

THE NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

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23rd December 2005

Department of Finance and Personnel
Rating Policy Division
Room D12 Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7NA

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: The Rates (Capital Values, etc.) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005

The Federation represents 45 housing associations which together provide 30,000 affordable homes for people in housing need in Northern Ireland. They build about 1,200 homes per year. The great majority of these 30,000 householders have incomes well below the regional average and about 80% qualify for Housing Benefit.

MAIN POINTS

A. The Federation accepts that the present rating system needs to be overhauled and that the proposed "discrete capital value system" is reasonable.

B. We believe it is essential that the new property tax should be socially progressive i.e. the main burden should be carried by those best able to pay and vice versa. The Federation will therefore look very carefully at the proposals for rate relief which the government promises to introduce in a subsequent piece of legislation.

C. The Federation considers that, as a general principle, the owners of homes which lie vacant for long periods should be required to pay a proportion of the normal rates bill. Therefore we welcome the fact that the draft Order will permit a future Executive to levy rates on vacant domestic property.

SUBSIDIARY POINTS

1. It is important that the implementation of such legislation coincides with the provision of adequate information and awareness for the general public. This should allow ratepayers to understand the breakdown and calculation of rates as well as the funding of respective services and the need to meet these costs;
2. NIFHA welcomes the proposed informal reviews of the valuations but urges the Department to ensure that staff work to clear guidelines and make any revisions on a consistent basis;
3. We would also encourage the proposal of a more direct approach to identify whether a property is unoccupied through consideration of a legal obligation to give information about the occupancy of a dwelling;

Yours sincerely

CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMSON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Representing and promoting housing associations in Northern Ireland

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

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