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Social housing in Northern Ireland: challenges and policy options

Joe Frey, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence

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About the author(s)

Joe Frey is Knowledge Exchange Broker for the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence. Joe is Visiting Professor to Ulster University. Prior to this, Joe worked at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for 35-years, and since 1998 as Head of Research.

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Introduction and background

This paper sets out what are considered the most significant issues currently facing social housing in Northern Ireland, and on this basis outlines a number of potential policy initiatives that could be examined in order to address them. However, it begins by providing a profile of the social housing sector in Northern Ireland, a sector that differs in a number of ways from social housing in the rest of the UK. It draws on evidence from a range of sources, including government statistics and research, academic papers and more recently qualitative evidence based on discussions with a number of key players in Northern Ireland.

The population of Northern Ireland is approximately 1.8 million (3 per cent of the UK's total). The preliminary results from the 2016 NI House Condition Survey (NHE, 2017a) indicate that there are approximately 780,000 homes in Northern Ireland, of which 123,000 (including approximately 1,000 vacant dwellings) are in the social sector. The structure of social housing in Northern Ireland continues to be unusual in the context of the UK, reflecting a legacy of longer-term political conflict in which access to social housing was originally an important factor.

Profile of stock and tenants

Approximately 86,000 (70%) dwellings in the social sector are owned and managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (Housing Executive herein) and the remaining 37,000 (30%) by housing associations. In addition, housing associations manage more than 4,000 units of accommodation that are not fully self-contained. In common parlance Housing Executive dwellings are often still described as "council homes", but since 1971, when ownership and management of the council's total housing stock was transferred to the Housing Executive, councils have had only very limited powers in relation to housing.

The Housing Executive has built no new dwellings since the early 2000s, when government policy designed to lower the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR) ensured that all new build in the social sector was provided by housing associations – on the basis that they could lever in a substantial proportion of costs from the private sector. Unlike in Great Britain (GB), however, where new build by councils has increased in recent years, and despite calls from some political representatives for the Housing Executive to revive its new build programme, this situation remained unchanged. The number of dwellings owned by the Housing Executive, therefore, continues to decrease slightly each year due to house sales, demolitions and a small programme of stock transfer to housing associations, while housing association stock increases each year through a combined programme of new build programme and acquisition of existing dwellings. The culmination of these two trends is that by 2016, the proportion of the social sector comprising housing association-owned dwellings had risen from 20 per cent in 2006 to its current level (30%), but remains much lower than in England (60%).

The 2016 NI House Condition Survey (NIHE, 2018) also provides an overview of the characteristics and condition of the social housing sector. The age profile of the stock is significantly younger than in England: in Northern Ireland approximately one third of the social sector was built after 1980 (a key cut-off in terms of improved energy efficiency) compared to approximately a quarter in England. Similarly, there are significant differences in dwelling type. The most common property type in Northern Ireland is terraced housing (39% of the social sector stock), while flats/apartments and bungalows both accounted for around one quarter of the sector's stock (26% and 23% respectively). Only a minimal proportion of the social housing stock (<1% excluding vacant dwellings) was estimated to be unfit[1]. In 2011 only an estimated 4% of social sector dwellings failed to meet the Decent Homes Standard in 2011[2] – a significant fall from 22% in 2006, reflecting, in particular, the ongoing investment in energy efficiency measures in the sector.

In relation to household characteristics, the 2011 House Condition Survey shows that the most common age group of household reference persons (HRPs) living in the social sector was 60 or more (38%); one fifth (22%) were aged between 25 and 39. Less than one quarter (22%) of HRPs were working (either full-time or part-time), with the remaining proportion either economically inactive or unemployed. The most recent Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey of Housing Executive tenants (2016) indicates that this picture has changed little: 21 per cent were employed (NIHE, 2017a).

Political and institutional context

In Northern Ireland, housing (and policy in relation to social housing in particular) has, for historical reasons, been strongly influenced by political considerations, not least by any potential differential effects on Protestant and Catholic households. It is therefore considered

[1] In Northern Ireland the statutory measure of housing quality continues to be the old Fitness Standard, although the Department for Communities has consulted on introducing a more modern standard drawing on elements of the Housing Health and Safety Standard.
[2] The most recent figures based on the 2016 survey have not yet been released.

vital to understand the political and institutional context in order to making a meaningful contribution to housing policy. The Housing Executive, in particular, which was established in 1971 against a background of political violence and widespread allegations of discrimination in the allocation of council housing at that time, occupies a special place in the political history of Northern Ireland.

Although its constitutional status remains contested, Northern Ireland is an integral part of the UK, but with distinctive governance arrangements headed by a 'power sharing' Northern Ireland Executive with considerable devolved power in relation to housing[3]. As part of the process of administrative normalisation within the context of the 'Peace Process' formalised by the 1998 (Belfast/Good Friday) Agreement, there has been an ongoing review and modification of governance structures in Northern Ireland with regard to social housing. Prior to devolution there was comparatively little policy divergence between the four jurisdictions in the UK with regard to housing generally (Mullins and Murie, 2006; Paris, 2008, Muir, 2012). Subsequently, however, and particularly since 2010, policy divergence increased significantly, especially in relation to policies designed to support households on low incomes and/or in the social or private rented sectors (McKee et al., 2017; Moore, 2017, NIHE, 2015). Northern Ireland, for example, is the only jurisdiction where tenants in the social sector are currently still by and large protected from the effects of the so-called 'bedroom tax' introduced in England, Wales and Scotland and where direct payment of rent from social tenants to landlords is the norm.

In Northern Ireland, a key ongoing policy difference compared to the rest of the UK has been the absence of any Large Scale Voluntary Transfer of social housing from the Housing Executive to housing associations. Government has tried to address this as part of a Social Housing Reform Programme (SHRP), set in motion by the Department for Social Development in 2012, a major objective of which was to transfer the Housing Executive's housing stock out of public ownership and into the hands of one or more (new or existing) housing associations, thus gaining access to private finance that would provide the substantial funding required to

[3] In January 2017 the Northern Ireland Executive collapsed as a result of serious differences between the two biggest parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party, and at the time of writing it has still not been restored.

upgrade the Housing Executive's stock (Frey, 2014). Significant progress had been made in terms of the consultative process, but the reform programme was effectively put into cold storage in 2016, because of party political differences, a situation compounded by the current political impasse, which has meant that (at the time of writing) there has been no Northern Ireland Assembly minister responsible for housing since January 2017.

Other distinctive features of the Northern Ireland political and institutional context include the legacy of decades of political violence and the resultant widespread ethno-religious residential segregation, in social housing in particular (Paris et al., 2003; Shanks and Mullins, 2016; Murtagh, 2016). The legacy of this continues to dominate a significant part of the debate on the future of social housing and is reflected in ongoing low key discussions between government officials and political (including paramilitary) representatives on how best to address not only the 'Peace Walls' which dominate the interfaces in many parts of Belfast, but also the more invisible 'Green Lines' separating local housing markets defined in terms of religious affiliation. This is of particular importance when examining the issue of housing supply, where the concept of historically determined 'territoriality' (in North and West Belfast in particular) has led to the juxtaposition of areas of derelict land and underused housing (traditionally 'Protestant' areas) and areas high demand (need) for social housing where there is severe housing stress, but with little potential land available (traditionally 'Catholic' areas), (Gaffikin, 2016; NIHE, 2014; Wallace, 2015).

Finally, although not directly a matter related to the social sector, it is important to note that Northern Ireland was also the region of the UK that was most severely affected by the housing market crash and economic downturn precipitated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/08. Average house prices in Northern Ireland remain more than a third below their peak in 2007 (LPS, 2018; Ulster University, 2018) and it remains the only region in the UK to still have a significant number of owner-occupiers in negative equity (DSDNI, 2015a).

Research and evidence

This section sets out a number of the key policy challenges facing social housing in Northern Ireland and highlights some recent research evidence designed to address them. They are not unusual in the context of the UK, but Northern Ireland's specific historical-political context – religious segregation and its wider effects – exacerbates the difficulties of addressing them. The Department for Social Development's (now Department for Communities) consultation document on a Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland (DSDNI, 2012) and the final document

(Facing the Future: The Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017 (DSDNI, 2015b) highlighted the major policy issues.

Supply of social housing

Ensuring an adequate supply of social housing has been a key challenge for Northern Ireland for many years. Long gone are the 1980s, when housing in Northern Ireland was still considered a top priority for government, and when the Housing Executive typically built more than 5,000 new dwellings a year. Increasing restrictions on public finance in the 1990s resulted in significant reductions in a programme that was increasingly being delivered by housing associations. From 1994 the Social Housing Development Programme (as it later became known) was guided by a Net Stock Model (see below), which over the years estimated the annual requirement for new social dwellings to meet newly arising need to be anywhere between 1,000 and 2,500. The variation in this figure over the years reflected the fact that it was essentially a residual model and its outcome was therefore highly dependent on projections of private sector output.

The Department for Social Development's consultation document on its Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland (DSDNI, 2012) highlighted the supply issue as a key factor in creating "the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market" (p.8). It proposed a multi-pronged approach, including more innovative approaches to funding (amended design standards, harmonisation of rents, attracting housing associations from GB) to enable a lower level of Housing Association Grant to be paid, thereby making existing resources go further. Developer Contributions was seen as a key planning policy instrument to be introduced in Northern Ireland as and when economic circumstances permitted.

In 2014, against a background of tighter public expenditure constraints, a public consultation on proposals designed to enable an increase in the supply of affordable housing (social housing and shared ownership housing) through developer contributions was launched (DSDNI: Developer Contributions for Affordable Housing; DoE: Draft Planning Policy Statement 22 (PPS22): Affordable Housing). The Department for Social Development was to establish and resource multi-disciplinary teams to negotiate the necessary legal agreements with developers. It was envisaged that developer contributions would be based on the overall profitability of a given scheme and informed by economic viability modelling. Each developer seeking planning permission for a development of five or more housing units would be required to contribute to affordable housing, in line with Housing Need Assessments undertaken by the Housing Executive. For purposes of consistency and clarity, and to achieve the necessary level of affordable housing, a regional target level of contribution – for example, a minimum 20% – might also be set. In specific circumstances, off-site provision or payment of a commuted sum could be justified, with commuted sums ring-fenced to fund affordable housing in areas of need.

Approximately half of the written responses agreed that a policy was necessary, while the remainder were more cautious or opposed to the proposal, usually citing the significant challenges faced by the construction industry and the potential impact on housing supply. Opinion was divided on many of the more detailed proposals and many suggested there was a need for further research, and, in particular, for a business impact assessment and clarification on the method of calculating financial viability.

In parallel to this a study entitled *Developer Contributions for Affordable Housing in Northern Ireland* was undertaken by the Three Dragons consultancy in partnership with Heriot-Watt University on behalf of the Department for Social Development (DSDNI, 2015). This report also highlighted the 'fragile' state of Northern Ireland's housing market and concluded that any developer contribution scheme without public subsidy would not be viable except in Belfast and its immediate surroundings. Recommendations from this report included the need for grant aid and development incentives as a means to introduce a practicable scheme as well as the establishment of a government support team to developers to advise on viability issues.

However, in the context of the ongoing challenging housing market conditions faced by developers and in the light of the consultation findings and the Three Dragons/Heriot-Watt research, the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Social Development jointly agreed that on the need for further research before deciding the way ahead for the policy – effectively putting it into cold storage.

A Housing Supply Forum was established in 2013 chaired by a leading representative of the construction industry and tasked with "identifying ways of helping to increase housing supply in Northern Ireland" (DSDNI, 2016, p.4). The Forum identified a number of key issues impacting housing supply: including availability of land in areas of housing need, availability of private and public finance, local developer capacity and the lengthy timescales for statutory consents. Its findings, published in 2016, made 10 recommendations. These recommendations included giving consideration to adopting a policy of "presumption in favour of sustainable development" in Northern Ireland; analysing key performance information arising from local council planning decisions undertaken at regular intervals; undertaking independent empirical research with both statutory authorities and the development community into housing delivery time-frames, to determine the actual time-frames being experienced; and launching a study to track selected housing development projects through the approval and delivery process with the purpose of identifying and removing barriers or blockages. These recommendations did not receive universal acceptance, a common theme being that they focused on what government could do rather than taking a partnership approach to solving the housing supply problem as well as an overemphasis on the role of the planning system.

In January 2017, the Department for Communities established a Housing Market Symposium in response to a key indicator contained in Northern Ireland's draft Programme for Government 2016-21: "the gap between the number of houses we need and the number of houses we have" (DSDNI, 2018). The Symposium was tasked with assessing current evidence on the nature and extent of the housing supply problem in Northern Ireland across all tenures and concluded that the planning process, and in particular the length of time taken to approve some planning applications, has impacted on supply in certain specific locations, but that these delays are by no means necessarily the result of inefficiencies on the part of the planning departments. This does not alter the fact that housing associations are currently still facing some difficulties in obtaining planning approval for certain sites, but often this can be related to other factors, including site conditions and challenges from existing local residents opposed to social housing developments for a variety of reasons. However, the Symposium's preliminary assessment of the evidence suggests that there is a significant evidence gap around the whole relationship between the planning process and housing supply and highlights the need for an independent comprehensive review of the relationship in the context of current housing market conditions.

Welfare reform

As in the rest of the UK, the impact of welfare reform poses a significant challenge to the social housing sector. This programme of changes to the benefits system for working age claimants, came into effect in Northern Ireland following the introduction of the Welfare Reform Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. Greene & Porter (2018) provide a useful summary of the current position in Northern Ireland, where, in line with the 'parity principle', the welfare policies of the Department of Works and Pensions (and its predecessors) have traditionally been adopted. A lack of consensus among Northern Ireland's political parties, however, meant that the timing and detail of some of the specific changes diverged significantly from other parts of the UK. In particular, Northern Ireland secured a number of mitigations, including indefinite direct payment of the housing element of Universal Credit to all social landlords (indeed to private landlords too) and the provision of funding ('Welfare Supplementary Payment') to protect existing working-age claimants impacted by changes such as the benefit cap and the bedroom tax ('social sector size criteria') until 31 March 2020. However, Housing Executive officials (who are responsible in Northern Ireland for administering Housing Benefit (HB)) have expressed concern that these concessions "have fostered a false sense of security among claimants, many of whom appear to have given little consideration to welfare reform and how they will deal with reductions in their income when mitigation ends" (Greene and Porter, 2018:49).

In Northern Ireland, the benefit cap was introduced in two phases: the first of these was in June 2016, and the second in November 2016. Analysis undertaken by the Housing Executive indicates that the overall effect of this was limited. The implementation of the 'social size criteria' began in Northern Ireland in February 2017, and a phased roll-out of Universal Credit in September 2017. While most existing claimants are protected from the impact of these, drawing on research undertaken in GB, there is deep concern in Northern Ireland about their impact on the living standards of tenants. Evidence from GB indicates that a year after implementation of the bedroom tax only half of the affected tenants were making rent payments in full. A further two-fifths were making good a proportion of the shortfall and one in ten were making no additional payments to cover the shortfall. Furthermore, three-fifths had reduced spending on household essentials, while one in four had borrowed money to help manage the shortfall (Greene & Porter, 2018).

Analysis of administrative data undertaken by the Housing Executive provides some insight into the potential impacts bedroom tax may have on both existing and future social tenants in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of both Housing Executive and housing association dwellings have two or more bedrooms. Only 18% of the entire self-contained social stock has only one bedroom. However, single (working age) applicants consistently account for almost half (45%) of the waiting list and a similar proportion of allocations each year. There is therefore a considerable mismatch between the type of stock available and that likely to be required by housing applicants of working age. Some 35,000 existing social sector claimants face a reduction in housing benefit for under-occupancy, and it appears that a significant proportion of new working age tenants will face the choice between accepting a home where there is a shortfall between the rent and the amount of benefit received or remaining longer on an already lengthy waiting list (Greene & Porter, 2018).

The phased roll-out of Universal Credit began as planned in September 2017. The online application process has already led to concerns, in particular the ability of some applicants without the necessary communication and computer skills to successfully navigate the complexities of the system (Young et al., 2017). The successful roll-out of Universal Credit is to a considerable extent dependent on digital inclusion, whereas Housing Executive research in relation to its own tenants indicates that less than three-fifths of its tenants had access to the internet from home in 2016 (NIHE, 2017b). Other concerns include the lengthy assessment period, its impact on household resources and the resulting impact on arrears.

A number of housing associations and the Housing Executive have indicated that the roll-out of Universal Credit has already led in many cases to a significant increase in rent arrears of households in receipt of Universal Credit. The removal of the automatic entitlement to the housing costs element of Universal Credit for 18-21 year olds was initially also a concern, particularly for those living outside the family home, given that younger single people are disproportionately at risk of poverty and homelessness (Young et al. 2017). However, this appears to be no longer such an issue following an announcement by the Prime Minister in March 2018. Housing Executive sources would also indicate that the bedroom tax and the introduction of Universal Credit (in the context of mitigations until March 2020) has resulted in a reduction in tenant transfers – who as a result of moving home or changing circumstances would lose their protected status – that militates against more effective use of the housing stock, and that this is evidenced by a significant reduction in the number of relets.

Homelessness and allocations policy

The most recent Homelessness Monitor for Northern Ireland (Fitzpatrick, et al. 2016) provides an independent analysis of this high profile issue, focussing on the impact of the deep post-GFC recession in Northern Ireland and UK government policy changes implemented since 2010. The report utilises a broad definition of homelessness that includes, rough sleeping, single people in hostels and temporary accommodation, statutorily homeless households and the hidden homeless.

In 2015/16 some 18,600 households presented as homeless to the Housing Executive. Approximately 60 per cent were deemed to be ‘Full Duty Applicants’ (FDA), an increase of 13 per cent in FDA cases since 2012/13 – with ‘accommodation not reasonable’ (often older people no longer able to live in their current home) showing as the most significant reason for presentation. Unlike in England there has not been such a significant upturn in the ‘loss of rented accommodation’ category, due in part to more limited increases in private sector rents than in England and the retention of direct payment to landlords in Northern Ireland (Fitzpatrick, et al. 2016). The use of temporary accommodation has remained fairly steady in recent years at around 3,000 placements a year. The report notes that the rate of statutory homelessness is higher in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, partly as a result of falling rates in the other jurisdictions, but also because of the administrative tradition that tends to re-house older people using the homelessness route and what one interviewee referred to as the “disproportionate additional priority” given to homelessness cases (Fitzpatrick, et al. 2016, p.36) as a result of the current Housing Selection Scheme that operates throughout Northern Ireland – an issue that is currently being addressed by the Department for Communities’ *Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations* (DfCNI, 2017).

In 2016, the issue of homelessness became headline news in Northern Ireland in recent times initially because of the death of five people who had been sleeping on the streets. However, closer examination found that drug addiction and mental health issues were major factors in these deaths, rather than simply homelessness. Homelessness continues to be a major ongoing controversial issue that cuts across a number of policy areas, including housing supply, allocations, welfare reform and the interface between health and housing.

In November 2017, the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) published its report on Homelessness in Northern Ireland (NIAO, 2017). It highlighted a number of key statistics, some of which illustrate substantial differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Between 2012 and 2017, there was a 32 per cent increase in statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland. Approximately one third of all cases were on the grounds of ‘accommodation not reasonable’ – reflecting to a considerable degree the aging profile of population whose older people need smaller more suitable (e.g. ground floor) accommodation. In Northern Ireland, approximately 80 per cent of all social dwellings that become available for relet are allocated to statutorily homeless households, a figure that is much higher than in the other three UK jurisdictions where the comparable figures lie between 13% and 38%.

The NIAO report is critical of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for being slow to adopt the preventative approach that has resulted in decreasing levels of presentations and acceptances in GB in recent years (an approach that in Scotland and Wales is already embedded in legislation). The report notes that the NIHE is in the process of implementing its own preventative model – Housing Solutions and Support – a process that is due to complete in 2018. The NIAO report also records that the new Homelessness Strategy 2017-27 (NIHE, 2017) places greater emphasis on prevention, but noted that this is heavily dependent on collaborative working and co-ordination between the public sector and voluntary sector – who are largely responsible for managing housing schemes for homeless people in Northern Ireland.

Maintaining and improving Housing Executive dwellings

The Decent Homes Standard was adopted in Northern Ireland in 2004, with the aim of ensuring that the entire social housing stock would meet the standard by 2010. The much younger age of housing association dwellings meant that upgrading to the new standard was primarily a concern for the Housing Executive. Successive House Condition Surveys have shown that the proportion of its dwellings failing to meet the standard has declined in recent years. The 2011 House Condition Survey indicated that only four per cent of social homes in to meet the Decent Homes Standard (in 2006 the figure was 22%), reflecting primarily ongoing investment in new, more efficient heating systems and insulation in existing properties, and the high energy efficiency standards incorporated in the new build dwellings provided by housing associations. However, the original target has still not been achieved. In addition to ongoing restrictions on public expenditure, a substantial fall in income from capital receipts (following the capping of discount on social dwellings to £24,000 and the effects of the housing market boom and bust in the 2000s) led directly to a significant reduction in the funding available to invest in improvements to Housing Executive stock.

A comprehensive survey of the Housing Executive's stock, undertaken in 2014 by Savills, updated a similar exercise undertaken in 2009, which estimated a requirement for investment of £5.1 billion over a 30-year period to maintain and modernise the Housing Executive's stock. The more recent survey took into account a number of new regulatory compliance requirements, increased costs and the lack of funds to invest in essential component replacement work in the intervening years and indicated that more than £6.1 billion was required.

An attempt to get around this issue by transferring relatively small numbers of Housing Executive properties in need of significant repairs has so far had only limited success. Two pilot schemes that had been identified in Derry/Londonderry and Bangor involving more than 120 properties were transferred (to two of the larger housing associations in Northern Ireland: Apex and Oaklee – now Choice) following a vote that indicated tenants were in favour of the proposal on the basis that their homes would be upgraded to modern standards over a number of years. More recently, however, there are indications that tenants are no longer persuaded by the arguments in favour of this type of transfer. A recent attempt to transfer Housing Executive homes in Ballyclare to a housing association was voted down decisively. Anecdotal evidence suggested concerns about rent increases were an important factor in this. The overall impact is that Housing Executive stock (effectively two-thirds of Northern Ireland's social housing stock) is gradually deteriorating with no sign that the necessary capital and revenue finance to arrest this decline is to be made available in the foreseeable future.

Policy options

There is general agreement among policy makers and practitioners that policy options to address these four key areas are limited. Primarily, this reflects a combination of economic headwinds and a housing market that has by no means fully recovered from the impact of the Global Financial Crisis. However, the challenge of dealing with the key issues facing the housing sector in Northern Ireland are undoubtedly compounded by the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive and an understandable reluctance of senior policy makers in government to pursue an agenda without ministerial leadership.

A number of ideas have emerged from informal discussions with key players in housing sector. Some of these are by no means new and have been the subject of debate before, indeed some are well developed but have been put in cold storage pending the return of a Minister responsible for housing. However, there is general agreement that in the absence of either significant additional government funding or a remarkable economic upturn (neither of which seem at all likely for the foreseeable future) there are no policy silver bullets that can really overcome these challenges to a significant degree. Nevertheless, set out below are some suggestions which could in the short-term help ameliorate the challenging situation and in the longer term provide some more significant gains.

Supply of social housing

Affordability problems in the private sector generally and the challenges that many vulnerable tenants feel in the private rented sector, in particular, mean that pressures on the social sector for additional accommodation are unremitting. Ongoing pressure on public sector finances has been reflected in the housing sector in Northern Ireland in 2018/19 in a reduction in the government target for the number of social dwellings to be built from 2,000 to 1,750, despite a rise in ‘housing stress’ (urgent need). Over the past two decades there has been a reluctance in government circles to reconsider the potential for the Housing Executive to resurrect its new build role because of the impact on government borrowing. However, Housing Executive is keen to undertake small scale infill development on its own estates, where conditions are suitable in order to obviate the need for what is often an expensive and time consuming process of land acquisition faced by housing associations – particularly in areas of high demand/need where there can be stiff competition from private sector developers. This policy development would mirror the growing appetite in England for Local Authorities to once again become direct providers of new social (affordable) homes. Outline proposals put to the Department for Communities by the NIHE are under consideration.

The introduction of developer contributions in Northern Ireland was put on hold some years ago, pending a significant upturn in the market. Analysis of the leading house price indices would indicate that the market has undergone a slow but fairly steady recovery over the past three years. In line with recommendations from the Three Dragons /Heriot Watt report it may well be time to revisit this issue, giving serious consideration to the recommendations in the report in relation to government incentives to promote this – something that could provide a cost effective use of public funding. The importance of working closely with developers, to understand the challenges they face is vital - particularly in relation to the regeneration of older urban areas.

Welfare reform

Indications from discussions with policy makers and practitioners were, not unexpectedly, rather negative in relation to the impact of welfare reform. The whole underlying Conservative philosophy driving welfare reform is not widely accepted. Mitigation measures are widely seen as holding back the tide, but there is pessimism about whether these will be extended past March 2020 when pressures on health and education budgets may increasingly take precedence. Best practice ideas abound in terms of dealing with the challenges and fallout, but policy ideas in this sphere are notable by their absence.

Homelessness

There is general agreement amongst key players that the way forward is through the greater emphasis on preventative measures and in line with the analysis presented by Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018), which notes that “while a range of health and support needs and behavioural issues, particularly in the teenage years, do significantly contribute to the risks of homelessness in young adulthood, the underlying causes are more to do with poverty”. The growth of street homelessness is particularly difficult to address given the link between it and the polysubstance abuse that is increasingly associated with this category of homelessness. Providing the complex support that is required to address these issues is hampered by budgetary pressures, including on the Supporting People programme.

Maintaining and improving Housing Executive homes

The difficulties addressing ongoing maintenance and improvement requirements are essentially a reflection of budgetary pressures. The shelving of the Social Housing Reform Programme for the foreseeable future appears to limit options for addressing this issue on a large scale and rent freezes in recent years have added to the problem. Small scale transfer to housing associations of developments requiring considerable improvement work will help at the margins. Historically a considerable proportion of funding for improvements to NIHE stock flowed from the sale of capital assets. However, while some income is still available from the sale of land that is surplus to requirements in terms of housing need, there is (understandably given the shortage of social dwellings) no political or policy appetite to re-invigorate the House Sales Scheme by significantly raising the current discount limit of £24,000 – a restriction which severely curtails the ability of tenants on very low incomes to purchase their dwelling.

Rethinking Social Housing

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the policy initiative *Rethinking Social Housing* launched earlier this year by the Chartered Institute of Housing funded primarily by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland. Currently underway, this initiative is using a combination of original research and engagement with stakeholders to address a number of key questions surrounding the future of social housing, including its future role and how government can make best use of it in its overall quest to provide a decent affordable home for all. The final report will undoubtedly provide valuable insights into the viable policy options for any new Minister for Communities in Northern Ireland – whenever s/he returns.

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University of Glasgow
3rd Floor, Olympia, 2-16 Orr Street, Bridgeton Cross, Glasgow, G40 2QH

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