



**Pre-sessions 41 Statement**

**UPR of the United Kingdom of GB & N Ireland**

**Palais des Nations, Building E, Room XXI**

**Monday 29th August 2022**

**Presented by: Cormac McArt**

## **\*SLIDE 1**

### **1. Presentation of Your Organisation**

This statement is provided on behalf of the Westcourt Centre, a Civil Society Organisation based in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

From 2008, the Westcourt Centre has developed a strong relationship with the homeless sector. A key feature of the work of the Westcourt Centre is its focus on providing an advocacy platform for people experiencing homelessness.

The Westcourt Centre has been involved in joint submissions by Edmund Rice International for the Universal Periodic Review of the United Kingdom in (May) 2017 and (November) 2022.

### **2. Human Rights Issue to Be Addressed**

Access to housing is a fundamental human right and social need (see Article 25.1 UDHR; Article 11.1 of International Covenant of Economic, Social & Cultural Rights, UN OHCHR Fact Sheet 21).

Northern Ireland is currently experiencing difficult and ongoing challenges regarding housing and homelessness. Many individuals and families struggle to access safe, secure and affordable housing suitable to their needs.

Since the last UPR in May 2017, the situation has not improved.

## **\*\*SLIDE 2**

### **3. Statement**

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive – NIHE - is the strategic housing authority for Northern Ireland.

As of 31 March 2022, there were over 44,400 applicants on the Social Housing waiting list, and the number of Full Duty Applicants - those who have passed all four statutory tests for homelessness but not yet been given a permanent social tenancy – stood at nearly 24, 000.

Just under one third of people experiencing homelessness are families.

In 2021, almost 6,800 children were accepted as homeless by the NIHE.

The lack of social housing alongside record rent costs in the private rental sector and the increasing cost of living is pushing many vulnerable people into extreme poverty.

The situation is compounded by issues around mental health and addiction. Tragically, we've had 15 drug related deaths of young people who were on the streets or in temporary accommodation in Belfast between June and July 2022.

### ***Housing Supply***

Analysis of the NIHE statistics over recent years shows that current policy is failing to make a dent in this acute social housing need.

Almost 22,000 homes are vacant while more than 44,400 people are on the waiting list, according to figures from 30<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

It signals a serious housing shortage, with demand far outstripping supply.

The issue of homelessness cannot be addressed effectively in the absence of an adequate supply of decent housing.

### ***Rising Rents / Rent Arrears***

Latest figures from July 2022 show that rents in the private rental sector continue to rise. In the last year, the average rent rose by 6.4% to stand at £724 a month. This compares with £682 in the same quarter last year.

Data from the NIHE shows the number of people behind on their rent in social housing tenancies is also on the rise.

As of May 2022, there were almost 39,500 tenants in arrears, up from 36,600 at the end of the 2017/18 financial year.

### ***Temporary Accommodation***

Households stay in Temporary Accommodation in NI longer than in England, Scotland and Wales.

Too many households have to stay in temporary accommodation for long periods because they cannot access suitable move on accommodation.

In February 2022, more than 1,500 households had been in temporary accommodation for a year or longer. In January 2019, this figure stood at 818 - so an 85% increase since then.

163 households have been in temporary accommodation for over five years.

On 1 May 2022, 8497 individuals including 3476 children (aged 0-17) were living in temporary accommodation.

### **\*\*\*SLIDE 3**

#### **Concerns**

In Northern Ireland we have an acute shortage of affordable social housing: we're seeing an increasing waiting list for social housing; more people in rent arrears; greater demand for temporary accommodation; a shift in the largest category of those presenting as homeless from single people to families; almost 7,000 children registered as homeless, and the 15 deaths of young homeless people between June and July 2022.

If you look at the number of people in housing distress and, with a report from the University of Ulster in March 2022 talking about up to 100,000 experiencing 'hidden homelessness' – that's those outside official statistics - we are in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis.

A significant issue in preventing and reducing homelessness in NI has been a lack of strategic coordination across the NI Executive. A specific standalone housing and homelessness outcome in the Programme for Government for the NI Executive would help develop the interdepartmental approach to homelessness that is required if we are to respond in a proactive and effective manner.

However, homelessness will persist without a greater supply of housing. The social housing waiting list has grown substantially and this trend looks set to continue particularly with the impact of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis.

### **\*\*\*\*SLIDE 4**

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Therefore we recommend that:**

- 1. The UK government addresses the issue of homelessness in Northern Ireland by ensuring the inclusion of a standalone housing and homelessness outcome in the Programme for Government for the NI Executive.**
- 2. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive increases the supply of safe, secure and affordable housing to meet current need.**
- 3. The UK government adopts the Third Cycle recommendations to show mutual support of the UPR and the SDGs on No Poverty, Good Health & Well-Being and Reduced Inequalities.**

### **\*\*\*\*\*SLIDE 5**

**Thank you.**