

Date: 16 December 10
Consultation: Proposals to Update Legislation to Reform the Office of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents registered and non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, our members provide 34,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at www.nifha.org

General Comments

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important consultation document. The Office of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman has served our society well and has acted as an independent advocate in resolving complaints and gaining redress for people's grievances with government departments and public bodies. However, it may be timely, because of changes in our political environment, in Northern Ireland, to update the legislation applicable to this office.

Specific Comments

Question Number 1

NIFHA broadly accepts the proposal to move to a single Ombudsman's office with powers to investigate complaints about government departments and public bodies in NI. We agree that the current dual system is confusing so a single Ombudsman's office seems a more sensible approach.

Question Number 4

Our Federation has strong concerns regarding the new power of the Ombudsman to conduct investigations on his / her own initiative. Our members are already subject to a number of regulatory authorities, including the Department for Social Development so we would therefore have reservations around this proposal as it may have the potential for another layer of regulation. NIFHA does not condone maladministration but we would like more information on how this would work.

Question Number 8

NIFHA has no concerns about increasing the number of bodies within the remit of the Ombudsman and we are not suggesting any additional bodies at this time.

Question Number 9

NIFHA agrees that public sector employment matters should be excluded from the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

Question Number 12

Our Federation welcomes the proposal for the widening of options for submitting a complaint and sees this as a method of improving access to the provision of the service.

Question Number 17

Regarding the proposal for new powers to require the provision of (reasonable) facilities, NIFHA has no objection to this as our members already provide information and facilities for other regulatory bodies.

Question Numbers 28 & 29

NIFHA does not express any views on the appointment process but we would prefer to see fixed term tenure with no further re-appointment.

Question Number 32

Our Federation agrees that arrangements for the Ombudsman to give account to Committees of the Assembly are reasonable.

I Hope you find our comments useful.

Submitted on behalf of NIFHA by:

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