



Chair's Foreword

The Housing Work sector has had a very busy and productive time since 2021, characterised by enthusiastic engagement by member administrations. The Work Sector focused its activity on areas of high priority policy work, in order to maximise the benefit for staff, broadened its reach, inviting relevant staff more widely to relevant events, and organised several 'cross cutting' events with other Work Sectors. Taken together this maximised the benefit of engagement with British Irish Council work.

These three underlying principles led to a very busy, productive and successful three years, and a lot of enthusiasm about our forthcoming work plan. Civil Servants often toil away in unnoticed areas of obscure or complex endeavour. There is nothing quite like realising that someone else is spending the days on the same complex, technical policy issue as you have. There is a joy and relief in being able to discuss issues like no-fines finlock gutters or definitions of key workers without only eliciting blank stares. Lessons were learned and connections made in a mutually supportive and non-hierarchical way. This sort of peer support, networking and sharing is invaluable to policy staff, and the benefits have been clear for everyone involved.

All administrations are facing crucial housing challenges of different types, and all have innovated in different ways to address them. There is therefore a lot to be learned from each other. One of the most prominent has been the challenge of decarbonisation, and in particular how we do that in a fair or just way. For housing officials, this includes consideration of retrofit of existing houses, standards of new build, heating systems and resident behaviour. The Work Sector organised study visits in Belfast (retrofit) and Cardiff (newbuild), an online conference on decarbonising heat (jointly with the Energy Work Sector) and attended the Welsh decarbonisation live event. All administrations are trying to rapidly re-orientate work in line with international and legislative climate commitments, so this work was particularly valuable and timely.

Another area which is focusing minds is the interaction between housing and health, in particular with regard to homelessness. Chronic homelessness is very often driven by mental health issue or drugs and alcohol use, and housing and health issues affecting these citizens need to be addressed together. Approaches were shared at a very successful Symposium in Dublin organised jointly with the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector to discuss innovative practice such as Housing First, Inclusion Health and delivering patient focused addiction services.

On behalf of the Northern Ireland representatives I would like to thank all the other Work Sector members, who made the job of chairing the Work Stream so enjoyable and the BIC Secretariat, who were always incredibly helpful. We are looking forward to the next few years and hope they will be as worthwhile as the last three.

David Polley - Official-level Chair of the British-Irish Council Housing Work Sector

Introduction

From official-level Chair of the British-Irish Council Housing Work Sector (and Northern Ireland Executive representative)

The BIC Housing Work Sector was established in 2009 and has been formally led by the Northern Ireland Executive since. The provision of housing, and related services, continues to present serious challenges across these islands.

In parallel, the critical need to decarbonise existing and new housing has taken on a stark urgency.

Working together within the BIC provides Member Administrations with an opportunity to share emerging and established good practice. It also allows us to create and nurture new connections with others facing common challenges. All involved bring back to our own work the best of what we learn from each other's experience.

When Ministers last met, in 2021, they agreed a work plan for the Housing Work Sector, focussed on four key themes:

1. Design issues
2. Accessing suitable and affordable housing
3. Aspects of Housing's role in Health and Social Care
4. Facilitating opportunities for collaborations between the BIC Administrations and work sectors through planned joint visits and events

This paper summarises BIC Housing Work Sector work since then.

Theme 1 – Design Issues

One of the key focuses of the Housing Work Sector is how to use innovation in construction methods to enable rapidity of delivery in housing in a carbon-neutral manner.

The Work Sector focused on several areas. One looked at sharing information on investment and delivery models. Another was about identifying immediate supply opportunities, and novel construction methods, to enable affordable low-carbon and energy-positive designs.

Belfast

In January 2023, officials from the eight administrations visited North Belfast to see homes (characterised by No-Fines cement¹ and Finlock² gutters) recently fully retrofitted by the Energy Efficiency in Social Housing Project.

The Project is partially funded by the European Regional Development Fund and aims to improve energy efficiency in over 2,700 Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes in Northern Ireland. The six-year €45 million programme is expected to be completed at the end of December 2023.

A number of schemes addressing aluminium bungalows and no-fines have already been completed or are currently on site. Improvements to the thermal efficiency of these homes include cladding, new double glazing, and insulation. Particularly interesting is the technical solution to rooflines, and joins, with owner-occupied houses.

The rest of the programme will see similar works done to more aluminium bungalows and over 2,500 No-Fines properties all across Northern Ireland.



Housing work Sector colleagues visit homes in North Belfast that have been fully retro fitted as part of the Energy Efficiency in Social Housing Project.

¹ 'No-Fines' is a type of lighter-weight concrete that was popular in construction some decades ago but can have poor thermal insulation and tendency to damp.

² Finlock gutters were a type of roof gutter commonly used in construction in decades past, but which has since proved to be vulnerable to problems arising from water contact.

Cardiff

In April 2023, the BIC Housing Work Sector group visited the Gas Works Modular Housing project in Cardiff.

The former gasworks site is being used for the installation of emergency accommodation, in the form of 155 modular units for 2-3 years.

This is done on a *meanwhile use* basis³, temporarily using the building to meet an immediate need, after which the site will be fully remediated and developed for the Cardiff Masterplan.

Cardiff City Council and the Welsh Government have engaged manufacturers to trial various types of modular homes. These range from one-bed to four-bed units, all of which use low-carbon technologies.

The BIC officials also visited the former Cardiff Eastern High School site. This is now a housing development consisting of low-carbon, energy-efficient, accommodation for independent living, in a mix of both social housing and owner-occupier homes.

IN addition, BIC officials attended *Decarbonising Homes Wales Live*.

This gathered a community of practice drawn from Academics, Social Landlords, Housing Developers, and Construction and Supply Chains. They discussed modern methods of construction and explored innovative solutions to achieving the decarbonisation of housing as part of our efforts to achieve Net Zero by 2050.



“The conference was a great opportunity for NIE staff to make contacts and discuss with Welsh housing sector colleagues the very similar issues we face.”

“The conference highlighted the similar issues that all our public bodies face and it was invaluable to hear similar experiences and how they were approached and strategised. The Isle of Man gained a great deal of insight from the BIC group that has influenced our own strategic approach.”

³ 'Meanwhile Use' is the short-term use of buildings which are temporarily unoccupied or out of use for a period before they are assigned to their ultimately intended purpose.

“Jane Owen, Department of Levelling Up & Communities, UK Government, has been in touch with Scottish Government for an informal chat on planning. As well as Noel Cullen, AHB Policy and Regulation, Government of Ireland, regarding legislative and contractual controls for Approved Housing Bodies and Sarah Cole, Innovative Funding, Welsh Government, regarding financial investment models to increase social housing.”

“IOM will also be reaching to understand what other innovative funding opportunities there are regarding innovative funding opportunities as we are currently starting the transition from a publicly funded social housing sector (tax funded) to a possible alternative models of social housing delivery.”

Decarbonisation of Heat – A Webinar

In March 2023, the Housing Work Sector collaborated with the Energy Work Sector to deliver a webinar on decarbonisation of heat, where policymakers from all eight administrations considered approaches to energy efficiency, retrofitting, heat networks and the development of clean heat strategies.

Shared challenges in uptake and implementation of retrofit schemes were also considered. These included behavioural change, deployment of new technologies, and grid capacity. Member Administrations also considered the financing of retrofit schemes, looking at specific and carbon-targeted fiscal measures, as well as ringfenced climate-focussed funds.

Moreover, for all administrations, energy efficiency is a key priority in the transition to low and zero carbon heating systems. In response, Member Administrations have identified some of the measures required to meet Net Zero 2050 targets, including - supply; demand; skills and training; education; public engagement; an enabling planning framework; the adoption of clean heat sources; and access to finance. To inform this approach, many administrations are developing evidence-based heat strategies to address core challenges in the decarbonisation of heat in buildings, while also seeking to address energy affordability.

The role of heat networks in decarbonising the supply of heat was explored. Some common challenges here include consumer uptake, industry support, and planning and legislative frameworks. Critical to the development of heat networks is the fuel source used. There is uncertainty in relation to using hydrogen in domestic heating, so electrification appears to be the most likely through use of large-scale heat pumps, solar thermal arrays and biomass and other energy recovery systems.

The Danish Government spoke on their collaboration with UK Government and Scottish Government on Heat Networks and Energy Efficiency. Energy Efficiency UK presented on the UK Government Heat Network Policy. plans to regulate the heat network sector across the UK and introduce heat network zoning in England.

Swansea University presented on their Solar Heat Energy Demonstrator (SHED). Welsh Government presented their Heat Strategy and outlined the key findings and the approach to developing policy packages. Scottish Government presented their Heat in Buildings strategy. The Northern Ireland Executive presented their RULET Pathfinder Programme. This was an example of cost-optimal retrofitting to achieve decarbonisation, with collaboration and partnership across government, academia, the energy sector and communities.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland presented on Ireland's National Retrofit Programme, which is designed to address barriers to retrofit across four key pillars: driving demand and activity; financing and funding; supply chain, skills and standards; and governance. The Isle Of Man Government gave an update on their new Energy Efficiency Scheme, an £8m programme to provide simple energy efficiency free of charge to help address the cost of living crisis.

“To see the approach from all BIC administrations and the challenges each faced was enlightening. It was highlighted throughout the presentations that although we were all trying to reach the same goal each approach had to be tailored to suit that particular administrations challenges.

Isle of Man Government have referenced that information we gathered from the webinar in our own strategical approach and found the information shared by other BIC administrations a great help.”

“NIE were encouraged by the fact that all BIC administrations are on the same journey to Net Zero and impressed with Scottish governments work with the Danish Energy Agency on heat networks and the potential impact on communal/ district heating.”

Theme 2 – Accessing Suitable and Affordable Housing

The availability of suitable and affordable homes is also a key priority of the Housing Work Sector. The specific focus is on first-time buyer affordability, key workers, and rural settings.

Member Administrations are advancing initiatives to support both renters and first-time buyers to access affordable housing. These are varied and include partial/shared/co-ownership schemes; deferred payment options; equity loan schemes; help to buy schemes; government-backed mortgage schemes; rent to own; and affordable rent/cost-rental schemes.

Several of these schemes are particularly targeted at first-time buyers, low-to-moderate income households, and/or high housing need locations where affordability is an issue. (Please see annex 1 for the discussion paper on this activity).

Member Administrations have shared common operational challenges and associated lessons learned. These have included variations in house prices; the risk of associated house price inflation; ensuring that these schemes encourage the provision of additional housing supply; the complexity and reputation of schemes; and the importance of getting the eligibility criteria right. Please see annex 2 for discussion paper on this activity.

Jersey

In March 2022 BIC officials travelled to Jersey for a Key Worker Housing Policy and Delivery workshop which focused on key worker accommodation challenges and ideas around policy solutions. “Due to the similarities of key worker recruitment and retention pressures in the Crown Dependencies, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man gave a presentation on their experiences and approaches to addressing key worker housing needs in their respective jurisdictions.”

As part of the workshop a visit to the Hue Court Key Worker Housing site was hosted by [Andium Homes](#), a company wholly owned by the Government of Jersey that provides affordable housing (social rental and assisted purchase). Hue Court was built in the 1970s and comprises two high-rise and four low-

rise blocks located close to Jersey’s General Hospital. In response to high demand for health Key Workers, Andium proposed making the two towers available as a flagship key worker housing scheme.

A [full refurbishment of Hue Court](#) was completed, involving a complete internal refit that included mechanical and electrical services, insulation, and high performance windows for a total of 90 Key Worker homes.

Housing Work Sector delegates were given a tour of a selection of one-bed and two-bed apartments to get a sense of the size, finish, and amenities on hand for the Key Workers living in Hue Court.



“The most recent and notable of these has been in relation to key worker housing. Through BIC, Government of Guernsey arranged to speak to the relevant officer in Jersey on their new approach to key worker housing. Due to the similarity of pressures felt in key worker housing provision, understanding the approach Jersey has taken formed an essential base for considering how Guernsey might progress in this area. This lead to a first proposal on Guernsey’s long term key worker housing strategy to the Committee for the Environment & Infrastructure, which it supported, and this is based on the approach followed in Jersey. As part of this work, we have also been in contact with the Isle of Man to better understand their approach and research in this area which, again, has provided very useful insight.”

BIC Housing Ministerial

In June 2023, The Housing work sector enabled BIC Ministers for Housing to come together for a virtual discussion to provide Ministers with an opportunity to share perspectives on delivering low-carbon

and affordable housing across the BIC Member Administrations, and also inform discussion between Heads of Administration at the 39th BIC Summit in Jersey.



INVERNESS: Abriachan and Drumnadrochit

In November 2023 Officials travelled to Inverness, Scotland to visit Abriachan, a small development above the shores of Loch Ness.

The development has received support from our Rural and Island Housing fund to build two homes from sustainable materials (wood construction and sustainable heating systems). The homes are owned and operated by a Community Trust as affordable home ownership. Importantly, the Trust has first

refusal on re-purchase if the homeowners ever choose to sell, keeping them in affordable home ownership in perpetuity.

Officials also visited Drumnadrochit, a larger community with a site opened up through loan funding to the landowner to develop road infrastructure. This road investment in turn was repaid through increased land values which were captured by sale to a developer who was able to provide a significant number

of homes. These included also supported accommodation and family homes in a village. These homes helped to meet increasing demand for homes from locals and from growth in Inverness, the nearest city at the other end of Loch Ness.



BIC colleagues visit a mixed use development in Drumnadrochit Inverness that comprised of 75 homes, both private and affordable, homes for the elderly, mixed commercial uses, health centre, public open space and associated infrastructure.

“Welsh Government colleagues linked up with Scottish Government counterparts to share learning and experiences, highlighting the importance and value of collaboration through the British-Irish Council.”

“Isle of Man Government Shared the experience and the process of fabric first with the Team looking at a de carb strategy for the Estate we manage. Instigated a report to look at the property portfolio and update the works previously done. We now have a draft document for the Affordable housing operated by the Department of Infrastructure. We will be using the contacts on the sheltered complex de carb scheme to review their learning, programme and costs.”

“NIE were impressed by the upgrading of the road infrastructure, including a new roundabout, that opened up the site for development and allowed affordable Housing Projects to proceed in Drumnadrochit.”

Theme 3 – Aspects of Housing’s role in Health and Social Care

Officials in the Housing Work Sector explored the role housing can play in the health and social care of those exposed to harmful substance use.

Housing and Drugs and Alcohol Joint Symposium

The British-Irish Council’s work sector groups on Housing, and on Drugs and Alcohol, respectively, agreed to jointly consider approaches to meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and/or alcohol.

Acting on this, the Council, with the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive, delivered a flagship symposium: *“Working together to meet the healthcare needs of people experiencing homelessness and substance use issues”* in Dublin in May 2022.

The symposium was an opportunity for those from the 8A (eight administrations) working in the housing, drugs and alcohol, health, and homelessness sectors to come together to share learning. The aim was to explore how to better meet the needs of those who experience homelessness, particularly for those also dealing with substance use related harm. The event was innovative in spanning a number of the Council’s areas of thematic activity, while also including representatives of civil society, third sector organisations, etc.

Overall, the gathering broadened the pool of policy officials and stakeholders involved in discussions about drug and alcohol dependency and homelessness, and highlighted shared interests in tackling these complex issues.

The symposium’s programme looked at approaches to supporting people who are homeless and use drugs and/or alcohol, who have many complex needs that require a joined-up approach between housing and health services.

Participants considered initiatives underway across Member Administrations to address these complex interlinked issues. These included models such as Housing First; Inclusion Health; delivering patient focused Addiction services; learning from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic; addressing gender issues; and reducing stigma.

The discussions and workshops were wide ranging, thought provoking and in many cases inspirational. Policy makers, national experts, service providers, voluntary and community organisations and people with direct experience contributed to help develop solutions in terms of how we can better align our responses and ensure improved outcomes for this vulnerable group.

The useful insights will assist policy makers and service providers shape interventions in years to come. The Joint symposium paper (Annex C) is a synopsis of the key themes discussed.



Dublin

In May 2022, participants at the symposium also had the opportunity to visit Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI). This is a national voluntary organisation that carries out activities for social justice for homeless persons and people who use drugs.

MQI provides frontline services, practical supports, pathways towards recovery and innovative responses to the issues of drug use and homelessness in Ireland.

Services incorporate the provision of meals, drug services, crisis intervention, needle exchange, rehabilitation and detox services, together with day programmes, aftercare and training. The visit included a tour and an overview of the service activities and officials were also shown the proposed site for the planned (and now approved) Supervised Injecting Facility.



Guernsey

In April 2024, officials travelled to Guernsey for a Private Rental Sector Policy workshop which focused on private rental challenges and ideas around policy solutions, across these islands.

There was a good wide-ranging discussion on respective approaches in the eight administrations to four specified areas- legal provision on tenant and landlord rights in regard to eviction; rent controls; housing quality standards; and financing.

Also, as part of the programme, the officials visited a number of the housing allocated sites that were being planned for development as part of the Island's Affordable Housing Development Programme. The tour was guided by the Guernsey Housing Association (who own the majority of the sites) and it highlighted the close proximity of the sites and the need for careful placemaking planning to ensure the island's housing requirements are met while also creating attractive places to live.

Guernsey's housing pressures are severe and linked predominantly to supply side pressures, which in turn is putting increased

pressure on the Private Rental Sector where demand far outstrips supply.



“It was a useful and informative visit to understand the varying levels of maturity in terms of the private rental sector regulation across the various jurisdictions. Particularly useful for the crown dependencies who face specific challenges in relation to demand supply and scale.”

“During the Guernsey visit NIE colleagues in the Private Rented Sector Team (PRS) had some productive conversation with DLUHC colleagues in the UK government sharing learning and experiences with contact details exchanged for follow up conversations.”

“As the IOM is still pushing forward with a private Landlords regulation it was informative to hear the experience of the other Jurisdictions and the comments received from the Private sector but also to hear how important it is to regulate the market. Useful contacts were made to inform those continuing to develop this scheme in the IOM.

The visit also enabled the IOM to make contact with the Guernsey housing Association and discuss how they have formed in a smaller housing market with similar limitations to growth.”