



Chartered
Institute of
Housing
Northern Ireland

Manifesto for the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Election

Making the case for good quality, affordable and sustainable homes



Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent 'stay at home' message amplified the importance of having a safe, secure and affordable place to call home. At no other time in modern history has housing and wellbeing been so evidently inextricably linked. During the past two years our members have delivered housing and homelessness services with creativity and resilience in the context of ever increasing financial and social challenges. This is not unique to our industry, but never before has the work of housing and homelessness professionals been so vital to the interest of the communities we serve and wider society.

The next mandate presents an opportunity for elected representatives to recalibrate public service delivery in Northern Ireland. Person-centred policies can and do have tangible results for communities that produce better outcomes at all levels and areas of society, not least health and wellbeing. In order to achieve this, we would urge all political parties to commit to recognising housing as a lynchpin to creating healthy communities that are able to thrive. Such a commitment must be backed by coherent policies and practices that are people-led rather than process-led.

As it stands, there are over 43,000 households on the waiting list for a social home, with many tenants living in dwellings that are inadequate or unaffordable. The climate crisis has also invoked an urgent sense among housing professionals that a step-change is needed when it comes to how we build and live in our homes. To meet the challenges ahead, parties must lead with ambition and a willingness to change how we develop and deliver housing policy in Northern Ireland.

Alongside our members, we have identified four high level priority statements for housing and homelessness that require political commitment in the coming mandate:

- The right homes are built in the right places and people can afford them
- Raise the standard of homes and tackle climate change
- People on lower incomes can get and maintain a decent home
- Everyone has access to a decent safe place to call home and renters receive a fair good-quality service from their landlord.



The right homes are built in the right places and people can afford them

Parties to reaffirm their commitment that housing be made a specific outcome in the programme for government as signed up to by Executive parties in New Decade New Approach in 2020

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), have called upon the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that in any forthcoming programme for government, housing be included as a specific outcome with key indicators and a specific delivery plan. We were frustrated to see the omission of a specific housing outcome in the draft outcomes framework, published in 2021, despite the clear commitment made by the executive parties in the New Decade, New Approach agreement to include it. Housing plays a central role as a driver of our economy and is a key determinant of social wellbeing. It is imperative that parties agree to the inclusion of a housing outcome in the programme for government in the incoming mandate. We have been campaigning for this jointly alongside NIFHA, Homeless Connect and Housing Rights.

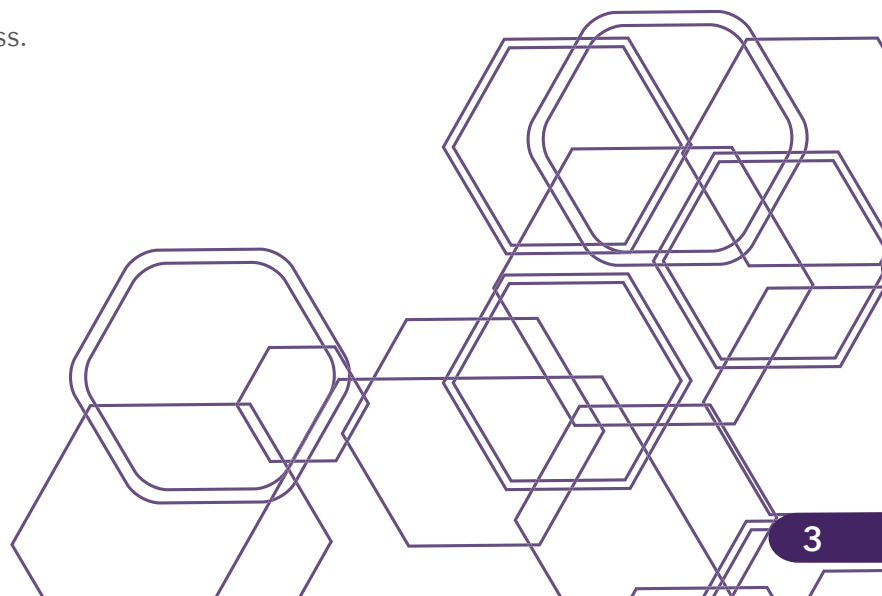
Provide the investment in social housing and strategy required to reduce housing stress

The new draft Housing Supply Strategy announced by the department is sound and ambitious, aiming for just over 2,200 social homes to be built each year. It will take a collective effort across all government departments to achieve this goal. Vitally, new and incremental funding will be key in ensuring these targets are reached. Although the introduction of multi-year budgets to help achieve this is welcome, long-term investment will be required to make it a success.

Tackle stigma through a parity of tenure approach wherever possible

CIH believes that a good way to build sustainable communities and help prevent the further residualisation and stigmatisation of social housing is to build mixed-tenure developments. We believe a 'whole system approach' to social housing can help tackle the stigma and false perceptions surrounding the tenure. In our view housing works better when different sectors work together in providing different homes that meet people's diverse needs; this is beginning to be reflected in public policy, for example, in relation to the Housing Executive being able to discharge its homelessness duty using private rented housing.

CIH also considers the need to level the playing field when it comes to new social and private developments at the community consultation stage. As it stands, there is a unique requirement for housing associations to carry out an additional step of community consultation for all new developments, something that the private sector does not have to do. We would question the necessity of this requirement and suggest its removal to create more of a level playing field. Although community consultation is important, the current planning system already provides adequate consultation with existing residents views, which although important, need to be balanced with the housing needs of prospective tenants.



People on lower incomes can get and maintain a decent home

Ensure allocations policy is supporting people into sustainable tenancies

For many years the housing selection scheme has been seen as a fair and objective way to assess applicants' housing needs and determine priority for the allocation of a social home. However, recent CIH research has shown that the current allocations policy for social housing is outdated and failing some individuals and families in need of a home. In our [Rethinking Social Housing report](#), interviewees felt the need for an allocations system that:

- Is more transparent
- Better reflects applicants' needs, including financial need and the needs of care leavers
- Has fewer perverse incentives and less ability to be 'abused' and 'played'
- Contributes more towards community sustainability and less towards the residualisation and stigmatisation of social housing.

We welcome the Department for Communities' fundamental review of social housing allocations policy; however, we would caution against maintaining intimidation points due solely to the disproportionality of points awarded in these instances. CIH supports the implementation of a banded allocation system that reflects applicants' time spent on the waiting list. This policy would still allocate housing on the basis of need but would better recognise the duration of time living in housing need.

Government should also work with the housing sector over the course of the next mandate to develop a selection scheme rule to support the delivery of pre-tenancy activity that prioritises supporting people into sustainable tenancies. This would enable all relevant agencies and landlords to ascertain the needs of applicants to ensure tenancies are appropriate to their needs. This

would include identifying, as early as possible, prospective tenants that are likely to struggle to sustain their tenancies and ensure that they have access to appropriate advice and support. For the avoidance of doubt, we are not proposing further disqualifications from social housing than what the rules and legislation currently permit, and beyond the changes that are currently proposed to the rules. Indeed, our [Rethinking allocations report](#) found that in England (where landlords have much greater autonomy in their allocations processes and exclusions), activity to help achieve sustainable tenancies was undermining efforts to house those who need homes the most. It found processes that fail to account for individuals' unique circumstances and housing histories can create unnecessary barriers for households most in need of social homes. A better balance can be achieved if policies and practice are people-led rather than process-led.

End the house sales scheme for NIHE

The sale of social housing contributes to its undersupply and homelessness. Although the house sales scheme has historically benefitted those who aspire to home ownership and has helped to create mixed-tenure communities, social homes being lost and not replaced at a time when demand is vastly outstripping supply is unsustainable.

Putting homelessness prevention on a statutory cross-agency footing

Homelessness is more than simply housing. It is well-evidenced that you cannot address homelessness or the prevention of homelessness without addressing disparities in health, education and justice. Therefore, the alleviation and prevention of homelessness will require co-operation between statutory departments. CIH believes that the success of NIHE's new homelessness strategy 'Ending Homelessness

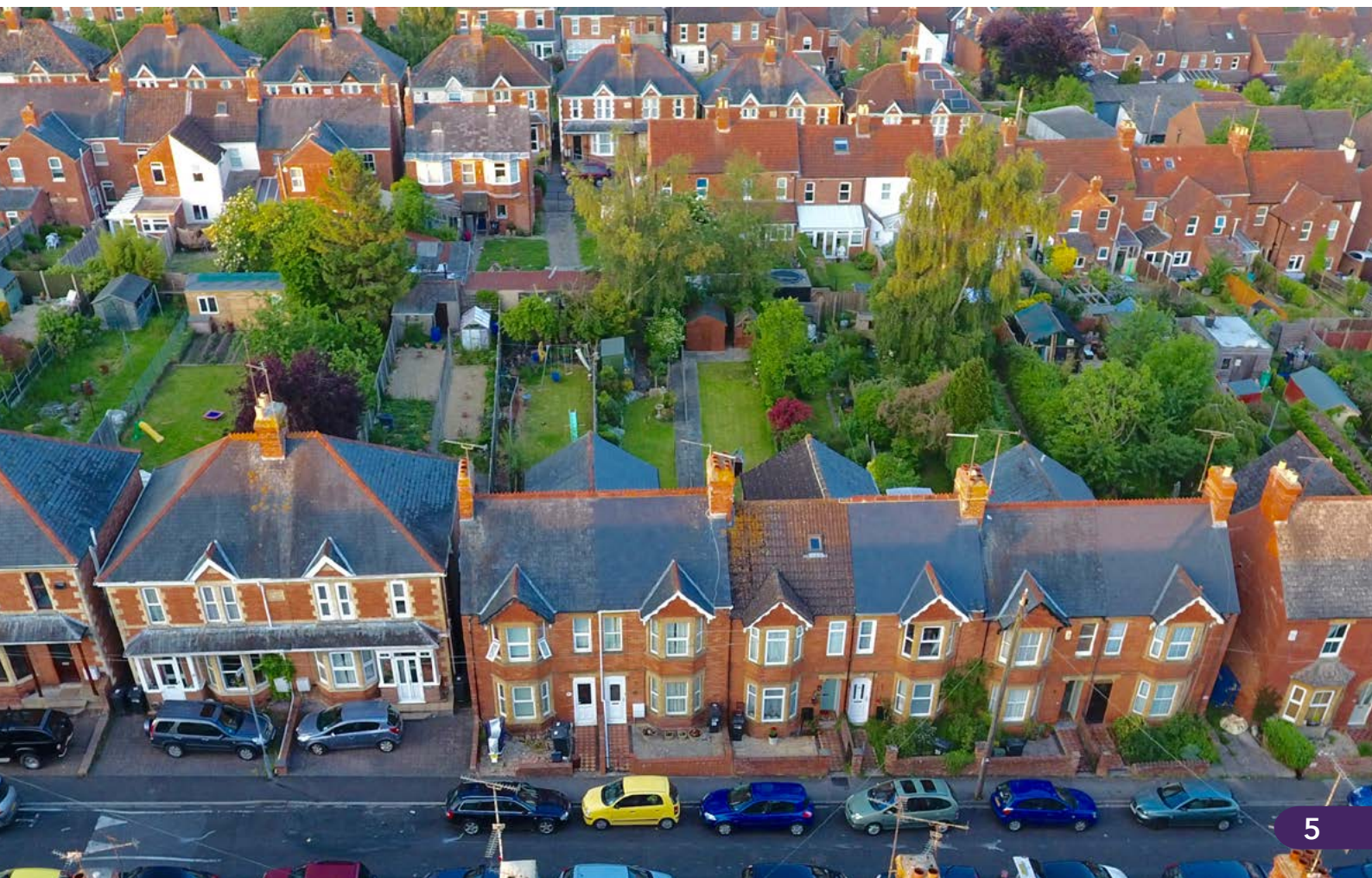
Together' with an emphasis on prevention, will require interdepartmental co-operation. Bringing an end to silo working, similar to the aspiration behind the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which sought co-operation between relevant authorities to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people, is a key component in preventing homelessness.

Parties to support the introduction of intermediate rent products in Northern Ireland

We would ask that parties support the introduction of intermediate rent products into the NI market as a means of providing more affordable housing for those who need it. Intermediate rent can help to alleviate the housing pressures faced across all tenures in NI by offering a viable rental option for low income households whose priority is not great enough to secure social housing and who find the private rental market unaffordable and home ownership unattainable. We welcome the department's commitment to intermediate rent products as an addition to the market and assurances that these products will not be put in direct competition with funding for the SHDP.

Homelessness presentations in line with any extension of notice to quit (NTQ) periods within the private rented sector

The current Private Tenancies Bill moving through the Assembly is set to increase the length of the NTQ period for tenants and landlords beyond the current four-week timeframe. The current policy for presenting to NIHE for assistance if you are homeless or are likely to become homeless within 28 days is commensurate to the current NTQ legislation. However, if NTQ periods are to be extended, so too must the timeframe in which applicants can make a homeless presentation, e.g., if NTQ periods are extended to eight weeks, then applicants should be able to present to NIHE if they are likely to become homeless within 56 days. Failure to ensure parity between these two things will only increase the vulnerability of those facing homelessness who are unable to access temporary accommodation in a suitable timeframe.



Raise the standard of homes and tackle climate change

The establishment of a heat and buildings action plan for retrofitting existing homes and ensuring net-zero in housing

Decarbonisation of the housing stock is one of our biggest challenges with our homes contributing to around 15 per cent of carbon emissions; but working to decarbonise our housing stock presents us with great opportunities – not least to provide warm, comfortable and affordable homes for communities here. It is imperative that parties commit to the establishment of a heat and buildings action plan similar to current strategies similar to that in England and Wales to help finance changes to how we live in our homes by devising a delivery plan that tackles:

- The lack of action on net-zero targets in housing to date
- The need to invest in and implement alternative heat sources that meet the needs of both new-build and retrofit properties
- How we ensure tenants and residents are at the centre of this work
- The current skills gaps by working to increase more opportunities for training and apprenticeships which will provide new jobs for a modern workforce for decades to come.

A new, specific fund for the retrofit of social housing

Our members are already at the forefront of building some of the most sustainable, carbon-neutral homes in Northern Ireland. Building new, green, zero-energy homes is vital, but the need to make fabric changes to existing properties within the social market is necessary in the fight to decarbonise our homes, tackle fuel poverty and future proof domestic properties. Long term funding certainty requires political commitment in the time ahead.

Commitment to Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) to build green homes at pace

If we are to meet the goal of over 33,000 social homes as set out in the draft Housing Supply Strategy, there needs to be a change in how we build them. Given the practical difficulties of achieving high levels of energy efficiency in on-site construction, MMC offers a huge opportunity to make a step change in the delivery of energy-saving, climate friendly homes. MMC has improved in terms of the quality of the product but requires considerable support to drive forward scale so that the industry has confidence to continue to invest and deliver more homes. In order for this to work effectively, significant investment is required to ensure the success and sustainability of MMC and to secure buy-in from the local construction industry.

An all-party commitment to support the revitalisation of the Housing Executive

CIH welcomes moves to revitalise the Housing Executive, which we believe is key to providing investment into existing social housing. Transforming the landlord arm of the organisation will allow it to access much-needed finance, enabling it to raise the quality of its current homes and begin building again. Failure to deliver upon this agenda will have a considerable impact on the standard of social housing in Northern Ireland and the ability to achieve net-zero emissions in housing. We would ask parties to engage constructively with this agenda and commit their support to change.

The development of a strategy to upskill workers to manufacture and build net-zero homes

It is well understood within the housing and associated sectors that we must work to increase the necessary skills within the workforce that is required to achieve net-zero homes in NI. There is an acute need for an increase in installers to retrofit existing buildings with energy efficiency and clean heat measures. The success of zero-carbon technologies will also depend on behavioural change. People will have to operate their heating in completely different ways. Education and training will be crucial in preventing some of the current experiences where homes are built to high energy efficiency standards, but residents and/or contractors may not have the knowledge to effectively work with the technology. It is our view that the investment return on upskilling and reskilling workers to help deliver nearly zero and net zero carbon homes would make a significant contribution to Northern Ireland PLC - as well as helping to grow the industry in NI by attracting elements of the workforce that have in previously relocated to GB to find work in the construction and associated industries. We would ask that parties commit to the development of a strategy in order to achieve this.



Everyone has access to a decent safe place to call home and renters receive a fair and good quality service from their landlord

Regulation ensures that housing professionals are equipped with knowledge, skills and competencies relating to good housing and tenancy management and they are recognised as professionals

As the professional body for housing in Northern Ireland we are committed to the professionalisation of the sector, including through appropriate regulation. The embedding of knowledge, skills and competencies has become high on the agenda in England through the subsequent white paper after the Grenfell tragedy and Northern Ireland should be no different. Social housing providers' commitment to professionalism will soon become the expected norm, and something residents will anticipate. CIH's professional standards for housing build on seven characteristics developed, tested, and refined to enable members to think about their professional development needs and how they can contribute to the professionalism of their organisation and the wider sector. To complement this and ensure outcomes are being achieved, it is our view that the consumer standard within NI social housing regulation should require landlords to demonstrate how they are advancing the professionalism of their staff. This should include a requirement for registered housing associations to evidence staff training and qualifications. This is also a key component of sound workforce planning at a time when the sector must encourage young professionals into housing as a career of choice. The professionalisation of housing staff gives them the recognition they deserve and instils confidence in the tenants and communities they serve.

A commitment to increase shared housing developments across Northern Ireland

'Shared housing', as part of the programme overseen by the Department for Communities, exists in the department's own words to "improve the choices that are available by tackling the barriers that prevent individuals from opting to live in shared neighbourhoods". The shared housing delivered under this programme is very welcome and much needed. However, we are not building nearly enough of it to feel its intended impact. Beneficial as it may be for those who have settled in shared communities, those still living separately are not experiencing its value. We would ask parties to commit to an increase in shared housing to offer more choice for those who wish to live in it, as well as recognising the value mixed-religion neighbourhoods have in building integrated communities.

