



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Please use this form to submit written submissions in relation to the Housing (Amendment) Bill. Return to committee.socialdevelopment@niassembly.gov.uk by Friday 4th September 2015.

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Organisation: (if applicable) Helm Housing

Date: 27th August 2015

(where possible, please structure your response to the specific clauses of the Bill and, if appropriate, suggest alternative or additional wording to clauses, which may assist the Committee's consideration of the need for any amendments to the Bill)

Helm Housing welcomes the opportunity to provide this written response to the Housing (Amendment) Bill as part of the consideration of this proposed legislation by the Social Development Committee. In summary, Helm Housing's response is as follows:

- **Support the sharing of information relating to empty properties and suggest that this is extended to Housing Associations**
- **Welcome any changes that will assist in tackling anti-social behaviour but believe the proposed amendment doesn't go far enough and formal information sharing protocols should be put in place between statutory agencies and housing associations**
- **Recognise the benefit of enabling housing grants made in the form of loans to be registered as a statutory charge and could be extended to other grants including mortgage interest relief and house sales discounts.**

However, it is clear that the proposals contained in the draft legislation are largely tidying up some existing anomalies in previous legislation rather than taking this opportunity to significantly improve powers, duties and responsibilities in these areas. In Article 1, for example, the proposal extends responsibilities on the DFP, DSD and NIHE to share information with each other that they each have obtained relating to empty properties. It is unclear why existing information sharing protocols don't already permit this sharing of information between internal Departments of Government and their agents. However, while we have been supporting the NIHE in efforts to identify any vacant properties in our areas of operation to enable a development of a comprehensive vacant homes strategy, it would be useful if DFP was empowered to similarly share information with housing associations where we are taking steps to bring back vacant properties into use. Often detail that DFP holds on contact details of owners or person liable for rates payment, would be advantageous to associations working to address the blighting affect in communities of vacant and blocked properties where we have been unable to identify the owner.

Article 2 is only a slight amendment from Article 13 of the Housing (Amendment) Act (NI) 2011, but Helm Housing supports any measures that will assist us to work with increased efficiency to develop and implement strategies for reducing crime, disorder and nuisance in our communities and protect our tenants. However, the proposed amendments enables a "person" to disclose information about a tenant that will help tackle ASB but stops short of enabling other statutory agencies such as the PSNI, Councils, Youth Justice Agency and NIHE to share information with registered housing associations to allow us to work more effectively for the benefit of victims. Over the last year, Helm Housing has been working with the named agencies above to develop Information Sharing Protocols in a pilot project covering the South Belfast area. This improved information sharing has enabled better informed decision making and partnership working, enhanced inter-agency relationships and more effective interventions at a much earlier stage. The use of good quality information and shared intelligence is essential in identifying and limiting the activities of those committing crime and causing disorder and in

tackling those whose actions adversely affect community safety and quality of life of individuals and communities. As part of this pilot we and other housing providers have signed up to an information sharing protocol and have put in place a government approved and tested secure network to ensure shared information is kept secure and confidential. It is the responsibility of the signatories to this pilot protocol that all are correctly registered in secure network to safeguard the security of the information; that Data Protection principles are upheld and strictly adhered to; professional ethical standards are maintained; information flow is strictly controlled; records are kept of decisions to share and withhold information and reasons. This information sharing protocol isn't a panacea to effectively tackle Anti-social Behaviour but we have already been able to evidence some success and have used detail of PSNI warrants and drug seizures in particular properties that has enabled us to take action through the courts against tenant and those living with the tenant for breach of the tenancy agreement.

A minor point regarding Article 2 Part 8 (d), we would suggest that the reference to a "secure tenant" is not necessary and that the existing wording in Article 13 Part 1 (b) of the Housing (Amendment Act (NI) 2011 is adequate ensuring that this covers both Housing Executive and Housing Association tenants.

Article 3 details registration as statutory charge of certain loans and expands on Article 9 of the Housing (NI) Order 1981 under Advances by the Executive. However, the reference in the amendment to be added after Paragraph (2) appears erroneous as there is no Paragraph (2) in Article 9 and maybe this should be added after Paragraph 2 in Article 10 which details "Directions to the Executive"? The new amendment does improve the directions to Executive on treatment of loans that remain outstanding and how these will be enforced. However, there should be a review of other grants made by the Executive and DSD through mortgage interest relief and even house sales discounts.



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