

Radical action — and money — needed on housing

THIS MONTH'S COVER stories give many interesting perspectives on housing and homelessness. They broadly support the final report of the review of affordability headed by Sir John Semple and the speedy action by Social Development Minister Margaret Ritchie, supported by the new Executive, to set up an inter-departmental group to see how to take forward the many recommendations needed to solve this complicated problem.

One perspective is that the issues in the private and social housing sectors are rather different. The private sector has built quite a lot of houses and apartments in recent years but they are not affordable to very many people. The problem is aggravated by investors who have been buying to rent and the less well known breed who have been buying properties, leaving them empty and pocketing the profit when prices rise.

In the public or social sector, by contrast, the house-building rate has been very low but the houses have been affordable. This is because most occupiers are not owners but tenants paying rents that are held lower than in the private sector; and, in the case of tenants on income support, the State pays the bill.

The article by Shelter raises an important question when it asks if promoting home ownership should be the main objective of a government housing strategy. It suggests that we might instead promote renting, provided the rents are reasonable and people have secure tenure.

Whether social housing is built for tenants or owners, it is glaringly obvious that we need an awful lot more of them. The Housing Executive wants a big increase to 1,500 new units per year. Shelter thinks we need 5,000 per year if we are to clear the huge backlog and give people hope of a home within a reasonable period of time. It seems at first glance an unrealistically huge number, but it would take 24 years just to replace the 120,000 homes that have been sold off under the 'right to buy' schemes.

Housing associations have made a big contribution to social housing in recent decades and they could do a lot more if Semple's report is implemented in full. But, among many other things – such as land acquisition and improved planning processes – an ambitious project like this will require a lot of

funding, as well as strict enforcement of the suggested duty on developers to offer 20% of new builds as social housing.

It remains to be seen if the Executive has the courage to make the sort of huge reallocation of finance needed to make affordable housing a reality.

Question mark over SCOPE

NICVA is considering ceasing publication of SCOPE, as you can read on page 5. Ultimately, only the readers and NICVA members can decide if SCOPE is fulfilling a useful function at a cost that can be justified and that the function cannot be carried out by other means such as the NICVA websites.

Undoubtedly the internet is a powerful tool and growing by the month in range, usability and content but people tend to look on the internet for information rather than for the range of issues that appear in SCOPE – the serendipity of the printed page.

Few websites, if any, have the same mix of news, features and comment as good magazines and they are not as good at drawing together a range of issues and themes. The printed word, in short, is better at promoting reflection.

Perhaps too, things that appear in print have greater power than the seemingly ephemeral words that appear on a computer screen. SCOPE has its own special authority, built up over its 32 years by editors who have cherished the voluntary and community sector and the values it espouses.

Of course, policy work is a minority pursuit but we have entered an exciting chapter in Northern Ireland politics in which we need to focus on writing new policies that meet our needs after the vacuum of Direct Rule.

SCOPE has always seen issues through a prism of equality and justice and fairness. Its fundamental values are about meeting the needs of disadvantaged individuals, areas and groups, creating a shared society and ending inequality and exclusion.

Challenge is fundamental to SCOPE. Whatever decisions are taken about its future, that role must be preserved.



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