Democratic Unionist Party: Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward

The DUP manifesto was launched on Monday 18th April and is available to download at www.dup.org.uk.

General

Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward has a series of specific actions under key priority areas such as ‘Making Progress’, ‘Early Intervention’ and ‘Helping Households in Difficult Times’. Some of these are very clear commitments that could see immediate action – such as opening a new radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital – while others are more aspirational – striving to make Northern Ireland the best place in the UK to do business. The manifesto also points to initiatives that the DUP would consider introducing based upon their success elsewhere such as the Total Place initiatives. The manifesto has a section on Housing, but there are also a number of other direct or indirect implications for housing in other policy priorities:

Integration

The manifesto states that the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration was “merely a starting point” and a more shared and united Northern Ireland is a theme that runs throughout the document. Shared spaces are endorsed as a concept and there are a number of specific measures on how to actively encourage greater integration, particularly in relation to education. The DUP state that they will seek to reduce spending on division and duplication and outline some of the areas that will be targeted, amongst which is expenditure on social housing.

Economy

At the heart of the manifesto is a focus on the economy and employment over the next four years. Maximising job creation in the short–term is a stated priority and, although housing is not mentioned in the list of examples of how this might be achieved, investment in housing as a means of boosting jobs in the construction sector would meet this objective.
Also with the intention of promoting economic growth is the suggestion of a graduate home loan scheme for first-time buyers with degrees in subjects crucial to improving the economy.

Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward commits to establishing a retrofit programme across Northern Ireland that would provide a range of energy efficiency measures that will create jobs, combat fuel poverty, reduce carbon emissions and cut energy bills for households.

Improving employability is another key area and one proposal that could have implications for housing organisations is ensuring sufficient training places for the unemployed though apprenticeships and internships.

Social Impact Bonds
The DUP manifesto suggests that social impact bonds could be a way of improving peoples’ lives at a reduced cost to government through preventative initiatives. This would involve ‘unlocking cash’ from both the private and charitable sectors. One example provided of where social impact bonds – essentially contracts where initial funding is provided to kickstart initiatives and interventions and the remainder is paid when certain outcomes have been achieved – have been effective elsewhere relates to a community housing scheme, so it is possible that this proposal could encompass housing delivery in Northern Ireland.

Older People
Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward states that DUP would seek to extend the Warm Homes Scheme and be more flexible about permitting repairs or upgrades of gas and oil boilers for older people. There is also a commitment (outlined under Health) to provide more resources for modifications in older people’s homes to help prevent falls and costly medical treatment that could have been avoided.

Crime/Community Safety
The DUP manifesto proposes a much tougher approach to ‘brick bandits’ and suggests that they would reverse the current policy of the Housing Executive to not seek prosecutions. The manifesto states that this issue is one that should also be taken more seriously by the courts.

Reforming Government
There are a number of proposals within this section of the manifesto that would have an indirect impact on housing policy and delivery. The DUP states that they would seek to break down barriers to joined-up
government and incentives cross-Departmental collaboration. More cross-Departmental working would go hand in hand with more partnership working with the voluntary and private sectors. The manifesto also proposes:

- Maximising the capital spend available to Departments by reclassifying resource allocations;
- Legislating to enable asset rich public service providers to raise private finance;
- More direct accountability through the rationalisation of arms-length bodies, with those that remain being required to provide an annual performance report and focusing on implementation rather than decision-making; and
- Tackling the culture of risk aversion among Departments and other public authorities.

The DUP manifesto also proposes a reduction in the number of government departments and a restructuring of the existing Ministerial portfolios. Under the proposed new structure, the Department for Social Development would be replaced by a new Department of Communities and Social Welfare, which would have responsibility for local government, housing, land and property services and the Social Security Agency. Planning would move to the Department for Regional Development as would urban regeneration.

Renewing Communities
Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward proposes introducing a Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill that would enable communities to make use of public assets and dormant land. It provides detail on the Social Investment Fund as an area-based approach across eight investment zones, investing in projects that support disadvantaged communities to end dereliction, find routes into employment and increase community services. There are also a number of very specific commitments to improve the quality of public services and introduce schemes that have benefits for the whole community, such as community allotments.

Helping Households in Difficult Times
The manifesto recognises that the current economic climate will result in financial challenges for households and proposes actions with regard to Fuel Poverty and Welfare. The DUP aspiration is to drive down fuel poverty levels in Northern Ireland so that they are comparable with the rest of the United Kingdom. In light of the fact that nearly half the population of Northern Ireland is deemed to be in fuel poverty, the manifesto proposes targeting interventions and action at those in most need to assistance. However, they would
promote energy efficiency measures in all housing tenures and develop an Energy Assistance Package to maximise the number of people getting advice and assistance with energy efficiency. Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward also proposes having a single point of contact for all fuel poverty and energy efficiency advice and fully implementing a Boiler Scrappage Scheme for Northern Ireland.

The manifesto indicates that the DUP would continue to make the case to DWP that welfare reforms should not have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland. It does, however, commit to supporting and implementing “logical welfare reforms” that simplify the social security system and help people move from welfare to work. Improving access to benefits through benefit uptake campaigns; ensuring that the system takes account of the particular needs of some claimants; and supporting people in times of difficulty (for instance extending the winter fuel allowance to cancer sufferers) are all key actions outlined in the manifesto. It also states that the DUP would pilot the automatic payment of benefits.
Housing

The DUP manifesto recognises that there is a significant rationale for investing in housing in terms of its positive impacts on the local economy, health and education. There are a number of actions within the housing priority, first of which would be the development of a comprehensive Homes and Communities strategy – to be agreed by the housing sector. In addition to the overarching Homes and Communities Strategy, the manifesto also proposes the development of a comprehensive, cross-Departmental homelessness strategy. The DUP also propose establishing a Northern Ireland Housing Forum which would involve all housing providers and representatives from government departments with a role in housing, including the Departments for Social Development and Finance and Personnel and a planning representative.

Placing an increased emphasis on the housing needs of the vulnerable, including older people and those with disabilities, and ensuring that processes are more sympathetic to their needs is another key action.

Institutional structures are a key area of focus with the manifesto calling for an early decision on the outcome of the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The DUP also state that they would welcome options that separate the strategic and landlord functions and utilise the Housing Executive’s assets to make social housing more self-financing. The manifesto also proposes examining how to create a single regulator for the housing sector which would encompass all housing tenures.

Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward also suggests that the DUP would seek to create certainty on future Housing Executive rent levels, although it is not clear exactly what this might entail. Any revenue raised, presumably by increasing rents, would be reinvested in reinstating empty homes, maintaining existing stock and installing energy efficiency measures. Other actions in relation to social housing include:

- Seeking a better balance between funding new build social housing and maintaining existing stock;
- Initiating a review of the Common Selection Scheme;
- Introducing legislation to strengthen the powers of social landlords to deal with anti-social tenants and extending those powers if possible to include private landlords and tenants;
- Extending the programme of installing carbon monoxide monitors;
• Working with telecommunications companies to develop a programme to provide affordable broadband access in social housing; and
• Consulting on a new process to regularly review the needs of tenants in social homes.

The manifesto also has a number of proposals in relation to affordable housing and suggests exploring how funding for the Co–Ownership scheme could be increased. In addition, the DUP propose establishing a government backed loan scheme for first–time buyers. Promoting shared ownership schemes and providing existing tenants with more opportunities to own or part–on their homes is another element of the affordable housing proposals. The manifesto also indicates that the DUP would work with housing associations to see if there are opportunities to enhance the role that housing associations play in developing affordable housing and regenerating communities.

In conjunction with expanding housing associations’ capacity to develop affordable housing and increase their role in place–making and community regeneration, Let’s Keep Northern Ireland Moving Forward proposes achieving ‘optimum efficiency’ in the housing association movement through procurement and consolidation.

For homeowners facing difficulties in meeting their mortgage payments, the DUP manifest suggests examining appropriate schemes that could offer financial assistance, advice and support.

The manifesto also states that a DUP Minister for Social Development would establish a light touch, mandatory register for private landlords.

Implications

The DUP manifesto clearly states that “the case for investment in housing is a compelling one” and makes the connection between good housing and other public policy priorities such as the economy, health and education.

The proposal to develop a Homes and Communities strategy would have a significant impact on housing policy in pulling together existing policies and strategies and providing an overarching framework for housing policy and delivery and a much–needed strategic vision and sense of direction. Agreeing such a strategy with the housing sector
would also help to ensure that housing organisations feel a sense of ownership for the strategy and its implementation.

New partnerships and more joined-up working is a theme throughout the manifesto and the establishment of a Northern Ireland Housing Forum could help to facilitate joint ventures for the delivery of housing and housing support and early engagement and collaboration with regard to the development of housing policy.

There are other specific actions with clear implications for housing policy – a focus on intermediate housing and investing in schemes that help first time buyers – as well as the way housing operates. The manifesto points to a clear sense of what the review of the Housing Executive could mean in terms of new structures and also new opportunities for housing associations to diversity their business model.

There are also a number of actions within other priorities that would have implications for housing, as discussed above.

Although there is a particular emphasis on social and affordable housing, the DUP manifesto acknowledges the need to sustain and boost the construction sector through investment in housing and also looks to increased regulation of the private rented sector. There is also the suggestion of a more holistic approach to the housing sector with a strategy, housing forum and regulator that encompass all housing tenures and housing providers.
For more information on CIH’s Housing Pact and our work during the election period and beyond, please contact Jennifer Donald, CIH Northern Ireland’s Policy and Public Affairs Officer.