

PRESS RELEASE

27 February 2025

Ombudsman proposes investigation into Housing Executive

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman is proposing to investigate the actions of the region's largest social housing landlord, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

The investigation into social housing conditions will be the third to take place under the Ombudsman's 'own initiative' power, which allows for an investigation to take place where she has a reasonable suspicion of systemic maladministration.

Ombudsman Margaret Kelly has written to the Housing Executive to propose her investigation after noting an increasing number of enquiries and complaints about housing to her Office. A significant proportion relate to concerns about maintenance and repairs, including reported delays in carrying out repair requests, the quality of the work undertaken and how the concerns of social housing tenants are responded to when issues are raised, including how complaints are handled.

The proposed investigation will also consider how the Housing Executive delivers adaptations to its homes to meet the needs of individuals with vulnerabilities, and what actions it takes to ensure the conditions of properties used for temporary accommodation are appropriate.

In deciding to take this action, the Ombudsman also reflected on the extent to which individuals reaching out to her Office have referred to housing issues having an adverse impact on their health.

Ms Kelly said:

'Access to high quality and safe housing is important in reducing health inequalities and improving the overall wellbeing of our population. A good maintenance and repairs service is one of the most important responsibilities landlords have. It is important there is confidence in how the Housing Executive delivers this service and responds when concerns are raised about housing conditions.'

Ms Kelly stated her proposed investigation would allow for a thorough examination of these important issues, with the aim of making further improvements in social housing provision.

The Ombudsman, having sent her investigation proposal to the Housing Executive, will consider carefully any response before deciding whether to proceed to investigate and finalise the issues that fall within the scope of her investigation. The Ombudsman will make a further announcement upon launching an investigation.

Notes:

The Office's own initiative powers were granted in section 8 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. They allow the Ombudsman to conduct an investigation where there is a 'reasonable suspicion' of systemic maladministration.

The criteria for selecting a subject for an own initiative investigation are:

1. The issue of concern has been identified by the Ombudsman to be one of public interest.
2. The issue of concern affects a number of individuals or a particular group of people.
3. The investigation has the potential to improve public services.

AND

4. The Ombudsman considers the investigation of the chosen issue is the best and most proportionate use of investigative resources.

Criterion 4 must always be applied, with at least one other.

The reason the Ombudsman is announcing her proposal is that section 29 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (NI) 2016 requires that before commencing an investigation the Ombudsman must prepare a proposal and provide it to the public body which may be subject to an investigation. The Ombudsman has provided her proposal to NIHE.

It is for the Ombudsman, having considered any response from NIHE or others that she has consulted, to decide whether the investigation will proceed.