

This place we call home?

KEY INEQUALITIES
IN HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES



Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Thanks to everyone who shared their stories, and thanks to the following organisations for their cooperation.

Armagh Traveller Support Group

Cedar Foundation

Craigavon Travellers Support Committee

Mencap

NIACRO

Pacemaker Press International (Photography)

South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)

Wolfhill Community Centre

Our statement on Key Inequalities in Housing and Communities in Northern Ireland is online at www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-housing

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Foreword

I have never known a time when I did not have a place to call home, a safe space where I could feel secure.

For housing is a basic human need. As Maya Angelou put it: 'The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned'. It provides a foundation for our family and community life and is essential for our health, our well-being, and for a prosperous society.

And, of course, having a roof over your head is something the majority of us take for granted. Most of us would accept that having access to secure, good and affordable housing should not be beyond anyone's reach in our 21st century democracy.

It is a sad reality, however, that suitable housing, which is such a basic foundation for all our lives, remains only an aspiration for some people in Northern Ireland. This might surprise some people, because housing inequalities rarely make it to the news headlines or the front pages of our daily papers.

The real life stories which follow tell us about personal experiences, good and bad, of finding and keeping a home. Great strides have been made in public housing provision in Northern Ireland over the past decades, and some of these stories show how imaginative and caring public policies can help people, with spirit and courage, to overcome the difficulties and challenges life has faced them with.

Others reflect the experiences of people who have had to struggle with housing issues for many years. They make for stark reading but they must not be ignored. Their continuing struggles challenge us all.

These stories show that for some, life-altering change has been possible, while for others it remains out of reach. I thank all contributors sincerely for their willingness to share their experiences, both positive and negative.

It is in that context that I commend this report to you - part of a suite of work undertaken by the Commission which seeks to highlight the key inequalities in housing and communities.

It is a call to action - a challenge to each of us to tackle inequality, whatever our role in society - as a politician, policy maker, worker or resident - we all have a contribution to make in tackling key inequalities in housing and communities.



Dr Michael Wardlow

Chief Commissioner

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland



*“It’s just marvellous
- it’s the answer to
our prayers.”*

Bryan and Warren

This is Bryan and Warren’s story, an example of how enabling people with a learning disability to live independently can transform lives and address inequality.

“It’s just marvellous - it’s the answer to our prayers.” This is how Isobel and Bob Henry, who are in their 70s, describe their sons’ new home. Both of their adult sons, Bryan (40) and Warren (38), are non-verbal, they both have a learning disability and complex needs which require 24-hour care.

Bryan and Warren have recently moved into a new bungalow near Omagh supported by Mencap after 23 years apart. There was previously no housing solution available to allow them to live together. They share the property with two other adults with a learning disability and have carers to look after them at all times – they have settled in well, the atmosphere in their home is both calm and welcoming.

Mencap’s Personal Support and Housing Service in Northern Ireland developed the supported living solution for the Henry family and believe people with a learning disability should have a real choice about where they live and who they live with, so housing is tailored to meet an individual’s needs and aspirations.

Before the move to this adapted home, Warren lived at home with their parents. Bryan had lived in a nursing home 33 miles away from the family home since 1994, which meant that it was difficult for his parents to visit him more than once a week. Bob and Isobel have campaigned for more suitable and independent living arrangements for their sons for over twenty years. They sought the assistance of everyone who could help, including local politicians.

Bob said: “This move has been good for all of us as a family. It is a huge weight lifted off our shoulders. Neither of us is getting any younger but this has given us peace of mind for the future.”

“Most importantly the boys are together again at last, they are happy here and they are well cared for. We feel like we have gained an extended family through their carers.”

“Our sons will never be able to look after themselves,” Isobel said, “but this type of supported independent living is more than we would ever have dreamed of for them.”

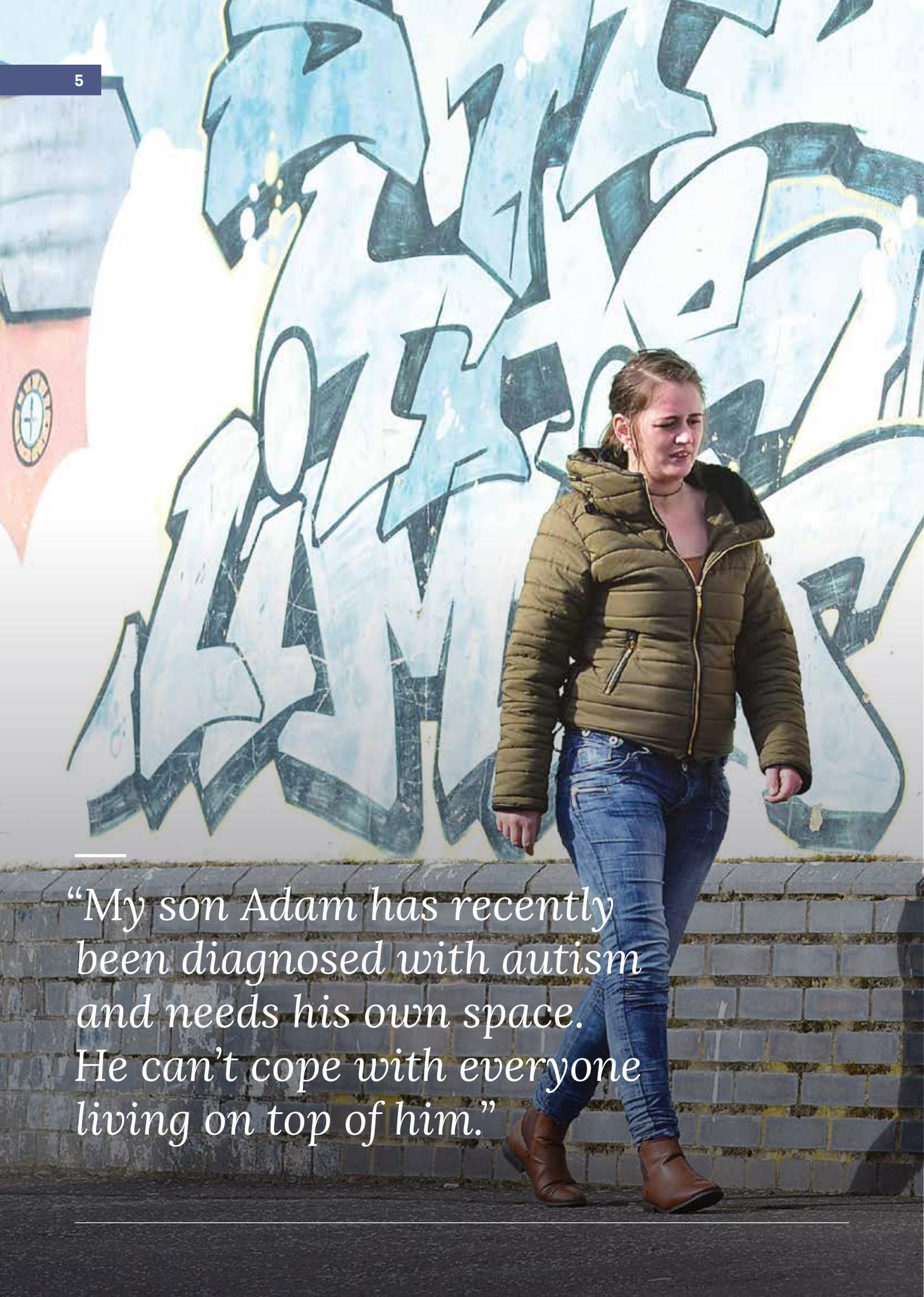
“We cannot express what this means for us as a family. We can call and see our sons whenever we want, just for 5 minutes after shopping or for a couple of hours at a time,” she said. “We don’t have to make an appointment or stick to visiting times. It is just wonderful. We are safe in the knowledge that our sons are content in what we can only describe as a home from home.”

Barry McMenamin, Regional Operations Manager for Mencap Northern Ireland commented: “This has been a great success story and proves the importance of building a housing solution around the needs of families and future planning. Mencap worked closely with the family and the Western Health Trust to come up with a solution where we accessed capital from our sister charity Golden Lane Housing, using their innovative Retail Charity Bond. We were able to find the right solution for all concerned.”

Key Inequality

Those with a learning disability are not always afforded an opportunity to live independently.



A young woman with brown hair tied back, wearing a green quilted puffer jacket, blue jeans, and brown boots, is walking past a wall covered in large, stylized graffiti. The graffiti is primarily white and light blue with black outlines. She is looking down and to her right. The wall is made of grey stone blocks at the bottom. The background shows a building with a red wall and a circular window on the left.

“My son Adam has recently been diagnosed with autism and needs his own space. He can’t cope with everyone living on top of him.”

Shauna

This is Shauna's story, which demonstrates the personal impact of social housing waiting times on people seeking homes in particular areas. It's just one of the stories that lie behind the statistics of housing waiting lists.

Shauna McLarnon is a young Catholic mother from north Belfast with four children, living four storeys up in a two bedroom flat – “surviving, not living” is how she describes her situation.

Shauna is distraught. She is hoping for a house in Ligoniel, which would let her be nearer to her family for a support network and the provision of childcare, and she has been on a housing list for almost two and a half years. She meets many of the criteria but does not have the number of points she would most likely need to qualify for a house in Ligoniel. Moving to a home more suited to her needs, and closer to her family, where her young children would be living at ground floor level, is her long-term goal, but the prolonged wait is taking its toll.

“I share a bedroom with Jenny-Louise, who's 10 months old,” she says. “The other three children Daniel (7), Adam (4) and Jessica (3) share the other bedroom. There is extremely limited space in the flat for all that comes with having a young family – clothes, toys, books and so on. There is no access to a garden nor to any place for the children to play.

“My son Adam has recently been diagnosed with autism and needs his own space, a room of his own,” Shauna says. “He has sensory issues and can't cope with the noise and stress of having everyone living on top of him. His behaviour has deteriorated because of it.”

“Living in such a wee flat up on the fourth floor is just awful,” she says. “Simple things, like trying to get the kids up and down to the flat, are terrible. There is a lift but it's often out of order. I simply can't manage the stairs with a buggy and four children and have to rely on my neighbours or sometimes random strangers just to get them home safely.

“I take the kids to visit my family and friends, just to get us out for a few hours, but getting the bus up to Ligoniel is very stressful. If I miss one bus I could be waiting at the stop for another 40 mins – try doing that with four kids on a main road in the rain!”

Every week Shauna checks to see if there are any developments in getting a house, but so far the answer has been no. “It's hard!” she says. “I dream of getting a house with more space and maybe even a garden close to my family in Ligoniel. It would be like winning the Lottery. The kids and I need a proper place to call home – we need to live!”

Kathleen Kelly, a benefits adviser at Wolfhill Community Centre, who also deals with housing issues, said: “Shauna is among the worst cases of housing need I have at the minute, but unfortunately she is not the only single parent waiting on suitable housing in the area. It's all too common in this part of Belfast.”

Key Inequality

Catholic household reference person applicants for social housing continue to experience the longest waiting times.



A man with a serious expression stands in front of a red brick wall and a dark brown wooden door. He is wearing a grey knit beanie, a patterned sweater, and a green quilted jacket. A black flower pot is mounted on the brick wall behind him.

“I just couldn’t understand why anyone would want to attack me or my home - I had no enemies.”

Ahmed

This is Ahmed's story, an example of how the homes of minority ethnic people can be vulnerable to racial attacks and the severe impact this can have on someone's life.

Ahmed Alzian had left his native Sudan for a new start in Northern Ireland in 2013. At first, his relocation started off well. He made new friends and, to help him integrate better as a new citizen, attended English lessons to improve his grasp of the language.

In October 2015 Ahmed arrived home to his house in Belfast and found two men robbing and ransacking it. He called out to a friend for help and they managed to take photos of the culprits as they fled.

When Ahmed went inside he was shocked at the devastation. "They had smashed up my home, stolen everything they could. They had damaged my Qu'ran which, as a Muslim, made me very angry and upset. I just couldn't understand why anyone would want to attack me or my home - I had no enemies."

To Ahmed's shock, the men returned moments later and attacked both Ahmed and his friend with metal bars. They tried to get their phones to destroy the photos we had taken of them but they didn't succeed. "We gave the photo evidence to the PSNI and reported the attack on my home and on us," Ahmed said. However, he no longer felt safe there. "I had to

pack up and leave," he said. "I truly believe that these people targeted me and my home because of racism. They left me frightened and homeless because of my race, I can think of no other reason."

Following the incident Ahmed had to move to hostel accommodation and was homeless until April 2016. Despite the incident, he has stayed in Belfast. He is happy in a new home and now is working full time at a job he likes.

Ahmed said: "I like to think of Northern Ireland as my home now, I like meeting new people here and I enjoy playing basketball. I just hope people see and accept me for being Ahmed the person and do not just see the colour of my skin."

Moira McCombe, Project Worker, Assisting People and Communities, NIACRO said: "The potential for psychological damage following a hate attack is substantial since it hits the part of us which wants to belong and can leave us feeling insecure and unsafe. Such an event also has the ability to damage part of our core identity which can leave feelings of hurt and anger."

Key Inequality

The homes of minority ethnic people and migrant groups may be vulnerable to racial attacks.



A woman with glasses and a red leopard print top is sitting in a chair with blue handrails. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. There is a small framed picture on the wall to the left and a blue object on the far left edge.

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“I thought I’d never
have a place like
this to call my own
– it’s just great”

Hilary

This is Hilary's story, an example of how the life of someone with a disability has been transformed through access to housing and support that meets her personal needs.

Hilary moved in to her new home in August 2016 and she is still excited about it. "It's just brilliant!" she said of her apartment in the purpose built facility in Lisburn.

After a stroke Hilary had been unable to live independently, and she had been in Ballymacoss Residential Home for more than 20 years.

Now supported to live in a self-contained one bedroom apartment, she talks passionately about being able to decide on her own colour schemes, picking her own pictures and cushions for her living room, and getting matching utensils for her kitchen. All the things that many of us take for granted, but Hilary had never been in a position to do before.

The apartment which Hilary now calls home has been designed to meet her every need. It incorporates technology to ensure that her independence isn't compromised and there are easily accessible buzzers and buttons to open and close doors and blinds. With modern technology Hilary can control almost everything in her new home, from heating to entertainment, with an iPad.

"I go to a day centre three days a week and there are other activities here, like glass painting, that I join in, but I love being able to go back to the peace and quiet of my wee home and watch my TV with a wee tippie on a Saturday night. I thought I'd never have a place like this to call my own – it's just great."

Hilary is one of 13 residents currently living in self-contained apartments at a purpose built facility which was developed by the Cedar Foundation, in partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and Triangle Housing Association.

Stephen Mathews, Cedar Foundation CEO, said:
"People with disabilities have an equal right to housing, but access to suitable housing is often limited and many are still inappropriately accommodated in residential or nursing care. The Cedar Foundation has been working with housing partners and the Health and Social Care trusts to develop models of supported housing that aim to ensure equitable access for disabled people to have a home of their own in their local community."

"At the heart of these models are advances in assistive technology that support the design of housing and limit the very disabling effects of physical disability, enabling individuals to live as independently as possible.

"For most people, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, new technologies, appropriately implemented, make independent living achievable - ensuring that a rights-based approach to housing is possible.

Creative environmental design with assistive technologies when combined with care and support packages support independence and social inclusion that changes lives."

Key Inequality

Many people with disabilities live in homes that are not adequate to meet their disability related needs.





*“David and I were living
in fear in our own home”*

Vincent & David

This is Vincent and David's story, an example of how LGB people can feel harassed and unsafe in their own homes and neighbourhoods.

The idea that your home could be attacked because of your sexuality seems ludicrous – but for Vincent Creelan and David McCauley it became a grim reality. Their home was attacked on various occasions from August 2007 until around July 2008. The couple, who are in a civil partnership, have a comfortable home in a good location with friendly neighbours. Vincent retired from the police 11 years ago while David runs an IT company.

When the attacks became regular and more frequent, they installed CCTV to watch for the perpetrators in the small hours at the weekends. It gradually became clear to them that this harassment was being done by a small group of local youths.

“They threw everything they could get their hands on at the house; from stones and eggs to pieces of masonry. The attacks were random but sustained over a long period of time,” Vincent said. “David and I were living in fear in our own home; a place where we should be able to relax and be safe – that is a terrible feeling.”

All incidents were reported to police, but the couple felt the investigation of what were homophobic hate crimes fell well short of PSNI standards. Vincent said: “I do not believe that we received the support and investigation that our complaints should have generated.”

The couple, supported by the Equality Commission, took a discrimination case against the PSNI alleging that failure to investigate their complaints was because of their sexual orientation. The PSNI settled the case without admission of liability.

“It is frustrating that in this day and age that we were considered a target because we are a same-sex couple,” David said. “We have been together now for fifteen years. We have some great neighbours who were very friendly throughout and we decided to stay in our home, despite everything. What we want most is to live in peace with our good neighbours, family and friends and to enjoy life.”

Key Inequality

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people can feel harassed and unsafe in their own homes and neighbourhoods.





Travellers and Migrant Workers

There are other areas of housing inequality that are not illustrated here by personal stories.



Key Inequality

Access to appropriate accommodation for Irish Travellers is limited.



Key Inequality

Migrant workers are vulnerable to becoming subject to tied accommodation with poor conditions and overcrowding.



KEY INEQUALITIES IN HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES



Catholic household reference person applicants for social housing continue to experience the longest waiting times.

Social Housing Waiting List 2013/14



Access to appropriate accommodation for Irish Travellers is limited



Number of planning applications for Irish Traveller sites in the areas of most need between 2007-2015

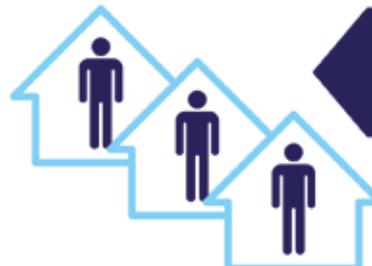


Migrant workers are vulnerable to becoming subject to tied accommodation with poor conditions and overcrowding.

The homes of minority ethnic people and migrant groups may be vulnerable to racial attacks.



Criminal Damage to a Dwelling Crimes: Racist Motivation



Those with a learning disability are not always afforded an opportunity to live independently.

Many people with disabilities live in homes that are not adequate to meet their disability related needs.



1/5 of those who needed a modification or adaptation did not have one

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people can feel harassed and unsafe in their own homes and neighbourhoods.



1/5 of homophobic incidents occurred at home
2/4 involved a perpetrator who lived locally