



Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Improving Social Housing Standards through Stock Transfer



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
3 June 2014





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Northern Ireland Audit Office

Comptroller and Auditor General

3 June 2014

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# Abbreviations

DFP	Department of Finance and Personnel
EQIA	Equality Impact Assessment
GB	Great Britain
MEI	Multi Element Improvements
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive



# Executive Summary



*Houses at Rinmore after refurbishment: photo courtesy of DSD*

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

1. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) was established in 1971 with responsibility for social housing in Northern Ireland, a function previously undertaken by district councils. It is the largest landlord in Northern Ireland responsible for the management and maintenance of around 88,500 homes valued at around £3.3 billion and generating £272 million rental income in 2012-13. An independent Stock Condition Survey<sup>1</sup> in 2009 identified a total cost to maintain all NIHE properties over the following 30 years of around £5.1 billion (an average of £56,000 for each property).
2. The NIHE's Multi-Element Improvements (MEI) programme, affecting around 5,000 homes, was suspended in 2007-08 due to a capital funding shortfall of some £150 to £200 million. The shortfall arose because of changes in the funding that was available in the public service and also because of the significant reduction in capital receipts from NIHE house and land sales, following the collapse in the property market in 2007-08. This MEI programme included replacement/upgrading of kitchens, windows and heating, as well as extensions to properties and environmental improvements. In 2009, due to the continuing shortfall in capital funding, the Department for Social Development (the Department) decided to explore the option of transferring some of NIHE's housing stock to Housing Associations<sup>2</sup>

as a means of delivering the delayed improvements. The rationale for this was that Housing Associations could address improvements for tenants in a more timely way by leveraging in private capital.

3. In January 2013, the Minister for Social Development presented a set of proposals involving change to the current arrangements for the planning, delivery and regulation of social housing. The Northern Ireland Executive subsequently agreed that these proposals should be subject to further exploration. This process may lead to further transfers of social housing to Housing Associations, but no decisions have yet been taken.

## Scope of this report

4. Since 1988 the ownership of around 1.3 million social homes in Great Britain (GB) has been transferred from local authorities to Housing Associations in return for a payment for the value of that stock. For tenants, this transfer involved a change in landlord. At **Part One** of this report we highlight best practice from GB, where stock transfer has been used as a way of ensuring social homes meet the United Kingdom Government's Decent Homes Standard.
5. **Part Two** of this report examines two small scale pilot transfers of housing stock from NIHE to local Housing Associations and highlights the lessons to be learned. The pilots were:

1 *Stock Condition Survey of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Housing Stock*, Savills, May 2009 (A representative sample of 10% of NIHE's housing stock was surveyed).

2 A Housing Association is an independent, not-for-profit social business that provides both homes and support for people in housing need, as well as key community services. In Northern Ireland Housing Associations are regulated by the Department for Social Development. Housing Associations in Northern Ireland manage around 34,000 properties.

- The transfer of 55 homes at Rinmore, Derry; and
- The transfer of 71 bungalows at Bloomfield, Bangor.

6. To inform our report we:

- reviewed best practice arising from social housing stock transfers in Great Britain;
- examined relevant documentation held by the Department and NIHE;
- held meetings with officials from the Department and NIHE;
- drew on the Department's January 2013 response to our initial audit findings relating to the Rinmore stock transfer; and
- consulted with third parties referred to in this report.

## Overall conclusion

7. In our opinion the Rinmore and Bloomfield pilot transfers did not fully provide viable templates for future significant planned housing stock transfers in Northern Ireland. However, based on our initial findings the Department and NIHE, with the assistance of the Strategic Investment Board, developed a Stock Transfer Protocol to take forward the proposed transfer of around 2,000 NIHE homes to Housing Associations. We will continue to monitor progress.

## Key findings

8. The transfer process in GB involved considerable project management challenges with many transfers taking longer to complete than initially planned. With NIHE planning to commence three phases of stock transfers involving over 2,000 houses in 65 locations within a narrow timeframe, it is essential that a comprehensive plan is established in advance, with clearly defined review points. We note that the planned start dates for the proposed programme of 2,000 houses have not been met and are currently subject to change. The Government in GB is encouraging the use of a competitive social landlord selection process as a means of helping to ensure the best price is obtained for the stock being transferred<sup>3</sup>. The Department told us that the next three pilot stock transfer schemes will be subject to a competitive process (**paragraphs 1.4 to 1.8**).

9. Transfers in GB only proceeded after tenant consent had been established by a ballot process and the transfer consultation document was the key means of communicating change to tenants. The Department has confirmed that tenant engagement will be an essential requirement in any future transfers in Northern Ireland and tenant ballots were used in both the Rinmore and Bloomfield pilots (**paragraphs 1.9 to 1.10**).

10. In GB a transfer value was calculated by the Local Authority to inform negotiations

<sup>3</sup> *Housing Transfer Manual*, Department for Communities and Local Government, Homes and Communities Agency and Greater London Authority, November 2013.

## Executive Summary

with the Housing Association over the price to be paid for the properties. The Department confirmed that although transfer values played no role in the two small scale pilots at Rinmore and Bloomfield, the use of the Transfer Value model, as used in GB, is now being considered in its proposed transfer of 2,000 homes over the next 3 years **(paragraphs 1.11, 2.22 and 2.27)**.

11. In GB if a capital receipt was generated from transferring housing stock to a Housing Association it was used to pay off any related housing debts, with any shortfall met by Central Government. NIHE has outstanding loans of £510 million and it is unclear how any remaining debt will be viewed by the Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) following a transfer of housing stock to Housing Associations **(paragraphs 1.12 to 1.13)**.
12. The preferred option in the October 2009 Rinmore appraisal was to transfer NIHE houses to Apex Housing Association with Apex undertaking improvements using the MEI approach. Within four months this appraisal was reworked to take account of an additional option suggested by Apex. The additional option, which involved Apex refurbishing 38 homes using MEI and building 17 new homes, qualified for £1 million of Housing Association Grant, and became the preferred option **(paragraphs 2.1 to 2.11)**.
13. The preferred option in the Bloomfield economic appraisal was to transfer NIHE bungalows to Oaklee Housing Association which would undertake refurbishment works using MEI **(paragraphs 2.17 to 2.19)**.
14. NIHE has delivered comprehensive improvements to nearly 35,000 of its properties through its MEI programme. The MEI improvements are to a higher standard than the Decent Homes Standard. The Rinmore and Bloomfield economic appraisals did not include an option considering that stock transferred to a Housing Association would be refurbished to the less expensive Decent Homes Standard. The Department told us that they did not believe tenants were prepared to accept improvements of any lesser standard than other previously improved neighbouring properties **(paragraphs 2.12 to 2.14 and 2.21)**.
15. A joint working group of Departmental and NIHE officials have developed a Stock Transfer Protocol setting out the governance arrangements, parameters within which a transfer will be implemented and respective roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. Protocols should be agreed by all parties involved, ensuring that housing stock transfers represent a transparent, consistent and fair process. The Department has indicated that future improvement schemes should consider as a minimum the Decent Homes Standard as opposed to the MEI approach used by NIHE **(paragraph 2.26 to 2.29)**.
16. The Department advised us that assurances given to tenants during

the transfer process, for Rinmore and Bloomfield, are set out in a Housing Transfer Offer document. The monitoring of these assurances is carried out through post-transfer progress meetings between the Housing Association and local NIHE management. Post-completion inspections will be carried out by NIHE. In our view it is important that assurances given to tenants prior to both the Rinmore and Bloomfield transfers and indeed as part of future transfers are fully delivered (**paragraphs 2.30 to 2.32**).

### Recommendations

**We recommend that NIHE continues to engage in regular discussions with Housing Associations to ensure the process of transferring housing stock proceeds as efficiently as possible and consider the extent to which the Housing Association sector can best be supported to ensure that plans for transfers can be successfully implemented.**

**We recommend that clear, measurable and time related performance targets are established for NIHE's three phase transfer programme involving around 2,000 homes.**

This will enable NIHE and the Department to undertake a full evaluation of the programme to establish a comprehensive impact evaluation, form judgements on the extent to which value for money has been obtained, and establish valuable lessons for transfers that may be approved in future.

**We recommend that the Department and DFP should consider carefully the treatment of NIHE's loan liabilities prior to embarking on any future transfer schemes and programmes.**

**We recommend that NIHE review its long standing approach of refurbishing social housing, through Multi Element Improvement schemes.** At a minimum we would expect future economic appraisals to consider options which include refurbishment to the Decent Homes Standard.

**We recommend that the Department ensure transfer values, as used in GB, are calculated by NIHE in all social housing transfers.**

Housing Associations should be aware that the results of the calculation will provide a starting point for negotiations on transfer values.

**We recommend that all assurances given to NIHE tenants, as part of a process that transfers social housing from NIHE to Housing Associations, are clearly defined, measureable and time-related.** Robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements should be established early in the process to ensure that assurances given to tenants are delivered.





# Part One: Background and Housing Stock Transfer Best Practice



*Bloomfield bungalows before refurbishment: photo courtesy of DSD*

# Part One:

## Background and Housing Stock Transfer Best Practice

### Background

1.1 To ensure its 88,500 properties (**see Appendix 1**) continue to meet modern housing standards relating to fitness, structure, energy efficiency and facilities, NIHE in 2012-13 invested around £146 million through planned maintenance, response maintenance and other improvement schemes. An independent Stock Condition Survey<sup>4</sup> in 2009 identified a total cost to maintain all NIHE properties over the following 30 years, to the Decent Homes Standard, of around £5.1 billion (an average of £56,000 for each property). The Decent Homes Standard is a technical standard for public housing introduced by the United Kingdom government in 2000, which aimed to provide a minimum standard of housing conditions for all those who are housed by Local Authorities and Housing Associations.

1.2 NIHE has delivered comprehensive improvements to nearly 35,000 of its properties through its MEI programme. MEI includes extensions, environmental improvements and replacement/upgrading of kitchens, windows, walls, doors, re-wiring, heating, water and electricity supplies. NIHE told us that the MEI programme banner was used from about 1990 and represented the merger of several of its predecessor programmes. According to the independent Stock Condition Survey the MEI programme involved improvements to housing stock in excess of the Decent Homes Standard (see paragraph 2.13).

The Department and NIHE were unable to provide NIAO with the original MEI policy/strategy documents. The MEI programme was suspended in 2007-08 due to a capital funding shortfall in that year of £150 to £200 million. As a result, around 5,000 NIHE properties have not been improved.

1.3 The Department in its 2013 housing strategy<sup>5</sup> recognised the funding constraints and proposed exploring innovative ways to deliver improvements. This included the option of transferring some of the worst Housing Executive stock to registered Housing Associations<sup>6</sup> for improvement. NIHE have developed a programme which will lead to the transfer of over 2,000 houses, most in need of repair, over the next three years.

1.4 The Department prepared a Strategic Outline Case in March 2012 to support the transfer of these 2,000 NIHE properties to Housing Associations. Consultation with tenants will be a key part of the programme which will be overseen by NIHE in three phases (**see Appendix 2**);

- a first phase starting in September 2013 of 702 properties in 18 locations;
- a second phase starting in March 2014 of 976 properties in 22 locations; and
- a third phase starting in September 2014 of 744 properties in 25 locations.

4 *Stock Condition Survey of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Housing Stock*, Savills, May 2009 (A representative sample of 10% of NIHE's housing stock was surveyed). The Department are currently updating the survey.

5 *Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-17*, Department for Social Development, 2013.

6 The Department for Social Development has regulatory powers in relation to the stock managed by around thirty Housing Associations in Northern Ireland.

The planned start dates for this programme have not been met and are currently subject to change.

### Recommendation 1

Commencing 34 stock transfer projects, including over 2,000 properties across 65 locations, will present NIHE with a very significant challenge. The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) has been participating in the Stock Transfer Working Group since October 2013. **We recommend that NIHE continues to engage in regular discussions with Housing Associations to ensure the process of transferring housing stock proceeds as efficiently as possible and consider the extent to which the Housing Association sector can best be supported to ensure that plans for transfers can be successfully implemented.**

## Stock transfers require rigorous project management to ensure that they are delivered on time and to budget

- 1.5 Since 1988 around 1.3 million social homes in GB have been transferred to the ownership of Housing Associations. The transfer process in GB has presented considerable project management challenges including significant time delays, arising from amongst other factors, establishing and controlling transfer set-up costs, identifying stakeholder interdependencies, and a lack of written guidance and protocols. Audit Scotland in a review<sup>7</sup> of stock

transfers commented that *“professional project management and a structured allocation of roles and responsibilities can help projects by ensuring resources are adequate and key issues and interdependencies are identified and managed.”* In our opinion it is important that these challenges are managed throughout the process, including establishing a comprehensive plan which sets out the length of time it will take to complete transfers and the potential costs involved.

- 1.6 Given the time delays experienced in GB and that NIHE propose to commence three phases of stock transfers, each taking around sixteen months and involving over 2,000 houses in 65 locations, it is essential that a detailed plan is established in advance, with clearly defined review points.

### Recommendation 2

Effective monitoring and thorough evaluation of the recently proposed Stock Transfer Programme in Northern Ireland will be crucial. **We recommend that clear, measurable and time related performance targets are established for NIHE’s three phase transfer programme involving around 2,000 homes.** This will enable NIHE and the Department to undertake a full evaluation of the programme to establish a comprehensive impact evaluation, form judgements on the extent to which value for money has been obtained, and establish valuable lessons for transfers that may be approved in future.

<sup>7</sup> Council Housing Transfers, Audit Scotland, March 2006.

## Part One: Background and Housing Stock Transfer Best Practice

1.7 Transfer set-up costs including internal staffing, consultants, tenant advisors, the tenant ballot and staff training must also be considered. The Department told us that NIHE already records its costs associated with stock transfer schemes. In our view the monitoring of these costs is not only important for managing the progress of the current transfers but also in providing benchmark information for future transfers. The Department's current position is that Housing Associations will bear their set up costs, but this will be kept under review.

1.8 The Government in GB encouraged the use of a competitive landlord selection process as a means of ensuring the best price is obtained for the stock being transferred and optimising value for money. The Department told us that the next three pilot stock transfer schemes will be subject to a competitive process (see paragraph 2.28). Local Authorities in GB submitted full business cases justifying their transfer proposals and approval of their proposals depended on evaluation of the business case (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1: In GB, the preparation of business cases ensures that the benefits of proposed transfers are clearly stated**

In GB, business cases for stock transfers are assessed to ensure that:

- they present a strong case for transfer: **the Strategic Case**;
- they deliver value for money: **the Economic Case**;
- the transfer is viable: **the Commercial Case**;
- they are affordable by Government: **the Financial Case**; and
- they can be delivered within an agreed timetable: **the Management Case**.

Source: Department for Communities and Local Government

### In GB the transfer consultation document was a key means of communicating change to tenants

1.9 In GB, transfers of housing stock to Housing Associations only proceeded after tenant consent had been established by a ballot process. To address the concerns of tenants, for example on issues such as future rent levels and standards of service, Local Authorities and the Housing Association agreed a formal transfer consultation document. This document was a key

means of communicating change to tenants. The document included legally enforceable commitments on tenancy rights, rent guarantees, investment in the stock and proposed housing policies. **Figure 2** sets out the requirements for effective tenant participation in housing stock transfers based on research by Audit Scotland.

1.10 The assurances given to tenants were crucial in determining whether the tenants voted to support proposed

housing stock transfers in GB. These will also have influenced the transfer price paid by Housing Associations as they outlined levels of service and expected improvements. The Department has

confirmed that tenant engagement will be an essential requirement in any future transfers in Northern Ireland and tenant ballots were used in both the Rinmore and Bloomfield pilots (see paragraphs 2.15 and 2.23).

**Figure 2: Requirements for effective tenant participation in stock transfers**

### **Adequate resources and support for tenants**

Securing adequate resources to support the activities of tenants' groups is a prerequisite for effective participation. Resources include monies for attending meetings, training, receiving independent advice on housing management and housing transfer matters, and for supporting good communication. Information of the right quality and type is key to tenant participation. Tenants also need time to build their capability to participate.

### **Good leadership**

Tenants need to be clear on the benefits of effective tenant participation, and on what needs to be done to achieve this in the local community. Leadership can be provided by a mixture of 'tenant champions' (tenants who speak out for tenants' rights) and tenant participation officers, encouraging and guiding tenants.

### **Excellent communication**

This needs to be a continuous process where information, ideas and power are shared. Tenants also need to be communicated with in a variety of ways to suit the locality, geographic spread and types of tenants. Initially, communication may need to focus on overcoming previous negative experiences of tenant participation ie, lack of information and poor communication. Tenants need adequate time and accessible information so that they can consider issues properly. Time and information also help tenant representatives to build trusting relationships with each other and the landlord.

### **Early involvement**

Tenants should be involved at the outset, ideally at the stage of identification of a problem or a need and thereafter in all stages of policy development. Tenants do not want to feel like they are simply approving plans that the landlord has already made. Tenants should be equal partners in decisions which affect their housing or services. They have a part to play in the future of the organisation through developing its business plans, policies and procedures.

### **A meaningful and up-to-date tenant participation strategy**

Tenants and the landlord should both prepare the strategy together and agree how it will be monitored or revised. Tenants need to be involved in preparing the strategy from the outset.

### **Housing/Service/Community improvements**

Tenants need to see action being taken early and they need any achievements to be communicated to them. Housing transfer provides opportunities for tenants to see their ideas being implemented. Realistic business plans should back up agreed developments or plans.

## Part One: Background and Housing Stock Transfer Best Practice

### In GB the calculation of a transfer value for housing stock informed negotiations over the transfer price

- 1.11 In GB to aid transfer price negotiations between the Local Authority and the Housing Association, a transfer value was calculated. This valued the stock as social housing, assuming affordable rents and good standards of maintenance. It did not reflect the current market value and was usually less than this. The transfer value was calculated by forecasting the future income and expenditure over a thirty year period and using the forecast surplus income for the period as a basis for negotiating the price to be paid by the Housing Association for the housing stock it would receive. If the transfer value calculation forecasts a deficit over the thirty year period then the Housing Association could consider entering into negotiations with the Local Authority seeking funding support. The Department has confirmed that although transfer values played no role in the two small scale pilots at Rinmore and Bloomfield, it is currently considering the application of the Transfer Value model for each of the planned schemes in the current 2,000 property stock transfer programme.

### The treatment of outstanding housing loans must be carefully considered

- 1.12 When social housing was transferred, the Local Authority in GB used the capital receipt to pay off the related housing debts. If the capital receipt was less than the Authorities housing debts, then the “overhanging debt” and any early redemption penalties were met by Central Government. The impact of this debt repayment was to ensure that all future rental income generated by Housing Associations would be invested in improving future services for tenants including the quality of housing stock received from Local Authorities.
- 1.13 NIHE has outstanding housing loans of £510 million. In 2012-13 the interest and principal repayments were £51 million and £71 million respectively. Transferring stock could potentially leave NIHE servicing this level of debt from a greatly reduced stream of rental income.

#### Recommendation 3

**We recommend that the Department and DFP should consider carefully the treatment of NIHE’s loan liabilities prior to embarking on any future transfer schemes and programmes.**

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland



*Houses at Rinmore before refurbishment: photo courtesy of DSD*

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

### The Department decided to run a small scale pilot stock transfer of 55 tenanted homes in Derry following local representations

2.1 In early 2009 the Department was approached by local community and political representatives about the feasibility of Apex Housing Association buying 55 NIHE properties at Rinmore Drive, Derry and completing significantly delayed improvement works. These homes were adjacent to properties which had already benefitted from the MEI programme undertaken by NIHE.

2.2 The Department, together with NIHE, engaged consultants to undertake an options appraisal of the alternatives to NIHE carrying out improvement works and provide the most viable option for future investment. No competitive process informed the selection of a Housing Association for the Rinmore transfer. The Department selected Apex Housing Association because of its local property holding and its acceptability to the community. The October 2009

appraisal (**see Figure 3**) included four options for evaluation:

- Option 1: Base Case where NIHE refurbishes to Decent Homes Standard;
- Option 2: NIHE refurbishes using MEI;
- Option 3: Housing Association refurbishes using MEI; and
- Option 4: Housing Association builds 55 new homes on the Rinmore site.

2.3 The financial ranking was determined by the Department to be more significant than the non monetary considerations. The preferred option was option 3 i.e. transfer of NIHE houses to Apex Housing Association. Apex would undertake the improvements using MEI, meeting the costs from borrowing or from within its own resources. The financial ranking reflected the cost of the option in terms of the public funding required to deliver it.

**Figure 3: The October 2009 Option Appraisal Results**

Option	Financial Appraisal Ranking	Non Monetary Appraisal Ranking	Overall Ranking
1. NIHE refurbishes to Decent Homes Standard	3	4	3
2. NIHE refurbishes using MEI	4	3	4
3. Housing Association refurbishes using MEI	1	1	1
4. Housing Association builds 55 new homes on the Rinmore site	2	2	2

Source: Department for Social Development



## Aspects of the October 2009 option appraisal process did not follow best practice

2.4 In our view aspects of the October 2009 option appraisal process did not follow best practice. The Department was unable to provide NIAO with the consultant's project brief and/or the terms of reference which should have set out the key assumptions and outputs expected from the October 2009 options appraisal. The appraisal did not have a more extensive long list of options for consideration and it is not clear who suggested and agreed the four options which were evaluated. There was no evidence that an evaluation panel, with all stakeholders represented, was established to assess and score the non monetary costs/benefits, despite this being a requirement under the guidance<sup>8</sup>. The Department do not share the view that an evaluation panel was necessary, as the tenants were in favour of the transfer and the Housing Association had made its preference clear.

## The appraisal was reworked to take account of an additional option suggested by Apex Housing Association

2.5 A project brief was issued to Apex in January 2010 which specified the necessary improvement works for 55 homes. Apex was invited to submit plans for implementation of these works,

together with their rent policy, tenancy conditions and other management policies. The Department told us that following the issue of the project brief to Apex, the Housing Association approached NIHE with a proposal to meet local needs involving the demolition of 17 bungalows and replacing them with 17 two and three bed houses. This new option qualified for £1 million of Housing Association Grant, payable for the construction of new homes, but not for the refurbishment being considered at Rinmore. In our opinion the grant funding made the housing transfer more attractive to Apex. The Department told us that the primary purpose of the option was to enhance the benefits to tenants.

2.6 In late February 2010 the Department instructed the consultants to rework the appraisal including an additional option to improve 38 houses and to demolish 17 bungalows replacing them with 17 new build properties.

2.7 We asked NIHE whether full and proper consideration was given to equality issues arising from the anticipated payment of Housing Association Grant, for example, whether the payment of grant for the Rinmore scheme displaced any other scheme. NIHE told us that the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) screening report for Rinmore concluded that since this was a pilot scheme and of limited scale there were little or no significant equality issues. NIHE told us that any future significant stock transfer would be subject to equality screening and an EQIA if appropriate. This has

8 *The Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure, Appraisal and Evaluation – The Weighting and Scoring Method*, Department of Finance and Personnel, September 2009.

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

now been completed for the proposed 2,000 property transfer programme (see paragraph 1.4).

### There was a shift in emphasis in the evaluation process between the two appraisals

2.8 There was a shift in emphasis between the October 2009 and March 2010 appraisals. In the October appraisal the Department determined that financial factors were more significant when comparing the options. However, by March 2010 non monetary costs/benefits had assumed much more significance. New non monetary costs/benefits criteria and weightings were introduced to the March 2010 appraisal while other criteria that had been used in the October appraisal were excluded (see **Figure 4**). As with the October 2009 appraisal there was no evidence that an evaluation panel, with all stakeholders represented, was established to assess and score the non monetary costs/benefits.

### The additional option suggested by Apex Housing Association became the preferred option in the March 2010 economic appraisal

- 2.9 The outcome of the March 2010 economic appraisal is summarised at **Figure 5**. In financial terms the options were ranked according to the amount of public funding required for improvements and new build works.
- 2.10 The “NIHE refurbishes to Decent Homes Standard” option was ranked last overall as it was assessed as not addressing the objectives of the appraisal. “NIHE refurbishes using MEI” option, although ranked second financially, was ranked fourth overall. Options involving a transfer to a Housing Association were ranked highest from a non monetary costs/benefits perspective. The “Housing Association builds 55 new homes” option was less favoured from a financial point of view due to the high level of Housing Association Grant required from the public sector. While the “Housing Association refurbishes 38 homes using MEI and builds 17 new homes” option required grant subsidy from the public sector, the non monetary costs/benefits of this option were deemed to score highest.

**Figure 4: There was a change in the non monetary costs/benefits criteria between the two appraisals**

October 2009 Option Appraisal		March 2010 Economic Appraisal	
Criteria	Weighting	Criteria	Weighting
Tenant requirements met with regard to extent and quality of proposed works.	5	Meeting existing tenant expectation with regard to extent and quality of stock improvements.	4
Equity between tenants of social housing across Derry.	5	Provides increased equity in social housing rents in the local community.	4
Financial implications for tenants (in terms of rent increases) are acceptable.	4	Acceptability of rental regime to tenants	3
Practical and acceptable decant option for tenants.	3	Acceptability of decanting solution to tenants.	2
Is acceptable to local stakeholders, including MLA's, Local Authority.	3	Acceptability to MLA's.	4
		Acceptability to Derry District Council.	2
Economic stimulus to the community.	5	Provides economic stimulus to the local community.	5
Better health and wellbeing for tenants.	4	Promotes better health and wellbeing in the local community.	4
Financially feasible decant option for tenants.	3		
Option accounts for location Right To Buy leaseholders and implications for works.	2		
Drives efficient procurement practice.	3		
Works implemented in acceptable period of time for tenants.	4		
Provides good longer term expectations of effective management and tenant satisfaction.	4		
		Achieves value for money/ additionality through public subsidy.	5
		Meets local housing needs.	4
		Promotes improvements in community safety/reduces crime.	3
		Assists in tackling homelessness.	3
		Delivers improvements in stock condition and functional suitability.	5
		Delivers improvements in stock efficiency (heat loss)	3

Source: Department for Social Development

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

**Figure 5: March 2010 Economic Appraisal Results**

Option	Financial Appraisal Ranking	Non Monetary Appraisal Ranking	Overall Ranking
1. NIHE refurbishes to Decent Homes Standard	5	5	5
2. NIHE refurbishes using MEI	2	4	4
3. Housing Association refurbishes using MEI	1	3	2
4. Housing Association builds 55 new homes on Rinmore site	4	2	3
Option suggested by Apex: Housing Association refurbishes 38 homes using MEI and builds 17 new homes on Rinmore site	3	1	1

Source: Department for Social Development

2.11 Although, in line with GB best practice, a transfer value was calculated in the March 2010 appraisal (see Figure 6), this was not used. There were no transfer price negotiations with Apex and Apex sought no additional funding from the

Department, despite the transfer value of the preferred option indicating that Apex would have to provide funds of around £661,000, to maintain and manage the properties, over the thirty year period.

**Figure 6: A transfer value was calculated in the March 2010 economic appraisal and in all transfer options represented a net present cost to Apex Housing Association**

Option	Transfer Value - Net Present Cost £'000	Unit Transfer Value - Net Present Cost £'000
1. NIHE refurbishes to Decent Homes Standard	303	6
2. NIHE refurbishes using MEI	1,048	19
3. Housing Association refurbishes using MEI	1,023	19
4. Housing Association builds 55 new homes on Rinmore site	1,138	21
Option suggested by Apex: Housing Association refurbishes 38 homes using MEI and builds 17 new homes on Rinmore site	661	12

Source: Department for Social Development

## The economic appraisal did not include a housing transfer option with Apex Housing Association undertaking improvements to the Decent Homes Standard

- 2.12 The net present cost of option 3 “Housing Association refurbishes using MEI” indicated that Apex Housing Association would need to provide funding of over £1 million (around £19,000 for each home). However, the net present cost of the option “retention by NIHE and refurbish to Decent Homes Standard” was only £303,000 (around £6,000 for each home). This reflects the considerably lower cost of maintaining homes to the Decent Homes Standard and the higher cost of MEIs. The Department told us that the Decent Homes Standard was however ranked last under the non monetary analysis by some distance because it did not adequately address any of the stated objectives.
- 2.13 The independent stock condition survey in 2009 concluded *“that it is important to stress that the improvement standard<sup>9</sup> i.e. MEI adopted by NIHE is well above the Decent Homes Standard. The rationale for this work has been more related to sustainability, tenant expectations and demand”*. A key risk identified, in the Department’s March 2010 economic appraisal, was that the Housing Association could put forward a scaled down improvement proposal, given that the MEI programme historically implemented by NIHE

included a number of works which were over and above what was strictly required to address the Decent Homes Standards.

- 2.14 In our opinion, the economic appraisal could have included a housing transfer option with Apex undertaking less extensive refurbishments to the Decent Homes Standard. This option would have required Apex to access significantly less private funding over the thirty year period. The Department told us that they did not believe tenants were prepared to accept refurbishments of any lesser standard than other previously improved neighbouring properties and as the case to proceed was dependent on tenant support, there was no merit in offering a lesser standard.

## The Rinmore tenants voted in favour of the housing transfer

- 2.15 In November 2010 NIHE Board gave its approval for the transfer to progress to formal consultation with the Rinmore tenants. Two independent tenant advisors were appointed to provide advice and assistance throughout the consultation process to tenants. A tenant ballot was conducted by an independent third party. In line with similar ballots conducted in GB, it was agreed that the outcome of the ballot would be determined by a majority of those who returned their ballot papers. A majority of 89 per cent (forty out of forty five) voted in favour of the transfer proposal.

9 The Department told us that the MEI approach is not a ‘standard’ as such but rather reflects a more extensive works package than may be required to meet the Decent Homes Standard.

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

2.16 The NIHE Board gave its approval to the Rinmore transfer at its meeting in March 2011, following which the Department gave its consent to the proposal in April. Ownership of the properties transferred to Apex in October 2011. The Rinmore MEI scheme has recently been completed; the new build scheme started in March 2013 and will complete in May 2014.

### A further small scale pilot stock transfer of bungalows at Bloomfield in Bangor was proposed by the Department

2.17 In late 2011 the Department proposed a second pilot transfer scheme of 71, one bedroom bungalows located in the Bloomfield estate in Bangor, to complete delayed improvement works. No competitive process informed the selection of Oaklee Housing Association for the Bloomfield stock

transfer. As tenanted stock transfers were considered similar to land transfer schemes, Oaklee were appointed by NIHE using the nomination process for selecting Housing Associations for Newbuild Land Transfer Schemes. This approach was approved by both the Department for Social Development and the Department for Finance and Personnel on the understanding that the remaining schemes in the proposed 2,000 property transfer programme (see paragraph 1.4) would be subject to a competitive process.

2.18 NIHE carried out an economic appraisal exercise to establish the most effective method of addressing physical and environmental problems associated with the Bloomfield bungalows. The economic appraisal report was completed in April 2013. The options appraised, the non monetary costs/benefit criteria used and a summary of the outcome of the appraisal are detailed in **Figures 7 and 8**.

**Figure 7: Summary of the results for the Bloomfield bungalows economic appraisal**

Options	Financial Appraisal			Non Monetary Appraisal Ranking
	Net Present Cost / (Value) £'000	Unit Net Present Cost / (Value) £'000	Ranking	
NIHE retain and provide response maintenance only	(230)	(3)	2	5
NIHE refurbishes using MEI	2,687	37	4	1
NIHE retain and undertake phased elemental replacement works	1,235	17	3	4
Housing Association refurbishes using MEI	(497)	(7)	1	2
Housing Association builds 30 new townhouses	3,607	120	5	3

Source: Department for Social Development

**Figure 8: Non monetary costs/benefits criteria and weightings for the Bloomfield bungalows economic appraisal**

Criteria	Weighting
To address all health and safety issues including fire safety.	35
To protect and enhance the asset by ensuring the dwellings comply in all aspects with current building and space standards.	25
To meet current and projected housing need and sustain lettability in the long term.	20
To provide a solution to take into account the views of the Residents, Community and Public Representatives.	20

Source: Department for Social Development

2.19 "NIHE retains and provides response maintenance only" option although low cost did not meet the appraisal's objectives. "NIHE refurbishes using MEI" option scored highly for non monetary benefits but was ruled out due to funding constraints on NIHE capital budget. The "Housing Association builds 30 new houses" option was rejected on both cost and housing need grounds. The phased improvements option, although attractive financially, was not favoured due to considerable disruption for tenants. The preferred option was transfer to Oaklee Housing Association, to fund and undertake MEI works, subject to a full consultation with the tenants and a tenant ballot.

2.20 The appraisal identified high levels of housing need in the Bangor area for accommodation that suits elderly households. We note that an option to replace 71 bungalows with 30 townhouses, which would have reduced the number of housing units available and removed bungalows meeting the needs of elderly residents, was identified and appraised. We are surprised that the appraisal did not include an option which would have involved Oaklee

Housing Association replacing the existing bungalows with new bungalows meeting the needs of the existing residents.

2.21 We also note, that similar to the Rinmore appraisal, no consideration was given to a transfer option with improvements being undertaken to the Decent Homes Standard. The Department told us that the MEI option was used rather than the Decent Homes Standard because NIHE had previously carried out a first phase of bungalow improvements in the estate under their MEI programme and, therefore, the Department believed that the community's expectations were that MEI would also be the approach for this scheme.

#### Recommendation 4

MEI represents a much higher refurbishment standard and cost than the generally accepted Decent Homes Standard implemented in GB.

**We recommend that NIHE review its long standing approach of refurbishing social housing through Multi Element Improvement schemes. At a minimum we would expect future economic appraisals to consider options which include refurbishment to the Decent Homes Standard.**

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

2.22 A transfer value for the bungalows was not calculated and there were no transfer price negotiations with Oaklee. The Department told us that calculation of a transfer value played no role in the two small scale pilot transfers of housing stock that have taken place to date in Northern Ireland. However it is currently considering this approach in connection with its proposed transfer programme of 2,000 social homes, which are badly in need of repair, to a number of Housing Associations over the next three years.

### Recommendation 5

Calculating a transfer value helps to ensure transparency, consistency of approach and is a key element in assessing the value for money of a stock transfer. The model is not influenced by changes in the housing market and ensures comparable transfers can take place over a period of several years. **We recommend that the Department ensure transfer values, as used in GB, are calculated by NIHE in all social housing transfers. Housing Associations should be aware that the results of the calculation will provide a starting point for negotiations on transfer values.**

### The Bloomfield tenants voted in favour of the transfer

2.23 The formal consultation was undertaken with the Bloomfield estate tenants from mid May to early August in 2013. The outcome was a 96.7 per cent response in favour of the stock transfer to Oaklee. The transfer was approved by the NIHE Board in August 2013 and

the Department in September 2013. Ownership of the properties transferred to Oakley in May 2014.

### The lessons learned from the Rinmore and Bloomfield pilots have informed the Department's new stock transfer protocols

2.24 At around the same time as the Bloomfield transfer was being developed the Department prepared a draft Strategic Outline Case which proposed the transfer of a further 2,000 NIHE properties to Housing Associations using the Rinmore stock transfer as a template for this programme (**see Appendix 1 and 2**).

2.25 In December 2012 NIAO wrote to the Department raising concerns about the Rinmore pilot, specifically with the transparency of the transfer value calculation; the very high standard and cost of improvements proposed and other aspects of the economic appraisal process. Whilst NIAO recognised the Rinmore stock transfer was a means of achieving improvements in housing conditions for the 55 houses involved, the Rinmore pilot did not in our view, provide a viable template for significant future transfers of public assets to Housing Associations. In response to the NIAO's initial audit findings, the Department explained that lessons learned from the Rinmore pilot, including NIAO's comments would be used to shape the proposed transfer of 2,000



properties from NIHE to Housing Associations via a competitive process.

2.26 A joint working group of Departmental and NIHE officials have developed a Stock Transfer Protocol setting out the governance arrangements of the proposed 2,000 property transfer programme, the parameters within which transfers will be implemented and the respective roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. The Stock Transfer Protocol specifically sets out that:

- Transfer schemes in the programme will be overseen by a Programme Board;
- Each scheme will proceed through an economic appraisal exercise to determine if investment in improvements is required;
- An expressions of interest exercise will be conducted by NIHE to establish which of the eligible Housing Associations wish to be involved in the programme;
- The transfer value of housing and/or Housing Association Grant available will be determined through a competitive bidding exercise for transfer schemes; and
- Housing Association bids will be scrutinised and the successful bid approved by an Assessment Panel. The Panel will be chaired by NIHE and include membership from the Department or its advisors.

2.27 The Department and NIHE told us that they are considering the Transfer Value model, as used in GB (see paragraph 1.11) as a potential way forward. They explained that this model has the potential to reduce the time taken for the feasibility and procurement stages, thereby making the Programme more readily deliverable for Housing Associations. A Programme Board structure will be introduced to facilitate robust management of the stock transfer programme, ensure appropriate governance and mitigate against further delay. The Department has indicated that future improvement schemes should consider as a minimum the Decent Homes Standard as opposed to the MEI approach used by NIHE.

2.28 The planned start dates for the proposed 2,000 property transfer programme have not been met and are currently subject to change. However, the Department informed us that Economic Appraisals have been completed for two advance schemes in Phase one of the transfer programme (Grant Avenue, Randalstown and Monkscoole House, Newtownabbey) and these are currently with DFP for approval. A further Economic Appraisal is being prepared by NIHE for the Belvoir Flats, Belfast scheme. The Department also confirmed that these three transfers will be subject to a competitive process and that a transfer value will be calculated. NIHE are appointing consultants to prepare Economic Appraisals for the remaining 31 schemes.

## Part Two: Piloting Tenanted Stock Transfer in Northern Ireland

2.29 NIAO welcomes the development of formal stock transfer mechanisms and protocols including the consideration being given to the calculation of a transfer value, as used in GB, and the clear indication as to what the refurbishment standard will be. It is important that the protocols are agreed by all parties involved, ensuring that housing stock transfers represent a transparent, consistent and fair process.

### Assurances given to tenants are set out in a Housing Transfer Offer document

2.30 The Department advised that assurances given to tenants during the transfer process, for Rinmore and Bloomfield, are set out in a Housing Transfer Offer document. Tenants involved in stock transfer schemes are informed of:

- the works to be carried out;
- the timescale for the works;
- any disturbance payments they will receive;
- the rents on transfer and post-improvement;
- limitations on rent increase for a defined period; and
- the Housing Association's various management and maintenance practices.

2.31 The assurances are also included in the Transfer Agreement and the Development Agreement which govern the legal transfer of the properties from NIHE to the Housing Association. The monitoring of these assurances is carried out through post-transfer progress meetings between the Housing Association and local NIHE management. Post-completion inspections will be carried out by NIHE.

2.32 In our view it is important that assurances given to tenants prior to both the Rinmore and Bloomfield transfers and indeed as part of future transfers are fully delivered. As it is early in the pilot transfer processes we have not been able to evaluate whether assurances have been delivered. We intend to monitor progress in this area.

#### Recommendation 6

**We recommend that all assurances given to NIHE tenants, as part of a process that transfers social housing from NIHE to Housing Associations, are clearly defined, measureable and time-related. Robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements should be established early in the process to ensure that assurances given to tenants are delivered.**



# Appendix 1: Northern Ireland Housing Executive Housing Stock Numbers

NIHE District Office	Housing Stock <sup>10</sup>	NIHE Stock Transfer Programme <sup>11</sup>
Belfast West	5,100	135
Belfast East	3,400	156
Belfast North	6,200	62
Belfast South	3,900	50
Shankill	3,400	18
<b>Belfast Area</b>	<b>22,000</b>	<b>421</b>
Bangor	2,700	128
Newtownards	3,900	16
Castlereagh	3,700	139
Lisburn Antrim Street	4,400	66
Dairyfarm	1,900	0
Downpatrick	2,400	0
<b>South East Area</b>	<b>19,000</b>	<b>349</b>
Banbridge	1,800	94
Newry	3,000	104
Armagh	1,900	28
Craigavon	4,200	124
Dungannon	1,800	26
Fermanagh	2,000	0
<b>South Area</b>	<b>14,700</b>	<b>376</b>
Ballymena	2,700	300
Antrim	2,400	147
Newtownabbey 1&2	4,300	474
Carrickfergus	1,900	0
Larne	1,300	180
Ballycastle	800	0
Ballymoney	1,500	27
Coleraine	3,100	107
<b>North East Area</b>	<b>18,000</b>	<b>1,235</b>
Waterloo Place	2,200	0
Waterside	2,400	0
Collon Terrace	2,400	0
Limavady	1,500	29
Magerafelt	1,300	0
Strabane	2,200	0
Omagh	1,800	0
Cooktown	1,000	0
<b>West Area</b>	<b>14,800</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>88,500</b>	<b>2,410</b>

Source: NIHE

10 Housing stock figures extracted from Northern Ireland Housing Executive District Housing Plans 2013-14.

11 There is a minor difference in the overall totals contained in Appendix 1 and 2 as the number of dwellings in some schemes have changed since the press release in July 2013.

## Appendix 2: Proposed Housing Stock Transfer Programme<sup>12</sup>

**Proposed Phase 1** - 10 projects including 702 properties across 18 locations to commence in September 2013.

8 units at Grant Avenue, Randalstown

72 units at Monkscoole House flats, Newtownabbey

78 units at Victoria Parade, Duncairn Parade maisonettes and Dehra Grove flats, Belfast

61 units at Torr Way & Annadale Crescent bungalows, Inverary bungalows and Moyard bungalows, Belfast

112 units at Woodland and Beechwood Houses, Rushpark, Newtownabbey

90 units at Antrim Flats (Rathglynn, Rathkyle, Greenpark Dr, Seacash Dr, Edenvale Park, Seacash Lodge) and Devenagh Way Flats, Ballymena

136 units at Grange Phases 1 & 2, Ballyclare

37 units at Magowan House, Portadown and Clare House, Newry

44 units at Chestnut Place / Castleview bedsits & maisonettes (& bungalows), Banbridge

64 units at Belvoir bedsit flats Moyle Walk / Kilwarlin Walk, Belvoir Park, Belfast

**Proposed Phase 2** – 12 projects including 976 properties across 22 locations to commence in March 2014.

70 units at Lendrick / Parker Street and Woodvale Phase 10, Belfast

120 units at Lenadoon/Dungloe, Carrigart Avenue and Suffolk Road flats, Belfast

30 units Antrim Rurals

90 units at Latharna House, Larne

159 units at Drumtara Phases 1-4, Ballymena

55 units at Kincora/Shancoole, Ballymena

90 units at Wellington Green and Ferris Park Phase 2, Larne

54 units at Ackinduff / Drumreagh / Ivybank bungalows, Dungannon and Drumhillary rural bungalows, Armagh

82 units at South Down bungalows and Newry / Mullaghbawn bungalows

66 units at Wellington Street and Avenue Road, Lurgan

102 units at Kilcooley Phase 1, Rathgill Phase 5 flats and Jubilee Court, Bangor

58 units at Tonagh Phase 3 flats & maisonettes and Glenmore flats, Lisburn

<sup>12</sup> Press release from the Social Development Minister on Tuesday 2 July 2013.

**Proposed Phase 3** – 12 projects including 744 properties across 25 locations to commence in September 2014.

88 units at Cregagh/Woodstock and Northbrook Street, Belfast

116 units at Carncoole House and Abbotscoole House, Rathcoole

29 units at Neillsbrook 2, Randalstown

78 units at Abbeyville Park aluminium bungalows, Whiteabbey; Hollybush/ Jennings aluminium bungalows, Ballyclare; Camlin Gardens aluminium bungalows, Crumlin; Ballymoney aluminium bungalows and Drumadragh aluminium bungalows, Coleraine

86 units at Doury Road Phases 2 & 3 and Granville Drive, Ballymena

107 units at Curraghmore/Glebeview, Coleraine; Hazelbank, Coleraine and Columbia Park/Church Street, Limavady

24 units at Upper Glebe maisonettes, Coleraine

48 units at Clonmeen / Enniskeen bungalows, Lurgan and Parkview / Moody Park bungalows, Banbridge

30 units at Huntly / Dunbarton / Kiltarriff aluminium bungalows, Banbridge and Cloughrea aluminium bungalows, Bessbrook

16 units at Lurgan Rural Cottages and Castlereagh Rurals

50 units at Kilcooley Phase 1B, Bangor; Craig Gardens Manor, Lisburn and Glen bungalows, Newtownards

72 units at Kilbroney House, Cregagh

**This is an indicative programme which may be subject to change**

# NIAO Reports 2013-2014

Title	Date Published
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