

# **THE NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS**

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30<sup>th</sup> June 2006

**Mr Liam Kinney  
District Manager,  
NIHE Belfast District 7  
12 Keylands Place,  
Belfast,  
BT2 7BA**

Dear Liam,

**Re: NIHE South Belfast Sectoral Study**

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents 44 independent voluntary organisations, which benefit the community by providing affordable accommodation and related housing services to those in greatest housing need. Taken together, our members manage almost 30,000 units of accommodation dwellings and build over a 1000 each year. In the last twenty-five years these associations have undertaken a range of projects to respond to the needs of a diverse society. This pro-active approach to service provision is continuing, as is our commitment to working for the benefit of the whole community, including South Belfast.

We would like to thank you for affording us the opportunity to make comments on the above and the additional workshop which was held on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> April 2006. I found this event extremely interesting and helpful in making preparations to formulate a response. This seminar also provided an ideal platform to encourage networking among stakeholders, local elected representatives and numerous voluntary and community groups.

NIFHA, on behalf of its members would like to highlight the following key comments in relation to this document:

1. This document identifies South Belfast as an attractive to live in as being a mixed community and comparatively affluent, which is not entirely accurate as it contains some of the poorest areas of Belfast which are reflected in the neighbourhood renewal areas of Donegal Road/Sandy Row and Donegal Pass/Markets. We hope that any proposed plan will address this issue and explain what the NIHE proposes to do in future to make this area more attractive.
2. The study refers to the over-supply of apartments, which results in a lot of valuable property lying empty in an area of high demand. All too often properties in the South Belfast area are held by people with money to invest over the long term who can afford to wait for an upturn in the market to give them a return on their capital. Perhaps the application of rates to empty houses may have an effect in releasing some of these dwellings by allowing them to be let or sold at lower prices.

***Representing and promoting housing associations in Northern Ireland***

**Chairperson: Mr Arthur Canning Dip (Est Man) MBEng    Chief Executive: Mr Chris Williamson MCIIH**

**VAT Registration No: 311 2120 40**

3. The relevant agencies should consider putting pressure on landlords of empty properties rather than trying to meet demand single handed. In addition, residents seem to be in favour of a limitation to around 5% for the number of HMOs and would accept voluntary HMOs if the demand for such accommodation was matched by more robust governance.
4. Our members recognise the need to retain and sustain communities, including the residential character. In recent years there has been phenomenal sporadic growth in the number of HMOs coinciding with significant increase in sales of social housing. The concentration of young people in rented housing has given rise to other social problems, resulting in the displacement of many households who were more familiar with the popularity of "digs" and this has exasperated the erosion of closely knit communities. Students who were lodging as part of a family home would have been much more aware of the concerns of older people and families, and hence more integrated into the community. This is an alternative provision of accommodation which should be positively encouraged, particularly with a large floating population.
5. Throughout Northern Ireland at present, there is a severe difficulty with the availability of land and the DSD's Total Cost Indicators (TCI) do not reflect property value and land prices in this area. This issue requires a more holistic approach from all primary stakeholders to include various government departments, particularly those with responsibility for planning with a view to recommending more land for the provision of adequate and suitable housing.
6. "Article 40" of planning legislation in Northern Ireland should be enforced to state that a percentage of any new build housing developments in south Belfast should be made available to the social housing sector. Not all public land should be sold at market value and should be sold to the public sector only. Providers of social housing cannot continue to rely on windfall sites indefinitely.
7. There is concern in relation to affordability particularly for singles and singles with dependant children. The high costs of the private market exclude those wishing to get onto the property ladder and it is important that low-cost housing developments should be available to those most in need.

Some representatives who attended the seminar in April expressed concern that the increased level of bureaucracy and regulation compliance which has been placed on housing associations in recent years indicate that the DSD is anxious to reduce the number of association in Northern Ireland. We have received numerous assurances that this is not the case and I believe that it is important to recognise the knowledge and experience of housing associations which has made a significant impact, encouraged growth and diversification of the housing market over the last thirty years.

I trust that you will find these comments useful and should you have any queries regarding any of the points raised above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D. Henderson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "D".

DONALL HENDERSON  
HOUSING POLICY AND RESEARCH MANAGER