Home... where it all starts

How the Housing Executive and Housing Associations, supported by the Department for Communities, are helping people, local communities and the economy in Northern Ireland

October 2019
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Yet more and more people are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Of the more than 37,000 people on the social housing list, around 24,000 are in housing stress. This means that they are living in unsuitable accommodation. To put that figure in context, there’s been a 20% increase in just ten years and a shocking 82% since 2002/2003.

Northern Ireland’s social and affordable housing providers – housing associations and the Housing Executive, supported by the Department for Communities – are doing all they can to provide homes for those who need them most.

In fact, around 1 in 6 (16%) of all the homes in Northern Ireland are social or affordable homes. The sector contributes enormously to the economy here – creating jobs not just in construction but in a host of related fields.

But we don’t just build homes. As not for profit organisations, social housing providers and their partners invest millions each year to support individuals, families and communities – from capital projects like play parks and community centres to training and employment initiatives and on to care and support for people with dementia.

The Benefits to Society NI initiative is supported by more than 20 organisations across the sector. The project aims to highlight the variety of ways and extent to which social housing providers work to the benefit of individuals, families and local communities as well as to the benefit of society and the economy in Northern Ireland.

This booklet highlights some of the headline statistics and offers case studies illustrating the kinds of work we do, along with personal testimonies from tenants and service users.

We want to do more – but there are major challenges standing in the way, some technical, some more fundamental. The key challenges are set out, along with recommendations for dealing with them.

These include:
- Urgent reversal of reclassification of housing associations as public bodies
- Increased and ring-fenced funding for the Supporting People programme
- Move from a 1-year to a multi-year social housing development programme
- Sustained investment in training and employment programmes, many of which are currently supported by the European Social Fund
- A greater emphasis by Government, local authorities and planners on mixed tenure, integrated communities and including community infrastructure in community planning
- More supports for housing associations to refurbish or convert derelict or vacant buildings
- Substantial, sustained investment to modernise or replace older Housing Executive stock.

We ask you to support this work in any way you can.

If you would like to know more visit nifha.org or email info@nifha.org
Solid Foundations
- home is where it all starts

Safe, quality homes are the foundation stones on which we build our lives, families and communities. Without a secure place to call home, it is almost impossible to maintain our physical and mental health, earn a qualification or get a job.

Yet more and more people are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Of the more than 37,000 people on the social housing list, around 24,000 are in housing stress. This means that they are living in unsuitable accommodation. To put that figure in context, there’s been a 20% increase in just ten years and a shocking 82% since 2002/2003.

“There is emerging evidence that affordability and tenancy sustainability in the private sector are starting to become problematic”\(^1\)

Even worse off are the nearly 12,000 households – single people AND families – who are officially homeless.

Despite this, there is no specific outcome for social and affordable housing in the current Programme for Government.

Northern Ireland’s social and affordable housing providers – housing associations and the Housing Executive, supported by the Department for Communities – are doing all they can to provide homes for those who need them most. Indeed, the delivery of new build social housing remains a key priority for the Department with more than two-thirds of the Department’s capital budget devoted to the Social Housing Development Programme.

We own or manage around 16% of the homes across Northern Ireland, while 14% are privately rented and the remainder are privately owned (40%) or mortgaged (29%).

Most of the homes built by housing associations through the Social Housing Development Programme are for social rented accommodation in areas where need has been identified by the Housing Executive.

These homes are allocated according to objective need via the Housing Executive selection scheme which includes criteria such as homelessness, insecurity of tenure, poor housing conditions, and need to support health or wellbeing.
Our ability to provide more homes is limited by the lack of suitable land and the high cost of purchasing what is available. One way government and councils can help overcome that challenge is to prioritise making surplus public lands available for social and affordable housing. This would not only allow us to build more homes but would also help reduce construction costs and maintain affordable rent levels.

Other challenges our political representatives can help overcome include:

- Supporting the delivery of social and affordable housing and assisting where communities are fearful of development in their area;
- Calling on statutory authorities to work collaboratively with housing associations to deliver social housing;
- Calling for the timely issuing of planning approvals.

In addition to delivering homes, the Housing Executive and housing associations also offer hundreds of programmes and supports which allow people to live independently in their own homes longer and help prevent people from becoming homeless.

Many of these are provided through partnership with other organisations, such as Health and Social Care Trusts.

This booklet will give you a bit of insight into the scale and impact of our work, and how it helps to transform lives and communities, while also delivering major economic and social benefits right across Northern Ireland.

We could – and want to – do more. In this booklet, you will learn about some of the key challenges we face and what can be done about them.
A Winning Equation
- the economic benefits

£118m on maintenance works, including
Improvements to
19,000+ homes

£44m on
300,000+ repairs

£516K awarded through Social Housing Enterprise Strategy, supporting 40 social enterprise initiatives or individuals
Decisions need to be made to ensure that we are equipped to provide decent housing and sustainable communities for future generations, and this long-term strategic objective is central to our work. We will continue to work alongside the Department for Communities to make progress with the implementation of the Social Housing Reform Programme. The most immediate requirement is to lever-in £7 billion of funds over the next 30 years to ensure that the Housing Executive’s homes remain fit to live in.

We are reaching a point when many of the successes in housing, provided not only by the Housing Executive, but also our colleagues in housing associations and the wider housing community, could be ended or lost. There is a pressing need to reform how housing is delivered in Northern Ireland in order to build on the success of the past five decades.

**£72m** on Supporting People Programme

**£12m** on Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) to c. 2,000 recipients

**£336m** on rent and rates

3,000+ STAFF

540 community groups worked in partnership with the Housing Executive through the Housing Community Network (HCN)
£3.8bn TOTAL ASSETS

£1bn total borrowings

£296m spend on acquisition and construction

£1=£2.84
Every £1 invested in construction generates £2.84 in total economic activity

£8.7m spent each year by HAs and partners on community investment

£15.8m IN CAPITAL PROJECTS

£5.6m ON SERVICES

300+ community investment services delivered over 5 years

25,000 PEOPLE BENEFITED

250 APPRENTICESHIPS
In addition to building much-needed homes, housing associations make a huge economic contribution to Northern Ireland. The sector directly employs more than 3,200 people, contributing around £76m in wages to the local economy.4

Housing associations also sustain thousands more jobs in the supply chain – a vital support, especially to our local construction industry. This significant multiplier effect – every £1 spent on housing construction generates a total £2.84 spend – means that housing associations contribute around £1b each year to the Northern Ireland economy.5

In addition, housing associations and their partners spend millions more each year on support services and investing in local communities.

As social enterprises and charities, housing associations also reinvest any surpluses in providing more and better homes and services for the communities that need them.

Housing associations have continued to deliver despite the challenging economic and politically uncertain environment.

Two specific issues add to the difficulties – reclassification of housing associations and an annualised development programme.

Due to housing associations being social businesses and registered charities, we are able to access private finance which would not otherwise be available.

Housing associations are essentially able to match fund every £1 from government grant funding to effectively build twice as many homes as would otherwise be possible.

While housing associations have been able to continue to borrow private finance during the last financial year, the issue of reclassification still cast its shadow over the sector and continues to jeopardise future borrowing potential after sector.

Following the Office for National Statistics’ reclassification of all housing associations in Northern Ireland as public sector bodies in 2016, the lack of a working legislature since early 2017 has meant that the necessary legislation to reverse this decision cannot be progressed.

Primary legislation has been drawn up and was ready to be put before Parliament at Westminster before the summer recess. NIFHA was a key stakeholder in this process and lobbied for the legislation to be brought forward at the earliest opportunity. NIFHA continues to lobby for action to resolve this critical issue as soon as possible.

In addition, the requirement to adhere to an annualised delivery plan adversely impacts costs and access to labour and adds pressure to the planning system. NIFHA is calling for a multi-year development programme, such as those in the rest of the UK, which would ease these pressures.
Helping someone obtain a home is one thing. Helping them maintain that home is another. Social housing providers are equally committed to both.

"With the strong understanding they have of the circumstances and needs of the individuals in their lets, many housing associations are well suited to engaging those most distant from the labour market – including the long-term economically inactive, disabled people who are seeking work, and the ‘digitally excluded’ – with the care and sensitivity required to do so."

That’s why we deliver so many training and employment schemes. These run the gamut from day to day skills such as personal development, learning how to manage household finances, eat well on a budget, and IT to apprenticeship and work placements. We also provide training and employment to help people who need a bit of extra support to realise their potential.

Many of these initiatives are delivered through partnerships with other organisations and some have received financial support from EU sources such as the European Social Fund. With the future of such funding in question post-Brexit, it is important to ring-fence funding for housing association training and employment schemes.
Colleen joined Triangle Housing’s Supported Employment Service in 2013 to gain more experience in administration with the goal of securing paid employment.

Colleen, who has autism, worked with her Employment Officer to identify and plan how she could achieve this. Colleen had several Business Administration qualifications, however, she needed to gain practical ‘on the job’ experience. In 2014, Colleen began a voluntary work placement in the Environmental Services Department of the then Coleraine Borough Council. Colleen soon became an asset to the department, especially after successfully completing further professional standard Word Processing qualifications.

During this time, Colleen’s colleagues were experiencing huge changes due to the amalgamation of the local councils, but Colleen, with support from her Employment Officer, showed great determination and perseverance to achieve her dream of becoming a permanent member of the Council’s staff team.

Finally, in late 2017, with the creation of the new Causeway Coast and Glens Council, a potential opportunity was identified which would allow Colleen to secure paid employment and remain within the Environmental Services Department, where she had developed strong working relationships with her supervisor and colleagues alike.

The Council’s Human Resources Department was committed to embracing ‘Positive Action’ in their Recruitment and Selection procedures. They worked closely with Colleen’s Employment Officer to ensure that the Job Specification and Job Description were appropriate and accessible. Reasonable adjustments were made under the Disability Discrimination Act, including a request by Colleen not to have to perform phone duties.

In May 2019, Colleen secured a part-time post as an Administrative Assistant in the Environmental Services Department, providing business support and administrative duties across the Building Control section of Health and Built Environment. Her duties also include providing an efficient, professional customer-orientated service for visitors and staff in the Environmental Services Directorate.

“It has been a pleasure working alongside Triangle to secure employment for Colleen. The support which Triangle have given and are still giving Colleen has been invaluable. This has been a real success story and I am very pleased to have been part of it.”

Hilary McAllister, Business Support & Administration Manager, Causeway Coast and Glens Council

“My job with Causeway Coast and Glens Council means everything to me.”

Triangle Housing’s Supported Employment Service helped Colleen secure a part-time post with Causeway and Glens Council.
"Trainig was delivered in a way that you could understand. When you went back to the helpdesk you could actually apply the lessons to a staff member who had an IT issue and if I couldn’t fix it myself, I could go to someone who was more experienced and had the knowledge. When I’ve needed help, the help has been there.”

Darren, ‘WorkChoice’ participant
Home is more than just a building – it’s a place where we belong and part of that sense of belonging comes from feeling that we are part of a community.

That’s why housing associations and our partners invest millions of pounds each year delivering a myriad of programmes to combat isolation and loneliness, to support personal development, mental health and physical wellbeing, and to bring people and communities together.

Social housing tenants, whether living in Housing Executive or housing association homes, both report high levels of satisfaction with their neighbourhoods.⁸

Our commitment to helping tenants engage with people in their local communities is credited with being one of the reasons for this.

Government and local councils can help by ensuring that both social and affordable housing as well as community infrastructure are made an integral part of the community planning process.

“Anybody can put up a building. But, building community is much tougher. Nurturing neighbourliness, friendships, trust, respect and resilience – this is the ‘soft infrastructure that is the indispensable scaffolding of sustainable place.”⁷

“Tenants relatively high levels of satisfaction with their neighbourhood as a place to live, and the increasing proportion of tenants who were very satisfied with their neighbourhood, suggest that resident engagement has played a role in developing cohesive communities.... There is a strong business case as well as a social case for community involvement.”⁹
BRINGING GENERATIONS TOGETHER

Social housing providers ensure that older residents have plenty of opportunities to maintain contact with people of all ages. Two of Alpha Housing’s current initiatives – ‘Happy Hatchlings’ and ‘Wee Ones Meeting Wise Ones’ offer great examples of this kind of work.

Happy Hatchlings
A long-standing relationship between Alpha and Happy Hatchlings grew out of a baby yoga class which Claire McMullan from Happy Hatchlings brought to Weir Court, Comber.

Claire had the mummies and the residents singing and dancing to ‘Rock-a-bye-baby’ and ‘If you’re happy and you know it’, amongst other classics.

Due to the success of the taster session, Claire went on to run a six-week course at Weir Court and ongoing sessions are being run at other Alpha Schemes. Alpha CEO Cameron Watt even joined in at a recent session at Johnston Court, Belfast.

Wee Ones Meeting Wise Ones
Alpha also partnered with the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) to celebrate Positive Ageing month with an intergenerational event called ‘Wee Ones Meeting Wise Ones’.

Tenants from McManus Court had a great morning singing songs and rhymes with babies and children from the local Newry area. The oldest participant was 97 years old and the youngest was 15 weeks.

“I have noticed a lady who comes to the group, who doesn’t really talk much, join in and sing along to the rhymes. I can see an awakening in her which is lovely. I feel the time has helped me to speak to people better as I found it difficult to interact with people I didn’t know. I now feel more able to join in conversations.”

Ruth, resident
Social housing providers and our partners also help communities come together by building shared facilities such as play parks, football pitches and community resource centres.

When Apex Housing built 120 family homes on the site of the former Glen Bacon factory at the Lenadoon/Suffolk interface in Belfast, they also sourced £4m from the EU’s PEACE III Programme and £5m from Atlantic Philanthropies to build the Glen Community Centre.

The building includes a large, multi-functional hall, meeting rooms, three retail units leased to private operators, and the Emerald Boxing Club’s gym.

It’s a one-stop-shop making a real difference to local people, from the very young to the very old, by providing services including:

- The Lenadoon Training for Employment Project, which has equipped hundreds of people with training and qualifications, improved life skills and self-esteem; and support to help break the cycle of benefit dependency.

- Glen Parent Day-care, which provides high-quality affordable childcare enabling single parents and young families to realise their potential through further education and employment.

- Glen Parent Youth Group’s After-Schools, Youth and Inclusion projects, which have a hugely positive impact on the lives of children, young people and families in the area.

- Lenadoon Community Forum, which advocates for and represents the views of residents in dealing with statutory bodies, elected representatives and funding agencies.

- Lenadoon Women’s Group, which provides hundreds of individuals and families with support for personal development, health and well-being and rights advocacy.

“It’s so much fun, you’d never be bored. It’s like home. You always have new friends, you always have your old friends with you and you’d just never be bored, never.”

Kirsten, a member of the Youth Club

“Apex have been absolutely fantastic, from the minute we moved in, they have been here and they have taken care of everything. No matter when I lifted a phone to them, they’ve been there at every single step.”

Paul Niblock, Community Youth Worker
Social housing providers strive to help make our communities more inclusive – to break down the barriers that divide us, whether they are political, religious, economic or racial.

We ask elected representatives, civil servants, council planners and everyone involved in community planning to put a greater emphasis on mixed tenure development and creating more integrated communities.

The joint NIFHA and Dept. for Communities Draft Report on Mixed Tenure highlighted the potential for mixed tenure development to be a key enabler for many of the outcomes in the draft Programme for Government 2016-21.

“The creation of vibrant and sustainable communities involves more than good housing. Environments need to be designed to support economic growth and the general wellbeing of residents.”

“Potential benefits of mixed tenure include: reducing place and tenure-based stigma; reduced levels of crime and anti-social behaviour; improved sense of community and social cohesion; better job prospects and improved school attainment; improved physical and mental health of residents.”

Mixed tenure case studies featured in the Mixed Tenure Report include Clanmil Housing’s Mountview in Lisburn and Radius Housing’s Fort Green in Bangor and Visteon in Belfast.

Another way that housing associations help to build including communities is by helping people who don’t qualify for traditional mortgages or social housing find a way to get on the property ladder.
NEW PATHS TO HOME OWNERSHIP

Co-Ownership is a housing association with a difference: its focus is on helping people who don’t qualify for traditional mortgages make their dream of home ownership a reality.

Co-Ownership customers can either
- buy a share in a home, pay the mortgage on that share, and go on to buy out Co-Ownership’s share over time, or
- rent a new build from Co-Ownership for up to three years and then buy it from Co-Ownership.

More than 28,000 homes have been purchased through their Shared Ownership scheme. Co-Ownership supports around 11% of first-time buyers in Northern Ireland each year, which translated into a £127m investment into the Northern Ireland economy last year.

Other housing associations are providing affordable housing and equity share solutions to encourage a mix of housing options within developments, leading to more sustainable communities.

Lesa, Alan and their two young children are among those who have benefited from this innovative approach. Lesa and Alan applied to Co-Ownership after they’d been renting privately in Rathfriland for four years.

Although their bank told them they wouldn’t qualify for a mortgage, Lesa and Alan decided to attend a mortgage event in their local branch.

There, they met one of Co-Ownership’s advisors who outlined options they might consider, including Shared Ownership.

With help along the way from the Co-Ownership advisor and an independent mortgage advisor who’d already worked with Co-Ownership, the couple were able to buy their own home in Rathfriland.

“The only thing we would do differently is apply sooner. The process is straightforward, we were supported greatly at every stage and that continues long after you join the scheme too. Co-Ownership afforded us the opportunity to own our family home and we can’t thank the team enough.”

Alan

Lesa and Alan, pictured with Co-Ownership Director of Customer Services Glynis Hobson, bought through Co-Ownership after four years renting privately.
More than 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, 90 per cent of social housing is still segregated along religious and cultural divides.11

Many of the neighbourhoods social housing providers work in are among the hardest hit by The Troubles and the most deprived areas of the UK: they are at the coalface of the Peace Process. Over the last few years, tensions have increased and there has been a marked escalation in paramilitary violence.

As well as identifying “widespread ethno-religious residential segregation in social housing”, Shanks and Mullins pointed to a “juxtaposition of areas of derelict and underused housing (traditionally ‘Protestant’ areas and areas of high demand for social housing stress but with little potential land available (traditionally ‘Catholic’ areas).12

In addition, some ethnic minorities, living in both urban and rural areas, have been subject to racist abuse, threats and even attacks.

Social housing providers are committed to building safe, sustainable communities and are involved in many significant projects to tackle segregation, intimidation and racism.

The best known of these is probably the Shared Neighbourhoods initiative which housing associations are delivering as part of the Government’s Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy and as part of the draft Programme for Government 2016-2021. This is being delivered by a number of housing associations who see the real potential of housing for a more inclusive society.

Over the past year Clanmil Housing has created three new Shared Neighbourhoods in Dundrum, Banbridge and Belfast.

Clanmil’s experience is that community buy-in is essential to creating conditions for shared neighbourhoods to be possible. It is essential that the community has a stake in agreeing what sharing means and Clanmil works with community representatives to develop a bespoke charter for each new shared neighbourhood that reflects local people’s priorities. This approach creates a space to nurture trust.

Clanmil also works with young people to promote sharing. In Dundrum, they brought four local primary schools together for a fun, educational cross community arts programme that encouraged the children to consider what the concept of sharing means to them. In Banbridge, a longer-term project with Banbridge High School, St Patrick’s Banbridge and New-Bridge Integrated College is engaging young people in the reality and challenges of integration over their five years in secondary school.

The target set by the Northern Ireland Executive for new Shared Neighbourhoods represents 10% of the overall Social Housing Development Programme. With 78% of people saying they would prefer to live in a mixed religion neighbourhood, this target needs to be more ambitious.

Less well known than T:BUC Shared Neighbourhoods, perhaps, is the Housing Associations Integration Project (HAIP). This flagship €1.1m initiative has been funded by the EU’s PEACE IV Programme. The project brings together more than 1,200 people from 40 social housing estates in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

“I really enjoyed meeting people from different communities. There isn’t enough communication between individuals, particularly among groups who feel that they are separated or somehow different from us. They’re not. We’re all human beings and should behave accordingly.”

Eamon, a resident of Apex Housing’s Alexander House in Derry/L’derry.
The project’s aim is to help people from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds learn about each other, embrace diversity and build lasting relationships between communities.

Match-funding for the project has been provided by the Executive Office in Northern Ireland and the Department for Rural and Community Development in Ireland.

This NIFHA-led initiative is the first of its kind to cover both Northern Ireland and the border counties. It’s being delivered in partnership with Apex, Choice, Clanmil and Radius housing associations as well as TIDES Training and the Irish Council for Social Housing.

Among the range of activities taking place are cultural visits to places like Crumlin Road Gaol and the Orange Museum, joint workshops on subjects of shared interest, cross community cultural events, and bespoke good relations training to create ‘community champions’ to carry the work on after the project ends.

One such event, organised by Radius and facilitated by Ballymena Intercultural Forum, was an evening of Afghan cuisine for residents of St Patrick’s Barracks in Ballymena and Randalstown.

Two women from Afghanistan talked about the dishes as they prepared them. The tenants then had the opportunity to sample the food and ask questions.

This was followed by a facilitated conversation where the Afghani women shared their experiences of Afghanistan and living in Northern Ireland.

“I got so much enjoyment from learning about other traditions.”

Jackson, Maine Fold, Radius

“This was a great chance to learn about women from other cultures who have made their home in Northern Ireland. Communication was excellent.”

Jill, Neillsbrook Fold, Radius

The project is supported by the EU’s PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.
Sometimes helping someone find a home is not enough. There are so many instances when people need a helping hand to be able to manage well enough to keep their home. Whether it’s putting food on the table, keeping a home warm, learning the skills to stay independent, overcoming addiction, dealing with physical or mental health issues, or having access to activities, technology or equipment to improve quality of life, housing providers are always there, delivering facilities and services specially designed to meet our tenants’ specific needs.

For example, in a recent study by the Financial Conduct Authority only 26% of respondents from Northern Ireland said they felt highly confident in managing their money. Keeping control of our finances is essential to well-being and many housing associations offer free money advice to help people living in their homes make the most of their income. People may struggle with their finances for many reasons, including debt, benefit cuts or the expense of moving into and furnishing a new home. A number of associations across Northern Ireland have invested in creating Money Advice Teams who help people to budget and stay on top of their bills through money management and incentivised savings programmes, to manage debt and access affordable credit, and to deal with ongoing welfare reforms.

Research also shows that, with our ageing population and the increased prevalence of dementia, need for supports for older people will continue to grow significantly over the coming years.

In fact, according to research commissioned by the Housing Executive and carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2018, the number of people aged 65 or over increased by 83% (137k), from 116k to 303k between 1971 and 2017. The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to increase by a further 81% (247k), from 303k to 550k, between 2017 and 2063.

In addition, support services are the safety nets that protect the health and well-being of individuals and families. Even more, they help prevent job loss, relapse into addiction or crime and homelessness.

A pilot study into a ‘Housing First’ approach to providing permanent housing for homeless people who are dependent on alcohol or drugs or who have mental health issues with the support, social care and health services they need provided to them in their own homes or locally in their community showed high levels of success, including improved:

- Health, mental and physical well-being
- social and community participation
- lower levels of crime and anti-social behaviour
- reduced substance misuse; and
- high levels of tenancy sustainment.

The value of investing in effective prevention and interventions has been shown. Every £1 invested in such measures saves the public purse at least £1.90 that would have to be spent on acute services – such as hospital, prison or emergency accommodation – if these services were not available.

“Preventing and rapidly resolving homelessness always costs less public money than allowing homelessness to become sustained or repeated.”

Despite this, providing the complex support that is required to address issues such as ageing, addiction and poverty “is hampered by budgetary pressures, including on the Supporting People programme” which finances many of the services the social housing sector and its partners deliver.

Northern Ireland’s political parties have all recognised the value of the Supporting People Programme and pledged their support for it. We call on all the parties – all our elected representatives – and Government to ensure that the Supporting People Programme is adequately resourced with sustained ring-fenced funding to meet current and future needs.
HELPING PEOPLE WITH GENERAL NEEDS

ALLEVIATING HUNGER

Along with having a roof over our head, one of our most basic needs is for food. Social housing providers deliver a range of supports in this area – from subsidised lunches and emergency food parcels to advice and training about shopping on a budget and preparing healthy meals.

Apex is a case in point. The housing association is a founder member of Foyle Foodbank - an independent charity based in the Apex Living Centre in Derry/Londonderry and supported by The Trussell Trust - which helps families by providing them with emergency food. With 1 in 5 people in the UK living in poverty, need for such assistance is growing. In the last financial year - 2018/19 - the Foodbank collected 20,343 kgs of food which fed 1,962 adults and 1,471 children.

Apex has also assisted 155 families over the last year and a half through the Apex Community Supermarket, an initiative which helps people find a way out of poverty. This project is supported by the Dept. for Communities through the welfare reform mitigations package.

It is crucial that these mitigations are extended beyond the current end date of March 2020, so that vital initiatives such as this can continue to meet growing need.

Members of the Apex Community Supermarket have access not only to food but to support during their journey out of poverty. Support includes individually tailored training and advice on money matters, cooking and nutrition, personal development, employability and positive well-being including managing stress, mental health and exercise.

The Community Supermarket also offers opportunities for meeting other people, building self-confidence and learning new skills through volunteering. In fact, many people who have used the Foodbank and Community Supermarket have gone on to become volunteers there.

Last year, a total of 64 tonnes of food were donated to the Foodbank and Community Supermarket.

In addition, Apex supports a local charity to manage its 34 inner city allotments. The project not only supports local people to grow fresh produce, learn about food and nutrition, but also helps sustain the small local charity. Any surplus food from the allotments is donated to the Community Supermarket.

Apex also runs a luncheon club which provides more than 4,300 subsidised meals each year to older people.

“I moved to Derry three years ago from Syria with my family and my volunteering role in the Apex Community Supermarket has helped me to improve my English and allowed me to make friends. My new skills will hopefully help me to get a job.”

Mohammad, Apex Community Supermarket Volunteer
Energy efficiency in rural homes has been given a boost through the new Handi-Heat project.

A three-year programme, Handi-Heat will help tackle fuel poverty by developing a series of resources for policy makers, examining sustainable energy solutions in rural communities.

Led by the Housing Executive, a €2m euro research grant has been made available by the Northern Periphery & Arctic Programme (NPA) and the European Regional Development Fund

Clark Bailie, The Housing Executive’s Chief Executive, explained “Handi–Heat is a fantastic opportunity for us to collaborate with a range of organisations from the Republic of Ireland, Finland, Iceland and the Shetland Islands to find solutions to problems faced by rural householders, such as reliance on home heating oil.

“We will also be upgrading four of our homes in Fermanagh and providing them with a renewable energy supply, so we can test how these measures could benefit our rural tenants.”

The project aims to document current home energy policy and practice across Northern Europe and develop viable business models with innovative solutions to tackle energy problems in rural areas.

It also aims to identify opportunities for rural communities to access renewable energy sources and reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.

Jenny Irvine, Chief Executive for ARC Healthy Living Centre, who received funding through the project, said “This development presents us with enormous opportunities for better understanding the link between fuel poverty and health inequalities, and will enable us in a very practical way to help people help themselves.

“The Handi–Heat project will focus on promoting practical solutions to rural energy problems and recognises that individuals and communities have a significant role to play in transforming the way we heat our homes.”

For more information, 
click online at www.nihe.gov.uk
HELP TO REGAIN OR MAINTAIN INDEPENDENCE

CREATING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE

North Belfast (NB) Housing’s Flax Foyer offers a housing support service which helps 18-25-year olds who are homeless with accommodation and support needs. Residents can stay in one of the 37 self-contained flats for up to two years.

Holistic, individually tailored support is provided to help residents develop the necessary skills to live independently. Education, training and support are offered in literacy and numeracy skills, cooking and laundry while counselling and support for addiction, physical and mental health as well and opportunities for volunteering and employment are also offered.

Flax Foyer receives funding from the Supporting People programme and validates the services provided.

Eamonn’s story

I spent most of my teenage years living on the fringes of society, transitioning into adulthood with a multitude of issues my young mind could not comprehend and lacked the capacity to deal with. At the age of 16, I found myself homeless and sofa surfing mainly between parties.

At the age of 18, I found myself living in a hostel, as the parties dried up and my options ran out. It was a frightening experience and not one I remember fondly. I managed 6 months before returning home - a place where support was in short supply and a multitude of temptations awaited.

I spent the next three years on a drug and alcohol fuelled binge. At the age of 21, I was hit with the reality of losing someone to suicide. This was the start of a new chapter in my life that brought with it a personal battle with mental illness and a prolonged period of emotional distress, fuelled by a cycle of addiction.

Mental health support was lacking but with the help of a local youth worker, I began to slowly rebuild my life and get things back on track.

It was a long road with many setbacks and, at the age of 23, I found myself homeless again with very few options.

A close friend recommended Flax Foyer, as she felt it would benefit me and my passion to work with young people. In September 2010, I moved into a flat at the Foyer.

During my time there, I was supported to undertake essential skills in English and a Youth and Community programme with Springboard. Within a year, I progressed from having no formal qualifications to being offered a place on the Youth Work degree at the University of Ulster.

Living at Flax Foyer provided the stability and the extra support I needed to ensure I engaged with services aimed at helping me progress both personally and professionally.

Unfortunately, not long before I started my degree course, I suffered another setback and ended up in hospital with kidney failure. I was determined not to fall back into old habits. My time living at Flax Foyer taught me that a setback doesn’t mean failure.

Six weeks later, in September 2011, I started my degree and went on to graduate in 2014. Since then, I have spent time working with vulnerable young people both at home and in refugee camps in France and Greece.

In September 2017, I began employment as a support worker in NB Housings’ Flax Foyer, helping young people, many of whom are struggling to cope with similar experiences I dealt with in the past. I feel that my personal experiences have provided me with the essential skills to offer the specialised support the service currently offers to young people.
The Housing Executive is an early adopter of cutting edge Electronic Assistive Technology and is currently using a range of smart home technology such as the Amazon Echo (ALEXA) to improve the quality of life for tenants in Derry/Londonderry.

An Assisted Living pilot scheme is underway, at a cost of approximately £30k and in partnership with the Health and Social Care Trust Occupational Therapy Service and Hive Studios. The first project of its kind in the UK, the scheme aims to improve flexibility, mobility, social interaction and security for a pilot group of 18 households with elderly, disabled and/or vulnerable tenants, aged between 6-68, who have a range of disabilities, challenges and family circumstances.

Working together to identify assisted technologies to support the circumstances of each individual tenant, the partnership helping each of the scheme's participants make the most of fully customizable, broadband-enabled smart devices.

Technology used includes:
- Voice and video-enabled Amazon Echo for communication and control of the smart devices;
- smart lighting & power socket systems,
- smart thermostats,
- video-enabled door security systems, and
- smart home monitoring devices for the benefit of the elderly living alone.

“This has been a really exciting and worthwhile project to be involved in. We can now monitor our entire home and ensure the safety and well-being of my autistic son Adam. Adam’s bedroom has also been equipped with sensory responsive lighting and he has his own Echo Spot which he loves. It’s great to see the Housing Executive partnering with local businesses to offer innovative services like this to the community.”

Melissa, Tenant

“When I first heard about this project, I couldn’t wait to get involved. When you have mobility issues – the ability to simply ask Alexa to do a range of tasks for you like turning the heating off and on, seeing who’s at your front door and being able to let them in, turning your lights off and on – even simple stuff like reminding you at the right time to take your medication – is a godsend. Also, the ability to add remote monitoring and call my buddy features is a major lifeline for some people living on their own. Even in terms of reducing isolation and of increasing my independence – this project has been invaluable.”

Mark, Tenant
Many housing associations offer care and accommodation specially designed for older people living with dementia.

Abbeyfield & Wesley’s Palmerston Home in East Belfast is one such centre and received the Staff Nursing Care Award in 2017 for ‘Inspirational Achievement in Dementia Related Activities and Alternative Therapies’.

Recognising that reawakening dormant memories brings joy to residents’ lives and that, according to a study by the Alzheimer’s Society, only 35% of people living with dementia get outside every week, the association decided to create a Magical Memory Garden. The Alpha Programme, Groundwork NI, Belfast City Council and Belfast City Airport provided funding for the project.

The garden, which boasts unique features such as a caravan and a car port, is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. Residents and visitors can relax and chat in the caravan, recalling family days out or holidays from days gone by. Or they can spend time in the car port, tinkering with, polishing or cleaning the car, or simply sit in the car and listen to the radio. There is also a large garden shed, which is home to the ‘Men in Sheds’ project, raised herb beds, and a serene, secluded ‘secret garden’ for quiet contemplation.

Abbeyfield and Wesley chief executive Geraldine Gilpin explains why there’s such a variety of areas and activities. “For people living with dementia, it is important to stimulate different senses. Also, everybody’s dementia is different. Each of our residents is at a different stage of dementia and needs a different stage of care and assistance. It is important to have a range of activities and solutions for these various stages.”

“I first got to love nature and being outdoors when my uncle Billy arranged for my family to be evacuated during the war, from Belfast to a house near Killowen Point, Rostrever. It’s something that’s stayed with me all my life. I really enjoy looking at all the flowers in the garden, smelling the fresh herbs, and helping with the potting out.”

Mary, resident

The popular car port gives residents an extra reason to enjoy some fresh air and exercise.
QUALITY OF LIFE

Whether it’s inventing handmade games or using the latest technology, housing associations are committed to improving the quality of life for people who require a bit of extra care. Both these approaches are very much in evidence at Radius Housing’s Loughview housing with care scheme in Holywood.

There, staff members are creative and quick to devise activities that engage and entertain residents. Carolyn Patty, a care assistant at Loughview housing with care, explains “We provide fun and stimulation, on top of the room and the food. We are not just carers: we want our residents to enjoy life here and see their quality of life improve.”

Reminiscence work – recalling and sharing life stories – plays a big part, as does music. “We have seen residents confused about where they are but, when we put on a song, they know all the lyrics, Kyla McFarland, another care assistant adds. Some of the games the care team have invented include catching fish and horse racing. The fish catching game helps improve dexterity, through the process of capturing the fish shaped piece of paper and lifting them off the table, and memory, because each fish has a question written on it. The horse racing game also prompts memory, as residents call out the numbers on the dice they roll. Carolyn says there’s a great sense of competition, with people closest to the board sometimes sneakily moving pieces on and others shouting out numbers.

Other activities include bingo, darts, inflatable bowling, shopping excursions and outings to places like museums and the Folk Museum.

Whether living at home or in a residential setting, everyone wants to remain as independent as possible for as long as possible. Radius uses technology to make this possible for older people, people with mental health issues and people who are thought to be at risk of violence. The Radius Connect 24 service provides 24/7 support 365 days per year to more than 21,000 people. Customers wear pendants and watches, which can be used anywhere. By pushing a button, users are put through to a trained call-handler, who then contacts family or emergency services as appropriate. The service has proved vital in allowing people to stay living in their own homes, and in many cases directly led to life-saving interventions by emergency services.

If adopted to its full potential, Radius Connect 24 could save the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland £34 million per year, based on results of a Scottish study on the impact of technology-enabled services.

“When I had an aneurism at 5 in the morning, I just pulled the cord at the side of my bed. I felt reassured because I knew that help was on my way and that someone would contact my son.”

Morris, resident

“Noelle and Morris, residents at Radius Housing Association’s Loughview in Bangor, say knowing that help is at the touch of a button gives them added peace of mind.

“It’s good to know that someone else always knows whether you are in or out.”

Noelle, resident
Caring for Where We Live

built heritage, regeneration and the environment

One of the ways we judge how well a community is doing is by its appearance. Well designed and well maintained homes and public areas indicate that there is a sense of pride in the local environment and a sense of its worth.

We feel safer in such places. In the same way, we tend to try to avoid neighbourhoods with derelict buildings, vacant lots and unkempt public areas because we feel less secure there.

The quality of our environment, access to services and community cohesion all have an impact on our wellbeing. Social housing providers understand this close connection between, home, community, pride of place and a sense of wellbeing.

The housing sector is engaging with local councils across Northern Ireland to help influence the local development plans that will shape our communities including housing services and investment infrastructure.

We, along with our partners, also invest millions each year helping to restore our built heritage, regenerate communities and protect the environment.

We ask our public representatives to ensure that more supports are available for housing associations wishing to refurbish or convert derelict or vacant buildings.

“...wellbeing is affected not only by tenure but by how the neighbourhoods are managed within which respondents live. This is a consistent theme across social renters, shared owners and owner occupiers.”

“Housing associations, together with local authorities, universities, and other anchor institutions, are working alongside residents and community organisations to address local challenges and drive change. They are already making an impact, often with limited resources, but there is the potential to do so much more.”
Derelict buildings blight our communities and are magnets for anti-social behaviour. Sadly, many neglected buildings are not only beautiful but are also important parts of our built heritage.

Even though refurbishing such buildings is more complicated and can be more expensive than creating new developments, reusing assets in this way is a carbon friendly approach and housing associations such as Clanmil know that the results are worth the extra effort.

One such project which has transformed a neighbourhood in the heart of Belfast is the refurbishment of the 101-year old former Blood Transfusion Bank at Durham Street and development of an adjoining vacant lot on Albert Street.

The landmark building was designed for the Belfast Corporation by Young & Mackenzie who were responsible for many of Belfast’s best-known buildings including the Robinson & Cleaver department store in Donegall Square. Despite its architectural importance, this beautiful building was slated for demolition. Clanmil bought it in 2012 and, a year later, it became a Grade B2 listed building.

Working with Rolston Architects and contractors Geda Construction, Clanmil restored as many original features as possible, including the elegant façade, with its stunning carvings.

The restoration was part of a £3.3million housing scheme providing a total of 23 homes, 12 secure apartments for over 55s, 10 2-3 bedroom houses for families and 1 specially adapted bungalow. The project was part funded by the Department for Communities.

“We are greatly encouraged that our community’s beautiful old building is providing new accommodation for a wide range of ages and residents. There is a need for family and older peoples’ housing in the area, so it is fantastic to see both provided for in this scheme.

“The whole process has been amazing. Clanmil worked with the community every step of the way. They’ve listened. That’s the most important thing – they’ve listened.”

Jean, St Mary’s Community Group

One of the new tenants, Cathy, is delighted that her family has found a home here.

Her son Sean, who is twelve, was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy when he was three years old. Despite the progressive and irreversible nature of his condition, Cathy had to endure a six year wait before securing a fully wheelchair accessible home. She says the new home has changed their lives.
Cathy’s story

It was horrendous before we got this house. Sean had no mobility in our previous accommodation, which was a 2-bedroom granny flat. It wasn’t wheelchair accessible or practical for him at all. He couldn’t even get his wheelchair into his bedroom, I had to carry him in. He couldn’t sit at the kitchen table with us, either, because there wasn’t enough room and he doesn’t have the balance to stay sitting up on his own.

His day to day routine was to come in from school, get out of the chair, and I’d carry him into the bed. In an emergency, I wouldn’t have been able to grab him, lift him and run out.

I was nearly demented trying to get what I needed for Sean. I felt I was running from pillar to post.

Then Clanmil agreed to build me a specially adapted bungalow for Sean.

There’s been a 100%, complete difference from when we moved in here, even in Sean’s mood. He’s able to go anywhere in this house in his electric wheelchair and outside as well. He can get at all his own things. He can sit at the kitchen table with us. And he can have friends in now: there was no room for that before.

Sean feels secure in his own home now, and independent. He has the freedom to whizz about and doesn’t have to call on me for everything.

It’s helped my own mental health too. I was ready for, if not going through, a breakdown. At times I felt like I was fighting a losing battle. I was a Mummy and I was supposed to be helping my child but I was helpless. Now Sean’s happy and I’m happy.”

“Go to a house where it is not suitable and look at the child then go to a house where it is suitable and see the difference.”
Cathy

“Our home’s bigger now. It’s easier to move around here and that makes me feel happier. Having that freedom lifts my spirits. I’d be very happy to see more houses like this being built for people who need them without them having to wait for so long.”
Sean
Social housing providers, in addition to providing homes, are at the heart of transforming communities. Newington Housing Association has been working since the 1970s to regenerate parts of North Belfast which were among the worst affected by The Troubles and long-term lack of investment.

For example, Newington’s £12.3m three-phase regeneration of the Limestone Road, which provided 85 new homes, revitalised a once-abandoned residential area and increased community confidence to the point that a security barrier on Newington Street was removed after almost three decades. The development also won three RICS awards, including Best Regeneration Scheme, and was named the UK’s Best Regeneration Project at the National Housing Awards in 2016.

In addition to other award-winning developments at Upper Queen Street and Girdwood, Newington is working with the Department for Communities, the Housing Executive, Apex Housing and community organisations to transform the New Lodge area. The latest stage in this redevelopment has involved moving 200 households out and demolishing old ‘two up, two down’ dwellings – both occupied and derelict - to make way for 88 spacious modern homes.

Residents were initially concerned that only about half of them would be able to live in the new development. Because, however, Newington worked closely with residents and the Housing Executive to source nearby accommodation - on a temporary basis for those awaiting homes in the new development or on a permanent basis for those who wanted them - the project was a success. So much so that the majority of the original 200 households still live very close to their former homes and neighbours, helping the area retain its strong sense of community.

“The community are absolutely delighted with the design and standard of the 88 new homes. “We are still lobbying for the demolition of the remainder of the outdated properties located within the Upper Long Streets to ensure full completion of the redevelopment of the area. The partnerships we have established have positioned us well to ensure future delivery of these homes.”

Kate Clarke, Community Worker

Nicole and her children were re-housed during the demolition and rebuild phase. They now live in one of the new homes.
Nicole’s story

I was hesitant about moving when it was first proposed. My friends and family all lived in the New Lodge and I was concerned that I would end up in another part of Belfast, totally isolated from them.

When I moved, Newington and the Housing Executive assured me that I could return to the New Lodge when the redevelopment was complete if I wished, so that gave me peace of mind.

Once I saw the transformation of the area, I decided to come back, even though I was extremely happy and had fantastic neighbours during the four years I spent in my temporary home.

I am delighted to say I am now in my new home. It is amazing and I can’t believe it.

“I have found myself sitting here, thinking back to when I was in my old, damp and dilapidated house. It brings a smile to my face because my life has changed so much. My new home has totally transformed myself and my children’s lives.”

“They are making new friends at the Youth Centre and I have been accepted to start a two-year access course in biometric science. I intend to go on to complete my nursing degree. I am currently in the process of applying for financial support for my study fees, through Newington Housing’s Student Bursary Scheme.”

“I just want to convey my appreciation to everyone who was involved in making this happen.”
Enjoying nature helps improve our health – both mental and physical. Social housing providers, tenants and staff, are involved in scores of initiatives to protect our environment, keep our estates and local communities tidy and bursting with colour, and help others learn to cherish the beauty around us.

Mervyn, better known by his nickname ‘Mossy’, is a Clanmil tenant who has spent a lifetime doing just that. An environmentalist, guerrilla gardener and forest guide, he takes every opportunity he can to give nature a helping hand.

Mossy’s story

I’ve always had a deep-seated love of nature and wildlife. It’s like a spiritual thing with me.

I used to have an uncle who lived down in Co. Cavan and, even when I was at pre-school age, he’d wake me at 5 a.m. to take me out to watch the larks rising over the hay meadows and hear them singing.

He taught me a great deal about nature and wildlife and how to look after it.

There’s a massive decline in wildlife everywhere. That’s one of the reasons I got involved with guerrilla gardening – to give nature a helping hand.

Albert Einstein once said that, if the bee population was wiped out, mankind would follow in three or four years.

Anyone can help. Just buy some packets of seeds, go out into the countryside or find some waste ground, poke a few holes and plant the seeds. Nature will take over from there and soon there will be beautiful plants and more bees.

Or you can take on an allotment, like I did when I retired. I can grow all my own plants, take cuttings, and use them for guerrilla gardening. I work on the allotment four, maybe five, days a week. I keep a wee flock of hens up there and either sell or exchange the eggs for more produce.

There’s so much nature all around us. When I was growing up, I used to come up to Belvoir Forest Park every chance I had. Then, in the 1990s, I got offered a part-time job as a Forest Guide with the Dept. of Agriculture Forestry Service. Most of our visitors were school groups, doing Key Stage 2 and 3. Some of the kids were so enthusiastic, I wondered whether we might be inspiring another David Attenborough for the future.”
Connswater Homes, along with the Plant & Play roadshow, provided a free 12 week after school club for children aged 7 and up during the spring and summer at Mersey Street, Belfast. The project offered a fantastic mix of science and nature themed activities. Children learned about gardening, wildlife, recycling and more, and the sessions included yoga and mindfulness as well.

The children worked with the facilitators to transform the Mersey Street allotment, with lots of flowers and vegetables. While the children were free to help themselves to the produce – to eat there or take home – most of the harvest was donated to The Larder Food Bank.

The thirteen children who took part showed a massive increase in both knowledge and confidence about gardening. Their willingness to get their hands dirty every week was a delight to watch.

“Three of my children took part in the Boom and Bloom after school club. They planted seeds and flowers which bloomed beautifully. The beds they cleared and planted look great too. The children were also able to pick and eat the strawberries they grew, and water the beds if needed - which they really enjoy doing. They loved the yoga also. All new things for them to learn. They also made some new friends at the club. Thanks to Vikki, Tammy and David, they had a fantastic 12 weeks.”

Lynsey
Choice Housing’s zero carbon development at Killynure Green in Carryduff is the first scheme in Ireland to have met Level Five of the Code for Sustainable Homes. This resulted in greater energy efficiency, more recycling, less water use and the creation of a play park during the construction phase, as well as lasting benefits for both tenants and the environment.

Each home has a natural gas boiler providing heat and hot water, as well as solar PV systems installed to cut electricity bills. In fact, two years after residents moved in, the total energy cost per home averaged less than £600 per year. This was in line with expectations and was no doubt a factor in the scheme winning the Project of the Year (Residential) category at the 2018 UK CIBSE Building Performance Awards.

Choice Housing have installed around 375 solar PV systems across Northern Ireland, including several sheltered housing schemes. The solar PV systems generate around 525,000kWh of renewable energy and reduce carbon footprint by around 200 tonnes each year.

Another innovative approach Choice have adopted is to tender for a ‘Preferred Electricity Supplier’ for their new homes. This means that tenants can benefit from low electricity prices as soon as they move into their new home.

“I moved into this development when it was built and have found that I have much lower energy bills than in my previous home, probably saving around £20 per month. I would rarely have my heating on, but when I do, I find that my home heats up very quickly and stays warm. It’s easy to budget for energy as I use a pre-pay cards for both gas and electricity. It’s also good to have solar panels on the roof as an alternative form of energy”.

- Margaret, resident
Dementia is a leading cause of death in the UK and on the increase in Northern Ireland. Ark Housing, in partnership with the South Eastern HSC Trust and Supporting People, developed and manages Ravara Court in Bangor, a flagship development that meets the latest dementia best practice standards and guidelines in accommodation, care and support.