

## **Response to the Call for Evidence on a Housing Supply Strategy Department for Communities**

**July 2021**

### **1. Introduction**

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute evidence to the housing supply strategy development process.

NIWEP is a membership organisation of women's NGOs in Northern Ireland. Established as the Northern Ireland link to the European Women's Lobby, the EU's expert body on women's rights and gender equality, NIWEP also has special consultative status with the UN. A key role for NIWEP is promoting gender responsive policy and decision making at local, regional and national level taking account of the state's international obligations, while also ensuring women and girls are engaged in policy and decision making. NIWEP also works to share information and good practice at international level with local members and stakeholders, and highlight local learning and good practice internationally.

NIWEP's core objectives involve raising awareness and promoting implementation of key international human rights treaties and initiatives, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). NIWEP views implementing the recommendations of CEDAW as a clear roadmap and mechanism to ensuring women's human rights are fully met and upheld in Northern Ireland, and the implementation of the UK's international obligations as a cornerstone of both upholding human rights domestically and taking a leading role in advocating for human rights internationally.

### **2. Endorsement**

NIWEP endorses the response of the Women's Regional Consortium to this consultation. In particular, NIWEP would like to draw attention to the focus on supporting victims and survivors of domestic violence through a housing supply strategy in this response, as it is critical from an equality perspective. Lack of access to housing, in particular affordable rented housing, is a key factor preventing many victims from leaving an abusive relationship, and preventing survivors from rebuilding their lives. This is despite priority given to victims of violence on the housing waiting list through the weighting system, and requires action through housing supply. The importance of housing as part of a comprehensive system protecting women is highlighted in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence (CEDAW), which emphasises that States Parties must ensure access to adequate support for victims of violence and abuse.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW, 1979), articles 1 and 2. The UK signed the Convention in 1981 and ratified in 1986

### 3. Comment

NIWEP welcomes the focus on high quality, affordable homes in sustainable neighbourhoods. This is important for everyone in Northern Ireland, but in particular for women, who typically are responsible for both the household and home, and on caring and providing for their family and household. Therefore, in particular access to local services, facilities and amenities, from health care and childcare to green space and outdoor play space is vital for women, and a gender perspective should be taken in both planning neighbourhoods and designing homes. From a gender perspective, access to public transport is particularly important, as women are less likely to own or have access to a car throughout the day. Women typically also trip chain movements, for example travelling to nurseries, creches and schools on their way to work, or calling in to parents, supporting parents to access services and shopping before going home. This must be taken into account in housing supply strategy, as failing to understand the specific mobility patterns of different population groups creates both locked in car dependency and access poverty, which often leads to financial poverty that is a key driver of social housing demand.

Accessible, affordable housing is also critical from a gender perspective. As noted above, women typically still have responsibility for managing the home and household, and this is particularly common in lower income groups, with women often managing very tight budgets where unexpected rent increases or other costs can create arrears leading to debt or in serious situations, eviction. The gendered nature of poverty is critical to understand with regard to housing supply, as this helps inform in particular the types of housing required in Northern Ireland. Importantly, there is a shortage of smaller units suitable for lone parents and single people, which has implications for affordability and may impact on access to the housing benefit element of Universal Credit. This has been clearly set out by the UN, and the right to housing is integrated into international human rights frameworks, including CEDAW and others.<sup>2</sup>

A housing supply strategy for a modern Northern Ireland must be based on a clear understanding of household trends, which is not clearly evidenced in the consultation document. Existing evidence indicates an increasing trend of single and two person households of all ages, alongside an increasing variety of family sizes and types. Therefore, it is critical to ensure a variety of housing types particularly within new developments, to ensure diverse and sustainable communities can emerge and thrive. In general, it is vital to prioritise mixed use as well as mixed tenure neighbourhoods, to ensure access to services, and encourage safe and cohesive communities.

#### 3.1 Equality and human rights

This submission is focused on highlighting the gender perspective on housing, which is not explicitly addressed in the consultation document. NIWEP welcomes, however, the recognition in this section that there are data gaps in relation to gender, and would welcome action to address these as a precondition for effective and efficient, evidence based decision making.

NIWEP also welcomes recognition that childcare is a key driver of economic inactivity. It would be helpful to explicitly recognise that economic inactivity due to family reasons affects in particular women; NISRA figures from 2019 show that over 85 per cent of people economically inactive due to family reasons are women, and that this reason is cited by a third of all economically inactive women, rising to half of women when students and retirees are excluded.<sup>3</sup> Lack of childcare, and adult social care, is therefore directly associated with female poverty, and lack of genuine economic choice among women, and is relevant to housing supply strategy. This emphasises the critical importance of a whole system, cross Departmental approach to housing supply; the focus must be on enabling all residents of Northern Ireland to make genuine choices about their lives, including housing.

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<sup>2</sup> UN international human rights frameworks – see an [overview](#) through the UN Human Rights Commissioner.

<sup>3</sup> NISRA (2019) [Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland](#)

