

GUEST BLOG: They don't make land anymore...

In June 2016, the [United Nations International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) issued its Concluding Observations on the performance of the United Kingdom in realising a **range of human rights**, including the right to housing.

Containing a range of **broad criticisms** relating to unemployment, mental health and the sanctioning of social security entitlements, **global attention** was also brought to the local level, with a recommendation that the State:

“intensify its efforts to address the challenges to overcome persistent inequalities in housing for Catholic families in North Belfast, including through meaningful participation of all actors in decision-making processes relating to housing.”

North Belfast now has the dubious distinction of being **twice highlighted** as the location for the failure of housing rights on the global stage. (The Committee highlighted the issue in its previous UK examination in 2009).



Social housing in Northern Ireland has an acrimonious history. **The Cameron Report (1969)** into the causes of what were termed 'disturbances' in Northern Ireland concluded that among other factors, inadequate housing provision and unfair allocation had contributed to 'a rising sense of continuing injustice and grievance'.

That history reverberates today as was witnessed by those tuning in to [BBC Radio Ulster's TalkBack on 19th September](#), and as experienced by the families and individuals who frequently approach PPR for help to secure their right to adequate housing.

Assessing and tackling housing need is at the heart of the issue. The **policy commitment** to address objective need stretches back beyond our post-conflict era to Direct Rule in the early nineties.

Targeting disadvantage, the theory goes, would be done by **directing resource** and effort to those groups, areas and individuals who were in greatest need, regardless of religion, creed or any other status. This would be the foundation on which a **new society** based on justice and equality would be built.

One factor overlooked in the debate on this issue so far is how **housing need** is assessed. Numbers of applicants on the social housing waiting list, their level of housing stress and the length of time they have been waiting are often seen as synonymous with need. However the picture is slightly **more complex**, and requires not only looking at numbers of those in need (demand), but also the capacity of existing housing stock to meet that need (supply).



The data that provides the clearest picture of where the greatest housing need

lies are figures relating to **'residual need'**. Broadly speaking, this calculation involves projecting the number of people who are in housing stress, subtracting the current supply of housing, less one years average annual re-lets to reach a number representing those on the waiting list whose housing needs cannot be met by the **existing stock**. This then indicates the number of new and additional social homes required to be built to meet that need.

PPR first came across this methodology in the then-Department for Social Development's Equality Impact Assessment on the site of the **Girdwood Barracks** in North Belfast in 2008. In that document, the data provided by the [Northern Ireland Housing Executive](#) stated that the 95% of the projected **need for additional social homes** would be in Catholic areas of North Belfast. Despite this finding, the Department recommended that 'shared housing' was the preferred way forward.

Since then, housing need in North Belfast has been expressed by successive housing Ministers Nelson McCausland and Mervyn Storey in terms of the waiting list in North Belfast Parliamentary Constituency, rather than the [NIHE](#) Housing District which was previously used, in order to argue that there is in fact no housing inequality impacting the Catholic community in North Belfast.

However, **calculation of residual need figures** across North Belfast Parliamentary Constituency and North Belfast Housing District show that the need for additional units of social housing is overwhelmingly in the Catholic community.



In our new post conflict society, meeting need where it arises, **regardless of community background**, gender or disability should be a given, not even the

subject of debate.

Certainly that is what the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement provided for. The **legislative requirements** of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are clear: according primacy to the legal duty to promote equality (and tackle persisting historic inequalities) is necessary if we are to build sound good relations,

Today the Girdwood site, stands as a reminder of a failure to implement this key provision of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Previously earmarked for 200 homes, it holds about 60 and a 'Community Hub'.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, **they don't make land anymore**. We must harness these equality and human rights obligations and use them to implement a proactive approach to zoning, vesting and planning applications in order to build homes now, where they are needed most.