

Subject: Progressing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland: an Update

Dear Sir or Madam,

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations represents 45 housing associations which provide a total of 30,000 homes for people in housing need.

Our members are independent voluntary bodies which make a significant contribution to improving the well-being of the population. 39 of them are regulated by the Department for Social Development and use a combination of grant from the government and substantial private loans to finance the construction of new homes. They have recently been designated as "public bodies" for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Federation has just a few comments to offer on the Bill of Rights Update:

General Points

1. We think it would be helpful for the relationship between rights and responsibilities to be outlined in the preamble to the proposed Bill of Rights.
2. We agree that "In a divided society it is important to maintain a balance between the protection of the rights of the two main communities and permitting or encouraging individuals to assert a shared or non-communal identity" (page 14). In the housing context, the Federation supports the principle that those who wish to live in a mixed housing environment should be able to do so.
3. We agree that, as stated in page 74, account should be taken of the resources available in relation to other priorities.

Pages 72-76, Versions 1 and 2 of the Sections on Shelter/Housing

The central motivation of housing associations is to provide decent accommodation which is appropriate to the needs of those who seek their help. They are also very keen to enable residents to be secure in their homes.

We would ask the Commission, however, to consider the following questions:

1. Over many years, the Housing Executive has found that some people intentionally made themselves homeless. Would the proposed Bill of Rights mean that they would nonetheless have to be accommodated?
2. Short leases and Shorthold Tenancies have been available in the private rented sector for many years. Would they be deemed to contravene the proposed Bill of Rights?
3. The NIHE and registered housing associations are now using Introductory Tenancies which can be terminated more easily than Secure Tenancies in the first twelve months if the tenant has engaged in anti-social behaviour. Would these be contrary to the proposed Bill of Rights?

I hope these brief comments will be of some help.

Yours faithfully

Christopher Williamson

Director
NIFHA

