

Ms Paige Jennings  
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8<sup>th</sup> November 2018

Dear Ms Jennings

## Freedom of Information Act 2000

I refer to your email dated 16<sup>th</sup> October 2018 in which you requested the following information;

*We wish to understand the level of housing benefit contributions paid to the private rented sector, B&B (bed and breakfast) accommodation and hotels. We therefore request the following:*

1. *The cost of housing benefit contributions to the private rented sector (private landlords, property management companies and similar), broken down by year, from 2012 – 2017, for Northern Ireland as a whole.*
2. *Within the above, the cost of housing benefit contributions to HomeCare Housing (part of HomeCare Independent Living), broken down year by year, from 2012 – 2017, for Northern Ireland as a whole.*
3. *The cost of housing benefit contributions to B&B businesses, broken down year by year, from 2012 – 2017, for Northern Ireland as a whole.*
4. *The cost of housing benefit contributions to hotels, broken down year by year, from 2012 – 2017, for Northern Ireland as a whole.*
5. *A copy of any policy governing payment of housing benefit to the private rented sector, B&Bs and hotels.*
6. *The total spend on new build social housing to address the housing waiting list, broken down by year, from 2012 – 2017 for Northern Ireland as a whole.*

I am writing to confirm that your request has been processed as a request for recorded information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and would respond as follows;

### 1. Cost of housing benefit contributions to the private rented sector

£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13
408	417	416	416	410	395

2. The Housing Executive considers that disclosure of the requested information would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of HomeCare Housing by placing them at a commercial disadvantage to other accommodation providers in bidding for future services of this nature.

The relevant exemption is section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000;

*Commercial interests.*

*(2) Information is exempt information if its disclosure under this Act would, or would be likely to, prejudice the commercial interests of any person (including the public authority holding it).*

Section 43 is a 'qualified' exemption and I must now go on to consider if the public interest is in favour of maintaining the exemption or vice versa. On weighing the factors for and against disclosure I have concluded that the public interest lies in not disclosing the information. I have set out below the factors which I have taken into account in reaching my conclusion.

*Factors in favour of disclosure*

There is a rebuttable presumption in favour of disclosure. I accept that there is a general public interest in transparency and accountability in how public money is spent.

*Factors in maintaining exemption*

The disclosure of detailed payments to an incumbent provider of accommodation services would be likely to place that provider at a disadvantage in tendering for future work by allowing rival bidders to undercut their cost submissions. There is also the potential for a distortion in the bidding process and this would constrain the Housing Executive's ability to run a fair and open procurement exercise. This would work against the public interest in the Housing Executive obtaining best value for public money.

3. The Housing Executive does not hold records of Housing Benefit payments made specifically in respect of B&B accommodation. This expenditure is included in the private sector totals provided in response to question one.
4. The Housing Executive does not hold records of Housing Benefit payments made specifically in respect of hotel accommodation. This expenditure is included in the private sector totals provided in response to question one.

5. The Housing Executive does not have a specific policy or guidance in respect of payment of Housing Benefit to the private rented sector, B&B and hotel accommodation.

6. **Total spend by NIHE on New Build Social Housing**

£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
17/18	16/17	15/16	14/15	13/14	12/13
109	105	99	146	83	83

Please note 14/15 financial year includes £50m in relation to the Co-Ownership Housing Scheme.

If you feel that the information we have provided does not fully meet your request you have the right to request a formal review by the Housing Executive within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to do so, please write to:

The Access to Information Manager  
Corporate Communications  
6<sup>th</sup> Floor  
The Housing Centre  
2 Adelaide Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8PB

Alternatively, you can email the FOI Team at [records@nihe.gov.uk](mailto:records@nihe.gov.uk).

If after such an internal review you are still dissatisfied with the response, you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF, who will undertake an independent review.

Yours sincerely



**Keith Megaw**  
**Assistant Director Corporate Accounting**