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Blog article by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Tackling housing inequalities and understanding diverse needs

Social housing is under pressure, so the conversation on social housing which the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is facilitating is timely. There are serious and diverse challenges to be faced, which include:

- the fact that the 2015/16 waiting list totalled over 37,000, whereas the new build target for the year was just 1500 homes
- the full impact of welfare reform after mitigation payments expire – and the necessity of anticipating the size of home people can afford and the stock available to meet that need
- the need to understand how housing needs will change as the population ages and health and social care is designed increasingly to be delivered at home
- dealing with the on-going impact of residential segregation on where and how we live, which is particularly relevant to social housing, and
- the fact that the private rented sector is now providing homes for people who previously would have been housed in the social sector – this leads to marked differences such as security of tenure and the provision of housing plus services.

The CIH project is focusing on three key questions:

- What is social housing?
- What does social housing do?
- Who is social housing for?

Housing requirements are not the same for all people. The steps needed to ensure an accessible, adequate and sustainable home are likely to differ from one person to another, depending on a number of factors. Understanding these needs is crucial to the work CIH is undertaking.

The Equality Commission's focus is on the characteristics and needs of people who belong to equality groups identified in our legal remit. We have made recommendations to tackle some of the inequalities we identified.

Last year we published a report which identified a range of inequalities in housing. These include, for example, the need to address longer waiting list times experienced by Catholic households. We recommended actions to take account of and resolve factors that shape supply and demand, while ensuring housing allocation is based on objectively assessed need.

We recommend that adaptation services are easy to access and affordable – measures to ensure this could include streamlining existing processes and reducing waiting times.

There needs to be suitable accommodation and services available for homeless single males, for young people affected by welfare reform, and for older people whose homes may have become unsuitable for them.

The CIH project follows the Department for Communities' fundamental review of social housing allocations, which prompted consideration of how the housing market has changed. The Equality Commission welcomed its emphasis on independent, tenure-neutral advice, but we also sought further consideration on measures such as banding applicants based on their time on the waiting list and the removal of intimidation points.

We welcome the broad engagement that CIH is undertaking and recognise that our voice will be one of many. We encourage anyone with an interest in this vital issue to join the discussion. It is vital that the three questions posed by CIH are answered in a way which truly reflects the needs of all the people in Northern Ireland.

The Equality Commission's papers on key inequalities in housing and our recommendations are available online: www.equalityni.org/KeyInequalities-Housing

Get involved:

- [Rethinking social housing NI](#) - have your say as an individual by completing the [short survey](#), or register to participate in a workshop in [Derry/Londonderry](#) (12 April 2018), [Belfast](#) (17 April 2018) or [Dungannon](#) (2 May 2018).

Article first appeared on the Chartered Institute of Housing's [website](#) on 5 April 2018