

# Charting Our Future - NIFHA Annual Conference 2015



More than 150 delegates and 20 exhibitors gathered at the Slieve Russell Hotel in County Cavan, Ireland, for the annual conference of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations.

This is NIFHA's premier annual event, designed to give members and key stakeholders an opportunity to hear from politicians, policy makers, financiers and other sector experts on the challenges and opportunities for social housing providers in Northern Ireland and further afield.

This year's conference was on the theme "Charting our Future", a deliberately upbeat message despite the unprecedented challenges facing social and affordable housing providers, not just in Northern Ireland but across the EU as a whole. It signals a desire to look forward rather than backwards, to be proactive rather than reactive, and, above all, to continue to meet our collective mission of delivering great homes and thriving communities.



In his keynote address NIFHA's Chief Executive, [Cameron Watt](#), set out the sector's desire to work in partnership with the government to develop realistic proposals for the transformation of housing delivery mechanisms that will broaden choice and boost supply in a cost effective way. But he usefully reminded delegates that as Northern Ireland's largest and most successful social enterprises, housing associations have much more to offer than simply increased housing supply.

This idea of a more varied housing offer was the primary focus of the first day, and the unifying message was that housing associations could no longer focus just on the building and managing of housing. Whilst providing good quality homes is a necessary requirement in building successful communities, it is not sufficient in its own right - diversification, and a broadening of the housing offer is the new normal.

This message was amply demonstrated in a series of short but inspirational videos from individual associations, which showcased the contributions in areas such as community development, employment and training, environmental action and wider support services. Delegates also heard that around 4% of housing association turnover was devoted to this 'more than bricks' approach and that research was underway to better understand the scale and impact of such

investment, with results expected in 2016.



The second day of the conference opened with an address from Mervyn Storey MLA, Minister for Social Development. The Minister expressed his concern with, and the need to understand the implications of, the recent decision in England to reclassify housing associations as public bodies.

The Minister is known as a politician who is not afraid to step outside the briefs prepared by his officials and so it was perhaps not a surprise when he commented that doing better with housing did not necessarily mean doing it cheaper. His recognition that broadening the service offer was important, but that it should not be at the expense of building good quality homes and thriving communities was widely welcomed by delegates.

Although times are tough and more seems to be expected of housing associations than ever before, the sector in Northern Ireland is in good financial health. The global accounts, prepared by [PwC](#), indicate assets worth £3.4b, and an in year growth in turnover (5.5%), capital and reserves (7.2%) and operating surpluses (8.1%). As an indication of the lender confidence in the sector, Northern Ireland's largest housing association - [Choice](#) - used the conference to announce that it has just signed a £150m direct loan deal with the [EIB](#), the first such direct lending to a housing provider in Northern Ireland.



Conference organisers the world over often struggle with how best to maintain interest and bring a busy and intense 2-day conference to a close with a full audience still present. On this occasion that daunting “graveyard slot” fell to [David Orr](#), Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation in England. David is well known to many as a gifted and inspiring speaker and he delivered a master class in holding an audience’s attention, challenging and inspiring them at the same time. Delegates were left with a very clear message - through commitment, professionalism and innovation, housing associations, as vibrant social enterprises, are the partner of choice in meeting the housing challenges that lie ahead.

\*This blog is featured on [Housing Europe](#) website and was written by NIFHA Board Member [John McPeake](#)