

Date: 22 October 2008
Consultation: No One Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility (Green Paper)

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents 40 housing associations. This includes 33 of the associations registered and regulated by the Department for Social Development (DSD). Collectively, these associations provide 30,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at www.nifha.org

Background

NIFHA's members are responsible for about twenty five percent of all social housing stock in Northern Ireland. Along with our members welcome a long overdue reform of the welfare benefits system. We would however, recommend that this review will give priority to improvements in the monitoring of welfare benefit assessment and impose serious sanctions as a deterrent to benefit fraud.

General Comments

- The impact of changes in the welfare system is likely to affect housing association tenants across the United Kingdom. It is important that changes must be clearly thought out prior to implementation to avoid unnecessary confusion, particularly for older and disabled residents who are not conducive to change.
- Since a large number of social sector tenants are dependent on partial or full welfare benefits, it is important that the implications of any changes are clearly communicated to them, so that they do not find themselves in a position where they are likely to struggle financially or have to go through a formal administrative process to allow continuation of their access to benefits. A succinct passporting mechanism needs to be incorporated within the new system.
- It is essential that the changes to the welfare system will not bring about a crippling administrative exercise for organisational staff. Any new duties must be clearly identified and staff should receive adequate training. However, the introduction of the new system should not give rise to back logs in relation to assessment of applications and/or making payments.
- The green paper indicates an ideal in taking up some type of employment where individuals in receipt of benefits can do so. This will require establishing and strengthening working relationships with the Department of Education and Learning, as well as the Social Economy

Network, in order to encourage employment, training programmes and new businesses. The process for such networking and proposed programme must be clearly set out.

- The notion of an “obligation to work” must be revised and due consideration given to those who may be identified as having entitlement to benefits in the long term, again some mechanism of passporting must be included for those with long-term and/or chronic illness.
- There is a significant level of inter-departmental relationship building required for the proposed new system. This includes the support of local employment partnerships, medical practitioners as well as providers of training and employment programmes. It is also important that there is consistency throughout the United Kingdom in relation to assessments and the administration of specific allowances such as the “treatment allowance” for drug users.
- Our members welcome the Government’s approach to more flexibility for part-term workers, elderly people and child carers. It is hoped that this will open up to a more diverse and highly skilled workforce, and address the imbalance and equality issues, especially in light of proposed training opportunities.
- The devolvement of power to local City Strategy Partnerships or Local Strategic Partnerships must be given careful consideration from a regional perspective. It is clear that the difficulties faced in each region of the United Kingdom are significantly diverse and of varying magnitudes. The establishment of the proposed new mechanisms to deal with these issues must reflect this.

I trust that you will find these comments useful and if you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Submitted on behalf of NIFHA by:



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