

Housing association founders mark 40-year milestone

The surviving members of a cross-community collaboration that helped revolutionise housing provision in Northern Ireland will reunite for the first time in four decades today at a special event to recognise their achievements.



The event is organised by the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) with support from Ulster Bank and OakleeTrinity Housing Association.

An eclectic mix of pioneers drawn from community groups, politics, the civil service and housing met during the dark days of The Troubles in 1974 at the Corrymeela Community and worked to establish alternative options to the centralised housing authority and drive forward plans for ambitious social change. Among those present were Derry/Londonderry activist Paddy Doherty;

politicians such as Hugh Logue (SDLP), Leslie Morrell (Ulster Unionist Party) and Erskine Holmes (NI Labour Party); and community workers including Jackie Redpath, now of the Greater Shankill Partnership.

That landmark Corrymeela conference resulted in major changes in the provision of housing, including the birth of the modern housing association movement. In the 1970s housing associations concentrated on refurbishing poor housing stock in urban centres and providing sheltered housing for older people. In the 1980s and 1990s the movement broadened its offer, building large numbers of family homes. Since the 1970s Co-ownership Housing Association has also been helping thousands of first-time buyers on to the housing ladder through its part-rent, part-buy scheme.

Today housing associations provide a third of affordable homes in Northern Ireland, employ more than 3,000 people and manage 44,000 homes, as well as providing high-quality care and support and many community services.

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) was also founded as a result of the Corrymeela conference. Its Chief Executive Cameron Watt said:

“In late 1974, at a time of great conflict and widespread deprivation, a small number of pioneers saw the potential of the emerging voluntary housing movement. Thanks to their foresight, imagination and determination, the movement grew exponentially in the following 40 years and huge progress made in meeting housing need and improving social conditions.

“It is only right that we recognise and celebrate these collective achievements and the brave decisions made during those dark years. From the small seeds planted in 1974, a large and flourishing housing association movement has grown. Although the movement is unrecognisable from its early years, we remain true to our original mission, purpose and values.”

He added: “Given the challenges that still confront us, we must at the same time look forward to consider how we can deliver more and better homes, care, support and a wide range of community investment. Housing associations are stepping-up in making a major contribution to building a more inclusive and prosperous future.”

In 1997 the late Peter McLachlan, first Chairman of the Steering Committee of the National Federation of Housing Associations recounted his memories of the Corrymeela Conference:

“The time was right. The mix of people was right. The urgent necessity for extra energy to meet chronic housing need was everywhere evident. There was an opportunity. In December 1974 I had a gut feeling we were doing something important, but I little guessed just how significant the movement would become twenty years later.”

Kenton Hillman, Head of Corporate and Institutional Banking (NI) at Ulster Bank said:

“The vision for social and affordable housing as well as building thriving communities is one which we at Ulster Bank are proud to continue to support. Ulster Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland have been actively involved in lending to the social housing sector since the introduction of private finance in 1988.

“There are challenges within the sector - however those within the sector continue to show dedication and commitment to the provision of housing to those in need and helping communities grow and thrive. We continue to provide funding for many of the associations across the sector from the largest to the some of the smallest.”

Colin Craig, Executive Director of Corrymeela said:

“Welcome and hospitality have always been at the heart of our work. In the early days of the troubles Corrymeela itself became a temporary place of shelter for hundreds of those who had been burnt out of their homes. It was also a safe space to think and to dream, and many ideas were born here. We were proud to support the early pioneers of social housing and are thrilled to welcome them back today, and join with them in celebrating the thousands of families whose daily lives have been transformed by their work.”

Participants in the 1974 Corrymeela conference: Sister Anna; Sean Cooney; P. Shevlin; Hugh Fraser; Mrs V Liversage; Ian McCarthur; Brendan Henry; Brian Shaw; Mrs J G Murphy; Mr C McNichol; Clem McCartney; Sean Morrissey; Michael Mooney; Jim Flynn; Paddy Doherty; Mrs S Humphreys; Michael

Morrissey; Patrick Carville; Desmond Forde; Brian Smeaton; Michael Wright; Brian Greene; Mrs Annie Ground; Mrs B Bashford; Jim Hamilton; Gerry Tully; Fred Tughan; James Kennedy; J Burgess; Mrs W A Craig; Mrs T Boyd; Richard Best; Peter McLachlan; David Stevens; Nick Acheson; Mr and Mrs Peter Hobbs; Terence Anderson; Rod Hackney; Mt Bentham; Robert Delargy; Mr R B Spence; Mr Calvert; Peter Anderson; Mike Gaston; Mr Orr; Mrs Williams; Erskine Holmes; James Delargy; Hugh Logue; Fred Bass; Victor Blease; Billy McGivern; Billy Cameron; Sue Kennedy; Phil O'Keefe; Sean Gallagher; David Kirkbride; Mr McFeely; W J Watson; Jackie Redpath; Mr T Kendall; John Gilbert; Mr McQuillen; Mr McCaughey; Barney Filor; Mrs Anne Sloan; Jim Cavalleros; Mr McSheffry; Mr Lazenbatt; Paddy Duffy; Roy Graham; Leslie Morrell; and Mr F Dillon.