

Northern Ireland Housing Strategy 2012-2017 (DSD)

Briefing to Assembly Committee for Social Development

March 2013

- 1.1 The Commission considers that the development of a “Northern Ireland Housing Strategy 2012-2017” provides an opportunity to develop a strategic approach to housing policy, having due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and having regard to the desirability of promoting good relations.
- 1.2 We recommend that the final Strategy provide a clearer strategic vision, taking account of the range of reforms underway/proposed and be supported by further information on how the Department will address the need for housing across all tenures in the coming 5 year period and beyond. We set out below key points with regards to each major theme.

Theme 1– Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures.

- The Commission recommends that the core focus of the draft Housing strategy be firmly maintained on meeting assessed housing need, having due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and having regard to the desirability of promoting good relations. Any considerations of facilitating economic regeneration / employment should be secondary to addressing housing need.
- The Commission would express concern about the impacts of any potential regression in social housing standards.
- The Commission considers that adopting the lifetime homes standard, alongside wheelchair standard housing, across the public and private housing sector would increase choice and provide access to improved quality of life, particularly for those with disabilities.

Theme 2 – Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable:

- The Commission draws attention the recommendations made in our July 2012 response to the OFMDFM Draft Disability Strategy consultation, calling on the Executive to:
 - address annual shortfalls in meeting assessed needs for social housing for disabled people;
 - provide ongoing investment and support for people with disabilities to live in affordable, accessible accommodation;
 - undertake further research into supporting people to live in their own homes independently and note that research undertaken by the Office of Disability Issues in May 2007 concluded that investment in accessible housing was a means of reducing health and social care expenditure and removing barriers to social inclusion .

- The Commission recommends the development of a culturally sensitive mechanism to assess housing stress in the Traveller Community. The Commission recommends that the appropriateness of the application of a separate planning mechanism for Traveller families applying to establish serviced family sites in the countryside should be reviewed as a matter of urgency. This review should take into consideration the provisions on site licenses for permanent serviced sites and the effect this provision may have on preventing the development of serviced and transit sites.
- The Commission recommends that the needs of Migrants and BME communities are assessed fully, including relevant research into the potential for overcrowding.
- The Commission recommends that overall Housing Strategy takes account of changes to definitions of homelessness and potential impacts of welfare reform.

Theme 3 – Housing and Welfare Reform:

- The Commission recommends that the Housing Strategy and the implementation of welfare reform takes full account of the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of the current housing stock in Northern Ireland.
- The Commission recommends that the Department should follow the decision of the Court of Appeal in Burnip, Trengove and Gorry and allow for additional accommodation for carers and disabled children.
- The Commission recommends that the Department ensures that housing benefit assessments of disabled people, including those with non-residential carers, fully takes into account the needs of disabled people, particularly when the effects of a disability may change within a time period. Similarly, assessments of parents separated from their children should also take into account that these claimants will be required to accommodate their children in their home to allow them full access to their family.
- The Commission recommends that relevant aspects of the above are also taken into account in the Review of the Housing Selection Scheme.

Theme 4 – Driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing

- The Commission restates its view on the value of shared housing and that segregated housing in Northern Ireland is not the way forward for our society. We view socially, ethnically, politically and religiously integrated housing as the preferred option and long term goal.
- The Commission recommends that the Department sets out concrete proposals for building shared neighbourhoods.
- The Commission considers that agreement should be reached on the Executive's Cohesion Sharing and Integration strategy at the earliest possible time to set the strategic framework for equality and good relations work at neighbourhood level.

Theme 5 – Getting the structures right

- The Commission considers that any changes to structures should seek to preserve the knowledge and experience of the Housing Executive, while seeking to maximise equality of opportunity and good relations.

General Comments

- The Commission considers that the use of the term 'Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations' (rather than 'Fairness and Equity') in the strategy would better convey to the public that the Department is aware of its statutory obligations and that it is putting these at the core of its business as required.
- The Commission questions why screening was not conducted at the stage where these proposals were being drafted, in line with Commission guidance. Screening at this early stage would have alerted consultees to the likely impact of the proposals set out in the document and thus improved the quality of consultation responses.

- 1.3 A copy of our full response to the DSD consultation on "FACING THE FUTURE: Northern Ireland Housing Strategy 2012-2017" can be downloaded from our website at:
http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/ECNI_HousingStrategyResponse_v1_141212.pdf

**Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
March 2013**

Annex 1: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

The Commission is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on fair employment, sex discrimination, equal pay, race, sexual orientation, age and disability.

The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 ("Section 75"), and to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage participation of disabled in public life, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006) ("Disability Equality Duty").

The Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission are jointly designated as the "Independent Mechanism" in Northern Ireland to promote, protect and monitor the implementation the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).