Facing the Future: 
The Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017
“Facing the Future,” Northern Ireland’s first ever housing strategy, recognises the fundamental role of housing in shaping our communities. The strategy is centred on a vision that everyone should have the opportunity to access good quality housing at a reasonable cost.

It is an inclusive vision that seeks to address housing need across all tenures and to play a role in helping support and sustain economic recovery, create employment and regenerate some of our most deprived and neglected communities.

As Minister for Social Development, I know how important housing as an issue is, to every one of us. As a society, we must ensure that good quality housing is available, in every tenure, which is affordable, accessible and sustainable.

The Housing Strategy is an affirmation of that principle, and its implementation can only benefit our society as a whole, our economy and our neighbourhoods.

An update on the Housing Strategy Action Plan has been published alongside this Strategy. It is encouraging and refreshing to see that real progress that has been made on such an ambitious programme of work in the first two years of its implementation and in the context of wider economic challenges. In August 2015, midway through the life of the Strategy, most actions are either completed or on track for delivery, and while some actions have been amended or delayed, this reflects our continued responsiveness to changes and developments elsewhere.

In implementing the Strategy, we will continue to listen to the views of all of our stakeholders, to ensure that we deliver for those who are most vulnerable, and to actively contribute to a society that is fairer and more inclusive. A vibrant and healthy housing sector is a priority for us all.
## OUR VISION

To ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access good quality housing at a reasonable cost.

## OUR ROLE

A home is at the heart of people’s lives. Good quality, reasonably-priced housing contributes significantly to creating a safe, healthy and prosperous society. In our view, Government has five main roles in relation to housing:

1. Helping to create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market that supports economic growth and prosperity;

2. Providing support for individuals and families to access housing, particularly the most vulnerable in society;

3. Setting minimum standards for the quality of new and existing homes and for how rented housing is managed;

4. Driving regeneration within communities, particularly those suffering from blight and population decline; and

5. Promoting equality of opportunity in housing and promoting good relations.

This strategy sets out how we intend to fulfil these roles over the 2012-17 period.

## A STABLE AND SUSTAINABLE HOUSING MARKET

The Northern Ireland housing market is emerging from a turbulent period. The market is now growing steadily, with prices at more sustainable levels which have better aligned to the overall performance of the economy and to household incomes.

The actions which we believe will help create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market in the medium to long-term include:

1. Working with others to increase the supply of new housing to meet longer term need through a Housing Supply Forum and consideration of developer contributions;

2. Providing support to first time buyers who can sustain home ownership but who are unable to access the housing market primarily due to tight mortgage credit
conditions, through continued support for co-ownership housing and the Affordable Homes fund;

3 Taking action on empty homes and regenerating areas through Building Successful Communities and Living Over the Shops;

4 Action on preventing and mitigating the impact of repossessions to help those affected and restore confidence and stability to the market.

As a result of an increasing population and a trend towards ever smaller households, the Regional Development Strategy 2035 indicates a need for around 11,000 new housing units per year. Over the last few years, the supply of new homes has hovered around 8,000 units a year. Addressing this shortfall will not only help to secure long-term stability in the housing market, but also create jobs and aid economic recovery. We are working in partnership with others to find ways to achieve this stretching goal.

ACCESSING HOUSING

There is no sign that the high demand for social housing will reduce in the near future. We are using public funding in innovative ways to increase the supply of social and affordable housing. We also are exploring ways of using our existing social housing stock and land more effectively and ensuring that the private rented sector offers a viable alternative for more households. In addition, we are asking fundamental questions about the future role of social housing and how it should be allocated.

We have put a clearer policy focus on preventing homelessness and working better in partnership with other bodies to support individuals and families with particular needs to live independently.

QUALITY STANDARDS

The standard of housing in Northern Ireland has improved dramatically over the last thirty years. This has made a considerable contribution to improving health and well-being and reducing carbon emissions. We aim to ensure that standards are maintained, energy efficiency further improved and that remaining poor housing is tackled.

In the social housing sector, we aim to further improve the regulation of social housing landlords to ensure that tenants continue to receive a good level of service and find new ways of financing essential maintenance of Housing Executive stock on a sustainable basis.

In the private rented sector, we are focused on making the sector a more attractive housing option for more people by improving standards and regulation.

Across all types of housing, we will examine whether the current minimum legal quality standard, the fitness standard, needs to be raised, explore new ways to support owners to
improve poor housing and seek innovative solutions to improve energy efficiency as a means of addressing fuel poverty and reducing carbon emissions.

REGENERATION

There are clear opportunities for housing to play a fuller role in regenerating communities, particularly those which have experienced population decline, empty homes and blight. We will develop new ways of helping communities re-shape such areas and make them a place where people want to live. We will ensure we work collaboratively with other parts of Government and local communities to regenerate once-vibrant areas which have suffered blight and population decline.

We also need to look at how we address the challenge of long-term empty homes, which represent not only a waste of a housing resource, but can all too often be a source of blight and a magnet for anti-social behaviour which can affect neighbourhoods and communities.

We will also build on our recent successes in promoting shared housing.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE

The Housing Executive has played a valuable role over the last forty years in greatly improving housing conditions across Northern Ireland and providing a range of quality services to its tenants and others. The time, though, is right to look at how it is structured and funded to take account of the challenges of public finances, the need to ensure tenants can continue to have access to good quality homes and to take account of the new political and civic structures that have developed.

Consequently, we are taking forward a programme of social housing reform to develop detailed options for departmental, strategic and regional structures for the delivery of Social Housing in Northern Ireland. Alongside this we will deliver new and enhanced policies for the social housing sector, to ensure that social landlords and tenants can work together to improve services, that rents are more consistent across the sector as a whole, and that the regulatory framework in which landlords operate provides assurance to tenants, investors and government for the continued provision of high-quality housing services.
OUR APPROACH

The strategy is organised into five themes:

Theme 1 – Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures

Theme 2 – Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable

Theme 3 – Housing and Welfare Reform

Theme 4 – Driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing

Theme 5 – Getting the structures right

The Action Plan Update published alongside this strategy document sets out our commitments, objectives and actions under each of these themes, with an update on progress.

OUTCOMES

The Action Plan associated with the strategy supports the Department in working towards five high-level outcomes:

1. Better housing management, with a more efficient and targeted use of resources;
2. Better regulation, with an increased focus in the interest of tenants and citizens and reduced red tape;
3. Greater flexibility and responsiveness, as circumstances and market conditions change;
4. Continued fairness for citizens, regardless of tenure and consistent with the need to support those who are most vulnerable; and
5. Implementing new structures that can support the above outcomes.

Given the wider economic climate, achieving this vision requires leadership, real commitment and effective partnership working. We aim to challenge ourselves to think and act differently, to work with others in new ways and to develop innovative approaches to address our problems and make the most of our opportunities.
This Strategy is the outworking of extensive stakeholder engagement during its development, a consultation exercise that generated a large number of responses on the wide range of issues it covered, and the individual elements which have, in addition, almost all been subject to public consultation in their own right.

The vision for this Strategy is...

> to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access good quality housing at a reasonable cost.

It is an inclusive vision that seeks to address housing need across all tenures and to play a role in helping support and sustain economic recovery, create employment and regenerate some of our most deprived and neglected communities.

The 33 individual outcomes that it aims to achieve are contained in the Housing Strategy Action Plan.

Progress against the Action Plan is monitored within the Department on a quarterly basis, and a mid-term review of progress will be published separately.
The Strategy was launched for public consultation from 15 October 2012 to 7 December 2012. Organisations representative of Section 75 groups, private individuals, and a wide range of industry stakeholders submitted responses totalling over 700 pages of comment from 90 respondents.

The responses received reflect the breadth of sectors and stakeholders with an active interest in strategic housing issues in Northern Ireland. Many respondents supported our ongoing regulation of the private rented sector, including through a landlord registration scheme. Stakeholders were also supportive of the Department’s work with others to regulate houses in multiple occupation.

Stakeholders commented positively on the continued delivery of social and affordable homes. There was strong support for the Social Housing Development Programme, and for the Supporting People Scheme.

There was recognition of the positive ongoing work on the Warm Homes Scheme. The scheme tackles fuel poverty, increases energy efficiency and reduces carbon emissions. The Department continues to provide grant assistance to 5,000 homes to replace old boilers, targeting this assistance to those most in need.

The House Sales Scheme was highly valued by many of our consultees, and the Department plans to maintain and enhance this scheme. We will also continue our work to implement the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland.

A full summary of responses to the consultation was published in September 2012.
Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Department in carrying out its functions to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally;
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- between persons with dependants and persons without.

Without prejudice to the obligations set out above, the Department is also required, in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

The Department has separately published an overarching equality screening of this strategy which has just been updated. In tandem with this, as stated in the consultation and Action Plan, each of the individual policies will be screened in the context of our section 75 duty and, where appropriate, an equality impact assessment undertaken.