

## **Feature writer of the year**

### **Endgame: what now for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive?**

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/endgame-what-now-for-the-northern-ireland-housing-executive-60732>

With this feature, Nathaniel shone a light on the looming disaster facing social housing in Northern Ireland.

It was a piece which required very skilful writing, in order to be informative both to readers in Northern Ireland who will be familiar with the issues at play and those in the rest of the UK who may be completely unaware.

In just a few short pages, Nathaniel explains the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) complex situation with clarity and flare.

Using information gathered over a three-day research trip to Belfast including interviews, conversations and site visits, he builds up a picture which touches on the business, political and human aspects of the story.

It is an ambitious feature which explores different solutions to the problem and is rigorously reported, asking tough questions of the NIHE's chief executive.

The end result is neatly packaged and accessible, tied cleverly to the wider ongoing problems facing Northern Ireland.

### **Starting to bite: how Universal Credit is making people homeless**

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/starting-to-bite--how-universal-credit-is-making-people-homeless-59445>

Nathaniel produced this feature at a time when Universal Credit was dominating headlines in the national press.

Through clever use of Freedom of Information laws, he managed to make a valuable contribution to the discussion surrounding Universal Credit and even move it on to new ground.

The figures Nathaniel gathered are deeply shocking, indicating that households on Universal Credit are more than twice as likely to become homeless.

To bring the data into context, he then conducted interviews with experts on welfare policy and the Universal Credit frontline, digging into the story behind the numbers.

It is a thorough and fluently-written feature which draws on a range of perspectives, and achieves the difficult task of bringing new information to light on a topic central to *Inside Housing's* readership and receiving widespread media scrutiny.

### **Investigation: why have so few fire doors been replaced since Grenfell?**

<https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/investigation-why-have-so-few-fire-doors-been-replaced-since-grenfell-61938>

This was another data-led feature, which broke the alarming news that tens of thousands of fire doors in council housing stock are not fit for purpose and that the rate of remediation has been worryingly slow.

Nathaniel's accomplished use of Freedom of Information laws gathered the most comprehensive data on this vital subject since the Grenfell Tower fire in June 2017.

Through his writing, he weaves it into a powerful feature which answers all the key questions: what is the issue, how has it grown, why has it happened and how can it be resolved.

The piece is highly informative, balancing expert commentary with insight from the local authorities at its heart.

It is an excellent example of confident trade journalism, taking on a difficult subject which is central to the magazine's readers and carries national significance, while also holding the government to account for its promises surrounding fire safety.



# Endgame: what now for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive?

Northern Ireland has been without a government for two years, leaving its biggest landlord - the Northern Ireland Housing Executive - languishing in a funding crisis. *Nathaniel Barker* visits Belfast on the hunt for solutions



Top row: the New Lodge Estate in north Belfast  
Bottom row: the NIHE's head office; Clark Baillie, chief executive of the NIHE

PHOTOGRAPHY: NATHANIEL BARKER, PACEMAKER PRESS

**W**hen *Inside Housing* tells the receptionist at a Belfast hotel that we're in town working on an article about the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), her face lights up. "I'm in a Housing Executive house myself," she says proudly. "I'm very happy with them."

She seems blissfully unaware that her landlord is on the verge of crisis. As Northern Ireland limps into a 27th month with no government, its public housing authority's enormous funding issues remain unsolved. The situation is approaching critical. In October, a senior civil servant's letter leaked to investigative website *The Detail* claimed that the NIHE would begin planning for "de-investment" across approximately half of its 86,000-home stock from the start of 2019.

*Inside Housing* is here to find out exactly what that could mean and how it can be avoided.

## Proud history

The NIHE was established in 1971 to divorce social housing from sectarian local politics. It was once the UK's largest landlord with about 170,000 homes, but a series of stock transfers and the Right to Buy have halved its portfolio, while it has not laid a brick since 2002. Nevertheless, its stock eclipses the 50,000 homes owned by the region's 20 housing associations.

The NIHE is more than just a social landlord: it also has 'regional' housing responsibilities for homelessness, allocations and distributing development grant to housing associations. Speak to any NIHE member of staff and they are likely to extol its reputation as a non-partisan and respected public institution.

"We're privileged," says chief executive Clark Bailie. "Because people come into our office and they share with us some of their most personal and delicate information, and they trust us to help them."

Indeed, the NIHE has much to be proud of. *Inside Housing* has written previously about its groundbreaking desegregation work, while its most recent annual report showed overall tenant satisfaction of 89% - significantly higher than most similarly sized housing associations.

"The Housing Executive is an institution; it's well liked," says David Williams, partner at consultancy Campbell Tickell.

Linda Watson, tenant and chair of the NIHE's Central Housing Forum, agrees. "I do share that view," she says. "We have a good say on a lot of things that are going on."

Nevertheless, she says that she has not been made aware of her landlord's funding woes. And these problems won't be solved by a good reputation alone.



The run-down New Lodge Estate in Belfast is emblematic of years of underinvestment in social housing

Outdated and shabby, the NIHE's headquarters are symbolic of its quandaries. From his office on the top floor, Mr Bailie calmly summarises the problem.

"You can play about with the numbers, you can make certain assumptions about rent and certain assumptions about the phasing, but you always seem to arrive at roughly the same figures. And if you look at the next 10 years and the value of the work we need to do and compare that to the rental income available to us, there's a gap of about a billion pounds.

"Now, in the good old days we would have looked at government to provide that level of funding each year, but government simply doesn't have that sort of money any more."

The NIHE takes about £290m a year in rents, while its ageing stock currently demands roughly £300m of annual investment. Management and debt costs account for £130m a year - meaning nearly half the required investment is lacking. This problem has been looming for some time: it was identified in an initial Savills survey in 2009, followed by a more comprehensive analysis in 2015.

The Fresh Start agreement from November 2015, which attempted to find common ground for a sustainable future for Northern Ireland, committed to "significant structural reform" of social housing provision as a result of funding pressures.

On one level, the solution is simple:

for the NIHE to borrow against its substantial assets to plug the funding gap. But while there is no legislation preventing the organisation from doing this - and it once had borrowings of around £1bn - it has not been practically possible since before the millennium.

"The snag is: at our current status, if we were to borrow, it would score against the Northern Ireland block," explains Mr Bailie, referring to the block grant provided to the region by Westminster. "Which means it would then be a series of difficult questions. Well, if we prioritise housing, from where do we remove the funding?"

## No agreement

Difficult questions that no one has the authority to answer. Since January 2017, when the late Martin McGuinness resigned as deputy first minister of Northern Ireland, the region's political parties have been unable to agree on a new power-sharing government. As a result, the NIHE is trudging towards a potential disaster, able to see a better way but without anyone to unlock the gate. In February, David Sterling, head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, told the BBC that if ministers do not return, some of the region's social housing may have to be "mothballed".

As Mr Bailie puts it: "It's quite frustrating that everybody seems to know what to do, what we want to do, but we just can't get it moved on."

Borrowing is not the only issue. The NIHE's rents are currently about 25% lower than housing association rents in Northern Ireland and have been frozen since 2016/17, capping its income.

"In around 2002, 2003, social housing rents in Northern Ireland were about the same as comparable areas in England and Wales, but then those rents started to increase and Northern Ireland didn't track that," explains Paul Price, director of social housing policy and oversight at the Department for Communities (DfC). Ministers in Northern Ireland chose not to increase rents at the same rate.

A document published by civil servants in December 2017 suggested that a Consumer Price Index of inflation plus 3% hike was needed to help balance the books. Mr Bailie reveals that a request to increase rents by above inflation in 2019/20 has been submitted to the DfC and is being discussed with the UK Treasury, although he will not disclose the exact proposition. It's not clear whether a rent increase could be implemented without ministers at Stormont - although Mr Price says this is currently being investigated.

Other peculiarities exacerbate the situation. Unlike councils and housing associations, the NIHE pays about £7m a year in corporation tax. The authority is also still paying back historic loans to the UK government at extortionate interest rates - in

some cases more than 13%.

For Mr Bailie, the long-term solution is that the NIHE's landlord function "be transformed into a different legal entity", taking it off the public balance sheet so it can borrow like a housing association.

Leo O'Reilly, the now-retired permanent secretary of the DfC, voiced his support for this option. Ms Watson is also positive about the idea. More specifically, Mr Bailie is optimistic about scaling up a mutual co-operative model with strong tenant and staff representation.

However, this would require political support from a functioning government. "One option could be that Stormont comes back and they consider and accept the recommendations that would be put in the business case, and then we all live happily ever after," Mr Bailie deadpans.

When ministers do eventually return, they may try something else. Anything involving extra capital from the DfC's budget is unlikely, explains Mr Price, as Stormont would face "a very difficult affordability challenge to fund that".

Last year, civil servants managed to find £20m from savings elsewhere to top up the NIHE's coffers, but Mr Price calls that "a sticking plaster" and says it may not be available again.

A more feasible route would be for funding to be diverted away from the NIHE's regional services to the landlord operation for stock investment -

**"It's quite frustrating that everybody seems to know what to do, what we want to do, but we just can't get it moved on"**



the DfC's social housing budget is currently heavily tilted towards development. Mr Bailie acknowledges that is a possibility, but argues it would be robbing Peter to pay Paul.

"If someone were to take a decision to reallocate new build funding, for example, from the regional to landlord, that would obviously have an impact on the new social housing build figures. It would help us, but would that be sustainable in the long run? I wouldn't think so. I think you're still left with the problem: how do you close that billion-pound gap?"

Then there's the possibility of stock transfers to associations - an approach the DUP has favoured in the past. However, civil servants decided to suspend the initial 2,000-home programme in November after tenants on two estates voted strongly to stay with the NIHE in a ballot. Mr Bailie reckons these results would likely be replicated across the province.

"There's tremendous brand loyalty - people trust us," he says - and Ms Watson corroborates that view. Of course, the disparity in rents will likely have played a role, and while Mr Bailie is firm that the NIHE was a neutral broker in the ballot, it's been privately suggested by some that the organisation made a special effort to promise improvements for the homes on the estates amid union pressure against transfer.

Hypothetically, the UK government could take over and provide emer-

gency funding or legislate for structural change of the NIHE. However, there is little political appetite for this on either side of the water.

## The nuclear option

Ultimately, if no funding solution comes forward, the NIHE will begin "de-investing" in an enormous chunk of its stock.

"That would mean that you would have to start making decisions that you would no longer invest money in a property once it reaches a certain physical condition," says Mr Bailie. "And at that point you'd be faced with a really difficult decision: it's good money after bad, and you have to withdraw that dwelling from use."

At the endgame, he says, that would probably constitute "about half" of the NIHE's stock - that's roughly 43,000 homes.

The aim, explains Mr Bailie, is to protect good-quality, viable public assets and keep poorer-quality homes safe and habitable for as long as possible, until they would need to be vacated and sold off or demolished.

The ramifications of this would be huge and would raise tricky questions. How could this impact on fragile relationships between nationalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland if one group felt it was being disadvantaged? Would rents stay the same for tenants no longer receiving planned maintenance

works? What would be the impact on the region's housing market?

Perhaps most concerning is the increase in homelessness as people's homes are decommissioned - people who the NIHE would have to provide with temporary accommodation through its regional services.

Mr Bailie says it is "really difficult" to predict when this approach would need to come into play - but describes the possibility as a "significant risk". Mr Price says that Mr O'Reilly's letter was correct to suggest the NIHE will start planning and modelling for de-investment from the start of 2019/20.

But remember, this is partially a story about years of underinvestment in Northern Ireland's social housing. Take a walk around the shabby New Lodge Estate in north Belfast and you could be forgiven for believing that the de-investment programme had already started here.

To avoid this dire scenario, the possibility of future investment must come forward by 2020, according to the NIHE. That means Sinn Féin and the DUP overcoming their differences sufficiently to form a power-sharing government. But there has been little progress since talks broke down more than a year ago. Then the politicians must agree on a way forward.

In March 2016, the DUP's Lord Morrow, as minister for social development, made the last ministerial statement about the NIHE's stock to date.

"The housing challenge in the next mandate will be finding and agreeing a way of giving the Housing Executive the ability to borrow," he declared. "If we fail to meet that challenge, the main function of future ministers with responsibility for housing will likely be to oversee the deterioration of the Housing Executive's stock and the long-term decline of the organisation itself."

For its part, Sinn Féin will be fiercely resistant to anything that could be seen as privatisation.

Even with broad consensus on the way forward per the Fresh Start agreement, sorting out exactly how to solve the NIHE's problems will be quicker said than done. Despite repeated approaches from *Inside Housing*, neither party was able to make a spokesperson available to discuss the NIHE's future.

If some of Mr Bailie's language sounds a little flippant, it is likely borne out of experience working against this background. And as an organisation, the NIHE is very limited in its capacity to lobby.

In the meantime, the receptionist at *Inside Housing's* hotel and tens of thousands like her across Northern Ireland remain unaware that their homes are at risk.

Taken as a whole, the recent history of the NIHE is a bleak tale of politics letting the public down. ■

# Starting to bite: how Universal Credit is making people homeless

1 in 34

APPROXIMATE RATIO OF HOUSEHOLDS CLAIMING UNIVERSAL CREDIT WHO HAVE DECLARED THEMSELVES HOMELESS SINCE APRIL

1 in 79

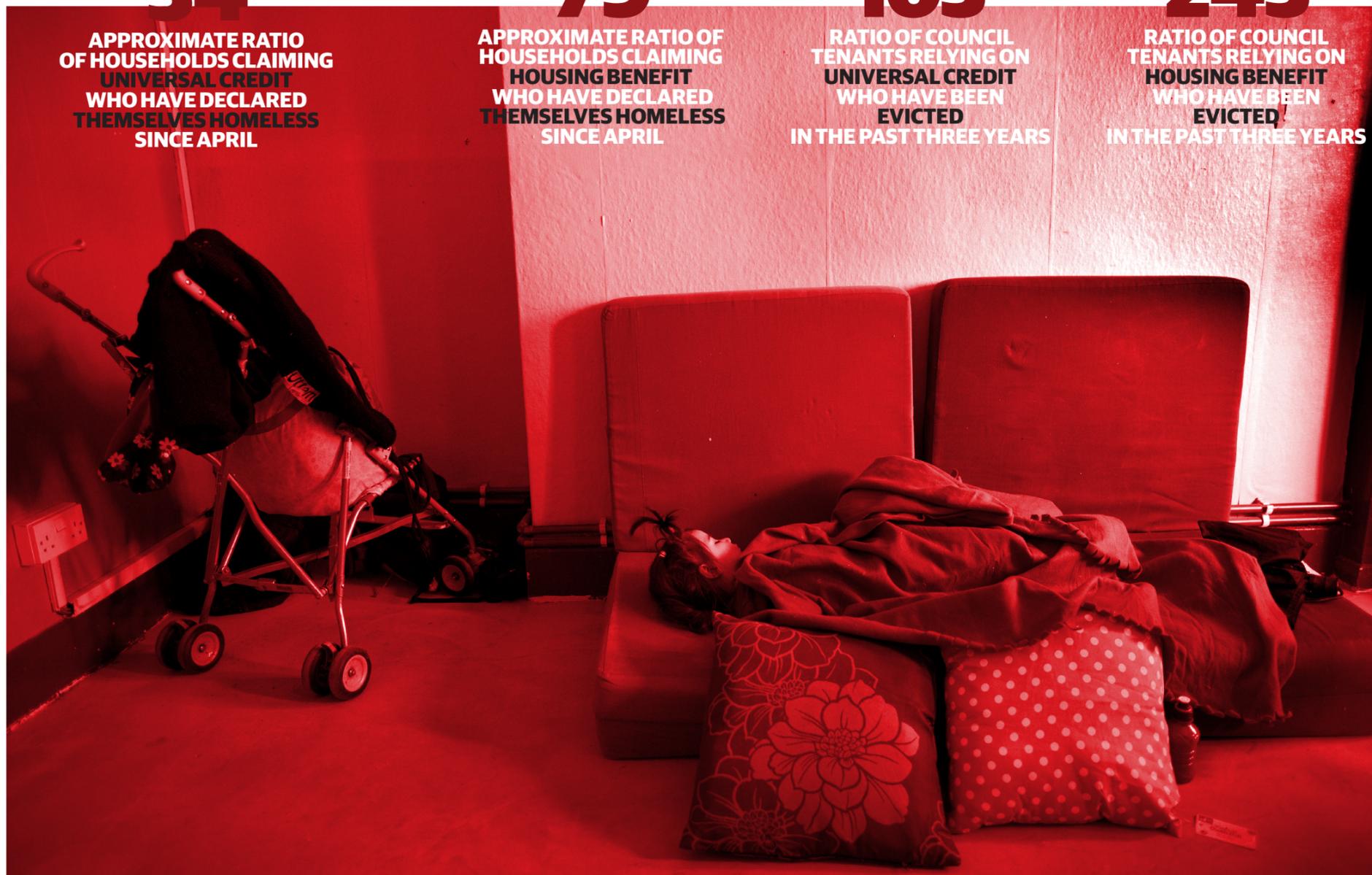
APPROXIMATE RATIO OF HOUSEHOLDS CLAIMING HOUSING BENEFIT WHO HAVE DECLARED THEMSELVES HOMELESS SINCE APRIL

1 in 103

RATIO OF COUNCIL TENANTS RELYING ON UNIVERSAL CREDIT WHO HAVE BEEN EVICTED IN THE PAST THREE YEARS

1 in 243

RATIO OF COUNCIL TENANTS RELYING ON HOUSING BENEFIT WHO HAVE BEEN EVICTED IN THE PAST THREE YEARS



New figures unearthed by *Inside Housing* suggest Universal Credit could be pushing more people into homelessness. *Nathaniel Barker* finds out why

**I**t's less than two weeks until Christmas. You have always struggled to make ends meet, but since transferring to Universal Credit this year the bills have started to pile up. You are now on a final warning from your landlord: pay the rent or you're out.

And now, a repayment is due for a crisis loan you took out several years ago. Under the old benefit system, child tax credit would be coming in next week - but it is still the best part of a month until your next Universal Credit cheque. The coffers are close to empty and you're regretting buying those Christmas presents. Soon, your landlord will act on their threat and you will have to declare your family homeless to the council.

A hypothetical example, yes, but real people around the UK will be facing very similar situations.

Universal Credit drags people deeper into debt. That much has been evidenced by organisations including Citizens Advice, the Association of Retained Council Housing, the National Federation of ALMOs and the UK's four housing association membership bodies. But now, for the first time, *Inside Housing* has uncovered figures which suggest this debt is making people homeless.

## Presenting as homeless

Using Freedom of Information Act laws, we requested data on how many households presenting to their councils as homeless are on Universal Credit or housing benefit - which is part of the legacy welfare system. Many authorities were not able to provide the numbers, but we have obtained information about Universal Credit leaseholds in 42 areas and housing benefit households in another 31.

Since April this year, among the 42 Universal Credit areas, 4,940 households have declared themselves homeless to their council while claiming the benefit - out of 168,653 Universal Credit households. In the other 31 areas over the same period, 3,600 households were receiving housing benefit at the point of presenting as homeless, out of 283,464 total claimants in these areas. In other words, roughly one in 34 Universal Credit households have become homeless this year, compared to one in 79 housing benefit households.

These figures are approximate snapshots and should be treated with caution. For instance, it's important to remember that Universal Credit combines six different benefits of which housing benefit is one, so the comparison is not exact - and that the figures have not been weighted to account for the many complex factors in homelessness.

However, the disparity is clearly stark. And there is further indication



that Universal Credit is playing a role in homelessness. Its impact on rent arrears has been widely reported. A BBC *Panorama* investigation last month found that the average amount owed by council tenants claiming Universal Credit is £662.56, while those on housing benefit are £262.50 in arrears.

*Inside Housing* also gathered data from stock-owning councils about evictions. Across 38 authorities with a combined 47,473 tenants claiming Universal Credit, 459 have been evicted in the past three years - a ratio of one to 103. In the same timeframe, another 39 councils with 147,478 tenants relying on housing benefit evicted 607 of these households - a much smaller ratio of one in 243. Again, this data is incomplete, but it suggests that council tenants on Universal Credit are well over twice as likely to be evicted as those claiming housing benefit under the previous system. For these people, homelessness is often inevitable.

Sam Lister, policy and practice officer at the Chartered Institute of Housing, says Universal Credit can drive people into financial difficulty from which they may never extract themselves. "The problem with Universal Credit is that it's paid in arrears with a five-week waiting period before your first payment," he explains. "Although there are advance payments available, if there's a dispute about your entitlement, you can't get that payment until that issue has been decided."

This means people with especially complex cases - who will often be the most vulnerable - could be put under intense budgeting pressure from the off. Alessy Beaver, co-ordinator of the Step Up programme at homelessness charity Thames Reach, agrees. "The main underlying problem is that these are people who are already vulnerable and Universal Credit is creating particular exposure because it's such a complex process," she says.

Even once a claim is processed,

that pressure is not necessarily lifted.

"Universal Credit is falling victim to the fact that general levels of benefits are low anyway," says Mr Lister. "Some of the problems are to do with the benefit levels being frozen since 2016 - which means the real value of your benefits is declining. That's not specifically a Universal Credit design problem, but increasing budgeting pressures due to the payment in arrears and that waiting period mean the fact that benefit levels are generally inadequate comes into sharper focus under Universal Credit."

## Paid monthly

The monthly nature of Universal Credit payments also plays a role, he adds. Under the legacy welfare system, different claims for different benefits meant varying flows of income from week to week, which "kind of does your budgeting for you". But under Universal Credit, less frequent cash injections mean people are needing to budget over longer periods - meaning that unexpected one-off expenses like replacing a broken fridge can have a bigger impact. And for people in non-salaried work, Ms Beaver adds, fluctuating pay cheques can significantly alter Universal Credit awards from month to month, making effective budgeting harder still.

These are features intrinsic to Universal Credit's design, and the problems they cause cannot be fixed by mere tinkering, including widely welcomed measures announced at the Autumn Budget such as new money for the transition process and higher work allowances for disabled people and families with children.

Among Universal Credit claimants declaring as homeless, councils held data indicating that around 6% had come from housing association tenancies, 5% from local authority tenancies and 26% from private tenancies - while the rest had either not come from stable accommodation or did not provide this information.

David Smith, policy director for the Residential Landlords Association, says private landlords are "reluctant to let to people on Universal Credit" because of fears they will not meet the rent. Its research in October found that 61% of landlords with tenants on Universal Credit have seen them go into rent arrears.

The complex nature of Universal Credit also puts landlords off, he adds: "Some private landlords are prepared to help people with their claims, but what is the benefit for them? It's not like there's a shortage of other tenants out there."

But, as the figures on council evictions show, there is an emerging issue in the social housing sector, too. Anabel Palmer, community investment and care director at 27,000-home Southern Housing Group, sees a grave challenge on the horizon.

"We go all out to make sure that we don't evict someone because they're in Universal Credit arrears," she says. "The minute anyone moves onto Universal Credit we immediately see if there's anything we can do to help them. We've been managing it very tightly so we don't have to take action to protect our income. But the full-on migration has not yet happened - and that's when it's going to get critical for councils and housing associations."

Southern supports its 1,500 Universal Credit tenants by offering one-on-one home visits, though Ms Palmer warns this will become much harder after that figure rises to 7,500, as is expected following managed migration. She says if the full roll-out of Universal Credit goes ahead in its current form, despite Southern's extensive planning, the impact on the organisation's revenues will be "significant".

The Department for Work and Pensions says it does not recognise the figures about homelessness and Universal Credit obtained by *Inside Housing*. A spokesperson adds: "Evictions are a matter between tenants and landlords, and can occur for a wide range of reasons. Everyone deserves a safe and secure home, and with Universal Credit housing costs can be paid directly to landlords if requested. We are rolling out the social landlord portal to support vulnerable claimants and since 2011 we have also provided around £1bn in Discretionary Housing Payments."

Even if Universal Credit works for most claimants, it is difficult to shake the feeling that it fails those who need it most. Thames Reach's Ms Beaver says she works with some people who are "just too vulnerable for Universal Credit".

The government has insisted that Universal Credit is here to stay, while at the same time maintaining a commitment to slash homelessness. In time, ministers may be forced to decide which policy takes priority. ■

How much progress has been made on rectifying issues with fire doors in council homes?

*Nathaniel Barker finds out*

## Fire doors: where are we now?

Since the Grenfell Tower disaster, cladding has dominated the debate on fire safety. However, while the aftermath of the tragedy has shone a light on the wide use of dangerous cladding materials across the country, what it has revealed about fire doors is equally concerning.

In March 2018, the Metropolitan Police revealed that it had tested an undamaged flat entrance fire door taken from the tower. It withstood fire and smoke for just 15 minutes, despite being designed to offer 30 minutes' protection in line with building requirements.

Further failures in tests on a wider range of products commissioned by the government were described by communities secretary James Brokenshire as evidence of "a broader issue across the fire door market". A five-month moratorium on the sale of glass reinforced plastic (GRP) composite fire doors was quietly agreed. GRP doors are particularly popular with social landlords largely for being relatively cheap to produce.

Snapshot data from government tests published in February showed that only three of 12 GRP door models tested met the 30-minute requirement, while two failed after less than 10 minutes. The government is still working with National Trading Standards and the Association of Composite Door Manufacturers to ►



develop a remediation action plan.

*Inside Housing* has carried out the most comprehensive research to date about the scale of fire door issues in England's council housing stock and reveals the glacial pace at which these issues are being fixed.

## Grim picture

The picture is as frustrating as it is worrying. Through the Freedom of Information Act, we obtained data on 326,863 fire doors in blocks of flats owned by 98 councils - which together own well over half of the nation's local authority housing stock.

A handful of councils that responded did not know how many doors are installed across their stock, and these have not been included.

Of all the doors counted, the councils believe that 33,522 (10.3%) are unlikely to satisfy the 30-minute standard, while several are still carrying out surveys to determine whether any of their doors are a concern.

Lord Gary Porter, chair of the Local Government Association, says that councils "have been failed" by the GRP door and testing industries.

Among the 44 councils that have identified non-compliant or potentially non-compliant doors since March 2018, half are yet to replace a single door. That includes Kensington and Chelsea Council - the owner of Grenfell Tower - which suspects that 931 of its 5,345 flat entrance fire doors are not fit for purpose. A spokesperson for the council said that a replacement programme is due to start in July, and that new doors are currently being installed in buildings "of specific concern".

Overall, the councils were able to confirm that just 2,689 problem doors have been replaced - 8% of those deemed unlikely to meet safety standards. Some said that replacements are ongoing but they were unable to provide figures.

The data points to widespread and multifaceted confusion regarding fire doors that helps to explain why, two years on from Grenfell, remediation has been so slow.

Much of this confusion arose in July 2018, when the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) issued Advice Note 16, to help landlords replace fire doors. This document stated that replacement fire doors needed test evidence that the product could resist fire and smoke adequately from both sides.

The advice neglected, however, to

specify that the 'both-sides standard' applied only to composite doors and not traditional fire doors, which are usually made of timber or steel. This point was clarified a month later by the government in Advice Note 17, but *Inside Housing* heard that in the interim some landlords needlessly cancelled orders for fire doors, sent back deliveries or refused payments after finding that they had not been tested from both sides.

Kevin Underwood, technical director at the British Woodworking Federation (BWF), says misunderstandings about what constitutes a safe fire door endure. "The BWF was concerned that the confusion around the testing and certification of different types of fire doors was creating greater fire safety risk than if the announcement had not been made, and the confusion is still there."

For instance, Portsmouth and Sutton councils have erred on the side of caution and interpreted all their GRP fire doors as faulty. The latter has committed to replace all these doors, having just begun a programme to replace 1,878 doors in 2019/20, costing an estimated £3.5m. Its ALMO, Sutton Housing Partnership, says the move "is part of our commitment to improving safety beyond the legally required minimum". On the other hand, Norwich Council is using GRP products as replacements.

Mr Underwood explains that there are at least two different types of GRP doors - foam-filled and those with a laminated timber core - that are likely to perform differently in a test. However, both he and fire door consultant Neil Ashdown say that not enough information has been released about the MHCLG tests. That means it is difficult to know why doors fail - and therefore understand exactly what makes a door more or less likely to comply with standards.

"The problem is they didn't say why the doors had failed," says Mr Ashdown. "It could be that some configurations - types of glazing systems for example - are more susceptible to issues." Meanwhile, government tests of timber doorsets are ongoing, but no fails have yet been recorded.

## Confusion persists

Mr Underwood is particularly concerned that the mistakes that led to inadequate fire doors being installed at Grenfell and elsewhere persist.

He is adamant that test data should not be taken as proof of a door's compliance. A test report, he says, "is just

# 98

Councils included in survey, owning well over half of the country's local authority housing stock

# 326,863

Number of fire doors on which we obtained data

# 33,522

Fire doors suspected not to meet 30-minute safety standard (10.3%)

# 2,689

Number of problem doors replaced so far (8%)

# £22.3m

Total bill identified by councils so far

**"It could be that some configurations are more susceptible to issues"**

a signpost in time" and could be years out of date, with the actual product made to a different specification with different materials.

"We still have building control asking for test reports in preference to third-party certification documents. It means there is still confusion out there," he says.

"Certification is seen as the blue riband," explains Mr Ashdown. "There is definitely a move towards that but I suspect it's unlikely to become a mandatory requirement."

Government advice on fire doors states that certification "will provide additional assurance of performance" but still accepts "carefully checked" test evidence.

All this confusion means that, according to Lord Porter, even though the moratorium was lifted in December, "councils are struggling to confirm that the fire doors that have come back onto the market meet their requirements".

Fire doors are one of the most fundamental elements of building safety,

often key to preventing compartmentation from being breached. However, it appears that social landlords, the industry, building inspectors and the government are all unable to definitively describe what constitutes a compliant fire door.

The MHCLG says its line is unambiguous: "Building owners should ensure that products being used in their buildings meet the appropriate standards. Where doors that have failed tests are installed, we have been clear that building owners must take responsibility and should review their building fire risk assessments."

This position relinquishes the onus of recommending which doors are safe, instead implying that if you do not think your fire doors are up to scratch, you should make sure other fire safety measures pick up the slack to mitigate the risk.

But councils are not satisfied with this approach. Diarmaid Ward, executive member for housing and development at Islington Council, says the authority is still awaiting results from ongoing official tests of timber doors "in the absence of clear government guidance". Similarly, Kettering Council says it is only able to replace doors ad hoc "after a detailed assessment and consultation with our framework partners" due to the lack of "definitive guidance".

Brighton & Hove City Council is waiting to replace 2,254 doors, and says it is "pressing MHCLG for information on the type of doors we should use".

Once landlords do know which doors to use, there is the question of money. The councils needing to replace doors in our survey have already identified a combined £22.3m bill. This will certainly rise as more replacement programmes are put in place, with many councils yet to calculate costs. Relatively conservative estimates put the rate at around £1,000 per door.

"Funding is clearly a massive challenge," says Darren Rodwell, executive member for housing and planning at London Councils. "It's unfair to expect local authorities to pick up the bill for manufacturers' safety failings and for shortcomings in government regulation."

If - as all parties ostensibly agree - residents' safety is of paramount importance, it is vital that the hand-wringing and finger-pointing over costs that have played out so tortuously with the cladding scandal are not repeated. ■