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Our reference: SUB/387/2013

Dr Kevin Pelan  
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Committee  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
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3 May 2013

Dear Kevin

Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the Housing Strategy draft Action Plan, on 9 May 2013.

Please find attached a synopsis of the main points for the briefing (Appendix A) and the Housing Strategy draft Action Plan (Appendix B). We aim to publish the action plan in early June, subject to the views of the Committee, which we would appreciate by 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2013.

Officials attending will be:

Deirdre Ward, Deputy Director of Housing; and  
Heloise Brown, Head of Housing Research, Policy and Legislation.

Yours sincerely,

**Dr Heloise Brown**  
**Head of Housing Research, Policy and Legislation**

## SYNOPSIS

### HOUSING STRATEGY DRAFT ACTION PLAN

#### *Introduction*

1. The draft Housing Strategy Action Plan (**Appendix B**) details the steps the Department is taking to give effect to the vision the Minister set out in his *Housing Strategy: Facing the Future*.
2. This draft Action Plan is based on the Housing Strategy proposals and the responses to these proposals from our stakeholders. In developing the Housing Strategy, the Department engaged with key stakeholders during the drafting process. The Department formally launched the Strategy in October 2012. Over 420 copies were issued to stakeholders, and the Department held two formal consultation events, attended by around 75 people representing a range of housing and other organisations.
3. The Strategy document and consultation questions attracted over 700 pages of comment from 90 respondents, and a further 12 pages of notes from the consultation events. Feedback from the consultation and events was recorded and analysed in a separate 'summary of responses' report, which will be published alongside this Action Plan.
4. The Committee were briefed on the consultation responses by officials at its meeting on 28 February. The Committee also provided officials with additional written comments on 12 March, for which we thank the Committee.
5. The Action Plan, which has been provided to the Committee in draft form, is organised by strategic theme in a similar way to the Housing Strategy document. The Action Plan also references the roles for Government that were described in the strategy. Further, whilst stakeholders and consultees acknowledged the responsibility of Government under section 75 to promote equality of opportunity they believed it would be beneficial to have such a duty explicitly referenced, and

therefore a fifth role for government in relation to housing has been added to the Housing Strategy Action Plan :

Role 5: “To promote equality of opportunity in housing in NI and to promote good relations.”

6. We are also responding to stakeholder concerns surrounding negative equity and repossessions. We will set up a taskforce to investigate the impact of negative equity and repossessions here, and to advise on courses of action for potential government intervention.
7. We will monitor progress towards the completion of this Action Plan through annual business planning, with quarterly progress checks.
8. The other key actions are proposed commitments that were referenced in the strategy consultation document and endorsed by stakeholders. These are outlined below.
9. The Department recognises that housing is a key, and a dynamic policy area. It is impacted by economic and social trends, and in turn has major economic and social effects. The annual planning of this Action Plan will therefore allow the Department to adjust to what is a changing environment.

## **THEME 1- ENSURING ACCESS TO DECENT, AFFORDABLE, SUSTAINABLE HOMES ACROSS ALL TENURES**

10. Under Theme 1 the Department will raise the fitness standard that applies to all tenures. But the Department is also taking actions specifically aimed at each of the three tenure types.

### *Private Rented Sector*

11. Regarding the private rented sector, the Action Plan includes improvements such as:

- a review of private sector regulation; and
- improved regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation.

The Department has already introduced a tenancy deposit scheme and is working towards landlord registration.

12. At consultation, stakeholders strongly supported improved regulation of the private rented sector.

### *Social Rented Sector*

13. To increase social rented sector supply, the Department intends actions including:

- harmonising standards with those used for private housing development;
- introducing a developer contribution scheme;
- exploring the potential for a wider range of bodies to be able to register as housing associations;
- developing innovative solutions for improving the worst NIHE stock; and
- increasing the supply of affordable homes.

## *Owner Occupied Sector*

14. To ensure sustainable access to home ownership, the Department plans to:

- establish a Housing Supply Forum;
- review the Warm Homes Scheme and further develop our work on energy efficiency;
- bring forward proposals to enhance the House Sales Scheme; and
- develop and implement a new strategic approach to supporting repairs in the private sector.

## THEME 2 - MEETING HOUSING NEEDS AND SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

15. Some measures the Department is proposing will benefit all tenure types, such as implementation of the Homelessness Strategy and establishing a working group to prevent or mitigate the impact of repossessions. Additionally, the Department is bringing forward actions tailored for each tenure type.

### *Private Rented Sector*

16. In order to meet private sector housing needs and support those in this tenure who are experiencing difficulty, the Department will provide a private sector access scheme to vulnerable households.

17. The Department is also continuing to fund advice and assistance to help vulnerable households access and sustain tenancies.

### *Social Rented Sector*

18. In the social rented sector, the Department will:

- lead a fundamental review of social housing allocation policy; and
- consider an additional form of social housing tenancy for adapted social dwellings.

19. The Department is also providing support aligned with welfare reform in both the private rented and social rented sectors. These actions are under Theme 3 of the Action Plan.

## *Owner Occupied Sector*

20. To meet housing need and support the most vulnerable in the owner occupied sector, we will :

- work with DHSSPS to make the best use of resources to support independent living; and
- review the Supporting People Programme, which was seen as very beneficial by stakeholders.

## THEME 3 - HOUSING AND WELFARE REFORM

21. Under Theme 3, the Department plans to:

- gather information specific to Northern Ireland on the impacts of Welfare Reform, to inform future policy;
- support the development of additional housing advice for those affected by Welfare Reform;
- develop criteria for access to passported benefits;
- work with social rented sector landlords to support those impacted by welfare reform, and to increase the availability of smaller social housing units .

Members will of course be aware that there are ongoing discussions on the Welfare Reform Bill. These proposals will be in addition to any decisions taken as part of those ongoing discussions.

## THEME 4 - DRIVING REGENERATION AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES THROUGH HOUSING

22. The Department proposes a number of actions on both regeneration and sustainable communities.

### *Driving Regeneration*

23. To drive housing-led regeneration, the Department will:

- develop an Empty Homes Strategy and separate Action Plan;
- support an Empty Homes Loan Scheme to regenerate communities by reducing the number of empty properties;
- put in place 4 pathfinder pilots on housing-led regeneration to tackle disadvantage, with the NIHE; and
- review the Living Over the Shops Scheme.

### *Sustaining Communities*

24. In sustaining communities through housing, the Department will:

- further develop social clauses in contracts for new house building;
- investigate opportunities for generating employment and training opportunities through housing-led regeneration;
- develop a Shared Community Programme;
- improve the policy framework for tackling antisocial behaviour in the social rented sector.

## **THEME 5 - GETTING THE STRUCTURES RIGHT.**

25. The Department is proposing a range of actions to improve housing structures, the most significant being the Social Housing Reform Programme, which members have already been briefed on and will be fully engaged in developing and exploring the detailed design proposals. Officials will be seeking to schedule a briefing for the Committee on the programme shortly. In addition we will:

- support business improvement in the social rented sector for the benefit of tenants and taxpayers; and
- transfer responsibility for agreed housing functions to councils as part of local government reform.

## **Conclusion**

26. The Department's Housing Strategy is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland and, following public consultation on the proposals, this draft Action Plan sets out how we will give effect to the Strategy's vision. The Department aims to publish the action plan in early June, subject to the views of the Social Development Committee, which we would hope to receive by 23<sup>rd</sup> May.
27. The actions proposed give effect to the roles for government that were identified in the Strategy, namely:
- supporting economic growth and prosperity, by creating the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market;
  - tackling disadvantage, by supporting the most vulnerable to access housing;
  - setting minimum standards for housing across tenure types; and
  - building communities by driving regeneration where it is most needed.
28. These actions are underpinned by the Department's duty to promote equality of opportunity in housing in NI and to promote good relations.

**Department for Social Development**

**3 May 2013**



Department for Social Development

**Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for  
Northern Ireland**

**Draft Action Plan**

**2012 - 2017**

## INTRODUCTION

This Action Plan sets out the steps we are taking to deliver our Housing Strategy: 'Facing the Future'.

'Facing the Future' was published on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012 and set out our proposals under five Themes:

1. Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures
2. Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable
3. Housing and Welfare Reform
4. Driving regeneration & sustaining communities through housing
5. Getting the structures right

The Strategy also set out four main roles for government in relation to housing:

1. Helping to create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market that supports economic growth and prosperity;
2. Providing support for individuals and families to access housing, particularly the most vulnerable in society;
3. Setting minimum standards for the quality of new and existing homes and for how rented housing is managed; and
4. Driving regeneration within communities, particularly those suffering from blight and population decline.

The Strategy was launched for public consultation on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012 for eight weeks, closing 7<sup>th</sup> December 2012. Organisations representative of Section 75 groups, private individuals, and a wide range of industry stakeholders submitted responses. Two consultation events were also organised.

The responses received reflect the breadth of sectors and stakeholders who have an active interest in strategic housing issues in Northern Ireland. The Strategy document

and consultation questions attracted over 700 pages of comment from 90 respondents, and a further 12 pages of notes from consultation events. Feedback from the consultation and events was recorded and analysed in a separate ‘summary of responses’ report, which will be published alongside this Action Plan.

In response to the suggestions of our stakeholders, we are now adding a fifth role for government in relation to housing to the four roles listed above:

5. To promote equality of opportunity in housing in NI and to promote good relations.

As well as the specific commitments in our strategy, we also have a statutory duty to equality screen each individual policy as it is developed, to identify and consider any potential Section 75 equality impacts from our proposals.

We will monitor progress towards the completion of this action plan through annual business planning, with quarterly progress checks, and consider how changing economic and social issues need to be addressed.

In taking forward the actions listed in this document, the Department will work towards five high-level outcomes:

1. **Better housing management**, with a more efficient and targeted use of resources;
2. **Better regulation**, with an increased focus on the interests of tenants and citizens, and reduced red tape;
3. **Greater flexibility** and responsiveness, as circumstances and market conditions change;
4. **Continued fairness** for citizens, regardless of tenure and consistent with the need to support those who are most vulnerable; and
5. **Implementing new structures** that can support the above outcomes.

## *Our existing work*

As well as commenting on our strategic proposals, stakeholders endorsed the ongoing work of the Department in relation to housing. For the Programme for Government 2011-15, we are working towards the PFG commitments in respect of housing, as follows:

- PFG 28: deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes;
- PFG 29: introduce and support a range of initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, including preventative interventions;
- PFG 30: improve thermal efficiency of Housing Executive stock and ensure full double glazing in its properties;
- PFG 81: by the end of 2014/15, to have implemented new structures to support the improved delivery of housing services to the citizens of Northern Ireland.

## *Private Rented Sector*

During the consultation, many respondents supported our ongoing regulation of the private rented sector, including through a landlord registration scheme. Stakeholders were also supportive of the Department's work with others to regulate houses in multiple occupation.

## *Social Rented Sector*

Stakeholders commented positively on the continued delivery of social and affordable homes. There was strong support for the Social Housing Development Programme, including for wider access to grants, and for the Supporting People Scheme.

## *Owner Occupied Sector*

There was strong support for the ongoing work on the Warm Homes Scheme. The scheme tackles fuel poverty, increases energy efficiency and reduces carbon emissions. The Department continues to provide grant assistance to 5,000 homes to replace old boilers, targeting this assistance to those most in need.

The House Sales Scheme was highly valued by many of our consultees, and the Department plans to maintain and enhance this scheme. We will also continue our work to implement the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland.

## *Completed Actions*

The Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA, has already implemented some of the proposals in the Housing Strategy during the consultation. This was done when it was clear that those proposals were overwhelmingly supported and urgently needed.

The Minister has therefore secured, within Welfare Reform, a number of flexibilities:

- that housing costs will continue to be payable directly to landlords;
- the ability to split payments within households, where appropriate; and
- the ability to make fortnightly payments to claimants.

In addition to this, since the Housing Strategy was published for consultation in October 2012, we have introduced a tenancy deposit scheme to assist tenants and landlords in the private rented sector to resolve disputes over deposits speedily and independently.

## FACING THE FUTURE: HOUSING STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

### THEME 1: ENSURING ACCESS TO DECENT, AFFORDABLE, SUSTAINABLE HOMES ACROSS ALL TENURES

#### Cross-cutting

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
1. Review the statutory fitness standard across all tenures		Review statutory fitness standard	Consult on new standard	Commence legislative process to implement new standard		To put in place an enhanced statutory minimum standard for housing across all tenures	Role 3

#### Private Rented Sector

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
2. Review private rented sector regulation			Commence review of regulation of private rented sector	Consult on proposals	Implement agreed proposals as relevant	To make the private rented sector a more attractive housing option by improving the regulatory framework	Role 3
3. Improve the regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)	Develop proposals	Agree proposals for new HMO scheme and take forward new legislation	Identify legislative vehicle for agreed proposals	Ensure agreed proposals are implemented		To have a new scheme in place for improved regulation of HMOs	Role 3

## Social Rented Sector

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
4. Harmonise standards for social housing construction with those used for private housing development	Agree revised building standards	Interim review of impact of revised standards	Review effectiveness of new standards			To encourage reduced costs for social new build; increased competition; continued quality of new build homes	Role 1
5. Introduce a developer contribution scheme		Keep market conditions under review with a view working with the Department of the Environment to develop contributions policy	Develop options for implementation & implement subject to market conditions			To have a scheme in place that will use market conditions to increase the supply of social and affordable homes	Role 2
6. Explore potential for funding social housing by enabling a wider range of bodies to register as housing associations		Engage with stakeholders and review legislative framework	Consult on options	Implement agreed proposals, including legislative change if required		To increase the supply of social housing by developing innovative funding methods	Role 1
7. Increase the supply of affordable housing by developing and launching a scheme to deliver affordable homes		Develop scheme	Launch scheme	Scheme ongoing	Scheme ongoing	To enable up to £19 million of loans, to be paid back by 2020, to support delivery of more affordable housing	Role 2
8. Develop innovative solutions for improving the worst NIHE stock		Develop and agree stock transfer policy.  Commence transfer of properties from NIHE to housing associations – up to 500	Transfer 2,000 properties	Complete transfer of properties to housing associations		To ensure standard of stock is maintained by transferring properties from NIHE to housing associations	Role 3

## Owner Occupied

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
9. Establish a Housing Supply Forum	Consider consultation comments on this proposal	Establish Housing Supply Forum & agree terms of reference for forum	Housing Supply Forum identifies ways of increasing the supply of housing	Implement Housing Supply Forum recommendations		To identify innovative ways of using the resources available to us to maximise support for marked increases in housing supply	Role 1
10. DSD will develop and implement a new strategic approach to support repair and improvement in private sector housing		Develop proposals for grants scheme and take forward new legislation required	Put in place new legislation.	Implementation and oversight of grants scheme	Oversight of grants scheme	To provide a wider range of support to homeowners; and an integrated policy approach	Role 3
11. Bring forward proposals to enhance the House Sales Scheme (HSS)		Develop proposals to enhance HSS	Bring forward proposals and consult	Implement recommendations		To support social tenants to enter other forms of home ownership	Role 2
12. Review the Warm Homes Scheme and further develop our work on energy efficiency		Evaluate Affordable Warmth Pilot	Review pilot and develop and launch new scheme.			To ensure that the Scheme makes the most effective use of available resources and targets those most in need	Role 1

## THEME 2: MEETING HOUSING NEEDS AND SUPPORTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

### Cross-cutting

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
13. Work with others to implement the Homelessness Strategy for NI		Chair cross-departmental forum and oversee development of action plans	Oversee implementation of annual action plan	Oversee implementation of annual action plan	Oversee implementation of annual action plan	To eliminate long-term homelessness and rough sleeping by 2020	Role 2
14. Establish a working group that will identify ways of preventing or mitigating the impact of repossessions		Gather information, establish working group and engage with stakeholders.	Identify further actions to prevent or mitigate the impact of repossessions			To reduce the impact of repossessions on both vulnerable households and the wider housing market	Role 2

### Private Rented Sector

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
15. Provide a private rented sector access scheme		NIHE to procure a provider and Department to set reporting/evaluation parameters	Oversee implementation of scheme	Review scheme		To help vulnerable individuals and families sustain private tenancies	Role 2

### Social Rented Sector

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
16. Lead a fundamental review of social housing allocation policy		Independent review completed and public consultation on proposals.	Finalise revised policy	Implement revised policy		To more effectively manage and allocate social housing	Role 2
17. Consider additional form of social housing tenancy for adapted social dwellings, and require social landlords to develop an accessible housing register and set targets for better use of this stock in the future		Review the outcome of the consultation on adaptations	Develop and consult on proposals	Develop policy and consider legislative requirement	Bring forward legislation if required	To ensure the most effective use of adapted stock	Role 2

### Owner Occupied

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
18. Review the Supporting People programme, including its policy and legislative framework	Work with Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety to identify how to make the best use of resources to support independent living	Review the outcome of the consultation on adaptations	Undertake review of the Supporting People Programme  Take forward recommendations from consultation on adaptations	Take forward recommendations from review		To assist 17,000 people with independent living by 2015	Role 2

### THEME 3: HOUSING AND WELFARE REFORM

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
19. Gather information on the impact of the housing-related changes of Welfare Reform		Publish research on social and private rented sectors and consider any policy implications	Continue information gathering as required			To gather information to required quality and on time, to enable the most effective implementation of Welfare Reform	Role 5
20. Develop criteria for access to passported benefits	Work to agree modelling for those entitled to passported benefits under Universal Credit (UC)	Continue discussions to agree appropriate modelling of grant thresholds under UC.				To have thresholds agreed for passported benefits in time for introduction of UC in April 2014.	Role 5
21. Work with the NIHE to provide support for the development of additional housing advice for those affected by Welfare Reform		Ensure that housing advice services are put in place for households impacted by Welfare Reform	Continue to monitor the need for housing advice as a result of Welfare Reform	Continue to monitor the need for housing advice as a result of Welfare Reform		To support affected households in understanding the options available to them	Role 2
22. Work with social housing landlords to support those impacted by Welfare Reform.		Assist housing associations to develop and implement action plans	Monitor action plans as required	Monitor action plans as required		To ensure that housing association tenants impacted by Welfare Reform are provided with options more suitable to their needs.	Role 2
23. Increase the availability of smaller social housing units	Encourage housing associations to deliver more single unit projects	Confirm no of units required with housing associations. Consider stock reconfiguration. Include additional 200 single units within SHDP	Include additional 200 single units within the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).	Review need for continued numbers of single units and include within SHDP for 2015 onwards		To deliver social housing which meets the needs of individuals and is cognisant of the impact of Welfare Reform.	Role 3

## THEME 4: DRIVING REGENERATION & SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES THROUGH HOUSING

### Driving Regeneration

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
24. DSD will take forward an Empty Homes Strategy and implement an action plan.	Development of Strategy and Action Plan for delivery by NIHE.	Publish and commence implementation of an Empty Homes action plan  Identify funding streams and launch an Empty Homes Loan Scheme	Consider proposals for legislative change.	Bring forward proposals for legislation to enable housing associations to lease empty properties		To meet housing need by reducing the number of empty properties and regenerate communities by reducing the number of empty properties.	Role 4
25. Working with the NIHE, pilot a housing-led approach to regeneration in four areas		Pilots in place by March 2014		Review and evaluate pilots & develop housing led regeneration policy for NI by May 2015		To tackle disadvantage in areas of need by investing in housing	Role 4
26. Review Living Over the Shops (LOTS) as part of a broader package of town and city centre regeneration		Review LOTS by March 2014	Ensure a revised programme is in place			To have a redesigned programme in place that will support housing-led regeneration in town and city centres	Role 4

## Sustaining Communities

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
27. Further develop social clauses in contracts for new house building	Include social clauses in housing procurement contracts in accordance with DFP Procurement Board Strategic Plan 2012-15	Include social clauses in housing procurement contracts in accordance with DFP Procurement Board Strategic Plan 2012-15 Review the effectiveness of social clauses in housing procurement contracts via DSD Procurement Strategy Programme Board	Continue to review the effectiveness of social clauses in housing procurement contracts via DSD Procurement Strategy Programme Board			To deliver wider social benefits from new social house building, such as employment opportunities	Role 4
28. Work with registered housing associations and others to investigate opportunities for generating employment and training opportunities		Investigate options for training and employability schemes in pilot housing led regeneration areas	Implement schemes to provide training and employment opportunities within housing-led regeneration area	Review impact of schemes with a view to further roll out as part of NI housing led regeneration policy, Social Housing Development Programme or housing association maintenance programmes		To work in partnership with others to support social housing tenants to enter training or employment.	Role 1

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
<p>29. Develop a Shared Community Programme, to include:</p> <p>amended NIHE application forms re: shared housing;</p> <p>piloting a Belfast City Centre waiting list; and</p> <p>continuing to work with Department of Justice (DOJ) and NIHE to support the reduction in interface structures</p>	Identify and agree a Belfast City Centre shared community boundary	<p>Deliver housing schemes within Belfast City Centre shared community boundary</p> <p>Work with DOJ and NIHE to support communities wishing to reduce or remove interface structures</p>	<p>Deliver housing schemes within Belfast City Centre shared community boundary</p> <p>Explore potential for expansion of shared community programme within social housing schemes</p> <p>Work with DOJ and NIHE to support communities wishing to reduce or remove interface structures</p>	<p>Include additional shared community schemes within SHDP</p> <p>Develop shared housing on basis of responses provided in application forms for social housing from 2013 onwards</p>		To remove barriers to developing more shared communities	Role 5
<p>30. Further develop the policy framework on tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) in social housing and proposals for a new 'notice of seeking possession' including an ASB warning</p>	Joint work with NIHE and housing association representatives to build capacity	'Notice of seeking possession' amended to include ASB warning	Develop proposals for legislation to introduce a new form of social tenancy	Take forward legislation if required		To enable landlords to effectively deal with anti-social behaviour	Role 5

## THEME 5: GETTING THE STRUCTURES RIGHT

Action	Timescale and targets					Objective	Role
	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17		
31. Support business improvement in the social housing sector for the benefit of tenants and taxpayers	Continue to work with NIFHA to support business improvement	Review the inspection process.				To support an improved social housing sector	Role 3
32. Transfer agreed responsibility for: regulation of HMOs and housing unfitness to district councils as part of the programme of local government reform	Prepare for the transfer of powers	Continue preparations for the transfer of powers	Arrangements in place for the transfer of powers to councils			To transfer HMO regulation and housing unfitness to Councils as part of the programme of local government reform	Role 3
33. Take forward the Social Housing Reform Programme		Implement year 1 of Housing Reform Programme	Implement year 2 of Housing Reform Programme	Ongoing implementation of Social Housing Reform Programme	Ongoing implementation of Social Housing Reform Programme	To support the improved delivery of housing services in Northern Ireland	Role 3