



Response to Consultation

Date: 20 July 2011

Consultation: Housing Selection Scheme Preliminary Consultation Paper

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents registered and non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, our members provide around 36,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at www.nifha.org

General Comments

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 social housing in Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to achieving social cohesion and reducing social exclusion within our society.

The operation of the Housing Selection Scheme has ensured that social housing allocations have been made equitably in accordance with housing need and this has contributed to the development of a higher degree of confidence in the building of an inclusive society.

However, the revised scheme, introduced in November 2000, was put in place during a different political and economic climate than to-day. Whilst the current proposals will make some changes that reflect the current influences within our society there are still some revisions required which our members consider important to the future operation of the scheme. We have detailed a number of these changes at the end of our response.

Specific Comments

1. Intimidation - The Scope and Role of the Current Rule 23

Do you agree that based on a risk-removal approach to intimidation, and given the changing political situation in Northern Ireland, as well as the tools available to address serious disputes and harassment, intimidation cases should no longer attract absolute priority for rehousing through an additional award of 200 points under the Selection Scheme?

NIFHA supports the removal of 200 points for intimidation cases. We recognise the difficult situations that people who are being intimidated face but suggest that the current system creates a disparity between them and other people who are homeless. We suggest that people, who are experiencing intimidation, have their housing needs assessed in the same way as other homeless applicants and should not automatically be given priority points as a matter of course. Awarding these points means that the applicant may bypass

other people on the waiting list who may be experiencing other aspects of home loss and homelessness which are not classed as intimidation but may be equally as distressing and traumatic.

Initiatives such as the offer of mediation services, establishment of safe rooms for people living in fear of domestic violence and the Hate Incidents Practical Action Scheme (HIPA) may reduce the need for people to permanently leave their homes and present to NIHE as homeless. The use of temporary accommodation, where necessary, may provide an opportunity for the cause of the intimidation to be investigated and resolved through the appropriate channels.

Do you believe that if the 200 Intimidation Points currently awarded under the Scheme were to be removed, the Primary Social Need factors (Appendix 2) adequately recognise and give due weight to the range of circumstances in which a person is forced to leave their home because of violence or serious risk of violence or lose their home because of an unforeseen disaster e.g. fire / flood?

If the 200 intimidation points were removed the current Primary Social Need Factors may not be adequate to cover the whole range of circumstances where a person may be obliged to leave their home. However, NIFHA also queries the rationale behind capping the points allowed to two factors as there may be some circumstances where it is appropriate to award multiple Primary Social Needs factor points.

2. Applicants Living in Unsuitable Accommodation

Do you agree that a range of circumstances relating to unsuitable accommodation should be given greater recognition through the Housing Selection Scheme, thereby reducing the need to seek redress through homelessness legislation?

NIFHA agrees that there should be a range of options and points relating to unsuitable accommodation with the emphasis on awarding points which fairly reflect an applicant's present living accommodation and give priority to those in greatest housing need.

We expect that the intention of this proposal is to award a higher level of points to applicants falling within this category to enhance their prospects for re-housing before they reach the point where they are considered to be homeless. The proposal in this area is considered to be too vague as it doesn't clearly define what constitutes unsuitable accommodation and it doesn't indicate the level of points that would be awarded under these circumstances.

Our main concern is that applicants falling within this category may very well be homeless because of the unsuitability of their accommodation but this may not be recognised by the proposed changes and an appropriate level of points may not be awarded to the applicant. The applicant therefore may not be re-

housed as quickly as they would have been under the current system where they are awarded Homeless (50) or Full Duty Applicant Points (70).

NIFHA therefore considers that we cannot see any merit in changing the current assessment for this category of applicant until there is greater clarification regarding the definition of Unsuitable Accommodation and the level of points that would be awarded under these circumstances.

3. Homeless Applicants in Temporary Accommodation

Do you agree that additional Interim Accommodation points should be awarded after further periods spent in temporary accommodation?

Do you have any views on whether any such additional points should be awarded to:

- a) Statutory homeless applicants placed in temporary accommodation arranged by the Housing Executive only; or
- b) Statutory homeless applicants who are either placed by the Housing Executive or make their own alternative temporary accommodation arrangements; or
- c) All statutory homeless applicants?

NIFHA supports the proposal to award Interim Accommodation points after extended periods spent in temporary accommodation. We recognise that there are pressures to move applicants from temporary accommodation and we hope that the award of additional points will enhance their prospects for the offer of a permanent home.

We believe that Interim Accommodation points should be awarded to all statutory homeless applicants who are living in temporary accommodation irrespective of whether the accommodation has been arranged by the Housing Executive or if the applicant has made their own arrangements.

4. Transfers: Anti-Social Behaviour

Do you agree that transfer access criteria should be included in the Statutory Housing Selection Scheme?

Do you agree that the transfer access criteria should contain provisions to enable social landlords to refuse transfer requests in circumstances where the tenant has been involved in anti social behaviour?

NIFHA agrees that transfer access criteria should be included within the statutory Housing Selection Scheme. We also support the proposal that the transfer access criteria should contain provisions to enable social landlords to refuse transfer requests where tenants have been involved in anti social behaviour.

Amendment of the Housing Selection Scheme to provide the Housing Executive and registered social landlords with greater discretion to refuse transfer applications from tenants involved in anti social behaviour would ensure consistency of approach and should enable social landlords to restrict

the spread of anti social behaviour by controlling the movement of tenants with a propensity towards this type of behaviour.

The Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 makes provision for social landlords to withhold consent to an exchange of tenancies where there are orders or injunctions in relation to anti-social behaviour in force or an application for such an order or injunction is pending before any court: The part of the legislation which deals with anti social behaviour will come into operation on 1st September 11, there therefore needs to be definitive policies in place prior to this date to support the application of the legislation by the Housing Executive and Registered Social Landlords in this important area.

Future Proposals

NIFHA has previously discussed a number of other areas within the Housing Selection Scheme that require review. We acknowledge that the Housing Executive has undertaken a review of the City Centre Landlord Area in Belfast and we await the issue of this consultation document which has been ongoing for the last couple of years and would ask for a date for implementation as new opportunities for shared future schemes in Belfast city cannot be considered until this is established. We hope that the document will address a number of the problems that our members have indicated they experience in this area.

We would also highlight the need for clearer policy regarding the housing of families with children above the ground floor level in apartment buildings. There seems to a contradiction in the application of the scheme as this type of accommodation may be offered to families with children but other social needs points may be awarded where the applicant's household contains a child of less than 10 years of age and they are living in accommodation above ground floor level. There is a difference in the way the policy is applied even within Belfast's New Lodge flats. A clear housing policy needs to be determined if apartment living is for families with children in NI and this policy needs to be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.

Our members have also indicated that the way the scheme manages the accommodation needs of older people needs reviewed. It has been suggested that the scheme automatically includes them on waiting lists which they do not have any interest in, meaning that Associations may be undertaking nugatory work by issuing them offers for accommodation from these lists.

NIFHA would also suggest that innovative approaches need to be taken to allocation of difficult to let properties through investigating initiatives such as the potential for introducing a Choice Based Lettings Scheme and a more cohesive and joined up approaches to addressing issues surrounding empty homes and void properties. We understood a Choice Based Lettings Scheme would be introduced in NI: what are the plans and timescales around this?

Our members have also raised concerns around the assessment process by NIHE staff in relation to the over the phone housing needs assessments.

We also wish to raise concerns around the quality of information being provided to applicants in relation to housing options particularly for sheltered housing in Northern Ireland.

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:

Maire Kerr

Housing Policy and Research Manager

NIFHA – Working Together for Better Housing

A: 6c Citylink Business Park, Albert Street, Belfast, BT12 4HB

T: 028 9089 7695 **F:** 028 9023 8057

E: MKerr@nifha.org **W:** www.nifha.org