

NIFHA showcases innovative peace-building work to Fine Gael visitors



Local resident Alfie McCrory pictured talking to members of the Fine Gael Engagement Group. Picture by: Arthur Allison/Pacemaker.

The Fine Gael Northern Ireland Engagement Group has visited the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) in Belfast to learn about a project that's helping nationalists and unionists find “new solutions to old

problems.”

The new group has been tasked with developing links with political parties and other significant organisations in Northern Ireland, in addition to attending party conferences and cultural, economic and academic events.

At NIFHA, on Tuesday, 30th July, Richard Mealey, project co-ordinator, told them about the Housing Associations Integration Project (HAIP) and what a difference it's already making in communities that were especially hard hit during The Troubles. They then visited a peace wall on the Shankill and met with residents at a Choice Housing estate in Cairnmartin.

Launched in July 2018, the €1.1m HAIP project, which is funded by the EU's Peace IV Programme and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), brings together social housing residents from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds to share experiences, learn about differences and embrace diversity in the communities in which they live.

Led by NIFHA, and delivered by four of Northern Ireland's largest housing associations (Radius, Clanmil, Choice and Apex), TIDES Training and the Irish Council for Social Housing, HAIP is the first initiative of its kind to cover Northern Ireland and the border counties. To date, over 1,200 tenants across 40 social housing schemes have participated in capacity building events and community workshops and the programme will complete in March 2020.



Pictured (L-R): Good Relations Officer Anne Mc Allister from Choice Housing Association; Fine Gael Louth TD Fergus O’Dowd, Chairman of The Fine Gael Northern Ireland Engagement Group; resident Alfie McCrory; and Housing Associations Integration Project (HAIP) Co-ordinator Richard Mealey.

Picture by: Arthur Allison/Pacemaker.

Discussing the visit Fine Gael Louth TD Fergus O’Dowd, Chairman of The Fine Gael Northern Ireland Engagement Group, said:

“This is our first visit to Northern Ireland and we are delighted to hear about the work of NIFHA and the HAIP project. We are keen to listen and to take these insights to inform best practice.

“During this visit, we met tenants from Belfast who are participating on the HAIP project. We got different perspectives on the perceived challenges and importantly, the solutions, regardless of political opinion.

“Going forward, we intend to meet with a range of groups to hear more about their programmes and to understand the concerns of those living in the local

community. It is a crucial time for the north and the south, especially with Brexit on the horizon. This Group will play an important role in helping to identify the issues that must be addressed during the Brexit negotiations.”

Richard Mealey, Project Co-ordinator for HAIP added:

“We work closely with our Good Relations Officers across a number of housing associations to complete capacity building workshops enabling tenants to acquire new skills, knowledge and confidence. This summer we published an interim HAIP evaluation report to enable us to take stock of how we were performing as a partnership and what impact we were making on the target communities in delivering this peace building initiative.

“The findings acknowledge that this was the first time this group of housing associations had been involved in a formal partnership project together and despite the steep learning curve, the partnership has worked and is continuing to work very well. We need to continue to measure the impact on the tenants and how the project is building a sense of community.”

“The report shows the significant progress that has been delivered to date. All 40 of the social housing schemes have now had community audits carried out with reports produced. The programme has also met its targets in terms of community engagement across Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, with over 1200 tenants participating in a wide range of community capacity building events and workshops, including flags and emblems workshops, cultural diversity sessions, environmental and family fun days, all providing opportunities for bringing a sense of positivity and community spirit to these neighbourhoods.”

Ben Collins, NIFHA chief executive, said:

“Approximately 90% of social housing in Northern Ireland is still segregated into single identity communities and we are keen to understand how we achieve a truly shared society, which embraces diversity and opposes sectarianism.

“It is clear from today’s visit that collaboration is key moving forward. We believe Northern Ireland’s housing could well become an exemplar for the island of

Ireland and Great Britain. Unfortunately, many of our communities are segregated in terms of religion, both the physical structures and also by behaviour.

“While forced integration is not an option, choice and encouragement should be given to those who want to live together. We don’t expect change overnight but over a period of time you can expect housing to play its part in bringing people together and breaking down barriers.”

Anyone interested in finding out more about the Housing Associations Integration Project can contact Richard Mealey, NIFHA (Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations) on Tel: 028 90897 698 or rmealey@nifha.org or www.haiptgether.org.

Match-funding for the project has been provided by the Executive Office in Northern Ireland and the Department for Rural and Community Development in Ireland. The partnership is managed and coordinated by the NI Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA).

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