

Social housing in Northern Ireland does not comply with human rights standards

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Social housing provision in Northern Ireland is not adequately funded to comply with international human rights standards. That's according to researchers at Queen's University Belfast, who publish their report, *Budgeting for Social Housing: A Human Rights Analysis*, today.

Human rights experts at Queen's School of Law have analysed the [Northern Ireland](#) government's spending on social housing, and have found that it does not comply with international legal obligations to use the maximum available resources to ensure progressive realisation of the right to adequate housing.

Since devolution, there has been a significant increase in the [waiting list](#) for social housing which currently stands at approximately 40,000 households. There has also been a rise in 'housing stress' and [households](#) 'presenting as homeless'. The report finds that in this context, insufficient funding for new social housing represents a violation of international human rights law.

The report makes a number of recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, including:

- Funding for new social housing must increase if government is to comply with its obligations under international human rights laws.

- The government must ensure that the price paid for land - a crucial resource for the right to adequate housing - does not unduly benefit advantaged groups such as [landowners](#), at the expense of taxpayers and those in need of social housing. In particular, practices such as land banking (leaving land dormant in the expectation that it will be zoned for development, multiplying its market value) must be tackled.
- While the proposals for increased protection for tenants in the private rented sector are very welcome, the private rented sector should not be seen as a long term solution to the housing crisis. In particular it is of concern that housing benefit payments are being diverted into the private sector through payments to private landlords.

Dr Rory O'Connell, speaking on behalf of the Queen's Budget Analysis Project Team said:

"Adequate housing is a basic human right, essential to human dignity, security and wellbeing. Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly are legally bound to use their resources to maximum effect in ensuring the right to adequate housing.

"While a considerable amount of revenue was raised under the House Sales Scheme, the budget for new social housing has not been not adequately resourced to ensure sufficient levels of new build to address the increases in waiting lists and homelessness. With more homes being sold than built, the social housing stock has decreased from 176,000 homes in 1987 to around 116,000 today."

The report highlights that, against the backdrop of insufficient funding, certain social housing responsibilities were shifted to housing

associations in 1998 because of their ability to borrow additional private funding - a power which has been denied to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive under HM Treasury rules.

Dr O'Connell continued: "While we welcome the additional funding accessed through housing association borrowing, their loans are repaid using money that is either provided or forgone by the State. Therefore the effect of this system of funding is to keep government debt 'off the books'. In addition, there are some negative consequences which cannot be ignored. Housing associations, as private organisations, may not be able to borrow money on as favourable terms as a public body such as the Housing Executive, if that body were empowered to borrow.

"Rent rates for housing association dwellings are generally higher than for those owned by the Housing Executive, making the housing less affordable. And there are potential gaps in the accountability and transparency of housing associations, making it difficult to ensure human rights obligations are being met."

Due to the lack of social housing stock, the report claims an ever increasing number of those who receive housing benefits have been forced to seek accommodation in the private rented sector.

Dr O'Connell said: "Approximately 57,000 tenants in the private rented sector are currently in receipt of housing benefits. This is not ideal. Rents paid into the social sector are reinvested in social housing while those paid into the private sector go to landlords. As many tenants in the private rented sector receive housing benefit, this means that tax payers' money is effectively subsidising the private rented sector. Also, the private rented sector does not protect tenants' rights to the same degree as the social sector does.

"While some may argue that social housing should not be a priority in

the current economic context, if anything, human rights and the protection of the most vulnerable assume even greater importance at such a time. Those who missed out on the benefits of prosperity should not be further denied their rights in a difficult economic climate."

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

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