

NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

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The RPA Review Team
Local Government Reform Division
Dept of the Environment
Goodwood House
44-58 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4NN

Dear Sir or Madam

Comments on the Consultation Paper “Emerging Findings”

The Federation represents 41 housing associations that together provide over 30,000 affordable homes for people in housing need throughout Northern Ireland. Since 1998 they have developed almost all the new social rented housing in the region.

Many of our members are rooted in local communities and others operate across the whole region. Housing associations provide accommodation for households with general and specialised housing needs, including those requiring support services.

Having gained additional information at the stakeholder event held yesterday in Armagh, the Federation is glad of the opportunity to comment on the “Emerging Findings from the Review of Local Government Aspects of the Review of Public Administration”:

1. Vision for Local Government in Northern Ireland

The stakeholder event considered the following draft of a shared vision for local government in Northern Ireland:

“Local government as a local leader in shaping, maintaining and promoting communities that are healthy, prosperous, safe, vibrant, sustainable and people-centred.”

In the Federation’s opinion, this draft falls some way short of describing the proactive role that we believe new District Councils should play in this region. We fear it would neither sufficiently inspire a new generation of civic leaders to offer themselves for election nor motivate the most able professionals to pursue for a career in local government.

Representing and promoting housing associations in Northern Ireland

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As an alternative we suggest:

“The vision for the new local authorities in Northern Ireland is to democratically lead local communities into a better, sustainable future. In doing so they will be catalysts and co-ordinate action by others as well as directly providing public services that offer good value for money.”

2. Principles of Strong Local Government

The Federation supports the four principles established by the original Review of Public Administration, namely:

- strong local government
- subsidiarity
- equality and good relations
- co-terminosity of boundaries.

3. Functions of the Proposed Local Authorities

- (a) The Federation considers that the functions to be transferred under “Emerging Findings” would not be sufficient to enable the new Councils to fulfil either of the above-mentioned visions for local government. Councils will be better able to influence the actions of other bodies if they themselves have a range of powers which impact significantly on the lives of their respective populations.
- (b) Conversely, we do not think the huge costs of reorganisation would be justified if only the “Emerging Findings” responsibilities were transferred.
- (c) While the concept of a gradual transfer of responsibilities has a certain logic, we feel it would be psychologically better to set a realistic but challenging target date and aim to make all of the changes on that date.
- (d) Landuse planning plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability, co-ordination of public services and social well-being so the Federation considers it essential that the new Councils should generally have full control over this function. We therefore disagree with the “Emerging Findings” proposal that Area Planning should remain with the Department of the Environment and see even less merit in the idea of splitting the responsibility between the Department and Councils. As an exception to the general principle, however, we feel the Minister should be authorised to:
 - require specific Councils to jointly prepare Area Plans or Subject Plans
 - determine specific planning applications with major implications for the whole region or a major part of it.
- (e) Libraries and youth and community services relate closely to neighbourhood renewal and the promotion of social inclusion so the NI Executive should take this opportunity to consider transferring these functions to the new Councils.

The Federation hopes these comments will be of help to the Sub-Committee and the whole Northern Ireland Executive.

Yours faithfully

Christopher Williamson
Chief Executive