

# £1bn for housing and support services under threat

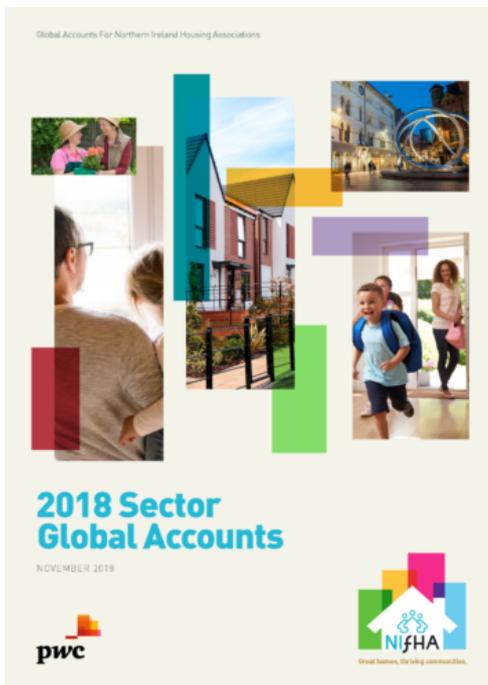


*Pictured launching the NIFHA 2018 Sector Global Accounts at the NIFHA Finance Conference on Wednesday, 5 December are, from left: Martin Cowie, PwC, who prepared the accounts; Jamie Delargy, conference chair; and Ben Collins, chief executive, NIFHA. Mr Cowie told the conference: “The housing association sector, made up of 20 registered charities, is a significant economic driver in Northern Ireland and has been for a number of years. Impressively, the sector has continued to perform well against a backdrop of significant political uncertainty and rising costs of land and labour.” Photo by Kelvin Boyes / Press Eye.*

**Housing and support services which help keep**

# people from becoming homelessness will collapse if urgent action is not taken, a housing expert has warned.

Ben Collins is chief executive of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA). He told NIFHA's Finance Conference this week, "Despite all the challenges, housing associations have managed to deliver more than 1,500 new social homes and vital support services to thousands of our most vulnerable people over the last year.



*Click on photo for NIFHA 2018 Sector Global Accounts*

***“In addition, the sector has secured more than £1bn in funding to help those who need it most,” he continued. “All of this, however, could collapse within a matter of months if a number of urgent issues are not addressed.”***

Mr Collins said “Our conference takes place during Homelessness Awareness Week (#HAW2018). With more **24,000** people in Northern Ireland in urgent need of suitable accommodation, including over **11,000** families officially designated as homeless, the need for a safe and secure place to call home has never been greater.”

Despite this, lack of funding, the introduction of Universal Credit and the inability

to introduce essential legislation could bring the mechanisms that help such people to an abrupt halt within a matter of months, he explained.

### **Prevention make sense**

Funding for the Supporting People programme, which helps 20,000 of the most vulnerable people to live independent lives, has been frozen for the last ten years. This year, funding for accommodation-based services was cut by 5% even though every £1 invested in these preventative support services saves the taxpayer £1.90 in acute services.

Speaking on behalf of Northern Ireland's 20 housing associations, which are all registered charities, Mr Collins called on the Northern Ireland Office to reverse this cut and increase funding to take account of the growing need when they set the new Northern Ireland budget early in 2019. **"As a society we must help the most vulnerable and it makes economic sense,"** he emphasised.

### **Double the value**

In addition, he said that **"certainty is needed within weeks"** on the reversal of reclassification, which could prevent housing associations from accessing private funding as early as next March. Private funding allows housing associations to build twice as many social and affordable homes as can be built through grant funding alone. NIFHA is asking for the necessary legislation to be passed through an Order-in-Council at Westminster. "At the very least, we need the continuation of the current arrangements until the legislation can be passed," Mr Collins said.

### **Universal Credit**

Mr Collins also noted that the effects of Universal Credit, which is being rolled out across Northern Ireland, are starting to be felt, with many tenants facing financial hardship and falling into arrears. NIFHA will continue to work closely with the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive and, along with the other UK housing federations, seek improvements to this system.

### **Act now**

The Secretary of State has published guidance to help civil servants take forward decisions where there is a clear public interest to do so and where inaction may lead to significant financial costs, Mr Collins observed. "We want to see the

Department for Communities and others taking forward decisions which are going to help the housing sector. Implementation of some of the recommendations from the recent allocations review would be a good start.”

Chief among these, he said, would be moving from a one-year to a multi-year development programme, which would ease pressures on planning, design and construction and so help reduce costs.

**For more information, contact Sue Doherty, Communications Officer, NIFHA at [sdoherty@nifha.org](mailto:sdoherty@nifha.org) or 0794 647 3651.**

***Background information:***

- The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) is the representative body for NI’s 20 registered housing associations.
- Our members, which are registered charities, provide more than 50,000 homes along with high quality care and support services and spend millions each year investing in the local communities.
- Housing associations employ more than 3,200 people and manage housing assets worth £3.8bn.