



ISSUES: Police, Belfast City Council wardens and student safety officers in the Holyland area of south Belfast

Housing crisis needs proper solutions

BELFAST is in the midst of a housing crisis.

Almost 12,000 people are on the waiting list for social homes in the city. As they wait, many of these people are struggling to find suitable accommodation. The number of private rentals has grown over the past few decades and now accounts for 17 per cent of all homes in the north – larger than the social housing sector.

And rents are soaring.

The average monthly rent is \$684 per month – 6 per cent higher than last year according to figures from property website PropertyPal.

Rents for apartments are around \$705 a month – 4.8 per cent higher than last year. But even a cursory online search shows that many properties in Belfast have much higher rents than average.

Fancy a two-bedroom flat in the south of the city featuring a massive TV on the mantelpiece and a random car tyre in a spare room? That'll be \$825 a month please.

Want to live in a drab grey box close to a railway line in south Belfast? \$900 a month plus some unspecified 'fees'.

One ground floor two-bedroom flat in the east of the city is being advertised for \$850 a month, again with those mysterious fees.

Incidentally, letting fees, including viewing, check-out and inventory fees, are banned in the Republic and England but not Northern Ireland.

The assembly's Private Tenancies Bill is aiming to provide tenants with better protection, including restrictions on rent increases.

But there are wider issues.

Most people under 40 are trapped in a depressing spiral of having to fork out on rising rents while not being able to afford the deposit for a house.

There's a huge emotional weight to buying a home. I bought my first house in 2019 and still hug the living room walls at night.

Claire
SIMPSON



I don't really own it, the bank does, but at least I have a degree of privacy after years of living in badly decorated, dark and damp places owned by other people.

There are good and bad landlords of course. For every one who told me that opening windows and a weekly application of bleach on the walls would get rid of a rampant mould problem, there were others who were quick to send someone out when a cooker broke or a pipe burst.

In recent years, the rise of Airbnb has dramatically changed the rental market. Some landlords can make the same in a week as they previously could in a month.

A two-night stay in a modest one-bedroom flat near Belfast city centre could set you back around \$200.

The prevalence of Airbnb has altered the character of once quiet residential streets across the city.

Long-term affordable lets are being phased out in favour of short-term stays.

Most people under 40 are trapped in a depressing spiral of having to fork out on rising rents while not being able to afford the deposit for a house

Never mind the 21st century complaint that we no longer know our neighbours, some people don't have actual neighbours, just a revolving door of visitors who treat their street as a weekend party base.

In areas where there is a high concentration of Airbnb lets, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to rent or buy homes.

The SDLP has called for better regulation and licensing of Airbnbs.

"We have seen what has happened with HMOs [houses of multiple occupancy] in the Holyland, so we need to avoid a repeat where we get beyond the point of no return," Councillor Gary McKeown has said.

Tonight, Belfast City Council will debate a Green Party motion calling on the executive to introduce a rent control scheme for the city.

Councillor Mal O'Hara has pointed out that such schemes are common in Europe and the US.

"It's important that we ensure that renters in Northern Ireland are not left behind, and are offered the same rights and protections as renters elsewhere," he said.

They are sensible ideas – much too sensible for an executive which has never really got to grips with particular housing issues in Belfast.

Market forces allowed the Holyland to change from being a close-knit community to a dumping ground for relatively cheap student accommodation.

The proliferation of student housing has turned out to be bad for the community, bad for students and an annual headache for the two main universities.

Endless complaints about anti-social behaviour are unlikely to stop until the area is no longer seen as an option for students only.

Having an affordable home should be a right, not a privilege.

Living costs are rising multiple times faster than wages. We cannot continue to allow renters to be at the mercy of the market.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 1 1921

Impact of 'Belfast Boycott'

SPEAKING at the quarterly meeting of the Belfast Wholesale Merchants and Manufacturers' Association yesterday, Mr John McCaughey (president) said that many of the men in Southern Ireland who, up till recently, had been 'on the run' were free to assist in enforcing their leaders' policy which has already proved so detrimental to everyone in business throughout the Southern and Western area.

The latest information pointed to the fact that many firms in the South and West who, prior to the boycott, were in a most prosperous condition, were now ruined.

They could not forget, however, that in the great majority of cases that same friendly feeling existed as before the boycott towards those in the North who were their former suppliers.

As soon as the way is open, most of them have the assurance that they will come back to the North with their business. ...

The chairman moved: 'That this meeting calls upon the Imperial Government... to extend to traders in this country the full protection in the discharge of their legitimate business inasmuch as freedom of trade with many areas has ceased to exist through the illegal operation of the "Belfast Boycott" and which is carried on by methods of violence and intimidation...'

Mr A C Marshall said: 'They all knew that the distributing merchants of Belfast had been suffering for a considerable time but Belfast as a whole had not suffered because the distributing merchants only represented about ten per cent of the trade in the city. The greater part of the trade of Belfast was done overseas.'

The boycott, however, affected a considerable number of the merchants.

Only that day a merchant told him that he recently sold a quantity of flour and that, after one delivery he received a letter from his customer saying: 'I cannot take another bag of that flour. The Belfast stamp is on the bags and they won't bake it in the bakeries here.'

The consequence was that the merchant lost £300 on the transaction.

THIS report underlines the serious impact of the 'Belfast Boycott, adopted by Dail Eireann in 1921 in retaliation for the sectarian work expulsions in Belfast, on the city's distributing trade with the south of Ireland. Rigorously enforced by the IRA and monitored by 'boycott committees' in every town, the boycott had been demanded by Bishop MacRory, Sean MacEntee, TD and others in 1920. It was finally lifted by Michael Collins in his pact with James Craig in January 1922. Its main effect was to enforce a barrier between north and south before legislative Partition had actually occurred.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com