

Electrical Safety First response to the Department for Social Development's review of the role and regulation of the Private Rented Sector

1. OVERVIEW

- 1.1. Electrical Safety First welcomes the invitation to submit written evidence to the Department for Social Development's (DSD) review of the role and regulation of the Private Rented Sector (PRS) in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2. As the only charity campaigning in Northern Ireland to reduce electrical fires and electrical-related injuries at home, our remit is to promote and encourage public awareness of issues surrounding electrical safety. Over the past five years, we have given over £47k in grants to community safety groups and helped hundreds of vulnerable clients rectify electrical hazards in their homes to help this cause.
- 1.3. Electrical Safety First believes that no one, regardless of age, income or where they live, should be put at risk of electrical faults in their home. Given the significance of the PRS in meeting Northern Ireland's future housing needs, we have been campaigning to improve electrical safety in the sector.
- 1.4. We therefore support the DSD's commitment to seek views on property and safety standards as part of its review and specifically consulting on whether electrical safety checks should become mandatory in all privately rented home.
- 1.5. At present, private landlords have a responsibility to ensure the homes they let have safe electrical installations (fixed wiring, etc.) and any appliances provided as part of any let. However, private landlords do not currently have to carry out inspections or provide documentation to this effect (despite them being required to do so for gas appliances and installations).
- 1.6. There is a precedent for action: In May 2014, Scotland made five yearly electrical installation and appliance checks by a competent person, a statutory duty for privately rented homes.¹ Respective Scottish landlords and lettings associations have supported these new requirements.

2. KEY FACTS ABOUT SAFETY IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- 2.1. The PRS in Northern Ireland is seeing unprecedented growth and has more than doubled over the last decade, from 115,000 dwellings (5% of all homes) in 1999, to 305,000 (12% of all homes) in 2012.² In some parts of Northern Ireland, the proportion of PRS stock is significantly higher. The highest proportion of private tenancies is in Belfast which accounts for 26% of privately rented home in Northern Ireland.³

¹ <https://www.prhpscotland.gov.uk/repairs-application-and-guidance>

² Department for Social Development. Review of the Role and Regulation of the Private Rented Sector. November 2015

³ Ibid

- 2.2.** The 2011 House Condition Survey confirmed that although the profile of the PRS housing stock has extensively changed, fitness standards are still substantially lower than other sectors. Although the level of unfitness has reduced, falling from 2.7% in 2006 to 2.0% in 2011, this rate is still much higher compared to the social housing (0.1%) and owner occupied (1%) sectors.⁴
- 2.3.** Furthermore, 8.2% of PRS properties were deemed to be defective in 2011 compared to only 1.5% for social housing and 3.2% in owner occupation. In the PRS, the non-decency rate was 10.2% (12,830 properties) a reduction from the 17% of properties recorded in 2009.
- 2.4.** Increasing numbers of families and vulnerable people are renting privately. According to the 2011 census, 39% of private rented households had one or more dependent children.⁵
- 2.5.** Despite this, tenants often face poor conditions and serious safety hazards. According to official statistics, 65% of all accidental fires in homes in Northern Ireland are caused by electricity.⁶ Independent research also suggests that private tenants are more likely to be at risk of electric shock or fire than owner occupiers.⁷
- 2.6.** Nearly half (48%)⁸ of Northern Ireland's electrical fires were caused by products including dishwashers, cookers and fridge/freezers - appliances that are routinely provided by landlords along with lets.
- 2.7.** By law, landlords have a responsibility to have gas installations and appliances in the properties they let checked on an annual basis. A recent survey carried out by Shelter and British Gas suggests 90% of private landlords comply with this requirement.
- 2.8.** However, there are no equivalent requirements for electrical installations and appliances. Given that gas typically only supplies a boiler and cooker, while electricity powers almost every appliance in the home and is supplied to every room, we believe this puts tenants at a particular risk. Electrical Safety First wants parity between gas and electrics.
- 2.9.** In addition, recent research undertaken by Electrical Safety First in conjunction with NUS USI suggests that students are being left exposed to unnecessary and dangerous situations by negligent landlords and lettings agents.
- 2.10.** Nearly 1 in 2 students surveyed experienced faulty electrics in their privately rented accommodation: 42% of students experienced broken sockets or light switches; 21% experienced constant tripping of the fusebox and 5% experienced an electric shock.⁹

⁴ The Housing Executive. *2011 House Condition Survey*:

http://www.nihe.gov.uk/northern_ireland_house_condition_survey_main_report_2011.pdf

⁵ NISRA. 2011 Census: <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/census/2011Census.html>

⁶ Analysis provided by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, 2013-14

⁷ Research conducted by Ipsos MORI. 25th June-2nd July 2010

⁸ Data based on secondary analysis of Northern Ireland Fire Statistics, 2013-14

⁹ Survey carried out during November 2015 by Electrical Safety First and NUS USI with a sample of 100 students between the ages of 18 to 49

- 2.11.** More must be done to reduce risks to private tenants by putting precautionary measures in place to ensure their safety, and that adjustments to private rented housing legislation are required to do this.

3. PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS FOR A SAFER PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

- 3.1.** We want the DSD to introduce a requirement for five yearly checks, by a registered electrician, of both fixed electrical installations in all rented property and any electrical appliances supplied with lets, along with basic visual checks on change of tenancy.
- 3.2.** Just as gas safety regulations require this annual check to be carried out by a Gas Safe-registered engineer, we believe checks on electrical installations and appliances should be completed by a suitably competent person. Using a member of an accredited registration scheme operated by a recognised body will give some degree of confidence that this has been achieved.
- 3.3.** Our reasons for recommending a five yearly timeframe are largely due to a desire to strike a balance between the likelihood of risks to tenants from deterioration in the electrical installation/appliances due to wear and tear, faults and tampering, versus costs placed on landlords.
- 3.4.** Visual checks should also be carried out by the landlord or responsible agent on change of tenancy or at least every year, whichever occurs first (Electrical Safety First has developed a checklist to help landlords carry this out).
- 3.5.** This precautionary regime would serve to significantly reduce the risks to tenant safety arising from faulty electrical equipment but without placing an undue regulatory burden on landlords (estimated costs are £100-£150 every five years).
- 3.6.** This proposal would bring regulation into line with laws for Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) in Northern Ireland where landlords are required to carry out regular checks.
- 3.7.** Improving standards will not only benefit tenants but also help landlords keep their properties safe from the risk of fire. Making private renting a better option is crucial to ensuring everyone has a safe, affordable home to live in so we hope that the DSD will seek to introduce these much-needed changes.

For more details about our submission or to discuss anything further, please contact:

Wayne Mackay
Policy and Public Affairs Advisor
wayne.mackay@electricalsafetyfirst.org.uk or 0131 445 4690