Mixed-tenure and local development plans - from strategy to delivery

Post-event report

Contents

Executive Summary

On 29 January 2026, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and Co-Ownership hosted a high-level, cross-sector workshop facilitated by Andrew Webb, Chief Economist at Grant Thornton. The event brought together around 30 key stakeholders including local council planners, private developers and housing association leaders to discuss ways of bridging the gap between emerging Local Development Plan (LDP) policies and the practical delivery of affordable housing in Northern Ireland.

Through a rigorous three-stage methodology – encompassing issue identification, root cause analysis and impact/effort prioritisation – delegates diagnosed the systemic 'blockers' currently delaying mixed-tenure developments.

Key findings include:

- Systemic friction: Significant delays are caused by a lack of standardisation in Section 76 planning agreements and a technical 'skills gap' regarding intermediate products

- Data gaps: Current district-level data is insufficient for site-specific delivery; a shared methodology for determining local intermediate need is a critical requirement

- Viability & mission: There is a pressing need to align commercial development realities with the social missions of providers to ensure sites remain deliverable in a challenging economic climate.

The path forward

The workshop identified a suite of 'quick wins', such as the creation of a sector-wide 'glossary of terms' and formalising early engagement at the Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) stage. These are supported by 'major projects', including the development of a Northern Ireland-wide model Section 76 agreement, an accredited skills programme, and a central, 'front door' source of information, all representing an appetite for collaborative solutions. This report serves as the strategic roadmap for continued engagement with the Department for Communities and local government to unblock the housing pipeline for 2026 and beyond.

Methodology: A three-stage strategic approach

The workshop's three-stage methodology was designed to identify key challenges and potential solutions. The proposed actions and recommendations that emerged from this process are intended to serve as a starting point for further discussion and collaboration with the relevant stakeholders, including those with delivery responsibility for these areas. It is acknowledged that additional work will be required to fully explore, develop and implement these solutions, and to ensure their effective integration with existing policies and processes.

Stage 1: Issue identification and theming

The session began with an independent "big three" exercise, where each delegate identified their primary challenges. These were then discussed at table level and clustered into themes. Through a plenary feedback session, the facilitator distilled these into core 'deep-dive' topics that formed the basis for the remaining stages.

Stage 2: The "root cause tree" analysis

To ensure solutions addressed the source of problems rather than just the symptoms, groups used a "root cause tree" visualisation:

- The trunk represented the core problem
- The branches represented the visible symptoms or knock-on effects
- The roots represented the underlying causes; delegates were encouraged to keep asking "why?" until they identified a root cause they could genuinely influence.

Stage 3: Impact vs. effort prioritisation

Finally, groups brainstormed actions to resolve the identified root causes. These were mapped onto a 2x2 matrix to categorise them as:

- Quick wins: High impact / low effort (priority items)
- Major projects: High impact / high effort (strategic, resourced items)
- Fill-ins: Low impact / low effort
- Thankless tasks: Low impact / high effort (to be avoided).

Summary of stage 1: Issue identification and theming

The individual and table exercises generated a volume of data which have been distilled into sub-themes:

A. Process and procedural bottlenecks

- Section 76 inconsistency: Recurring concerns regarding the lack of standardisation in Section 76 clauses and agreements, including the approach to their negotiation, the methodology for determining affordable housing requirements, and the inconsistent enforcement of these requirements, featuring delays and variability in their application

- Council variability: Feedback highlighted "inconsistency between council areas" regarding monitoring, enforcement and the management of affordable housing triggers

- Early engagement: A strong consensus on the importance of engagement with planners and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) before a planning application is submitted (e.g. at the PAD stage).

B. Financial viability and market dynamics

- Viability gaps: Direct feedback on "financial viability in a challenging market", specifically how rising costs interact with fixed affordable percentages, particularly for developers who have already been on-site for extended periods

- City centre specifics: Discussions on the delivery and management of one-bed apartments, lender appetite for these units, and the risk of market failure in high-density urban settings

- Information and stigma: Points raised regarding the "stigma of social housing", and the need for better information for consumers to build understanding of mixed-tenure development and intermediate homes, ensuring they are attractive to the 'squeezed middle'.

C. Capacity, knowledge and education

- Understanding of 'intermediate' housing: A perceived "lack of skills and understanding" within statutory bodies and at a political level regarding the different types of intermediate products and the mechanics of intermediate rent (which has yet to launch)

- Intermediate rent evolution: Concerns regarding the current pilot status of intermediate rent, and the need to consider how it can be scaled up and evolve into wider delivery, maximising its contribution to mixed-tenure developments

- Resource constraints: Concerns regarding "capacity within council planning teams" to assess complex viability appraisals

- Sector-wide collaboration and education: The need for a 'front door' approach – potentially a central source of information for developers, facilitated through sector-wide knowledge-sharing and collaboration

- Expert working group: The need for an expert working group to develop a shared methodology and framework for sector-wide education, ensuring a consistent and effective approach to educating stakeholders on affordable housing products and processes.

D. Strategic alignment and evidence

- Defining need: "Lack of data on affordable need at a local level" and the difficulty in translating 15-year Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMA) into granular, site-specific requirements

- Provider purpose: Concern over "conflicting objectives for housing associations" – balancing their core social mission with the requirement to deliver tenures (like intermediate rent) where they may lose management control; likewise concern over conflicting objectives for private developers – balancing demand-led housing in a needs-based framework.

The top four challenges

Following the table feedback, the facilitator synthesised the room's input into four core themes:

1. Capacity and skills

Addressing the educational gap within statutory bodies and delivery partners

2. Viability and purpose

Examining financial mechanics and the core mission of housing providers

3. Section 76 standardisation

Developing a consistent, predictable framework for agreements

4. Determining intermediate need

Creating a robust, shared methodology for local market evidence.

Summary of stage 2: Root cause analysis (technical deep-dive)

Delegates used a 'root cause tree' methodology to diagnose the four core challenges. This approach separates observable symptoms (branches) from fundamental causes (roots).

A. Capacity and skills

- Symptoms: Operational inefficiency; pushback on planning rules due to lack of 'big picture' context; and poor value for money

- Root causes: Lack of commercially tested policy; vague high-level guidance; absence of case studies; and a need for technical training.

B. Viability and purpose

- Symptoms: Stalled delivery of sites; mission drift for HAs (building private to subsidise social); and market failure risks in city-centre apartment schemes

- Root causes: Macro-economic inflation; lack of specialised commercial expertise in councils; "clash of cultures" between social mission and commercial profit; and inflexible policy application.

C. Section 76 standardisation

- Symptoms: The "postcode lottery" of requirements; negotiation gridlock; high transaction costs; and ambiguous monitoring/enforcement roles

- Root causes: Lack of an NI-wide model template; undefined lead roles (Department for Communities [DfC] vs NIHE vs council); risk-aversion in legal drafting; and inconsistent "trigger point" definitions.

D. Determining intermediate need

- Symptoms: Building the "wrong type" of property; negotiation stalemates; and private developer hesitation to commit without sales data

- Root causes: Relying on outdated/high-level district data; siloed data sets; inconsistent methodologies for defining 'need'; and a lack of real-time local market intelligence.

Summary of stage 3: Impact vs. effort matrix

Following the root cause analysis, groups mapped potential interventions onto an impact/effort matrix. The goal was to filter the 'roots' identified into actionable projects, focussing on those that provide the best return on effort.

Capacity and skills	The consensus was that upskilling is a high-impact necessity; targeted education for all stakeholders was seen as a 'quick win', while establishing a "front door" or affordable housing unit for the sector was categorised as a 'major project' requiring DfC leadership
Determining need	Improving the flexibility of waiting lists and DPG (Development Programme Group) approvals were seen as impactful 'quick wins'; transitioning to site-specific market evidence and shared data hubs (e.g. using NIHE Data Hub more effectively) were identified as high effort but important long-term projects
Section 76 agreements	The group strongly prioritised the creation of clear guidance as a 'quick win'; however, the development of a standardised model agreement – while high effort – was deemed the most critical 'major project' to prevent gridlock
Viability	Early engagement at the PAD stage was viewed as a high-impact, low-effort 'quick win'; developing specialised expert working groups or viability review teams was categorised as a 'major project' that could be funded via planning fees.

⊳⊳ Suggested Actions

The following actions have been distilled from the workshop as potential ways forward for the sector. To ensure effective implementation, these actions will be taken forward through a structured and collaborative approach.

Quick wins (high impact / low effort)	1. Develop a "glossary of terms": Create a shared language for intermediate products to prevent communication breakdown 2. Library of case studies: Use local and UK-wide mixed-tenure examples to demonstrate "what works" to planners and developers, including monitoring and enforcement 3. Clarify 'intermediate rent': Launch a targeted promotion and education campaign to explain the mechanics of the emerging intermediate rent tenure.
Major projects (high impact / high effort	1. Northern Ireland 'model Section 76 agreement': Work with legal and planning leads to create a standardised template/clauses to reduce bespoke drafting delays 2. PAD stage integration: Formalise 'early engagement' to discuss Section 76 and viability before a full application is submitted 3. Accredited skills programme: Launch a technical training suite for council planning functions, focussing on development appraisals and intermediate products 4. Shared methodology for need: Commission a data-informed methodology to bridge the gap between district-level SHMA and site-specific market reality 5. Sector 'front door': Establish a centralised approach to act as a source of information and commercial testing for developers and councils.

To progress these actions, three targeted working groups will be established, each focusing on a specific theme.

- **Information and consistency:** This group will focus on improving information sharing and consistency, including the development of a shared glossary of terms, model Section 76 agreement/clauses, PAD stage integration, case studies and sector 'front door'

- **Consumer understanding and education:** This group will focus on enhancing consumer understanding and professional education, including clarifying intermediate rent, and launching an accredited skills programme

- **Determining need:** This group will focus on improving the methodology for determining need, including the development of a shared methodology for need and enhancing data-informed decision-making.

This structured approach will enable the sector to tackle the key challenges identified through the workshop and make meaningful progress towards delivering mixed-tenure developments.