



Chartered
Institute of
Housing
Northern Ireland



RETHINKING
SOCIAL
HOUSING
NORTHERN
IRELAND

THE NEXT STEPS

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Foreword

The coronavirus pandemic has shown the importance of secure, quality housing like never before. In the private market, the popularity of apartments has fallen while the demand for larger homes with green spaces has risen.

It is easy to understand why this is happening, as people experienced more of their waking hours at home during lockdown than perhaps they ever had before. At the same time, the pandemic has meant more first-time buyers are locked out of this market, due to more onerous requirements for a deposit.

For the people who want to own their own home but can't, and for those whose private rented homes don't meet their needs - social and affordable housing can be the answer. Not just during this pandemic, but always.

For those of us fortunate to have dedicated our work to ensuring people can keep a good quality home, we see the positive impact that decent housing has on people's wellbeing and communities. There are few things more satisfying than handing over a set of keys and knowing someone's life will be enriched by it.

One of the great strengths of social housing is how it offers security and stability in a way that other housing options may not. This is especially the case for people who need support to live well and to live independently.

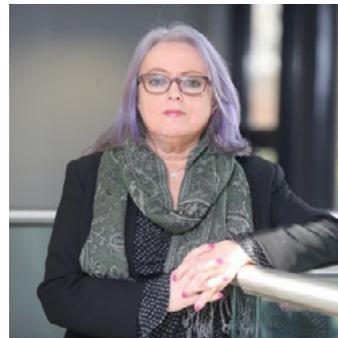
But as people's support needs change over time, and as new challenges arise in providing social and affordable housing including welfare reform, we must make sure that the way we build housing and deliver services reflect the demands of the 21st century.

However, strategic housing policy has not changed much in recent times. For this reason the Chartered Institute of Housing published its Rethinking social housing Northern Ireland research, which offered recommendations for change to ensure social housing remains responsive and relevant.

We are pleased that some of the recommendations were able to be progressed during the absence of the NI Executive. We are now urging government to revisit the remaining ones to ensure that effective social housing policy is high on its agenda.

In light of the pandemic, we have summarised and updated some of the key issues in this document for consideration.

We want our recommendations to be both useful and challenging. But above all, we want them to play a role in making sure we have the right homes in the right places - with the right services - now and well into the future.



Eileen Patterson CIHCM,
Chair, CIH Northern Ireland

Introduction

Housing investment continues to be a relatively high political priority in Northern Ireland. The New Decade New Approach deal, which saw the restoration of the NI Executive, committed for housing to be included as a specific priority in the forthcoming Programme for Government. In the meantime, £146 million has been made available to build 1,850 new social homes in 2020/21 – the highest investment level for nine years.

Meanwhile, housing stress levels remain significant and continue to increase; as of June 2020 there were 28,945 households in housing stress, compared with just over 22,000 at the same time in 2015. The coronavirus crisis is illustrating the central role of housing in meeting people's needs. For some people, home has been a sanctuary – a place to feel safe. However, for others, it has been a prison. The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) has joined with national and regional partners in a new campaign "Homes at the Heart", which calls for housing to be placed at the heart of the coronavirus recovery.

The pandemic must act as a catalyst for change. Investing in social housing and the enabling infrastructure makes this possible, as does ensuring sufficient investment for health and support services. It will also boost the economy, create jobs and improve people's lives when our nation needs it most. Social housing must be a central political concern. It should be recognised as a strategic way to help build the overall number of homes we need and care for people in need.

Everyone deserves a safe, secure, comfortable place to call home. Not just now, in the middle of this crisis, but always. However, the way we approach social housing strategically has not changed for some time. Furthermore, the public spending environment remains tough – many public services compete for resources amidst sustainability questions, which arise partly from the changing demographics of our population.

For this reason, CIH undertook a major research project Rethinking social housing Northern Ireland to ask fundamental questions about the future of social housing policy.

Over 230 people participated in the research through workshops, roundtable discussions and an online poll, 35 per cent of whom were tenants or residents. The resulting report ("the Report") combined the results of what people told us with our desk review of the evidence. It made recommendations for change where we believed this was required to ensure social housing meets people's aspirations in the future.

The Report's recommendations included roles not just for central government, but also for local government and the housing sector. After the Report was published, certain recommendations were progressed during the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, such as:

- Mid-market rent: the Department for Communities (DfC) undertook work to begin exploring the viability of mid-market rented housing for Northern Ireland
- House sales scheme: legislation to secure reversal of the ONS reclassification of housing associations as public bodies includes the end of the house sales scheme for housing associations
- Mixed-tenure housing: CIH has been working with councils to ensure local development plans have regard to best practice in facilitating mixed-tenure schemes
- Tackling stigma: the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) launched the 'Benefits to Society' campaign, which uses positive messaging to tackle some negative perceptions of social housing.

While the house sales scheme is ending for housing associations, it is currently not proposed to end for the Housing Executive. The minister has stated her intention "to consult separately on methods of entry to affordable homeownership which will include consideration of the future of the Housing Executive house sales scheme". CIH encourages the minister to progress this work as a priority; it is our view that the house sales scheme must end for the Housing Executive as well.

We acknowledge that the stigmatisation of social housing remains a pervasive issue and central concern for housing practitioners. It is anticipated that recommendations two and four of this report will contribute to the desired outcome of reducing stigma associated with social housing.

We also acknowledge the work being undertaken by the Housing Executive and DfC on the fundamental review of social housing allocations. We are generally very supportive of the recommendations put forward to the department by the Housing Executive, and we are now encouraging their swift implementation, particularly:

- the removal of intimidation points from the Housing Selection Scheme
- greater use of a mutual exchange service
- aligning the number of bedrooms a household is assessed to need with the size criteria for eligible housing benefit customers.

To this end we would encourage a timeline for which the current recommendations are enacted. Furthermore, while we strongly agree that social landlords should be able to use choice-based lettings (CBL) for difficult-to-let properties, we also believe that social landlords should be able to use CBL for as many properties as they think necessary - this could be facilitated by NIHE running a pilot with an interested housing association.

Other recommendations from the Report required further development, particularly if the ones for central government are to inform the forthcoming Programme for Government as concrete actions that will help ensure social housing provision is fit for the 21st century. Such recommendations include the proposals to adopt a common definition and understanding of need as it relates to housing. Therefore, this publication sets out the next steps that we believe are required to see the Report's vision implemented in full.

Given the intractable issues surrounding the segregation of social housing on religious grounds, we feel it is important to highlight from the Report social housing as a strategic tool for conflict management and facilitating mixed-religion neighbourhoods. Housing-led regeneration and development is central to this agenda. 'Housing for all' schemes are very welcome, and not without their challenges. However, we must consider what is required for the step change needed in the development of shared housing, and the strategic use of housing in breaking down division.

Finally, it is pertinent that this publication comes at a time when there is a surge in Universal Credit (UC) claims, which include the housing costs that help people keep a home. UC in Northern Ireland has unique and advantageous features such as twice-monthly payments, housing costs paid direct to landlords by default, and supplementary payments that fully mitigate the bedroom tax. Yet people face difficulties with starting and managing a claim, as well as financial problems linked to the five-week wait or the use of advance payments to bridge the gap.

CIH was clear when the Report was launched that we wanted it to be useful and challenging, but above all to play a role in ensuring that social housing continues to be relevant and responsive to people's housing requirements well into the future.

Methodology

Two working groups were established to support the next steps of the Rethinking social housing Northern Ireland project. One working group revisited the **supply and mixing** recommendations of the Report, but excluded the stigma theme since the aforementioned NIFHA project is addressing it. This group was chaired by CIH Northern Ireland vice chair Niall Sheridan. The other working group revisited the **eligibility and priority** and **security and independence** recommendations; this group was chaired by CIH Northern Ireland chair Eileen Patterson.

The working groups comprised of a group of leaders from across the sector. Their role was to:

- help identify opportunities to work on key recommendations
- avoid duplication of work being undertaken by other stakeholders
- inform thinking around the proposed recommendations
- provide feedback on activities and outputs
- help monitor progress on delivery of the Project, and
- develop proposals for effective housing policy for NI.

Acknowledgements

CIH would like to thank all of the below participants who were involved in both of the working groups over six months, and to DfC who acted in an advisory role.

Apex Housing, Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid, Belfast City Council, Campbell Tickell, Choice Housing, Circle Voluntary Housing Association, Clanmil Housing, Connswater Homes, Housing Rights, Inspire Wellbeing, Newington Housing Association, Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Northland Developments,

Professor Paddy Gray OBE, Radius Housing, South Ulster Housing Association, Strategic Investment Board, Supporting Communities, Triangle Housing, Túath Housing, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence and Ulster University.

The working groups were serviced by the authors Anna Lancaster and John Lewis. We would like to note that the contributions garnered were extremely valuable to this project. The outcomes of this project are CIH views.

Outcomes

Given the movement towards outcomes-based approaches in Northern Ireland and further afield, the following outlines the desired results of the recommendations in a framework of outcomes-based accountability.

- We meet the housing needs of more people.
- More homes have required standards of quality and sustainability.
- We have more balanced communities.
- There is less stigma associated with social housing.
- We support more people into sustainable tenancies.
- Private renting is a more attractive housing option.
- More people with complex needs live independently in their own homes.

Recommendations

Further to the final research report of Rethinking social housing Northern Ireland and from the subsequent discussions of the working groups, the Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland offers these further recommendations for consideration.

1. Establishment of a vehicle to coordinate public land for housing development should be explored.

Access to land in areas of housing need has long been recognised as a barrier to social housing development. The Housing Supply Forum of which CIH was a member recommended the following in its 2016 report:

“Consideration should be given to completion of a mapping exercise overlapping demand with availability and zoning information and to allowing the construction industry to have access to data on available public land. To enable this to be progressed a meeting should be convened with the DFP Minister / OFMDFM with a view to targets being set for the release of publicly owned land.”

Following this recommendation, the Department for Communities (DfC) has progressed the agenda through its Public Land for Housing project, work that is both welcomed and valued by the housing sector. However, the availability and digitisation of land maps continue to vary by department and public body. To further progress this work, buy in at Executive level is crucial so that it can be afforded sufficient priority within each government department.

The progression of this work in our view should be a central register of all public sector surplus land, with a view that priority is given for new social and affordable housing supply on this land. Thought must then be given to how this land is allocated to social and affordable housing providers. One option is an independent vehicle with a strategic aim of coordinating public land for housing development, in pursuit of the aforementioned targets.

In other jurisdictions, the Welsh Development Agency strategically assembled land sometimes using compulsory purchase orders, so that development was plan led rather than opportunity led. In the Republic of Ireland, the Land Development Agency is a commercial, state-sponsored body that coordinates public land with a focus on the provision of housing. The experiences of these bodies may form an evidence base in implementing this recommendation.

Outcome: We meet the housing needs of more people.

2. The utilisation of tenure-blindness policy should feature in all councils' local development plans.

The strategic planning policy statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) mandates councils' local development plans (LDPs) to consider evidence of housing need when allocating land for development, to facilitate the right mix of housing tenures. This will be achieved "by zoning land or by indicating, through key site requirements, where a proportion of a site may be required for social/affordable housing".

CIH supports this promotion of mixed-tenure developments as a new, key objective of our planning system. It represents a welcome opportunity for partnership working between councils and providers to deliver the right homes in the right places for the people who need them.

As councils work to develop their LDPs and technical supporting policies, it is important that attention is given to ensuring they have measures that support the sustainability and cohesiveness of mixed-tenure developments.

To this end, CIH supports 'tenure blindness' policies being incorporated in local council development plans. This means, as far as is practicable, social housing should not be readily distinguishable from private housing in terms of external design. Social housing should be well integrated in relation to the layout of developments. Mixing within estates will help to build sustainable communities and encourage a shared environment for all tenants.

This policy goes to the heart of good practice in design, addressing the perception that the presence of social housing impacts on the sale prices of private homes in mixed-tenure developments. The evidence is that mixed-tenure developments do not reduce property prices, provided the housing quality and the design of the development overall are of a high standard, where tenure-blindness is important.

Policies of tenure-blindness have been incorporated in some but not all councils' draft plan strategies published to date. CIH would now urge all councils to consider incorporating this policy in their local development plans.

We have been working with Belfast City Council with regards to reviewing guidance that supports affordable housing policies. This includes promoting clustering; we recognise the practical considerations that must be given to the guidance, not least the impact of dispersed units on housing associations in relation to their management in larger developments, as well as the cost implications for regeneration work compared with units that are co-located.

CIH recognises and supports the work undertaken by NIFHA in relation to tackling the wider stigma surrounding social housing.

Outcomes: We have more balanced communities; there is less stigma associated with social housing.

3. Intermediate rental products should be piloted in viable locations to assess their impact.

When looking at the housing market there are gaps in costs for occupiers between social housing, and the private market including private rental and home ownership. Private rented accommodation is affordable in relative terms, compared with many regional markets in Britain in Ireland. However, those with low incomes and who have insufficient priority to achieve a social home can find themselves financially stretched to afford their rent. The impact of COVID-19 may only serve to exacerbate affordability issues, given employed renters are more likely than homeowners to work in jobs bearing the greatest economic and health risks in this crisis.

Therefore, CIH believes there is a need for intermediate rented housing, which in broad terms is housing for rent that is provided outside of the general market, for those whose needs are not met by the market. We welcome the viability study on mid-market rent (MMR) that DfC commissioned following its recommendation in Rethinking social housing NI.

We also welcome the revised definition of affordable housing for planning purposes proposed by DfC, which in our view would permit the use of MMR towards the social and affordable housing obligation in new developments, where it is needed.

Viability of MMR will naturally vary based on factors such as location and the funding model used. Therefore, we believe MMR should be variously piloted at several locations to assess its impact. Housing associations who want to provide MMR should have access to financial transactions capital (FTC) to do so. We support the minister's commitment that there be no need to choose between social and intermediate housing in respect of capital investment, by maximising newer funding streams such as FTC for intermediate housing.

Outcome: We meet the housing needs of more people.

4. A level playing field between new social and private developments should be provided at community consultation stage.

As set out above it is important to tackle the stigma surrounding social housing. Tenures across social and private housing naturally differ, but wherever practicable they should be treated similarly or the same in pursuit of a 'parity of tenure' approach.

One example where this is not presently the case is the way new social housing developments are consulted upon. There is a unique requirement for housing associations to carry out an additional step of community consultation for all developments, compared with the private sector. We would question the necessity of this requirement and suggest its removal to create more of a level playing field between social and private housing providers in this regard.

Community consultation is important, which the planning system facilitates. However, the views of existing residents need always to be balanced with those of people who need social homes; the added consultation for housing associations to obtain scheme approval is not representative of this balance. Its existence suggests new social housing requires 'more of a say' from communities than other tenures, which reinforces negative perceptions and misplaced fears surrounding social housing.

Outcome: There is less stigma associated with social housing.



5. A roadmap to deliver net zero carbon in housing by 2050 should be provided.

We face a global climate change crisis to which housing is contributing. Our homes produce almost 15 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions by using gas and oil for heating, and electricity use in buildings contributes another 15 per cent. Setting standards for energy efficiency to make homes cheaper to heat and to address the challenges of climate change must be a priority.

New homes and existing homes differ greatly, both in terms of what can be achieved and the associated costs. The focus must not only be on new homes but on retrofitting as well, which also provides an opportunity for a boost to the post-COVID economy.

Unlike the rest of the UK, there is no specific target in Northern Ireland in moving towards 'net zero carbon', such as minimum Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings. Furthermore, it is expected to be the end of 2021 before the energy strategy is published, so much needed policy decisions on targets and the funding to achieve them will be delayed.

In this context there is an opportunity for a clear housing-led policy framework that complements and supports cross-departmental approaches on energy. The low-carbon agenda should be recognised as a key issue under the forthcoming housing supply strategy. This would allow all interests to plan and engage on the issue. The previous Code for Sustainable Homes provided a clear direction of travel and a planned approach that enabled industry to prepare. Going forward the emphasis should be on replicating this commonality of purpose, given the scale of the task ahead.

In the shorter term, housing associations are anticipating nearly zero-energy buildings (NZEB) requirements for all new social homes from 31 December 2020. However, there is presently little information or guidance on this, including how it ties in with the 2050 target of net zero carbon. Providers need clarity around this as a priority.

Outcome: More homes have required standards of quality and sustainability.



6. The delivery of homes using modern methods of construction should be increased through the provision of long-term investment and support.

Given the scale of our housing shortfall, and the need to deliver more homes at speed, modern methods of construction (MMC) has become increasingly attractive. One example is the athlete's village built for the commonwealth games in Glasgow, where 700 homes were delivered in a tight timescale.

MMC has potential to bring a range of benefits:

- Given the practical difficulties of achieving high levels of energy efficiency in on-site construction, it offers a huge opportunity to make a step-change in the delivery of energy-saving, climate-friendly homes
- Some new homes are being built to inadequate space and accessibility standards - MMC could help resolve this
- Following the Grenfell Tower fire, there is a high premium on homes being built of safe materials and by safe building methods - MMC must ensure this happens

- The Grenfell Tower fire exposed severe weaknesses in the enforcement of building regulations. The consistency of production standards achievable via MMC potentially resolves many such problems
- MMC offers new employment opportunities outside the traditional building trades and can help to solve building industry skill shortages.

MMC has improved in terms of the quality of the product, but requires support to drive forward scale so that the industry could have confidence to continue to invest and deliver more homes. Currently running on pilots is not sustainable or cost effective. The Welsh Government has provided a lot of support and is seeking to develop regional hubs to secure greater scale, and ensure housing development operates as an anchor in local economies. More long-term investment and support (30 years plus) would be required to grow the pipeline and size of schemes.

Outcome: More homes have required standards of quality and sustainability.

7. Government should work with the housing sector to develop a selection scheme rule to support the delivery of pre-tenancy activity that prioritises supporting people into sustainable tenancies.

During the Rethinking social housing NI research, there was a strong sense that people believe social housing should be housing that meets a need or is for people in need, as well as housing that creates security and stability. Some research participants referred to the role of the housing selection scheme and 'points' in determining needs-based priority, almost exclusively in a negative light; some argued that allocations contributed not to creating the sustainable communities that are desirable, but to residualisation and the stigma surrounding social housing.

It is important to acknowledge that residualisation has taken place over decades and is also a function of the mismatch of supply and need/demand of social housing. Nevertheless, the housing selection scheme rules have arguably not kept up to prioritise supporting people into sustainable tenancies, where increasing numbers of applicants have complex and multiple needs requiring support.

Ensuring tenancies are sustainable is very important. This means working to ensure tenancies are sustained through promoting life skills that enable this to happen. Often, early and proportionate intervention from housing managers that is centred on an applicant's needs plays an important role in creating sustainable tenancies. So, it is important that the selection scheme rules facilitate this work, or at the very least do not impede it.

In serious cases, the rules permit applicants - other than full-duty applicants (FDAs) - to be disqualified from social housing in certain circumstances involving things like past rent arrears, abandoning a previous tenancy, illegally occupying a dwelling and being involved in serious anti-social behaviour. The Department for Communities has proposed ineligibility for FDAs on the basis for unacceptable behaviour of which we were generally supportive.

However, by focusing on disqualifications and not on the work of housing professionals that could prevent such disqualifications in future, the rules fail to place an emphasis on and legitimise the pre-tenancy activity of housing professionals.

We are proposing that government work with the housing sector to develop a selection scheme rule

that facilitates the delivery of pre-tenancy work that prioritises supporting people into sustainable tenancies. This would include identifying, as early as possible, prospective tenants that are likely to struggle to sustain their tenancies and ensure that they have access to appropriate advice and support. It would involve things like referrals to in-house tenancy sustainment or specialist benefits teams, or an external debt advice agency. Such officers are trained to look at an applicant's income and expenditure, explore opportunities to reduce costs (e.g. debt consolidation) and maximise income (e.g. ensuring the applicant is receiving all benefits to which they are entitled).

These affordability checks would be carried out at the initial interview stage and rechecked at tenancy sign up stage. A working example of a practice with similar approaches was demonstrated to the working group by Hull City Council, with their traffic light approach delivered through a framework of support.

Pre-tenancy work also includes an assessment of support needs for applicants, perhaps through a case conference approach, which was also raised as an issue by the working group. Pre-tenancy work should not only identify support needs of individuals but also ensure that this support is actually provided, to assist practically with sustainment of tenancies.

For the avoidance of doubt, we are not proposing further disqualifications from social housing than what the rules and legislation currently permit, and beyond the changes that are currently proposed to the rules. Indeed, our recent Rethinking allocations report found that in England (where landlords have much greater autonomy in their allocations processes and exclusions), activity to help achieve sustainable tenancies was undermining efforts to house those who need homes the most. It found processes that fail to account for individuals' unique circumstances and housing histories can create unnecessary barriers for households most in need of social homes. A better balance can be achieved if policies and practice are people-led rather than process-led.

Outcome: We support more tenants into sustainable tenancies.

8. Better information sharing should take place among housing bodies and external agencies that supports people into sustainable tenancies.

Further to recommendation seven, CIH believes that better information sharing amongst social housing providers and with external bodies is required in pursuit of tenancy sustainment. This should include sharing of information regarding the housing history and/or support needs of tenants, who are both moving into social housing for the first time, and moving from one landlord to another.

It is important to ensure tenancies are sustained for a variety of reasons. Fundamentally, it means that tenants continue to enjoy a settled home and all the advantages that come with stability. It means they avoid the considerable personal and financial cost of tenancy breakdown, such as serious stress, potentially being separated from support networks, and expenses associated with moving home. Preventable tenancy failure also contributes to churn and undermines sustainable communities.

From a social landlord's financial perspective, tenancy sustainment means avoiding costly evictions, expenses associated with re-letting properties, and having much-needed social homes sitting empty for periods with lost rent. For society it means that public funds are not needlessly used for homelessness, health and support services for vulnerable households, which may be exacerbated where tenancy breakdown triggers a spiral of deprivation and a cycle of homelessness.

We have seen improved information sharing take place in recent years; one example is the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which permitted information sharing between external bodies and housing associations for the purpose of helping associations address instances of ASB among tenants. This change was valued by the sector, but members tell us there is more to do. Social landlords

need to be able to share information with relevant external bodies such as utilities companies and support providers.

Effective sharing of information and support needs will assist landlords to determine what would be suitable accommodation to meet the needs of applicants and would also prevent applicants being housed in accommodation which is not appropriate for their needs. When applicants are placed in inappropriate housing this can cause additional stress to vulnerable people and additional costs when it is established that they will need to be moved again to more appropriate accommodation.

Social landlords have cited evidence of the above to CIH, for example when applicants are registered for and housed in sheltered housing for independent older people based purely on information relating to their age. Meeting the age criteria alone will not determine or ensure that sheltered housing is an appropriate housing solution and landlords should be provided will full information on health, social and support needs. There is growing evidence of applicants being housed in sheltered housing who, due to their care and support needs, are unable to sustain independent living or they are unsuitable for the communal living aspect of sheltered housing.

Finally, CIH believes that cross-body training opportunities should be pursued by housing providers, allowing all social housing professionals to train alongside one another allowing for sharing of good practice, networking and relationship building.

Outcome: We support more tenants into sustainable tenancies.

9. Strategic and operational groups should be established by the housing sector to oversee the implementation of recommendations seven and eight and share good practice on tenancy sustainment.

CIH acknowledges the ongoing discussion among the sector that will be necessary for the success of the implementation of recommendations seven and eight, as well as the proposals from the fundamental review of allocations. This will require knowledge transfer at both strategic and operational levels.

Therefore, we propose the establishment of a strategic task and finish group, to oversee the implementation of change to the policy framework and to make recommendation for the development of a housing strategy for Northern Ireland.

Furthermore we recommend the establishment of an operational working group, which we envisage would meet at regular intervals to support the delivery of the recommendations on the ground, as well as to share examples of good practice and to problem-solve issues related to allocations and tenancy sustainment surrounding active cases on an ongoing basis. This operational group would use the information sharing enabled by recommendation eight in pursuit of tenancy sustainment concerns.

Outcome: We support more tenants into sustainable tenancies.



10. Management standards in the private rented sector should be raised through the licensing of landlords.

Successive studies have shown that the Northern Ireland private rented sector works reasonably well. However, this is not always the case; there are landlords and tenants who do not adhere to the law or principles of good practice - some deliberately, others unintentionally. CIH promotes good landlord-tenant relationships and knowledge transfer to private landlords, offering advice and guidance on various issues including the topical issue of Universal Credit (UC) roll-out and how to manage tenancies where UC is claimed.

One gap in the current system is sector-wide landlord licensing, incorporating independent accreditation. Landlord registration was an important first step to enabling better regulation of the sector. The logical progression in our view is a licensing system to determine competency. We believe that a properly constituted, proportionate and reasonable licensing system is an important tool for driving up standards in a growing and much needed sector. As the Housing Executive moves to include private rented accommodation in the discharge of its homelessness duty, private landlord licensing would represent a concurrent vehicle to ensure property and management standards are observed.

The main consideration of licensing systems already in place in Britain is often whether they are reasonable and effective in respect of the cost of a licence and enforcement practices. The two are of course related and an important challenge is setting fees at a level that gives authorities enough resources for enforcement, while at the same time not being unreasonably burdensome on landlords. This could be determined by an impact assessment. For example, a landlord licence fee under Rent Smart Wales is £144 for an online application, while agent fees begin at £977 and are graduated to reflect portfolio size - this system appears to incorporate cross-subsidisation based on ability to pay. A licensing system shouldn't be so light touch that it becomes a checkbox exercise, but neither need to be heavier than the market it seeks to regulate.

Outcome: Private renting is a more attractive housing option.

11. Standards and security in privately rented housing should be improved through social lettings agencies and long-term leasing.

Rethinking social housing NI demonstrated a strong link between social and private rented housing policy. The gap between supply and demand of social housing means that many prospective social housing tenants including those on the waiting list continue to rent privately, often with social security support. It is important to ensure that more of these tenants can avail of the security and professional housing management that social housing provides. So, the importance of a 'whole system approach' to social housing policy incorporating private rented housing becomes more evident.

One way is through the involvement of social enterprises in private lettings. This can involve such organisations owning the stock that is being managed; managing stock on behalf of private landlords; or both. The aims of such operations variously include providing a professional management service, good customer care, improving physical standards, and accessibility for marginalised people.

One example is the Scotland based lettings agency Homes for Good, which manages around 500 homes and owns half of these. They raised investment to purchase these homes from Impact Investment funds who look for a social impact as well as a financial return. They renovate purchased properties to a high standard and then 90 per cent of them are let out to tenants who are often excluded from good quality private rented homes, including people who are accessing benefits, on low incomes, have experienced homelessness or have a disability. Homes for Good also works across the broader private rented sector, not just with vulnerable people, which makes the business model viable.

Counted among social enterprises are housing associations, and the strategic provision of market rented housing has increased among Northern Ireland's associations to provide professional housing management and bring empty homes back into use. Whether an association undertakes this work will depend on how it relates to its organisational strategy, as well as the characteristics of local private rented markets, but it is a welcome and ongoing development that can also support this recommendation.

Other models should also be considered, including social landlords' long-term leasing of properties from private landlords in order to manage them. This would secure additional homes for a fixed term in pursuit of security objectives for tenants, while guaranteeing rent to private landlords regardless of whether the property is empty. This differs from the private 'single lets' Housing Executive approach to temporary accommodation for homeless households, where the private landlord's payment is dependent upon a tenant's housing benefit, topped up with discretionary housing payment. The scheme we are proposing may be attractive to a wider cohort of private landlords and secure properties for letting on a longer-term basis.

Long-term leasing initiatives are currently in use in other jurisdictions, including Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Examples include The City of Edinburgh Council's private sector leasing contract, currently awarded to Link Group Ltd, guaranteeing rent for five years; the Welsh Government's recent pilot 'lease' scheme, being trialled in three local authority areas, guaranteeing rental income for five years; and Ireland's long-term leasing schemes for housing associations and local authorities to secure private properties for up to 25 years with guaranteed income for owners, but only if they provide a minimum of five properties. These jurisdictions could serve as an evidence base for a similar scheme here.

Regulatory measures introduced over the past decade and changes currently proposed have helped and will continue to help improve standards and security in the private rented sector. However, there is room for more development – in addition to the need for licensing of private landlords, we should explore the potential for social purpose agencies, and for long-term contractual arrangements in the leasing of private rented accommodation.

Outcome: Private renting is a more attractive housing option; we support more tenants into sustainable tenancies.

12. The Housing First service should be expanded in pursuit of security for people with complex needs who experience chronic homelessness.

Security is a recurrent theme in this report, and it is important that it is achieved for as many people as possible. Rethinking social housing NI highlighted how social housing with support services improves the lives of people with specialist and complex needs and enables them to live independently. The Housing First model is recognised internationally as a model which aids people with complex needs that are experiencing chronic homelessness. CIH supports the expansion of the service due to its success; locally,

Housing First service users report better health and social networks; a majority maintain their tenancies; and there is a reduction in levels of alcohol use and in the use of PSNI and emergency services.

Results show that expanding this service should ensure that those who are most vulnerable will be offered the required levels of support that they need to sustain their tenancies.

Outcome: More people with complex needs live independently in their own homes.



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