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First Minister

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Dear First & Deputy First Minister,

We would like to congratulate you on your appointment as First Minister & Deputy First Minister, and we hope that we can have a positive and productive working relationship with you and the wider NI Executive in your new role.

As the four primary housing and homelessness sector organisations, whose work represents housing associations, housing professionals, tenants and service users, we are gravely concerned at the housing crisis which we are currently facing.

Housing is one of the most important building blocks of a sustainable society with direct links to outcomes in health & wellbeing, education and employment. Yet too often housing has been overlooked when Programme for Government (PfG) and funding priorities are being set. We know from our work in the sector, that housing is fundamental, and that investing in housing can lead to cost savings in other areas.

To match the importance of housing, we would like to see policy decisions and actions by you as Minister and the wider NI Executive which will support improvements in the sector and which ensures housing has a central place in the PfG. As we have stated before, it is essential that housing is included as a specific, stand-alone outcome with relevant indicators within the PfG. The housing and homelessness sectors believe such an outcome would drive the collaborative work necessary to tackle poor housing and rising levels of homelessness, and ensure these issues are prioritised by the Executive.

There is strong sectoral support for a specific standalone housing outcome with relevant indicators, and it was committed to in the New Decade New Approach deal. We envisage this as being: *Every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs.*

The most recent draft PfG Outcomes Framework viewed housing as an enabler and exists only as a key priority area under other PfG outcomes. However, we know from the collective experience of the people we work to support, that finding a safe, secure and affordable home to live in is an end in itself. In our view, a housing outcome should be viewed as akin to the other nine outcomes already included in the draft outcome's framework. Such an outcome would make a real and positive difference to people's lives and serve to improve wellbeing.

The PfG is a signal of intent, but we are aware that there are practical changes which can and should be taken forward, which will bring direct support to the sector in delivery of new housing and support for tenants.

This includes reform of the planning system to ensure that it works efficiently and does not delay projects unnecessarily, and investment in the water and sewage infrastructure, so new developments can be delivered, particularly in areas of high need.

The housing waiting list continues to grow, and while new build targets have been met recently, the cuts to the Social Housing Development Programme budget has significantly reduced the number of homes which will commence construction this year. That is a retrograde step, and we need to see a significant, multi-year budget for new housing to begin to make an impact on the housing waiting list.

New build is one challenge, but we are also acutely aware of the need to improve existing housing stock, which will play a part in supporting decarbonisation, improve sustainability and help to reduce energy bills for tenants. Retrofitting is expensive, but the medium to long term benefits is significant and widely acknowledged, and it can bring a new skill initiative and employment opportunities. England and Wales are already investing significantly in these programmes, while Northern Ireland is at risk of falling behind. We would like to see movement on a retrofitting strategy as a priority that will address energy inefficiencies and fuel costs thus aiding a just transition for lower income households.

As we look to how we invest in support for vulnerable tenants, Supporting People is one of the most impactful programmes with consistent positive outcomes. This programme supports tenancies, and allows people to live independently, relieving pressure on health and other public services. Over the last 16 years, there has been one uplift in the value of the Supporting People programme in 2022/3 and even in that year it was beneath the level of inflation.

The underinvestment in the programme has meant that many providers funded through the Supporting People Programme are struggling to make ends meet. Recruitment and retention of staff has become a significant challenge. While the level of housing needs amongst the population here has grown, the commensurate resources to fund the programme have not been forthcoming.

The homelessness system in this society is under enormous strain. The number of households with homelessness status on the social housing waiting list now stands at 27,566. This number has increased by 122% over the last decade. The number of households living in temporary accommodation provided by the Housing Executive has more than doubled since January 2019 with 4,469 households living in such accommodation in September 2023. While we have homelessness strategies and policies which seek to provide a roadmap to prevent and reduce homelessness here, the blunt reality is that they seriously lack the resources required for implementation. Without concerted political leadership, well thought through strategy across Government here and adequate resources these figures will continue to worsen with all the consequences this will have for those impacted and wider society.

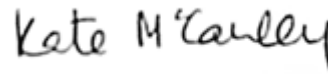
The issues we raise here are just some areas where reform or investment can bring significant change. We understand that housing reform is a considerable task, but as a sector we are committed to taking the steps that will support implementation of policy which can help us to deliver high quality homes, reduce homelessness and improve the lives of citizens.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at an early stage of this new NI Executive, as we begin to work together in this new era of what we all hope will be effective devolved Government.

Yours Sincerely,



Seamus Leheny
NI Federation of Housing Associations



Kate McCauley
Housing Rights



Justin Cartwright
Chartered Institute of Housing



Nicola McCrudden
Homeless Connect

Cc:

Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons MLA
Jayne Brady, Head of the NI Civil Service
Colum Boyle, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities
Clerk of Communities Committee, NI Assembly