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Date: August 2015

Consultation: *Department for Social Development consultation on Housing (Amendment) Bill*
- **Request from Committee for views on proposals contained in Bill**

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents 23 registered housing associations in Northern Ireland. Collectively our members provide 44,000 homes comprising general needs, specialist and supported accommodation, as well as shared ownership. Further information on our members and NIFHA's work is available at www.nifha.org.

Housing associations are not-for-profit social businesses which increasingly borrow significant amounts of private finance to deliver public benefit in meeting housing need, supporting their tenants and investing in communities.

General Comments

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the proposals. We recognise that the current Bill is significantly different from the Draft Bill presented to the Committee in June 2104. NIFHA expressed concern at some of the clauses in the initial Bill related to short tenancies believing that they could cause problems in housing management in view of the timescales involved, and welcome the fact that they are no longer part of the Bill.

Specific comments

The new Bill has 3 clauses and we outline our view on each clause as follows

Clause 1 – relating to information sharing in relation to empty homes.

In September 2013 the Department for Social Development launched its new Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2018 which is being delivered in partnership with the NI Housing Executive and housing associations. Figures provided by Land & Property Services in the Department of Finance and Personnel detailed in the strategy indicate that there are approximately 32,000 empty properties in Northern Ireland. In order to maximise all opportunities to meet housing need, reduce blight and tackle antisocial behaviour, the rejuvenation of empty homes is imperative.

Housing associations are identified in the strategy as key partners in bringing empty homes back into use and we work closely with the Empty Homes Unit established by the Housing Executive.

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NIFHA members involved in this work see it as a natural extension of role they are already playing in developing new homes and investing in communities. Working with individuals and communities, there is real scope for housing associations to play a major role in supporting the aims and objectives of the Empty Homes Strategy. For example Habinteg last year worked with Habitat for Humanity to refurbish an empty property in North Belfast, and Clanmil recently purchased a development in Dunmurry which had been built by a private developer and had lain empty for several years due to the economic downturn, bringing 46 apartments into use for social housing.

Establishing ownership of empty property has long been a barrier to bringing empty homes back into use. We strongly support the clause which will allow LPS (Land and Property Services) to share information with the Department and the Housing Executive in relation to empty homes. This will, if used effectively, assist in bringing more empty homes back into use. We also support the sharing of information in the other direction, which will assist in tackling fraud by highlighting incidents where a property is listed as vacant by LPS but appears to be occupied. Our members are committed to tackling tenancy fraud and support the sharing of information which would assist them in doing so.

Clause 2 – relating to information sharing in relation to Anti Social Behaviour.

We very strongly welcome the sharing of information in relation to tackling anti social behaviour, and have long sought to clarify and strengthen legislation in this area. Some housing associations have worked to achieve local agreements particularly with the PSNI, local councils and the Housing Executive on this, and advise that where those agreements have been reached, it has been beneficial in their ability to deal effectively with anti social behaviour. They also use approaches such as Customer Charters, Acceptable Behaviour contracts and Good Neighbour agreements, and when appropriate have worked with organisations such as CRJ (Community Restorative Justice) and Alternatives to introduce mediation. This is something associations would be keen to explore further.

Members particularly welcome the fact that local Councils would be part of any information sharing arrangement, as often they can be crucial in sharing information around housing management issues such as noise abatement.

NIFHA has been seeking to establish a wider Information Sharing Agreement with the PSNI and the Bill will make such arrangements significantly easier. It is evident that when agencies have been willing and able to share information, it has helped alleviate anti social behaviour, and legislation which will enshrine this is welcomed. We believe that the clause would be strengthened by the use of the word 'shall' rather than 'may' and we would support such an amendment.

Sections 8(f) and (g) are particularly welcome sections of the Bill as it appears to allow housing associations to act on the basis of information they have received in relation to anti social behaviour.

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Clause 3 - Regulation as statutory charge on certain loans

NIFHA have currently no specific comments or concerns in relation to this Clause of the Bill.

Conclusion

We welcome the Bill and would be happy to provide any further information on our response, or provide further examples of the way in which we are actively working with our members in relation to good practice in information sharing in relation to empty properties or in tackling anti social behaviour.

For further information please contact

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