

Background Briefing on the North Belfast Housing Inequality

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1. North Belfast's Housing Crisis

Despite making up approximately 45% of the north Belfast population, Catholic families make up almost 3/4 of those in housing stress on the waiting list. However, these waiting list figures must be examined against the numbers of social houses being built to address the need. In 2008 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive projected that by 2012, 95% of the need for new build social housing in north Belfast would be required to address need in the Catholic community.

2. What has Government's Response Been?

As part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, legal provisions were introduced which made it an obligation for all Government Departments and public authorities to proactively address religious inequality where it exists. The NI Executive also committed to allocating resources on the basis of objective need.

This effectively means that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development have the legal obligation, as well as the power, to build and allocate social housing on the basis of need and promoting equality. In fact, this is a core commitment of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Despite these legal obligations and policy commitments, the inequality experienced by Catholics in housing need in North Belfast has remained unresolved. A number of key decisions by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development lie behind this situation. Here are some of them:

- a. **North Belfast Housing Strategy:** between 2000-2007 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive spent £133m on a North Belfast Housing Strategy. During this period, a senior representative of the NIHE described the strategy to the *Ireland on Sunday* newspaper as follows:

"In the Protestant community we have a classic inner city problem of a housing market in decline and an ageing population. The answer here is to renew and reinvent areas by demolishing low standard housing to attract people back."

The senior representative's advice to Catholics in north Belfast waiting for social housing was:

"Become more mobile, moving for example to areas outside North Belfast."

The situation for both Catholics and Protestants on the waiting list got worse during this period. According to NIHE figures, in 2003 there were 789 Catholics and 179 Protestants in

Housing Stress on the waiting list. This rose to 1081 and 403 respectively in 2009, with Catholics comprising 73% of those in housing stress. Crucially, despite spending £133m of public money, no strategy existed to reduce this inequality.

- b. Social Housing Development Programme Strategic Guidelines:** in 2009 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive introduced new guidelines to “[d]irect the development of the social new build programme based on an objective assessment of social housing need and housing condition in accordance with existing strategies and commitments”.

Whilst North Belfast, West Belfast, and Derry previously had a ‘ring-fenced’ number of units of new social housing in recognition of the need to address existing religious inequalities, the new guidelines abolished this policy of ‘ring-fencing’. No evidence was provided as to how existing housing inequalities experienced by Catholics would be tackled in the absence of the ‘ring-fencing’.

As a result of these new guidelines the Northern Ireland Housing Executive reduced new build social housing targets in North Belfast by 29%.

- c. Belfast City Centre Waiting List:** there is limited land available in north Belfast to comprehensively address inequality experienced on the social housing waiting list. Therefore it is essential to use all available opportunities to provide housing for those in most need. Belfast City Centre, which includes pockets and vast swathes of unused land, is one such opportunity. Much of this land is currently with, or adjacent to, North Belfast.

In 2011 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive introduced plans for a new City Centre Waiting List for social housing in the Belfast City Centre area. However, instead of maximising the land to address inequality they created a new social housing area which sets aside objective need. Housing allocation in this newly designated area will operate on a 50/50 religious quota basis as opposed to promoting equality and tackling need. To implement this quota when there is such an unequal playing field contravenes the spirit and law emerging from the Good Friday Agreement and will effectively exacerbate inequality.

3. Housing and the Girdwood site

Girdwood Barracks and Crumlin Road Gaol is a 27-acre site in North Belfast. It is surrounded by some of the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland who consistently rank amongst the most deprived in terms of health, employment, education and housing. All these communities are impacted by health, employment, and educational disadvantage. However, the need for new build social housing is specifically acute among the Catholic community. What is critical is that the Girdwood regeneration has the potential to contribute significantly towards addressing all of these different needs.

In 2008, the Department for Social Development produced a ‘Draft Masterplan’ for the Girdwood Barracks and Crumlin Road Gaol with proposals which did not mention or evidence how the longstanding needs of the various local communities would be met. In response, PPR and community groups called on the Department to provide evidence on how any proposals would target proven need [[link to http://www.pprproject.org/content/urban-regeneration-resources](http://www.pprproject.org/content/urban-regeneration-resources)]. To this day, this basic requirement remains unfulfilled.

In 2009 and again in 2010, two Ministers for Social Development (Ms Margaret Ritchie MP and Mr Alex Attwood MLA respectively) announced approximately 200 new social homes for the Girdwood site, with the then Minister Attwood MLA proceeding to commence the

procurement and design processes including appointing a design team and housing association.

In 2011, the current Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA instructed the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to remove the proposed social homes for Girdwood from their Social Housing Development Programme. Minister McCausland MLA stated that cross community agreement was required for regeneration proposals to move forward.

In May 2012, Minister McCausland announced that a cross-party political deal had been reached which involved the construction of homes, to be located in areas which suggest that some of the social homes will be built for those Catholics in most need on the waiting list, and others for Protestants on the waiting list. The announcement was made the day before the screening of the BBC's Spotlight programme which focused on the political agreement made in relation to the Girdwood site. No figures on the numbers of social homes to be built have been released, although the footprint, and subsequent news reports, suggests a potential 70/30 split.

Disturbingly, it also emerged that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had produced leaflets and disseminated them among members of the Protestant community in Belfast and elsewhere attempting to attract them to live in the predominately Protestant area beside Girdwood and effectively engineer housing need.

4. What about housing need in the Protestant community?

While the change in demographics in north Belfast have witnessed increased need for social housing in the Catholic community, poor housing conditions are witnessed by many communities across north Belfast including those within the Protestant community. Basic short and medium maintenance problems go unresolved, and structural conditions in housing which require refurbishment programmes have been unaddressed for years.

Devising a social housing new build programme which is not proportionate to need will not address the existing housing problems faced within the Protestant community. Indeed much needed maintenance and refurbishment work will remain unaddressed as the public purse tightens in the existing economic climate, and is targeted at attempting to generate need for additional homes instead of maintaining, refurbishing or replacing existing social housing stock.