



Hillview, Housing Inequality and Spotlight: An Overview

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What is the problem in North Belfast?

Overall shortage of social housing: According to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) 'Belfast Housing Investment Plan 2015 – 2019' there were almost 12,000 people on the social housing waiting list in Belfast in 2015 and almost 7,000 in 'housing stress'. Around 6,000 families presented as homeless and over 3,000 were accepted as such¹. On the supply side, 542 social homes were built in Belfast in 2014/15².

According to the Belfast City Council's topic paper on housing for its Local Development Plan 2020-2035, projected social housing need for Belfast for the period 2015-2019 is 5,664 homes, of which 1,236 are foreseen for North Belfast³. The same document noted that there were 2,429 families on the waiting list for North Belfast, of which 1,484 were considered to be in housing stress⁴.

Differential in provision of social housing: Stark differences exist in provision of social housing units across predominately Catholic and predominately Protestant areas, which do not in any way reflect objective need.

NIHE needs assessment figures for 2016 indicate that there was a need for 938 new units of additional social housing in predominately Catholic North Belfast 1, while in predominately Protestant North Belfast 2 there was a need for 38 additional social homes [[See PPR Hillview Policy Brief]]. Earlier NIHE figures, for 2014, indicated that there was a surplus of 72 housing units in Protestant areas of North Belfast in contrast with a deficit of 666 units in Catholic areas⁵.

The housing situation for Catholics in North Belfast has twice attracted comment from the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg and UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing. (see PPR, *Build Homes Now!* 2016, p. 7.)

Roots of housing inequality: Socio-economic inequalities – including religious discrimination and inequality in housing -- fuelled and compounded the era of civil disturbance that became known as 'the Troubles'. The official inquiry into the cause of the civil disorder that broke out in the 1960s concluded that inadequate housing provision and unfair allocation contributed to "a rising sense of continuing injustice and grievance"⁶ and pointed to a "misuse in certain areas of discretionary powers of allocation of houses in order to perpetuate Unionist control of the local authority." It was against this backdrop that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was established in 1971. Designed

¹ NIHE, Belfast Housing Investment Plan 2015-2019 at https://www.nihe.gov.uk/belfast_housing_investment_plan_2015.pdf, p. 17. Cited in PPR, *Build Homes Now!* 2016 p. 7.

² NIHE, Belfast Housing Investment Plan 2015-2019 at https://www.nihe.gov.uk/belfast_housing_investment_plan_2015.pdf, p. 6. Cited in PPR, *Build Homes Now!* 2016 p. 7.

³ Belfast City Council, Topic paper: housing. Local Development Plan 2020-2035 at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=20493&slD=18628 paras. 3.36-3.37.

⁴ Belfast City Council, Topic paper: housing. Local Development Plan 2020-2035 at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=20493&slD=18628 para. 3.37.

⁵ NIHE information received by PPR under a Freedom of Information request, July 2014. Cited in PPR, *Surrounded by Land but 'no space' for housing?*, 2015 p. 8.

⁶ Cameron, Lord (1969). *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Cited in PPR, *Equality Can't Wait*, 2013 at <https://www.pprproject.org/sites/default/files/Equality%20Can't%20Wait.pdf>, p. 9.

to provide housing on the basis of 'need' with a points based allocation system, the popular expectation was that the new body would operate in such a fashion so as to put "an end to allegations about sectarian discrimination in housing allocation."⁷ (see PPR, *Equality Can't Wait*, 2013, p. 9)

This clearly hasn't happened.

Which authorities are responsible?

Over past years PPR's work has shown how public authorities with policy commitments and legislative obligations have failed to uphold their duties and have failed to be guarantors of fundamental provisions of our peace process. Whilst the actions and policies of the NIHE features heavily, many other public bodies including the Department for Social Development (now the Department for Communities), the Equality Commission, Belfast City Council and the Department for Regional Development (now the Department for Infrastructure) have played a part in the ongoing inequality. Significant roles have also been played by political representatives, both at constituency level, and on the decision making structures within Belfast City Council, the Housing Executive and the NI Assembly. The evidence gathered by PPR over years of work demonstrates that a collective failure to act in accordance with the domestic equality obligations and international human rights obligations (including 3 UN level interventions) has perpetuated housing inequality in North Belfast. [[see PPR, *Equality Can't Wait*, 2013, p. 11.]]

Why does the Hillview site matter so much?

Hillview is a microcosm of the forces and issues around inequality in social housing in Northern Ireland. The Equality Can't Wait campaign, which began in 2012, identified Hillview as a windfall site with potential to help meet social housing need early on in its work. The site - designated 'unzoned whiteland' under the statutory development plan – was approved for retail use in 2000 but has lain vacant since the failure of a Dunnes store on the site in 2007. The site was identified, for instance, in a photo-mapping exercise of vacant Belfast land carried out by residents in 2015 (PPR, *Surrounded by Land but 'no space' for housing?*, 2015).

The August 2017 planning decision to approve retail-only development of the Hillview site is one in a documented long line of failed opportunities to tackle inequality and build homes according to need in North Belfast. An earlier example was the Girdwood Barracks site, at the heart of five of the most deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland – Crumlin, New Lodge, Water Works, Shankill and Ardoyne. In 2010 then-Housing Minister Alex Attwood announced plans for 200 social homes on the site, a decision reversed by his successor Minister Nelson McCausland. A subsequent legal challenge brought by a Catholic single mother who had been on the housing waiting list for nearly 13 years resulted in an out of court settlement which provided for the building of sixty homes on the site (see PPR, ECW pp. 49, 55).

The Hillview site remains a singular opportunity for housing inequality in North Belfast to be addressed.

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⁷ Singleton, D. (1985) Housing Allocation Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland, in, Singleton, D. (Ed.) (1986) Aspects of Housing Policy and Practice in Northern Ireland 1984-1986. Belfast: Department of Town and Country Planning, QUB. Cited in *Equality Can't Wait*, p. 9.

