

Environmentally Sustainable Homes

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Summary of Paper

NIFHA urges the Northern Ireland Executive to support the Sustainable Development Strategy for NI with a requirement for *all new* housing to meet the Code for Sustainable Homes.

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents registered and non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, these associations provide 30,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at www.nifha.org

Background

A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland was introduced in May 2006. It requires development to be sustainable in social, economic and environmental terms.

In 2007 the UK government committed itself to the target that, by 2016, all new homes should be 'carbon neutral'. This means, measured over a year, any carbon dioxide produced by the homes would be offset by emissions saved by their renewable sources of energy.

Registered housing associations are at the forefront of sustainable house-building in Northern Ireland. As a condition of grant, their homes are designed and built to increasingly demanding environmental standards. The Minister for Social Development has made it clear "the bar will continue to be raised" until all housing association development is carbon-neutral.

The UK government has adopted the *Code for Sustainable Homes* as its way of measuring progress on the path to carbon-neutral development. The Code's criteria are:

- Energy and carbon dioxide emission
- Materials
- Surface water run-off
- Waste
- Pollution
- Health and well-being
- Water
- Ecology
- Management

The Code has six levels. Level 1 is basic whilst Level 6 represents carbon-neutrality. Since June 2008 registered housing associations are required to achieve Code Level 3 in their planned developments.

The housing association movement in Northern Ireland has widespread experience of developing sustainable homes. They use:

- high-quality insulation
- renewable heating systems (eg solar water heaters, photovoltaic cells, heat pumps, wood-chip boilers)
- rainwater harvest systems (to flush toilets, wash cars, water gardens etc)
- timber from sustainably managed forests
- CFC free paint – to reduce harm to the ozone layer
- site management techniques to minimise construction waste.

Challenges

1. Environmentally sustainable house-building is *essential* and *urgent*. It is required by the UK government and the Northern Ireland Executive.
2. The *unit cost* of sustainable house-building is relatively high. A mass market, with economies of scale and many competing suppliers, has not yet developed. This applies to materials, equipment and labour.
3. The *competitive pressures* of a depressed housing market strongly discourage private developers from building to higher environmental standards. Their concerns would be greatly reduced, however, if the same minimum requirements applied to the whole industry.

Recommendations

1. The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) should *amend Northern Ireland's building regulations* to require all new housing to meet Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes from a precise date. DFP should also specify when Levels 4, 5 and 6 would be made mandatory.
2. DFP should encourage improved sustainability in housing by giving *rate rebates* linked to the Code Levels of brand new homes and the Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) of other residential property.
3. DFP should recommend HM Treasury to *reduce the rate of VAT* to 5 per cent on work that improves the energy efficiency of domestic property.
4. The Departments of Environment and Regional Development should ensure Northern Ireland *complies with EU directives* on sustainable development (eg sewage treatment, household waste disposal, assessing the impact of development on areas susceptible to flooding).

Conclusion

Sustainability is imperative. It must not be set aside during economically difficult times. There is a clear case for government to increase the minimum standard of house-building. This would stimulate the market to bring forward new products and processes at lower unit cost.

Further Information

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