

**Date:** 22 October 10

**Consultation:** Programme for Cohesion Sharing and Integration

## **Introduction**

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents registered and non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, our members provide 34,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at [www.nifha.org](http://www.nifha.org)

## **Background**

NIFHA is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation document on behalf of our members in the Housing Association movement. NIFHA's members are responsible for around twenty five percent of all social housing stock in Northern Ireland which are widespread throughout the province. We recognise that housing in Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to achieving social cohesion and reducing social exclusion.

Our members are pleased to work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development in participating with and developing shared future initiatives. They have assisted in promoting social cohesion, sharing and integration throughout all their housing schemes across Northern Ireland.

## **General Comments**

NIFHA commends the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on having a vision that they hope will build a shared and better future for us all. Their leadership should assist in contributing to bringing positive changes to our society as a whole. Housing has been viewed over many years as an indicator of separatism, with polarised estates and the locality or neighbourhood people live in acting as an identifier of their religion or background.

It has been suggested by the 2009 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and given further mention in the report of the Independent Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland that 80% of people said that they would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood. NIFHA suggests that whilst the provision of mixed race or mixed community housing are not the only variables to contribute to a socially cohesive society, they are vitally important in bringing people together by breaking down community segregation.

## **Specific Comments**

### **2.0 Political Leadership / Community Engagement**

NIFHA broadly supports the themes contained in chapter 2 of the programme. Of particular interest are those concerning community participation and engagement, developing shared spaces and encouraging shared neighbourhoods.

The theme concerning cultural identity, including issues around flags and emblems, murals, bonfires, cultural expression, language and popular protest, is important for our members. Housing Associations suggest that care should be taken when naming streets and also when naming supported or sheltered housing schemes to ensure they are neutral and will not bring offence to any group within our community. However, Housing Associations have been approached on a number of occasions by community or residents groups in some areas and have been asked to use names that they consider not to be neutral; this would result in the housing becoming labeled within that community. Our members consider that clear policy guidelines need to be developed in this area by the Department for Social Development, which would support councils in determining the appropriateness of some of the names that communities may suggest.

### **3.0 People and Places**

Housing Associations welcome the work that is currently being done to promote the potential of shared future housing in Northern Ireland, such as the screening of each new housing scheme for its shared future potential and the work being done on the pilot programme across 30 shared neighbourhoods. Social Housing in Northern Ireland is allocated on the basis of housing need, which is determined by a points based system. Article 22 of the Housing (Northern Ireland) order 1981 requires that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive shall submit to the Department a scheme making provision for determining the order in which prospective tenants or occupiers of the Executive's houses are to be granted tenancies or licences of those houses.

To meet the requirements of the 1981 order, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is responsible for and operates the common waiting list for the allocation of all social housing in Northern Ireland. The allocation of social housing in Northern Ireland in the past has been a highly contentious issue with strong political implications. This means that there may not be the political will, within Northern Ireland, to make constructive changes to the way the common waiting list is managed or how social housing is allocated.

The programme rightly says that the current process for the allocation of social housing does not readily take account of people's aspiration to live in a mixed community; in fact it may be argued that it increases the risk of greater polarisation of our communities. However, even though there may not be the political will to make changes to the Common Selection Scheme, the system for allocating social housing needs to be reviewed, in the light of this, to ensure that the aspiration of 80% of the population to live in a mixed community is taken into account.

Legislative change is required if amendments are to be made to the Common Selection Scheme, this means that if changes are required they will not be short term goals. The current system could be amended in a number of ways which wouldn't contravene the legislation to include such initiatives as including on the housing application form a question asking applicants if they would be willing to live in a shared future housing area. Furthermore the

potential for introducing a Choice Based Lettings Scheme should be evaluated to establish if it would be beneficial in promoting social cohesion in Northern Ireland.

### **6.0 A Secure Community**

NIFHA welcomes the initiatives outlined in this section of the programme with respect to community safety and the important role communities have in creating a safe and welcoming environment for all the people and groups who live and enter into their localities. NIFHA has been working with a number of agencies, for some considerable time, to develop information sharing protocols on behalf of our members. Information sharing protocols should assist with the exchange of information between partners regarding anti social behavior with the aim of excluding people who practice this type of behavior from the social housing sector. This should, hopefully, act as a deterrent to people undertaking this type of behaviour and partnership working by Housing Associations within communities and with other agencies should assist in reinforcing this.

### **7.0 A Cohesive Community**

NIFHA supports the themes contained within chapter seven of the programme outlining the various strategies to be put in place to assist with developing a cohesive community. We would reinforce the comments we have made previously that when building cohesive communities care needs to be taken with regard to place names and whilst agreeing with the overarching principle that social housing should be allocated on the basis of need, we suggest that the housing selection scheme should also recognise people's willingness to live in a shared society.

### **8.0 Supporting Local Communities**

This part of the programme recognises the important role that volunteers undertake in our society and within our communities. Many Housing Associations have grown from small community based housing providers and they still maintain their close links with the communities they seek to serve. Housing Associations Boards are comprised of volunteers who give up their time freely for the benefit of social housing in their communities. NIFHA therefore welcomes that this programme will continue to support the principle of volunteering as a vehicle in delivering a socially cohesive society.

### **10.0 Mechanism to Oversee the Implementation of CSI**

The programme recognises the impact that housing makes to assist the development of a socially cohesive society. NIFHA therefore believes that as its members provide in excess of 25% of all social housing in Northern Ireland, the Housing Association voice should be heard on the panels which are being established to oversee the implementation of CSI. We suggest that Housing Association representatives could make a significant contribution to the implementation of this important programme and NIFHA would be happy to facilitate the panels in whatever way we can.

## **12.0 Options for the Delivery of Funding and Policy Advice**

NIFHA does not propose to make any comment on the options for the delivery of funding and policy advice except to reiterate that the voice of the Housing Association movement would be beneficial to the delivery of this important programme.

I hope you find our comments useful please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or clarification on any of the points raised in this consultation response.

*Submitted on behalf of NIFHA by:*

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