



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **The impact of intimidation on the work of Registered Housing Associations (NI) and the allocation of housing**

Sturgeon, B., Faulkner-Byrne, L., & Bryan, D. (2025). *The impact of intimidation on the work of Registered Housing Associations (NI) and the allocation of housing*. Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. <https://nifha.org/2025/01/28/nifha-welcomes-removal-of-intimidation-points-in-housing-selection-scheme/>

### **Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### **Publisher rights**

Copyright 2025 the Authors.

### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

### **Open Access**

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

# The impact of intimidation on the work of Registered Housing Associations (NI) and the allocation of housing

January 2025



Dr Brendan Sturgeon  
Dr. Lisa Faulkner-Byrne  
Prof. Dominic Bryan

## **Contents**

Summary	2
Background to the Paper	4
Purpose	5
Political and Policy Context	7
Methodology	14
Findings	16
Conclusions	26
Acknowledgements	29
Bibliography	30

## Summary

1. **This short report examines the challenges for registered Housing Associations in Northern Ireland created by the points-based system used to allocate social housing. Specifically, the way points are allocated for intimidation, particularly intimidation by paramilitary groups, how this impacts the fair allocation of housing, the allocation of housing by need, and the development of successful shared communities.**
2. The report reflects the experiences of the Housing Associations in Northern Ireland and was commissioned by The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA). The report offers a brief policy review relevant to the distribution of social housing, then provides evidence from Housing Associations of their experience at dealing with cases of intimidation perpetrated by paramilitary groups.
3. Creating adequate social housing provision in Northern Ireland is challenging given the shortage of available housing, high levels of deprivation that exists across the region and the scale of residential segregation that remains apparent.
4. Intimidation by paramilitary groups creates pressure on the provision and allocation of homes in a number of areas of Northern Ireland. The issue has both severe **systematic and practical consequences**. In systematic terms, the issue has facilitated an over emphasis on intimidation cases, leading to the abuse of the current structure for determining allocation. In practical terms, the issue has created a process where other key issues, often related to shared housing, are made more challenging.
5. Creating appropriate provision for housing is undertaken using a system that allocates homes on a points basis. Because of the way points are allocated provision of housing is skewed towards individuals who have been victims of particular types of intimidation. The way points are allocated specifically profiles paramilitary activity and anti-social behaviour.

6. There are very good reasons for helping victims of intimidation move to safer areas. However, this leaves many of those in dire need of rehousing further down the list and creates the impression of unfairness.
7. It has meant that some at-risk individuals (based on their disability, gender or ethnic background) are marginalised by **a system that appears to be much more responsive to threat than need.**
8. Dealing with the resulting issues takes up a disproportionate amount of time for Housing Associations. In some areas, it makes it harder to develop shared housing estates and shared communities.
9. **The main focus of this scoping paper has been on outlining the key challenges associated with intimidation points and housing allocation. Throughout the conversations that facilitated the development of this report, participants also noted some potential solutions to this issue, this has included:**
  - i. **A review of how points are awarded, including a closer inspection of how issues related to domestic abuse and homelessness can be better prioritised.**
  - ii. **An assessment of how more effective data sharing can ensure that people are not rehoused within streets of where they were intimidated.**
  - iii. **Consideration of a quota system that would allow for the development of more 'balanced' communities.**
10. Whilst these are reasonable and valuable observations, a discussion relating to possible solutions to the problems outlined in this paper, needs further work.

## **(1) BACKGROUND TO THIS PAPER**

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA), formed in 1977, is the representative body for Northern Ireland's 20 registered housing associations. To ensure the fair provision of housing and the broader success of housing associations, NIFHA works with government to develop housing policy that is best placed to support social and affordable housing.

Registered housing associations provide a broad range of housing options, from family homes to supported living, as well as housing solutions for those who want to buy their own home.

A fair and proper system for housing allocation is crucial in Northern Ireland – around one fifth (17%) of the population lives in relative poverty<sup>1</sup> and over 90% of the population still live in residential segregation.<sup>2</sup>

Senior staff within NIFHA and its member Housing Associations have been reflecting on how they can best ensure that registered housing associations can continue to deliver for those who wish to avail of their services, while creating cohesive, shared and peaceful neighbourhoods. In addition to identifying how existing good practice can be sustained, senior staff have also observed some key challenges that often cause problems in the delivery of their work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Communities (NI) (2023), *The Northern Ireland poverty and inequality report: 2022-23* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Poole and Paul Doherty (2024), *Ethnic Residential Segregation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Ulster University – the Centre for the Study of Conflict).

## **(2) PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER**

The total number of applicants on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) waiting list on 30 September 2024 was 48,366. Of these applicants, 36,741 households were in 'housing stress'. In total, more than 16,000 households presented as homeless to the NIHE in the year ending September 2024. The household types with the highest proportion of homeless presenters were single males (33.6%) and families (28.7%)<sup>3</sup>.

One of the biggest challenges that housing associations, working under the banner of NIFHA, routinely encounter when determining housing allocation is the issue of intimidation points.

Intimidation points form part of the Housing Selection Scheme, which is governed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). The Scheme is a key source of guidance for NIHE, when they are making an assessment regarding how best to allocate housing.

When people apply for housing, their position on the waiting list for social housing is determined by the points they are awarded in application of the scheme. Points are awarded under a number of categories, one of which is intimidation: 200 points are allocated to a person who has been a victim of intimidation. It is the issue that leads to the award of more housing points than any other matter.

When considered in this context, the award of intimidation points should greatly expediate the process by which an individual will be rehomed.

Rule 23 of the Selection Scheme entitles individuals to intimidation points if a number of criteria are met:

---

<sup>3</sup> Department for Communities (2024), *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin: July – September 2024* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

*“The Applicant’s home has been destroyed or seriously damaged (by explosion, fire or other means) as a result of a terrorist, racial or sectarian attack, or because of an attack motivated by hostility because of an individual’s disability or sexual orientation, or as a result of an attack by a person who falls within the scope of the Housing Executive’s statutory powers to address neighbourhood nuisance or other similar forms of anti-social behaviour.*

*The Applicant cannot reasonably be expected to live, or to resume living in his/ her home, because, if he or she were to do so, there would, in the opinion of the Designated Officer, be a serious and imminent risk that the Applicant, or one or more of the Applicant’s household, would be killed or seriously injured as a result of terrorist, racial or sectarian attack, or an attack which is motivated by hostility because of an individual’s disability or sexual orientation or as a result of an attack by a person who falls within the scope of the Housing Executive’s statutory powers to address neighbourhood nuisance or other similar forms of anti-social behaviour.”<sup>4</sup>*

Whilst intimidation points offer an important safeguard for individuals at genuine risk of intimidation and threat, local media and key stakeholders regularly report on the ways in which the system can be manipulated.

This paper will explore the policy background to the points based allocation system and will reflect some of the difficulties Housing Associations are having in creating need based, shared housing allocations.

---

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *NIHE Housing Selection Scheme* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).



### **(3) Political & Policy Context**

The points-based allocation system for housing in Northern Ireland was introduced by the Housing Executive in 1988. The purpose of such a system is to allocate the scarce resource of social housing (48,366 households are currently on the waiting list in Northern Ireland), according to the strategic objectives of the Government and delivery agencies. The vision of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is that *'Everyone is able to live in an affordable, sustainable and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe, attractive, and climate-resilient place.'*<sup>5</sup>

The overriding principle is that selection based upon need. The Programme for Government 2011-2015 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2012) is clear in its direction in relation to the achievement of its aim of building *'a shared and better future for all.'*<sup>6</sup> *The Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027* also suggests *'We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities.'*<sup>7</sup>

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that all public agencies:

*"...shall have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between:*  
*(a) persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;*  
*(b) men and women generally;*  
*(c) persons with a disability and persons without; and*  
*(d) persons with dependants and persons without."*

*Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 also states "without prejudice to this obligation, Public Authorities are also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting*

---

<sup>5</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2024) *Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Annual Report* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2012), *Programme for Government* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive).

<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2024), *Draft Programme for Government* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive).

*good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, and racial group.<sup>8</sup>*

Under the present Good Relations Strategy *Together: Building a United Community*, there was a target to create 10 new shared neighbourhoods and an ‘*overarching review of housing to bring forward recommendations on how to enhance shared neighbourhoods.*’<sup>9</sup>

The task of building houses to meet need, and to create housing as shared neighbourhoods has fallen to the registered housing associations. This in a context when pressure for housing has grown significantly.

The points-based system was developed at a time of high levels of violent conflict. Whilst there is no doubt that threats from paramilitary groups still exist, the present context is very different. In 2013, the complex system of housing allocation was examined in a substantial report from the Ulster University and the University of Cambridge.<sup>10</sup> Among their recommendations were significant changes to the allocation of housing to a banded scheme, prioritising by need.

In December 2020, the Department for Communities published a report on the outcomes of their consultation. Eighteen of twenty proposals were approved, but significantly for the issue discussed here, the Minister Deirdre Hargey decided that Proposal 7 on the removal of intimidation points would not be proceeded.<sup>11</sup> The consultation suggested:

---

<sup>8</sup> The Northern Ireland Act, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> The Executive Office (2013), *Together: Building a United Community* (Belfast: The Executive Office).

<sup>10</sup> Paddy Gray, Michela Keenan, Ursula McAnulty, Anna Clarke, Sarah Monk and Connie Tang (2013), *Research to Inform a Fundamental review of Social Housing Allocations: report Number 1 – Current Approaches to Accessing and Allocating Social Housing in Northern Ireland* - <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/social-housing-allocations-report1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Housing Rights (2024), *Briefing paper on reform of intimidation points and provision for victims of violence and those at risk/under threat of violence including victims of domestic abuse with the NI Housing Selection Scheme* (Belfast: Housing Rights).

*“... further work will be carried out and alternatives considered for two proposals, which will not progress. These are the proposals to remove intimidation points and interim accommodation points.”<sup>12</sup>”*

This decision was made, despite 7 out of 10 respondents to the consultation supported change to the system on intimidation point. The consultation reports the following:

*“The importance of multi-agency working to address the underlying causes of intimidation was highlighted. A number of respondents noted a perception that intimidation points are abused at the moment and there was a need for greater transparency, clear processes and guidance moving forward. Some proposed an alternative system where intimidation points would still be awarded, but at a reduced level or with a weighting applied to reflect trauma. Others felt that points should be extended to award points for other traumatic circumstances. Concerns were also raised by respondents regarding the safety of victims and the wider community.”<sup>13</sup>*

In response to these concerns, the Minister said the following: *‘ There must be robust verification of intimidation points: I want to make changes that will prevent any manipulation of the system for awarding these points.’<sup>14</sup>*

In 2015, Cameron Watt (then Chief Executive of NIFHA) stressed that while a respective system should ensure that no one lives in intimidation, the current structure creates the potential for ‘points-chasing’<sup>15</sup> The NIHE have also indicated that a significant number of their cases that are connected to intimidation are also often also linked to paramilitary groups. In 2017-18, the NIHE reported that nearly 80% of accepted intimidation applicants were *‘ fleeing paramilitary*

---

<sup>12</sup> Department for Communities (2020), *A new housing supply strategy* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

<sup>13</sup> Department for Communities, *A new housing supply strategy*.

<sup>14</sup> Department for Communities, *A new housing supply strategy*.

<sup>15</sup> Inside Housing (2015), *NI ‘intimidated points’ policy could be scrapped* - <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/ni-intimidation-points-policy-could-be-scrapped-44621>

*intimidation*.<sup>16</sup> There is increasing concern that these two points are inextricably linked – the issue of ‘points-chasing’ and the activity and presence of paramilitary groups.

In 2020, the then Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, rejected a proposal to remove intimidation points, stating – *{points} are still needed today to meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable*.<sup>17</sup>

Later in 2020, Caral Ní Chullín, deputising for Ms. Hargey as Minister, indicated –

*‘Two of the 20 proposals need more work. The first is regarding intimidation points. I do not intend to proceed with the proposal to remove intimidation points. People in danger in their own home need prioritisation under the selection scheme. The manner of that prioritisation needs to be tightly focussed on such people, including victims of domestic violence. But, consistent with this, the mechanisms for such prioritisation need to prevent abuse and provide robust verification. They need to ensure that the manner in which the scheme responds to cases of intimidation does not distort the list. Officials are investigating options for an alternative proposal, including consideration of a statutory body to independently manage this verification process. I will be able to update the Assembly further on this in due course.*<sup>18</sup>’

In 2024, the Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons, indicated he was *‘aware that there is significant concern that intimidation points are being abused*’. However, he later went on to say that the NIHE verification scheme was *‘robust*’. Minister Lyons has also stated that he believes *‘change is needed to ensure that victims of trauma or violence, including victims of domestic abuse, are*

---

<sup>16</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *Information on homelessness and intimidation figures within the last five years* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

<sup>17</sup> Housing Rights (2024), *Briefing paper on reform of intimidation points and provision for victims of violence and those at risk/under threat of violence including victims of domestic abuse with the NI Housing Selection Scheme* (Belfast: Housing Rights).

<sup>18</sup> Department for Communities (2020), *Housing Statement from Minister* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

*treated more consistently*, but so far, there has been little indication regarding what exact type of change was needed to meet this objective.<sup>19</sup>

The degree of connection between intimidation points and paramilitary activity was outlined in a response given by the NIHE to a Freedom of Information request, in 2023 – see Table 1 for details of the response<sup>20</sup>:

Table 1: Connection between individuals presenting as homeless and paramilitary activity.

Year	Number of individuals presenting as homeless due to intimidation	Number of cases of intimidation that were connected to paramilitary activity	Number of acceptances	Number of acceptances connected to paramilitary activity
2017/18	558	425	355	286
2018/19	481	377	374	297
2019/20	335	246	255	212
2020/21	286	236	256	230
2021/22	180	142	171	149

The data indicates a significant correlation between cases presenting as homeless due to intimidation and the number of cases where intimidation was caused by paramilitary groups. In 2017/18, the number of cases where there was a connection between the two was 76%. In 2018/19, it was 78%. In 2019/20, it was 73% of the total number of cases. In 2020/21, it was 83% (the highest of this five-year breakdown) and in 2021/22 it was 79%.

<sup>19</sup> Social Housing: Intimidation Points (2024), *Oral answers to questions – Communities – in the Northern Ireland Assembly* - <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2024-04-23.5.9>

<sup>20</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *Freedom of Information Request* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

## Media Review

In 2019, the *New Statesman* reported that housing points awarded for intimidation from paramilitary groups immediately '*places someone at the top of the housing needs table, especially in regards newly built houses.*'<sup>21</sup> The report also indicated that while '*the system is well-intentioned and necessary to protect individuals from serious injury and death, the points system is ripe for abuse.*'

In addition, the report indicated that given an individual subject to intimidation will be quickly rehoused, there are examples of situations where paramilitary groups can 'run' those deemed 'undesirable' out of 'their' area. This can involve broken windows, paint bombs or worse.

In 2021, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) 'expelled' families from a housing estate in Carrickfergus, as they believed they were Catholic. The article explained these threats are 'verified' through the police, or, more commonly, through charities and community groups that have contacts in paramilitary groups.<sup>22</sup>

In 2024, the *Irish News* had a lead article that indicated that the system creates a 'hierarchy of victims', which could lead to some people being disregarded or marginalised.<sup>23</sup>

Key issues from Political & Policy Context and Media Review:

- The offering of 200 points under the category of 'intimidation' significantly disadvantages some applicants with high need, but whom are not under the threat of intimidation.

---

<sup>21</sup> *New Statesman* (2021), *How Northern Ireland's paramilitaries exploit the social housing system* - <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/04/how-northern-ireland-s-paramilitaries-exploit-social-housing>

<sup>22</sup> *Belfast Telegraph* (2021), *UVF orders removal of Catholic families from Carrickfergus housing estate in '21<sup>st</sup> century form of ethnic cleansing'* - <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/uvf-orders-removal-of-catholic-families-from-carrickfergus-housing-estate-in-21st-century-form-of-ethnic-cleansing/40297946.html>

<sup>23</sup> *Irish News* (2024), *Giving housing points creates a 'hierarchy of victims', court is told* - <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/giving-housing-points-for-intimidation-creates-a-hierarchy-of-victims-court-is-told-ETM6QCOAIFDWFOG6AJUCNSLOD4/>

- The verification of intimidation relies on evidence on paramilitary organisations. In turn this could give intimidation by paramilitary groups greater profile than other forms of intimidation, such as domestic abuse.
- In some instances, this has led to the manipulation of the system by paramilitary groups.
- This makes the development of safe and shared neighbourhoods particularly challenging to deliver.

In an effort to better understand and inform these issues, senior staff working within NIFHA have commissioned a team of researchers – Prof Dominic Bryan, Dr Brendan Sturgeon and Dr Lisa Faulkner Byrne – to undertake a brief review of the current system from the perspective of registered housing associations.

The Research Team and NIFHA have agreed that this review will focus on four key issues:

1. The scale of the impact caused by intimidation points on the work of housing associations.
2. The verification process involved in determining intimidation points.
3. The impact that intimidation points have on the capacity of different housing associations to fairly allocate homes on the basis of race and gender.
4. The impact intimidation points have on the aspiration to create shared housing areas.

This section will identify the methodology adopted by the Research Team, before they present their findings in the fourth section of this report and their concluding remarks in the final part of the paper.

#### **(4) METHODOLOGY**

Every member of the Research Team has prior experience and awareness of the matters discussed in this paper, but to further inform their knowledge of this area, they adopted a qualitative approach to their methodology. This included:

- An assessment of existing data related to housing provision and allocation.

- A focus group of senior staff from a range of key registered housing associations. The focus group took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2024, at the offices of NIFHA. Representatives from the following associations were present for the focus group session:
  1. Choice Housing
  2. Woven Housing
  3. Radius Housing
  4. Newington Housing
  5. Clanmil Housing
  6. Apex Housing – response via email
  
- A collection of in-depth interviews of senior management involved in four key registered housing associations:
  1. Apex Housing
  2. Choice Housing
  3. Radius Housing
  4. Clanmil Housing
  
- A desk-based analysis of relevant academic and policy reports was also undertaken. It should be noted that the Research Team are well aware that there has already been a varied and valuable collection of work completed on this matter. We particularly recognise the important work of Professor Paddy Gray and colleagues at Ulster University, who have studied this matter in great detail.



## **(5) FINDINGS**

This section of the Report will be organised around the four key issues identified in the methodology:

1. The scale of the impact caused by intimidation points on the work of registered housing associations.
2. The verification process involved in determining intimidation points.
3. The impact that intimidation points have on the capacity of different housing associations to fairly allocate homes on the basis of race and gender.
4. The impact intimidation points have on the aspiration to create shared housing areas.

Some of the issues associated with each category overlap and intertwine, but the Research Team will present the respective challenges separately, in order to best illustrate the magnitude of each problem.

Under each category, key information has been organised under a collection of sub-headings.

### **4.1 The scale of the impact caused by intimidation points on the work of registered housing associations.**

*The unequal distribution of points within the NIHE Housing Selection Scheme:*

- Participants in the focus group and in-depth interviews stressed that cases with high levels of intimidation points have a significant impact on their work. It was noted that this impact can take different forms, but it was generally agreed that it manifested itself in the following two ways:
  1. Where a resident of a particular housing association is awarded intimidation points and moves to the top of the allocation list.
  2. More common, is the need to allocate housing to individuals outside of their existing network, who have been in recent receipt of intimidation points.
- One participant suggested that '*intimidation points impact on pretty much every aspect of our work*'. This participant also noted that although the cases could be intermittent was

stated that each case of this type can take anywhere between six months and one year to resolve a move. It was noted that some cases can take 'years' to complete.

- Another participant explained that the issue '*creates a disproportionate drain on our resources. Not the points themselves obviously, but the effort we have to invest in dealing with the behaviours that cause intimidation.*'
- Participants generally felt that although the issue was 'regional', there were also 'regional differences' in regards how the issue presented itself in different locations.

#### *Issues with Community Confidence:*

- It was noted that changes in the Selection Scheme means that applicants can now select as little as one area in their application. Most applications of this kind focus on 'new builds', which places significant pressure on the allocation of this type of home.
- In this instance, one participant explained '*we're allocating larger numbers of properties in one scheme, all at once. So, if the waiting list has 10 intimidation cases at the top, and all 10 people move into the new scheme, and all start causing ASB at the same time, this is a real challenge for housing management.*'
- This can create some 'distrust' of housing associations at the local level – '*some people who have been on the list for years, miss out and become suspicious. We are often allocating blind.*'
- Another participant agreed with this sentiment and suggested that – '*some people know how to work the system, and they are abusing it to the detriment of others.*' The nature of the scheme means that it can be difficult to 'build a community.' One participant explained that to do this effectively, a housing association ideally wants to *allocate applicants who have varying housing need factors a home in an area of their choice. Some option to look at factors when making offers other than allocating exclusively on points level would help create a more 'balanced community' in the early days of new schemes.*
- In response to this, participants felt that a solution could be the ability to allocate to applicants from different bands, which would give priority to factors other than points.
- It was pointed out by a participant that when a group of individuals with high intimidation points move into a new build area, it can take a '*long time for an area to settle down. It can*

*lead to a lack of confidence in that area... a lack of demand for that area. The ramifications are huge.'*

- Participants explained that they have a basic lack of data on applicants, which means that people can be placed in certain areas 'inappropriately'. In this respect, there were examples where an individual had been moved only a street or two away from the location where they were the victim of intimidation. It was noted that this creates 'distrust' and 'anger' at a local level.
- Another participant stated that the process delivers a 'dangerous' message to young people in these areas, who can see that there are brutal reprisals for those who 'step out of line'.
- Participants also noted that even though the scale of the cases can at times be small, the 'ripple' effect can be significant, impacting the work load and resource allocation right across the various housing associations active across Northern Ireland.

*The degree of paramilitary activity involved in intimidation cases:*

- One participant identified that *'we have found that many of these (intimidation) cases, if not virtually all of them, have been intimidated out because they have been causing anti-social behaviour... or threatened out of the area by paramilitary groups.'*
- Almost every participant pointed out that where people have been awarded intimidation points, the intimidation is almost always carried out by locally based paramilitary groups.
- Another participant suggested that *'most (intimidation cases) are rarely connected to religion, race or sexual orientation.'*
- Almost every participant explained the way in which the current system focuses on intimidation, means that other pressing issues (often connected to race and gender) are deprioritised – see section 4.3 for more details.
- It was suggested that the issue of intimidation creates *'anti-social behaviour super enforcers... who are paramilitaries... who are able to use the system... to actually have a process that facilitates a paramilitary telling an individual: you're a problem, I'm going to do X, Y and Z. That has a big impact, as it gives the impression that paramilitaries can get things done. The housing associations, the Housing Executive would take weeks... they said it would have to*

*go court, but now it's sorted. Essentially it gives them capital to be players in the system.'*

- It was noted that paramilitary influence comes in different forms. In Loyalist areas, it was common for the groups to promote a 'home for locals' slogan, to discourage 'non-white' individuals from moving into 'their' area –

*'we have examples where houses have been targeted after someone from a migrant background have come out to visit a property. It's very difficult... because we have to advise these individuals of the risks... so, you are almost social engineering in a way. You can't get away from the fact that we (housing associations) are being hugely affected by paramilitary groups. This has been rumbling on for a long time even though they're already manipulating the system, they want more.'*

*Unresolved problems are often moved on:*

- Several participants explained that the way in which intimidation points are allocated does not resolve the primary problem of disorder, instead *'it moves the problem from one area to another... frequently into new estates, which immediately causes problems in housing management and unsettles estates where the problem is recirculated to.'*
- It was noted that some individuals repeat anti-social behaviour across multiple tenancies, in different areas, which goes to support their 'priority status'; for a follow-up move. It was noted that this often leaves other applicants feeling as though these individuals have been 'rewarded' for their bad behaviour.

#### **4.2 The verification process involved in determining intimidation points.**

*Verifying organisations:*

- One participant noted there was tension regarding how intimidation cases are judged – *'we are completely reliant on the police (to make a judgement regarding whether a case is valid). In some cases, there are genuine examples of situations where people have been exposed to some truly awful intimidation, but there are also examples where it's just paramilitaries controlling things.'*

- Other participants explained that a number of locally based organisations can also be involved in the verification process, including:
  - Base2.
  - Northern Ireland Alternatives.
  - Community Restorative Justice Ireland.
- It was suggested that all three of these organisations collect information on paramilitary threats and each had an influence on whether some individuals under threat or investigation might be allowed back into an area.

#### *Political will.*

- A participant in the focus group that underpins this paper indicated that that *'up to now, there has been a lack of political will' to make change happen.* It was suggested that *'no political party would want to make a decision to change the system. The current approach is so embedded... I think politicians don't want to touch this issue.'* When asked why this might be the case, the participant stated that *'it (the current process) is too messy to get into... it would take significant reform and I think in some cases... in some areas... any change might be quite unpopular.'*
- Another participant also indicated that the issue needed more political leadership – *'it's very difficult... we (housing associations) are in agreement... and we've been in that agreement for some time that this process needs reform, but we're being told by the Housing Executive that they believe the process is effective. So, you have a bit of a standoff. We want reform. We want a system that is fairer for everyone. I think the only way to fix that impasse between us and them (NIHE) is via ministerial intervention.'*
- This perspective was supported by another participant who indicated *'I actually think we (housing associations) are too downstream to address to solve the problem. We're also in a situation where NIHE aren't involved in new builds... so when it comes to new builds... taking their allocations... can be quite frustrating. We need some sort of political intervention here.'*

#### *GDPR:*

- Some participants were frustrated with NIHE's refusal to share more information about applicants on the basis of GDPR – *'I think NIHE are hiding behind GDPR. I feel as though they think we (housing associations) would start to pick and choose applicants who fit a certain 'desirable' profile, but we just want to make sure we are not allocating blind and we are fully aware of the necessary information. There are situations where people are being re-homed two or three streets away from the point where they've been intimidated, because we don't know enough about them. It's a terrible look.'*

#### **4.3 The impact that intimidation points have on the capacity of different housing associations to fairly allocate homes on the basis of race and gender.**

##### *Unequal outcomes:*

- One participant explained that many of their residents are frustrated by the current system, as it appears to produce 'unequal' outcomes – *'A victim of domestic violence is not treated with the same level of priority as a drug dealer.'*
- As discussed at the outset of this paper, a fair and proper system for housing allocation is crucial in Northern Ireland – given the level of poverty that exists across the region and that many declare a preference for living in a neighbourhood of their own religion.
- Both of these issues put a considerable strain on the system. On one level, the need for housing allocation is significant and pressing. On another level, some individuals are quite selective regarding where they would be prepared to live.
- One participant indicated that the current system, created in the 1970s, is *'out of date'* and no longer fairly reflects the degree of 'need' and 'diversity' that exists across Northern Ireland –

*'we're in a situation now, in a great way, where we have much more diversity than there was in the 1970s. In the 1970s, the system was designed to address genuine concerns related to sectarianism... where people were being forced from their homes. The merits of the system are worthy, but you have to realise that we're in a different time. Firstly, the risk of expulsion on sectarian grounds is much lower now, but also... we have to get real about how we are providing for vulnerable migrant families, who are coming here to live.'*

- Participants also stated that there are many people who suffer from various types of inequality that are not treated with enough care and clarity – *‘we have a large number of disabled people on our waiting lists, who have very specific needs and limitations regarding where they can live, but they are not prioritised to a high enough level... and they are not even close to being prioritised to the same level as those who have suffered apparent intimidation.’*

*Provision challenges:*

- One participant explained that the scale of need has created an environment where it is hard to cater for applicants who are not at the very top of their respective waiting lists – *‘we (those involved in the provision and allocation of homes across Northern Ireland) just don’t have enough homes. The only way to get out of the pressure we’re in, is to build more houses, but someone needs to take on that cost. We can build our way out of some of the problems we face.’*
- Also, in regards how the experience of Housing Associations differs from the Housing Executive in cases of this kind, it was explained that *‘NIHE staff will generally allocate to one applicant at a time within a development, not the 20/30 at a time that we can be making – so, the impact is higher on us (Housing Associations), due to the concentration of allocations for new build schemes.’*

#### **4.4 The impact intimidation points have on the aspiration to create shared housing areas.**

*The virtue of sharing housing:*

- According to NIFHA, housing associations are *‘committed to building safe and sustainable communities.’*
- To achieve this ambition, registered housing associations are involved in a range of projects that aim to tackle segregation, intimidation and racism.

*Relevant schemes and initiatives:*

- The best-known local policy that provides direct support for shared neighbourhoods, falls under the *Together: Building a United Community* (TBUC) strategy.

- The Northern Ireland Executive currently have a target that indicates that shared housing should represent 10% of the overall Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). As part of the SHDP each year, the Department aims to deliver at least 200 shared housing units.

*Existing challenges:*

- New build housing aimed at providing mixed social homes are often quickly marked by sectarian and/or paramilitary graffiti. A participant in the focus group, pointed out that this process can work in two, sometimes competing, directions. Firstly, there can be what is locally understood as a 'power grab', as graffiti is placed around an area to 'scare' off the 'other' community. On another level, the groups can mark and vandalise individual homes where they are trying to discourage a prospective resident from moving in.
- One participant explained that if a new build is being considered, it was common for intimidation to increase in that particular area. In this sense, it was argued that there was a correlation in the number of intimidation cases recorded and the forthcoming availability of new homes.
- Most participants felt that many areas in Northern Ireland were not ready for areas of shared housing in the sites where they were working. It was suggested that some residents would aggressively oppose any proposal of this kind in their area.

*Basic principles:*

One of the participants involved in the focus group explained that there were some issues that need to be better understood when considering how best to deliver more shared housing zones across Northern Ireland. *When you're looking to build a community, it takes different types of people... a range of ages, some people with families, others living alone. When we're discussing 'shared' housing areas, is how do we integrate minority communities into these sites. We have to look at how we embrace the diversity that now exists across Northern Ireland. I have to admit that's not easy... some people... some areas don't want to be inclusive, but that should absolutely be the aspiration.'*



## **(6) CONCLUSION**

1. This short report examines the challenges for registered Housing Associations in Northern Ireland created by the points-based system used to allocate social housing. Specifically, the way points are allocated for intimidation, particularly intimidation by paramilitary groups, how this impacts the fair allocation of housing, the allocation of housing by need, and the development of successful shared communities.
2. The present points-based system for the allocation of housing offers a proportionally very high number of points to this type of intimidation. There are very good reasons for helping victims of intimidation move to safer areas. However, this leaves many of those in dire need of rehousing further down the list and creates the impression of unfairness.
3. Dealing with the resulting issues takes up limited resources which has an adverse impact on the ability to provide services to other tenants and applicants. In particular, in some areas, it makes it harder to build shared communities
4. There is reasonable evidence to indicate that the present points-based system offers a certain level of control to paramilitary groups in some areas.

Establishing adequate social housing provision in Northern Ireland is challenging given the high levels of deprivation that exists across the region and the scale of residential segregation that remains apparent.

Creating appropriate provision for housing is made challenging by a system that allocates homes on a points basis, which persistently skews provision toward individuals who have been victims of particular types of intimidation. The way points are allocated specifically profiles paramilitary activity and anti-social behaviour.

This intimidation is generally committed by paramilitary groups, who have been accused of 'abusing' the current system. Evidence in this report also indicates that this process has afforded paramilitary groups considerable control in areas where they are active.

Intimidation by paramilitary groups creates pressure on the provision and allocation of homes throughout Northern Ireland. The issue has both severe **systematic and practical consequences**.

- In systematic terms, the issue has facilitated an over emphasis on intimidation cases, leading to the abuse of the current structure for determining allocation.
- In practical terms, the matter has created a process where other key issues, often related to shared housing, are diminished and overlooked.

It has also meant that some at-risk individuals (based on their disability, gender or ethnic background) are continually marginalised by **a system that appears to be much more responsive to threat than need**.

The main focus of this scoping paper has been on outlining the key challenges associated with intimidation points and housing allocation. Throughout the conversations that facilitated the development of this report, participant also noted some potential solutions to this issue, this has included:

- A review of how points are awarded, including a closer inspection of how issues related to domestic abuse and homelessness can be better prioritised.
- An assessment of how more effective data sharing can ensure that people are not rehoused within streets of where they were intimidated.
- Consideration of an alternative system of allocating a spread of applicants in new schemes from different parts of the waiting list, to allow for the development of more 'balanced' communities. "

Whilst these are reasonable and valuable observations, a discussion relating to possible solutions to the problems outlined in this paper, needs further work.

### Acknowledgements

The Research Team would like to thank all the individuals from Housing Associations who participated in the different strands of our fieldwork. In addition, we would like to thank senior staff at NIFHA, particularly Seamus Leheny and Tracey Ellis, for their support and advice during the develop of this paper.

The authors hope that the content of the paper offers a valuable insight into the complicated issue of intimidation points and its impact on housing allocation.

## **Bibliography**

Belfast Telegraph (2021), *UVF orders removal of Catholic families from Carrickfergus housing estate in '21<sup>st</sup> century form of ethnic cleansing'* - <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sunday-life/news/uvf-orders-removal-of-catholic-families-from-carrickfergus-housing-estate-in-21st-century-form-of-ethnic-cleansing/40297946.html>

Department for Communities (2020), *A new housing supply strategy* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

Department for Communities (2020), *Housing Statement from Minister* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

Department for Communities (2024), *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin: July – September 2024* (Belfast: Department for Communities).

Department for Communities (NI) (2023), *Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin: October-December 2023* (Belfast: Department for Communities (NI)).

Department for Communities (NI) (2023), *The Northern Ireland poverty and inequality report: 2022-23* (Belfast: Department for Communities (NI)).

Housing Rights (2024), *Briefing paper on reform of intimidation points and provision for victims of violence and those at risk/under threat of violence including victims of domestic abuse with the NI Housing Selection Scheme* (Belfast: Housing Rights).

Inside Housing (2015), *NI 'intimidated points' policy could be scrapped* - <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/ni-intimidation-points-policy-could-be-scrapped-44621>

Irish News (2024), *Giving housing points creates a 'hierarchy of victims,' court is told* - <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/giving-housing-points-for-intimidation-creates-a-hierarchy-of-victims-court-is-told-ETM6QCOAIFDWF0G6AJUCNSL0D4/>

Irish News (2024), *Newtownards arson attack could be linked to on-going Loyalist feud* - <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/newtownards-arson-attack-could-be-linked-to-ongoing-loyalist-feud/a401337813.html>

New Statesman (2021), *How Northern Ireland's paramilitaries exploit the social housing system* - <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/04/how-northern-ireland-s-paramilitaries-exploit-social-housing>

Northern Ireland Executive (2024), *Draft Programme for Government* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive).

Northern Ireland Executive (2012), *Programme for Government* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *Freedom of Information Request* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2024) *Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Annual Report* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *Housing List Updates – 2023* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *Information on homelessness and intimidation figures within the last five years* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (2023), *NIHE Housing Selection Scheme* (Belfast: Northern Ireland Housing Executive).

Michael Poole and Paul Doherty (2024), *Ethnic Residential Segregation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Ulster University – the Centre for the Study of Conflict).

Social Housing: Intimidation Points (2024), *Oral answers to questions – Communities – in the Northern Ireland Assembly* - <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2024-04-23.5.9>

Paddy Gray, Michela Keenan, Ursula McAnulty, Anna Clarke, Sarah Monk and Connie Tang (2013), *Research to Inform a Fundamental review of Social Housing Allocations: report Number 1 – Current Approaches to Accessing and Allocating Social Housing in Northern Ireland* - <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/social-housing-allocations-report1.pdf>

The Executive Office (2013), *Together: Building a United Community* (Belfast: The Executive Office).