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CIH Northern Ireland response to the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027

General comments

In our response to the draft Programme for Government (PfG), we want to express our strong support for housing as a central priority. We welcome the clear recognition of housing's role within the draft PfG, as this is crucial to everyone having a decent, safe and affordable home and to preventing and ending homelessness. We emphasise the importance of ensuring adequate and multi-annual funding to meet the ambitious goals set out in the Housing Supply Strategy. This includes the development of much-needed social homes and the significant decarbonisation efforts required to meet environmental targets. We support the Housing Executive's 'Ending Homelessness Together 2022-2027' Strategy, which promotes housing solutions that break the cycle of homelessness.

A key enabler of these housing supply ambitions is the critical investment in water infrastructure upgrades, necessary to support new connections and accommodate growth. Without addressing these infrastructure challenges, we risk falling short of the strategy's objectives.

While our expertise lies primarily in housing, it is evident that housing intersects with many other PfG outcomes, such as health, economic prosperity and social inclusion. As such, we have taken the opportunity to highlight these connections in our consultation response, underscoring how a robust housing system is also essential for achieving the wider goals of the PfG.

We look forward to working with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that housing remains a priority and that the necessary resources and long-term funding commitments are in place to deliver on these vital commitments.

1. Programme for Government Priorities

i. Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing

CIH Northern Ireland strongly agrees that the priority 'provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing' should be included in the Programme for Government.

We have been a consistent advocate for a dedicated housing priority within the PfG. We warmly welcome its inclusion in the draft document and have worked closely with partners, officials and ministers to realise this outcome. We support the housing supply strategy as a crucial tool for achieving this goal and delivering the 2,200 social homes required to address need. This strategy focuses on increasing both the quantity and quality of housing in the region by addressing key factors, including decarbonisation.

We have outlined several key factors that we believe are crucial to providing more social, affordable and sustainable housing:

1. **Increased investment:** CIH advocates for increased and multi-annual investment in social housing development to meet the growing demand for social and affordable housing. This includes both new construction and the refurbishment of existing homes.
2. **Water infrastructure:** We strongly advocate for a sustainable and long-term funding solution for NI Water. This will ensure that essential infrastructure is in place to support the ambitious targets of the Housing Supply Strategy and the broader aims of the Programme for Government.
3. **Sustainability:** CIH advocates for sustainable housing, which includes building energy-efficient homes to EPC A standard, reducing carbon emissions through retrofit, and promoting sustainable living practices. We call for updated building regulations to enforce higher energy efficiency standards across all new builds.
4. **Strategic planning:** CIH emphasises the importance of strategic planning at both local and regional levels to identify housing needs and allocate resources effectively. This includes developing long-term housing strategies that consider factors such as population growth, demographic changes and economic development.
5. **Partnership and collaboration:** CIH believes that partnerships and collaboration between housing providers, government agencies and community groups are essential for delivering more social, affordable and sustainable housing. This includes working together to identify funding sources, develop innovative housing models, and address the challenges of delivering housing in specific areas.
6. **Land availability:** CIH highlights the need for increased land availability for housing development, particularly in areas where demand is high. We support a more strategic, planned approach to development in these areas, prioritising public sector land for housing development and ensuring it is delivered efficiently..
7. **Innovative housing solutions:** CIH supports the development of innovative housing solutions, such as modular construction and intermediate rent, to increase the supply of affordable housing and reduce housing costs for residents. We advocate for greater support for modern methods of construction and its supply chain, to accelerate delivery and create new skills and job opportunities.

8. **Tenancy management:** CIH emphasises the importance of effective tenancy management practices to ensure that social housing is allocated fairly and efficiently, and that tenants are supported to maintain their homes.
9. **Community engagement:** CIH believes that community engagement is essential for successful housing development. This includes involving local residents in decision-making processes, and ensuring that housing developments meet the needs of the community.

By addressing these factors, CIH believes that it is possible to deliver more social, affordable and sustainable housing in Northern Ireland to meet the growing demand and improve the lives of residents.

ii. Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy

Housing plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth and stability. When the housing system is healthy, it supports many positive outcomes throughout the economy.

Firstly, housing directly stimulates economic activity. Housebuilding and improvements create jobs in a wide range of industries, from construction to furniture and appliances. This increased economic activity boosts consumer spending and overall economic confidence. CBI have reported that every £1 spent on construction creates £2.92 in economic activity.

Secondly, stable housing is essential for overall economic stability. When people feel secure in their homes, they are more likely to make long-term plans, such as expanding their family. This stability contributes to a positive economic outlook and encourages investment.

This outlines how a thriving housing system is essential for a strong and sustainable NI economy. It generates economic activity, fosters stability and supports healthy communities.

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) outlines several key recommendations for the Northern Ireland Executive to foster a globally competitive and sustainable economy. These recommendations primarily focus on housing and infrastructure, recognising their pivotal roles in economic growth and well-being.

Key CIH recommendations:

1. Accelerate net-zero housing: CIH urges the Executive to invest in housing decarbonisation to reduce carbon emissions and create sustainable living environments. This includes:

- **Dedicated funding:** Establishing a specific fund for housing decarbonisation.
- **Energy-efficient homes:** Promoting the construction of new energy-efficient homes.
- **Retrofitting:** Supporting the retrofitting of existing housing stock to improve energy efficiency.

2. Secure sustainable capital financing: CIH advocates for increased capital funding for housing development to address the housing crisis and stimulate economic growth. This involves:

- **Reversing budget cuts:** Restoring funding to the social housing development programme.
- **Expanding housing supply:** Supporting the development of affordable and social housing.
- **Long-term planning:** Implementing clear, long-term housing plans to ensure adequate supply.

3. Address infrastructure challenges: CIH highlights the importance of infrastructure development in supporting economic growth and sustainability. Recommendations include:

- **Reforming NI Water:** Addressing issues within NI Water to facilitate investment in infrastructure.
- **Investing in infrastructure:** Prioritising investment in essential infrastructure such as roads, transport and energy.
- **Sustainable development:** Ensuring that infrastructure development aligns with sustainability goals.

By implementing these recommendations, the Northern Ireland Executive can create a more sustainable, resilient and globally competitive economy, benefiting both residents and businesses.

iii. Safer communities

Adequate housing can bring a safer community in several ways:

- **Reduced crime:** Well-maintained housing can deter crime by creating a sense of community and reducing opportunities for criminal activity.
- **Improved mental health:** Safe and affordable housing can reduce stress and improve mental health, making people less likely to engage in harmful behaviours.
- **Stronger community ties:** Adequate housing can foster a sense of belonging and community, leading to increased social cohesion and reduced crime rates.
- **Better health outcomes:** Good housing conditions can improve physical and mental health, reducing the need for emergency services and promoting overall well-being.
- **Reduced social isolation:** Adequate housing can help prevent social isolation, which is often linked to increased crime rates and other negative outcomes.

It is CIH's opinion that by ensuring everyone has access to safe and affordable housing, we can create stronger, safer communities.

We responded to the Review on Anti-Social Behaviour and we support a multifaceted approach to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB), emphasising the importance of a balanced response that includes both enforcement measures and support services.

Key recommendations from CIH include:

- **Expanding the definition of ASB:** To address a wider range of behaviours, including inter-familial ASB and domestic violence.
- **Introducing positive requirements to ASBOs:** To provide a proactive approach to addressing the root causes of ASB.
- **Lowering the threshold for granting ASBOs:** To make it easier to obtain ASBOs and address ASB more effectively.
- **Consideration of changes to ASBO laws regarding age:** Recognising the need for a nuanced approach to ASB among young people.
- **Including registered housing associations as relevant authorities:** To ensure that all housing professionals have access to the necessary tools to address ASB.
- **Lowering the threshold for granting injunctions:** To enable swifter interventions against ASB.
- **Granting power of arrest without a warrant for injunction breaches:** To enhance the effectiveness of injunctions.
- **Adding exclusion powers to injunctions:** To protect individuals from harm and create safer living environments.
- **Introducing absolute grounds for possession:** To provide a more efficient and effective way to address the most serious cases of ASB, while recognising that this should be used as a last resort.
- **Regulating drinking in public places:** To address anti-social behaviour related to alcohol consumption.

CIH also advocates for a collaborative approach, involving housing providers, law enforcement and community organisations to address ASB effectively. By implementing these recommendations, we believe that Northern Ireland can create safer and more cohesive communities.

iv. Cut health waiting times

All the Executive is engaged in making a healthier society in Northern Ireland, and so it is very important to note the intricate relationship between health and housing. Adequate housing is not merely a physical shelter; it significantly impacts people's overall health and well-being.

The UK has conducted several research studies to support this claim. Researchers have utilised hospital discharge data to investigate the relationship between this and homelessness and these studies have often found that individuals experiencing homelessness have higher rates of hospitalisation and require more complex care compared with the general population.

Key findings from these studies typically include:

- **Increased hospitalisation rates:** People experiencing chronic homelessness often have higher rates of hospitalisation due to a variety of health conditions, including mental health problems, substance abuse and illnesses.
- **Longer hospital stays:** When hospitalised, people who are homeless may require longer stays due to the complexity of their health conditions and the challenges they face in accessing ongoing care after discharge.
- **Frequent emergency department visits:** People experiencing chronic homelessness may frequently rely on emergency departments for their healthcare needs, which can impact hospital resources and lead to longer wait times.

- **Discharge to homeless shelters:** A significant proportion of homeless patients discharged from hospitals may end up returning to temporary accommodation, highlighting the challenges they face in securing stable housing.

One action of the PfG is to “prepare for future investments that will provide improvements and efficiencies that help us reduce waiting times”. We believe adequate housing can be a contributing factor to help achieve the reduced waiting times and pressures on our local hospitals.

CIH Northern Ireland has consistently highlighted the strong link between health and housing. Our advocacy work emphasises the following key points:

1. Invest in affordable housing:

- **Increased supply:** A significant increase in affordable homes is crucial to reduce homelessness and housing insecurity.
- **Tenure diversity:** Promote a mix of tenures (e.g. social housing, intermediate rent, shared ownership) to meet diverse needs.
- **Rural housing:** Address the specific housing challenges faced by rural communities.

2. Improve housing quality:

- **Energy efficiency:** Ensure homes are energy-efficient to reduce health risks associated with cold and damp conditions.
- **Accessibility:** Make homes accessible to people with disabilities, reducing the need for institutional care.
- **Safety:** Prioritise safety measures to prevent accidents and injuries.

3. Health and social care collaboration:

- **Collaborative approaches:** Foster collaboration between housing providers, healthcare professionals, and social care services.

- **Community-based services:** Invest in community-based services to prevent hospital admissions and support individuals in their homes.
- **Holistic care:** Promote a holistic approach to care that addresses both physical and social needs.

4. Address social determinants of health:

- **Poverty reduction:** Implement policies to reduce poverty and inequality, which are closely linked to health outcomes.
- **Education and employment:** Support education and employment opportunities to improve economic stability and health.
- **Community development:** Invest in community development initiatives to strengthen social networks and support systems.

5. Preventative care and early intervention:

- **Accessible primary care:** Ensure access to primary care services, including preventative health checks and screenings.
- **Health education:** Promote health education and awareness programmes to prevent illness and encourage healthy behaviours.
- **Early intervention:** Invest in early intervention programmes to address health problems before they escalate.

Adequate housing is a fundamental determinant of health. By addressing housing needs, we can significantly improve the overall health and well-being of individuals and communities. When people have access to quality housing, they are more likely to lead healthy and productive lives.

v. Reform and transformation of public services

Social housing is a public service because:

- **It addresses a fundamental need:** Housing is essential for human well-being, and social housing ensures that everyone has access to a safe and affordable place to live.
- **It promotes social equity:** Social housing helps to reduce inequality and ensure that everyone has equal opportunities.
- **It supports economic growth:** Stable housing can improve educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life, which contributes to a stronger economy.
- **It aligns with public values:** Northern Ireland society believes that it is the government's responsibility to provide essential services like housing, especially for those who are most vulnerable.

Furthermore, as a public body the Housing Executive needs significant funding to improve its homes. This includes modernising the quality and making them more energy-efficient for residents. By securing the necessary loans, we can ensure more people have warm, dry and comfortable homes.

We support the revitalisation of the Housing Executive so it can access this finance. This includes securing a sustainable funding model that will unlock investment in its homes and improve energy efficiency. By supporting these efforts, we can help create better homes for current and future tenants.

vi. Protecting Lough Neagh and the environment

The PfG states “tackling climate change and paying attention to our natural environment are critical for our wellbeing and our prosperity and can help unlock new opportunities”. It also calls for “an urgent need to set our carbon budgets and develop our first Climate Action Plan”. This must include details of cross-cutting steps to reduce carbon emissions and work towards net zero.

Housing contributes significantly to carbon emissions, estimated to be around 14 per cent of total emissions. Northern Ireland also has a particular reliance on fossil fuels for heating and energy.

The urgency of addressing climate change is driven by the severe consequences of inaction. By reducing carbon emissions, we can mitigate these risks and create a more sustainable future for ourselves and generations to come.

CIH Northern Ireland believes that the housing sector plays a crucial role in mitigating the risks of climate change. Here are some key ways that we believe the housing sector can contribute:

1. Achieve the necessary investment for decarbonising homes:

- **Invest in a dedicated housing decarbonisation fund:** This will provide the necessary resources to accelerate the transition to net-zero.
- **Explore non-traditional financing options:** Such as FT Capital, to attract additional investment.
- **Commit to fully funded grants for low-income households:** To ensure that everyone can benefit from the transition.
- **Stimulate the market and private investment:** By offering incentives and creating a favourable environment for private investment in decarbonisation projects.

2. Build the policy, legislative and regulatory environment for a fair and equitable transition:

- **Prioritise retrofit initiatives:** Collaborate with appropriate authorities to promote place-based retrofitting approaches.
- **Introduce new-build standards:** Ensure all new homes meet stringent energy efficiency standards.
- **Implement updated minimum energy efficiency standards:** For all tenures.

- **Phase out new fossil-fuel heating systems:** Commit to a decision on hydrogen and support the regulation of the heat network sector.

3. Invest in skills and innovation to make Northern Ireland a leader in low-carbon technology, retrofit and construction:

- **Develop training and skills funding streams:** For both the public and private sectors.
- **Establish funding for social landlords:** To support training and planning for retrofit.
- **Strategically support the development of Modern Methods of Construction (MMC):** To accelerate the construction of zero-carbon homes.
- **Pilot and rollout trusted, tailored advice hubs for retrofit:** To provide clarity and confidence to residents.

These objectives aim to ensure a just transition to net-zero, addressing housing decarbonisation, improving living conditions, and creating a sustainable future for Northern Ireland.

vii. Ending violence against women and girls

Domestic abuse is a significant issue in society today. Many people experience domestic abuse every year, and women continue to be killed by their partner or ex-partner.

Housing organisations house and employ many people across Northern Ireland, meaning the housing sector encounters people affected by domestic abuse.

The draft PfG states “this requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach” and CIH agrees housing providers have a crucial role to play in ending violence against women and girls.

Here are some key points of how the social housing sector can assist the NI Executive to achieve this.

1. Safe and affordable housing:

- **Emergency housing:** Provide safe emergency housing for survivors fleeing abusive situations.
- **Permanent housing:** Offer long-term, affordable housing options to help survivors rebuild their lives.
- **Housing options:** Provide a range of housing options to meet the diverse needs of survivors, including supported housing, refuge accommodation, and mainstream housing.

2. Specialist support services:

- **On-site support:** Employ or contract specialist staff to provide on-site support to survivors, including counselling, advocacy and practical assistance.
- **Partnerships:** Collaborate with local domestic abuse services to provide comprehensive support to survivors.

3. Staff training:

- **Domestic abuse awareness:** Ensure all staff are trained in domestic abuse awareness and have the skills to identify and respond to potential cases.
- **Safeguarding policies:** Implement robust safeguarding policies and procedures to protect survivors and staff.

4. Safeguarding practices:

- **Risk assessment:** Conduct regular risk assessments to identify and address potential safety concerns for survivors.
- **Tenancy management:** Implement tenancy management practices that are sensitive to the needs of survivors and promote their safety and security.

5. Advocacy and policy development:

- **Lobbying:** Advocate for policy changes that support survivors of domestic abuse, such as increased funding for housing and support services.
- **Collaboration:** Work with other stakeholders, including government agencies, charities and community groups, to develop effective strategies for tackling domestic abuse.

6. Community partnerships:

- **Local initiatives:** Support local initiatives aimed at preventing domestic abuse and raising awareness of the issue.
- **Collaboration:** Collaborate with other community organisations to provide comprehensive support to survivors.

By taking these steps, the social housing sector can play a crucial role in providing safe and supportive housing and services to survivors of domestic abuse, contributing to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to tackling this issue.

2. Building new foundations

Regarding the plans for investment in infrastructure, the structural funding barriers faced by **NI Water** need to urgently be addressed. This is to ensure it can provide sufficient water infrastructure to the many new housing developments needed across NI, to address the housing crisis. It is imperative we:

- **Recognise funding barriers:** Acknowledge the limitations in NI Water's current funding model.

- **Explore alternative funding or governance structures:** Consider options like increased borrowing capacity, governance reform or partnerships to secure more capital.
- **Ensure financial viability:** Any new funding structure should be sustainable and capable of supporting infrastructure needs.

By addressing these funding barriers, NI Water can better support housing development and contribute to a more sustainable and equitable housing system in Northern Ireland.

It is also important to address the need to **retrofit** our homes in NI. CIH Northern Ireland believes that retrofitting homes is a crucial part of investing in public infrastructure for several reasons:

- **Energy efficiency and climate change mitigation:** Retrofitting homes significantly improves their energy efficiency, reducing energy consumption and carbon emissions and therefore addressing climate change.
- **Fuel poverty and improved living conditions:** Retrofitting homes can help address fuel poverty while improving living conditions by making homes warmer, healthier and more comfortable.
- **Economic benefits:** Retrofitting homes creates jobs in the construction and energy sectors, boosting the local economy.

3. Shaping a better tomorrow

i. People

To achieve the actions listed under the 'people' mission, CIH believes safe and affordable housing is a fundamental building block to help address issues of integration, racism and social justice. Listed below are important factors that will support the mission "no one is left behind".

1. **Social inclusion:** Access to safe and affordable housing is essential for social inclusion. It provides a stable foundation for individuals and families, allowing them to participate fully in society and build strong relationships.
2. **Poverty reduction:** Affordable housing helps reduce poverty by ensuring that people have a basic need met. This can lead to improved economic stability and reduce the likelihood of people becoming involved in criminal activity.
3. **Community cohesion:** Safe and well-maintained housing can foster a sense of community and belonging, which can help to break down barriers between different groups and promote integration.
4. **Mental health and well-being:** Having a safe and secure place to live can significantly improve mental health and well-being, reducing the risk of social problems.
5. **Educational opportunities:** Access to affordable housing can improve educational outcomes for children and young people, providing them with the opportunity to reach their full potential.
6. **Economic stability:** Stable housing can contribute to economic stability by providing a secure base for individuals and families to work and participate in the economy.

CIH believes by delivering safe and affordable housing, government can address the root causes of social problems and create a more equitable and inclusive society.

ii. Planet

The effects of climate change impact everyone and we want to reiterate the importance of why addressing retrofitting in our homes can support the Executive in achieving its mission.

Retrofitting homes is crucial for achieving the goals of a Climate Action Plan because it directly addresses the housing sector's significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.

1. **Energy efficiency:** Retrofitting homes to improve insulation, upgrade heating systems, and install renewable energy technologies can significantly reduce energy consumption. This, in turn, reduces carbon emissions associated with heating and powering homes.
2. **Climate change mitigation:** Retrofitting homes helps to mitigate the impacts of climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing homes for the effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events.
3. **Improved living conditions:** Retrofitting homes can also improve living conditions by making them warmer, healthier and more comfortable. This can lead to reduced energy bills and improved health outcomes.
4. **Economic benefits:** Retrofitting homes creates jobs in the construction and energy sectors, boosting the local economy.

But we cannot achieve without adequate investment, as this are crucial for achieving net-zero targets in Northern Ireland. A budget solely for this will help, which may involve ring-fencing funds.

iii. Prosperity

CIH Northern Ireland emphasises the crucial role of housing in driving prosperity in Northern Ireland. We believe that everyone having access to a safe and affordable home is essential for:

1. **Economic growth:** Stable housing can contribute to economic growth by providing a foundation for individuals and families to participate fully in the workforce and contribute to the economy.
2. **Social inclusion:** Adequate housing is essential for social inclusion, as it allows people to participate in their communities and access essential services like education and healthcare.
3. **Community well-being:** Safe and affordable housing can improve the overall well-being of individuals and communities, reducing poverty, crime and social problems.

4. **Investment and development:** A stable and prosperous housing system can attract investment and development, contributing to economic growth and job creation.

CIH Northern Ireland advocates for policies and initiatives that promote affordable housing, improve housing conditions, and ensure that everyone has access to a safe and stable home. We believe that this is essential for creating a prosperous and equitable society in Northern Ireland.



About CIH

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the independent voice for housing and the home of professional standards. Our goal is simple - to provide housing professionals and their organisations with the advice, support, and knowledge they need to be brilliant. CIH is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. This means that the money we make is put back into the organisation and funds the activities we carry out to support the housing sector. We have a diverse membership of people who work in both the public and private sectors, in 20 countries on five continents across the world. Further information is available at: www.cih.org.

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