

## Independent Housing Commission: Key Issues

**Date:** 31 December 2009

### Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents all of the registered and six of the non-registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively, these associations provide 30,000 good quality, affordable homes for renting or equity sharing. Further information is available at

[www.nifha.org](http://www.nifha.org)

### Background

The Independent Commission on the Future of Housing in Northern Ireland was launched in April 2009, met many stakeholders and invited written evidence. NIFHA submitted preliminary views on 9 October 2009.

In November the Commission invited comment on a set of key issues it had identified and NIFHA responded on 31 December 2009. This briefing paper for the Social Development Committee concentrates on NIFHA's views on structural issues.

NIFHA considers the Independent Housing Commission to be a timely and important initiative. It is a useful means of:

- seeking consensus on the housing vision we in Northern Ireland should aim to achieve by 2020
- proposing such changes as seem appropriate to the responsibilities, policies and administrative structures to achieve that housing vision.

The Federation believes the Commission needs to take account of several major changes that affect each of the sub-sectors of the housing market to a greater or lesser extent:

1. Since the devolution of power to the Assembly, the nature of the relationship between the Department for Social Development (DSD) and Housing Executive (NIHE) has changed and the Federation believes greater clarity in their respective roles would be helpful.
2. The operating environment for the registered housing associations has substantially changed due to such factors as:
  - the DSD's Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Programme
  - pressure on capital subsidy levels
  - additional statutory requirements and more intense regulation.
3. The rapid growth of the private rented sector has had an impact on each of the other tenures.

4. The market for homes for sale has experienced extreme instability in the last five years and is still depressed.

## The Federation's Views on Structural Change

1. The Minister for Social Development should determine the housing outcomes to be achieved from a Homes and Communities Strategy that is central to, and is consistent with, the Regional Development Strategy approved by the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly.
2. Because the relevant skills are currently located in the NIHE rather than the DSD, the Minister should either delegate to the NIHE the responsibility for drafting the first Homes and Communities Strategy or second the relevant NIHE staff to the Department for that purpose.
3. Before production of the second Homes and Communities Strategy, the strategic arm of the NIHE should be transferred into the DSD or be changed into an "arm's length agency" analogous to the Roads Service within the Department for Regional Development.
4. The proposed reform of local government should proceed without further delay so the new Councils would be responsible for local landuse planning, community planning, neighbourhood renewal, housing grants to the private sector and Homes in Multiple Occupation. When the new authorities have settled down, they should also be given responsibilities currently undertaken by the NIHE but which are neither directly related to the NIHE's housing management role nor suitable for transfer to the DSD or another government department.
5. Pending implementation of 3 and 4, clearer boundaries should be set between the NIHE's landlord role and its other roles. The NIHE would continue to own its housing stock and any loans raised would continue to be classed as public borrowing.
6. Tenants of NIHE homes unlikely to be modernised for a long time should be given the option of voting for small scale voluntary transfer to an existing registered housing association which would then modernise the properties with private finance.
7. The DSD should regulate and inspect all social landlords (the NIHE and the registered housing associations) using criteria that prioritise sound governance and good outcomes for service users. All private landlords should be required to register with the DSD, achieve basic standards laid down by law and be subject to spot checking by the new local authorities.
8. Registered housing associations should continually aim to maximise benefit to the community and be open to restructuring provided their Boards judge that the anticipated community benefit would exceed the costs. The community benefit of having a variety of associations with special expertise should be taken into account.

## Other Aspects of the Key Issues Paper

The Federation responded to the many other important questions posed by the Commission and will be happy to share its full submission with the Committee.



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