

THE NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

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Lyn Mackender
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Equality House
7 – 9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast
BT2 7DP

Dear Lyn

**Re: RACIAL EQUALITY IN THE PROVISION OF HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION
- A Guide for Providers on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and
Harassment and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity**

I refer to the Commission's proposed Guide for Providers as detailed above.

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. Thirty-eight of these organisations are Registered Housing Associations that receive Housing Association Grant from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and as a result of the Housing (NI) Order 2003 all but two very small associations have also been designated as public authorities under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Taken together, our members manage almost 30,000 units of accommodation which equates to one quarter of social housing in Northern Ireland. As the primary developers of new social housing they also build around 1500 properties each year. In the last twenty-five years these associations have undertaken a range of projects to respond to the needs of a diverse and changing society. This pro-active approach to service provision is continuing, as is our commitment to working for the benefit of the whole community.

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultative process as accommodation provision is at the heart of our members' business. Moreover, we are very pleased to see the work of our member associations detailed in a number of the practical examples given throughout the document. Overall NIFHA and its members support the stated aim of the policy however, in responding to the consultation document the Federation would like to highlight the following issues:

1. **Point 61A** suggests that those wishing to use positive action measures should seek advice from the ECNI. We recommend that the Guide also indicates that for social housing providers approval from the DSD would be necessary as this type of measure would be deemed to require a "Local Lettings Policy".

2. **Point 72** makes reference to the NIHE's planning responsibilities. We suggest that this issue is not the responsibility of one body and that the work of others such as the Planning Service will impact on success in this area. In our view planning is a major concern as the process is generally protracted and cannot quickly adjust to a change in needs or to a fluctuating population. The end result is that necessary services are often not there for people to access when an unanticipated need suddenly arises. We recommend that inward migration is factored into growth planning to ensure that appropriate accommodation services are available.
3. **Point 80** recommends that accommodation should cater for minority ethnic communities in terms of location, size, type, design etc. Whilst, our members would be supportive of this view and indeed have put it into practice (e.g. BIH at Hong Ling Gardens) this may not always be possible if the government does not provide the necessary resources to achieve this aim. Housing Association schemes receive funding on the basis of "Total Cost Indicator" figures and the standard sums allowed by DSD may mean that the costs of a proposed scheme do not stack up. Financial input from BIH was necessary to enable the Chinese Elders scheme to go ahead.
4. **Point 81** Care needs to be taken that addressing needs in this manner is not seen as reverse discrimination i.e. that certain communities/cultural groups are entitled to better design standards than others, for example greater living space or lower property density. This issue could become more divisive in the future as it is likely that there will be increasing pressure to produce high-density developments.
5. NIFHA recommends that the issues raised in **Point 84** could be addressed more effectively through direct consultation with Co-ownership Housing Association.
6. **Point 172** refers to the use of information sheets with explanatory diagrams in relation to repairs. The Federation welcomes this suggestion, however we believe that this material should be formulated on a joint basis rather than individually so that there is consistency across the various housing providers and to maximise the benefit for service users. Alternatively, there may be similar resources in existence that could be adapted for use by accommodation providers in Northern Ireland.
7. **Point 174** raises a valid issue, however the need to make adjustments to facilitate cultural differences could come into conflict with performance targets set for housing associations in relation to repairs response times – this would need to be addressed with the DSD's regulation and inspection unit. In addition, the staff numbers in some very small associations may not allow for a female to be present. We accept these comments in no way diminish the need for alternative arrangements; rather they are intended to highlight some practical considerations.
8. **Point 234** NIFHA commends the proposal to use common forms and contribute to a database, but as many associations already have substantial workloads this must be done in a way that is both easily achievable and effective if it is to be successful.
9. The Federation has a number of concerns in relation to **Point 238**. Firstly, this may conflict with guidance given by the DSD on the Scheme for the Sale of Dwelling-Houses by Registered Housing Associations and at the very least any such conditions would require Departmental approval. Moreover, we would like clarification on who would have responsibility for policing such covenants and how this would be done.

10. On **Point 248** we have no objection to the principle of providing a range of information to other agencies; however the wording of this point is slightly confusing – is this intended to be a joint resource pack that covers all housing options or a recommendation that each provider produces an individual pack? Many associations already issue a variety of information on their services and on individual schemes; as indeed does the NIHE. Is this a recommendation to develop an additional resource or a suggestion that the distribution of information currently available needs to be better managed?
11. The Federation and its members would support the Commission's proposal in **Point 287** that the NIHE provide aggregated data to landlord's participating in the Common Selection Scheme.
12. We have concerns about the suggestion in **Point 296** that housing providers could take steps to ensure equality of treatment for particular racial groups if monitoring indicates that fewer properties are being allocated to people from that grouping. We agree that housing providers could be open to legal challenge if they took action which involved the setting of quotas, but we are not convinced that the proposed steps, whilst helpful, would significantly alter the waiting list in due course the allocations made. The current Common Selection Scheme is based on housing need which will not necessarily be specific to any particular group. The Federation believes it may be more beneficial to monitor the waiting list in relation to race rather than just the allocations as this would show whether there is an issue in relation to accessing the service for people from particular racial groups. Independent random checks of the assessment process could also highlight inconsistent or discriminatory treatment of applications from people of differing racial background which could then be addressed through training.

Finally, a more general concern for housing associations is the resource issue, as the Federation's members rarely receive additional funding for new initiatives or requirements. We accept that many of the recommendations made in this consultation document will not incur additional financial input or will fall within associations' existing responsibilities; however, there are some suggestions that merit extra resources.

On behalf of our members I am pleased to be able to contribute to this process and hope you will find these comments helpful. If you have any queries about any of the points raised or require further information about the Federation and its members please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

LUCINDA McMURRAN
Corporate Services Manager