongings, and wait for staff to arrange publicly-funded housing for them. People have done so only to wait the entire day before being shifted, not to a house, but to [a different hotel](#) – one paid for by the Housing Executive rather than by the Home Office.

In [Housing Executive-funded hotels](#), neither new refugees nor people born here have meals provided or access to kitchens or laundry facilities. New refugees in particular, having until recently been banned from working, have no money (due to the 5-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment – a feature built into the UC system -- there is no way that UC could be accessed before asylum support stops). What this means practically is that these people – including children – go hungry and suffer distress that risks exacerbating past trauma.

People with **disabilities** in this situation can have difficulty being allocated a fully accessible temporary accommodation place. Further, people are frequently placed in **locations** very far from where they had been living – too distant for their children to continue attending school, for themselves to continue attending college, or for anyone in the family to attend GPs or consultants, some of whom are giving them much-needed ongoing medical care. Work is hard to find in an area where you know no one, where you may be far from public transport, and where, you've been told by the Housing Executive, your stay is only meant to be temporary anyway.

Some families can produce letters of support from teachers, medical staff or other contacts urging for them to be returned to the areas where they had been living and where they have built up support networks; and in some cases the Housing Executive has been able to move them accordingly. Yet housing staff are limited in what they can do by the lack of social housing supply and alternatives to temporary accommodation.

⁴ According to statistics obtained by PPR through Freedom of Information, the Home Office issued 932 asylum decisions in Northern Ireland between 1 August 2023 and 19 March 2024. Of these, 876 were positive decisions to grant refugee status; 49 were refusals; and the remaining seven were "unknown case types where we are unsure whether it was a positive or negative decision without a further interrogation of our data".

Asylum accommodation – a microcosm of NI’s housing problems.

As of end 2023, there were [2,831 asylum seekers](#) here. Of these some were in houses or flats, many facing the same issues around conditions as discussed above. Another 741 were housed in hotels under the responsibility of Mears Group, the private company holding the Home Office contract for asylum accommodation, facing a range of [rights issues](#). [Children](#) were particularly affected, as documented not least by asylum seekers’ own monitoring.

Solutions.

The key public policy and human rights issue held in common by all these groups of people is the consistent **failure of the state** to build sufficient quantities of social housing, meaning that some families have been living for years on the waiting list, with little prospect of a social home. Often, if they are lucky enough to be allocated one, the conditions are poor – badly insulated, mouldy, damp and hard to heat. The existing policy and practice framework is in clear violation of both the substantive requirements of the right to housing and the state’s duties around non-discrimination, non-retrogression, progressive realisation and the allocation of the maximum available resources by public bodies.

Part of the blockage to building homes in areas of ‘contested’ space is the continuing legacy of sectarianism and the logic of a peace process which continues to demand ‘equal’ allocations of new social homes between communities, regardless of the different levels and types of need which exist in each. This has the effect of both eliding the existence and experiences of new communities such as refugees, and failing to recognise that equity and a human rights based approach require that social homes be built according to **objective need**.

PPR, through our campaigns on housing conditions, religious and cultural discrimination in housing, increasing the supply of social housing and rethinking the way publicly owned land can be used to address the housing crisis, develops solutions in partnership with a coalition of directly impacted people and experts. Our focus over the last decade has been identifying publicly owned land within Belfast, which could be used to help address the housing crisis. This land, documented by families in housing need in partnership with academics and photographers, is now recorded in a publicly accessible map on <https://takebackthecity.ie>.

Our Take Back the City campaign has a particular interest in the **Mackie’s site** in west Belfast, public land in the heart of one of the most deprived areas of the city, owned by the Departments responsible for addressing the issues of homelessness and deprivation. In 2022, we launched an urban design competition for the site, which received international interest. A panel of judges including homeless families alongside US and UK developers, planners and architects selected [Matthew Lloyd Architects](#)’ submission as the winning design. The plans have subsequently been developed with the input of homeless families, local community groups and public bodies, and have now been submitted into the planning process. They have already received over 800 emails of support sent directly to political party leaders and the Head of Planning and Development at Belfast City Council.

The plans, and the story behind their development, are available to view in full at <https://takebackthecity.ie>. We commend them to the Special Rapporteur as an example of how people directly impacted by housing stress, homelessness, poverty and sectarianism can lead the way in rethinking how states can deliver sustainable and good quality housing to meet need.

Some publications of interest from our 2023-24 housing archive

About the Mackies plans

[Take Action](#) page; [Design Framework](#) document; [timeline](#) of the campaign; interactive [map](#)
<https://www.takebackthecity.ie/news/new-report-on-community-led-housing>, 17 Sept 2023

About housing clinics

<https://www.takebackthecity.ie/news/demanding-our-rights-take-back-the-citys-community-housing-clinics/>, 21 Mar 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/blog/2024-02-grieving-family-facing-eviction-by-housing-executive-pleads-for-an-intervention-from-housing-minister>, 28 Feb 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/blog/2023-12-housing-crisis-make-sure-to-follow-the-proper-procedures> 11 Dec 2023

About NI social housing

<https://www.takebackthecity.ie/news/what-does-it-take-to-build-homes-for-people-who-need-them>, 20 Mar 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2024-03-what-happens-when-the-state-deprioritises-social-housing>, 14 Mar 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2024-03-child-homelessness-in-belfast-rises-20-in-under-two-years>, 14 Mar 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/blog/2024-01-power-politics-territory-and-the-take-back-the-city-campaign> 15 Jan 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/video/video-2023-10-the-other-waiting-list-crisis-podcast-from-the-holywell-trust> 25 Oct 2023

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2023-08-social-housing-development-in-northern-ireland-who-is-counting>, 4 Aug 2023

<https://www.nlb.ie/blog/2023-04-theyre-fiddling-with-the-figures-again-pt-2> 19 Apr 2023

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2023-04-ni-housing-executive-imposes-new-reporting-restrictions-on-social-housing-waiting-list-data>, 6 Apr 2023

About NI's private rental sector

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/FOI/2023-04-affordable-to-whom-exactly-homelessness-and-the-affordable-housing-future>, 28 Apr 2023

About evictions and the state of temporary accommodation

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/02-2024-housing-need-overview-temporary-accommodation-framework-reliance-on-temporary-accommodation-impact-of-temporary-accommodation-on-children-in-hotel-settings> 14 Feb 2024

<https://www.nlb.ie/blog/2023-11-ppr-calls-for-a-cold-weather-moratorium-on-evictions> 20 Nov 2023

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/11-2023-evictions-from-asylum-accommodation-briefing> 16 Nov 2023

About asylum accommodation

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/10-2023-children-in-the-asylum-system-in-northern-ireland> 31 Aug 2023

<https://www.nlb.ie/investigations/policy-watch/10-2023-use-of-ni-hotels-as-asylum-hostel-accommodation> 12 Jun 2023