



Roundtable Report

The barriers and solutions to building homes in Northern Ireland

Co/ownership

January 2025

Co-Ownership Roundtable



MLAs and housing industry professionals joined Mark Graham, Chief Executive of Co-Ownership, to take part in the roundtable. Better collaboration between public and private sectors can help make land available to create places where people want to live.

Co-Ownership convened a roundtable meeting in October 2024 to discuss the barriers and solutions to building more homes in Northern Ireland. Participants included MLAs from the five main political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and representatives from housing associations, central and local government and the private sector.

This is a critical time in the housing sector, with rising numbers of people living in temporary accommodation and unsuitable and unaffordable homes. We're not building enough social and affordable homes to meet this need and in the last number of years have seen worryingly low levels of house building in the private sector, putting further pressure on affordability and the availability of homes for first-time buyers.

These challenges are recognised in the draft Programme for Government, which states: *“Good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing. We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. The challenge we face is evidenced by the social housing waiting list, which currently stands at over 47,000 households, including 35,000 experiencing housing stress.*

These numbers are on the rise, indicating a pressing need for action to uphold the basic right to a good home. The Executive has not been able to deliver on its ambition of 2,500 new social homes a year, and we therefore want to commit to the long-term public subsidy required to deliver more social homes, while at the same time innovating to develop new funding models for the delivery of more Affordable Homes to make this achievable.”

The Housing Supply Strategy, published in December 2024, will provide a long-term framework to achieve this aim.

These are issues that were discussed during the roundtable which recognised the multifaceted and interconnected challenges we face from skills and capacity in the construction sector, to the critical importance of infrastructure, the reform of the planning system and the strategic use of public sector land.

Participants



Ciara Ferguson
MLA for Foyle
Sinn Féin



Deborah Erskine
MLA for Fermanagh and South
Tyrone
Democratic Unionist Party



Kellie Armstrong
MLA for Strangford
Alliance Party



Patsy McGlone
MLA for Mid Ulster
Social Democratic and Labour
Party



Andy Allen
MLA for East Belfast
Ulster Unionist Party



Mark Graham
Chief Executive
Co-Ownership



Elma Newberry
Director of Strategic Housing
Authority
Northern Ireland Housing
Executive



Angela Wiggam
Director, Head of Planning
Ireland
Turley



Cathy Reynolds
Director City Regeneration
and Development
Belfast City Council



Anita Conway
Director of Development
Radius Housing

Skills and capacity

There was agreement that skills and workforce were a major barrier to building more new homes across Northern Ireland. This is not only an issue for the construction sector, but for all sectors involved in housing including planning and infrastructure.

Within the construction sector people spoke of an aging workforce and not enough being done to encourage people into the sector. Better paid and more reliable work elsewhere, in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, was also recognised as a barrier.

An MLA said that construction companies have reported to her that they will often send staff outside Northern Ireland for work, due to the delays in projects becoming ready here. This means that if a scheme gets permission there is often a lack of construction companies available to take forward the build.

There was a view that the skills gap goes beyond the construction sector and that there was a lack of capacity in many government departments and planning departments within councils. The capacity issue is particularly evident in the planning system.

This inevitably leads to delays in processing times and developers being less inclined to take forward projects. Investment in the planning system, including development of career pathways and retention plans, should be a priority for local government and the Department for Infrastructure.

This is an issue that could be taken forward by the NI Executive through a skills framework, which would focus on all areas of the construction sector.

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Planners in border areas are moving across the border where the pay is much better, as are workers in other industries.

Patsy McGlone
MLA



Recommended next steps:

There is a significant skills gap and capacity issue within the construction sector and in central and local government. The NI Executive and local government need to work together to develop a skills strategy to address this to ensure we have the right people to deliver the homes needed.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure across Northern Ireland was identified as a barrier during the roundtable discussion. The most critical issue is the lack of waste water capacity caused by a lack of historic investment. The need for a sustainable investment strategy in all our critical infrastructure was discussed and there was agreement that the waste water capacity issues must be given priority.

A range of solutions was discussed. While developer contributions for waste water may be part of the solution, ultimately NI Water need to have an adequate long-term investment plan. One of the shared frustrations was the lack of transparency and certainty on where housing developments could proceed, with many examples being shared of housing developments being stalled or lost.

Infrastructure issues do not begin and end with NI Water. In developing new large-scale housing plans, a holistic approach to infrastructure is required. There is a need to ensure that roads are to an acceptable standard, public transport provision is included, and that people have access to schools, health and social care facilities, as well as spaces for exercise and play. To address these barriers, we need a joined-up approach across government and it was welcomed that the draft Programme for Government recognises this.

While the issues regarding NI Water are known and can be remedied through sustained adequate investment, there is a need to progress developments which have been approved more rapidly. This will ensure we have the ability to support those who are seeking a new home, and start to address the housing challenges we face.

It was suggested that reusing existing infrastructure was part of the solution. With high street premises becoming vacant, and all building space not being used, there is an opportunity to rethink how we provide housing.

City centre living is not a new concept, but as was pointed out, there needs to be new thinking around how we develop these spaces. Other towns and cities have shown what can be achieved through government working with private developers and housing associations to create new homes and regenerate towns and cities.

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There needs to be an area-based approach to infrastructure which would make it easier for NI Water and NIE to progress issues.

Kellie Armstrong
MLA



Recommended next steps:

Infrastructure challenges go beyond the current capacity issues within Northern Ireland Water. To address these, we need a proactive and holistic approach to planning, infrastructure and services to build successful and sustainable communities.

Planning

There was a shared frustration with the planning system, with people noting that the way the system currently operates acts as a barrier to development and investment. It was recognised that the slowness in the planning system was often to do with resourcing, including the resourcing of the many government agencies involved in the planning process. One MLA commented that the issue wasn't a lack of reviews of the system, it was about the implementation.

It was also recognised that it wasn't just about the system for planning approvals. There was a frustration with the slow progress on the implementation of the Local Development Plans. Planning powers were devolved to local government in 2015, and it was highlighted during discussions that only four of the 11 councils' new planning policies, including housing policies, are in place.

It was agreed that this, together with the zoning of extra land, was critical to ensure we get the right homes built in the right place to deliver sustainable communities that include mixed tenure rather than mono-tenure areas. One of the barriers highlighted was the capacity within the Planning Appeals Commission to hold the public inquires for the new plans.

Overall, it was agreed that a more effective planning system was essential to ramp up the delivery of new homes.



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The planning process has become elongated, with an expertise issue within the council planning system and a need to invest in more planning.

Deborah Erskine
MLA



Recommended next steps:

Local Development Plans should be implemented in all council areas as soon as possible. This will require removing barriers such as resourcing within the Planning Appeals Commission.



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It's not just about land. There are sites in Belfast with planning permission but there are delays in development due to viability issues. The funding streams available in other cities are not available here in Northern Ireland.

Cathy Reynolds
Belfast City Council



Access to land

Access to land suitable for building new homes was seen as a significant barrier. There was a consensus that better use could be made of surplus public sector land to deliver more affordable homes. It was highlighted that there is often a lack of clarity on where surplus land was available.

There was also a view that the process for disposing of land within the public sector was not conducive to taking a more strategic view of sites and how they might be best used for multi-tenure development. The main barrier seems to be the need for public bodies to get the “best value” for the land quickly rather than viewing it strategically as a way of creating public value.

Lack of access to land for housing is having a detrimental impact on the ability to develop new quality homes in rural communities. This is an issue which was raised during the roundtable discussion by both elected representatives and industry experts. An MLA said it is concerning that a housing association applied to develop land in their constituency but was turned down. If houses are built, people will live in them. Access to land is not only an issue within rural communities, but also within towns and cities. There is a lack of land available to build new large-scale developments to meet the housing needs of the population.

One solution suggested would be to bring vacant retail units back into use. This has been successfully done before with the “living over the shop” initiative. It would require support from government to ensure schemes of this nature were attractive to developers and housing associations.

There was a strong consensus that we need a joined-up approach from Executive departments, local government and developers to strategically identify and make land ready for housing.



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The demand is continuing to grow for social housing and there is not enough land in high demand areas.

Elma Newberry
NI Housing Executive

Recommended next steps:

Greater levels of collaboration between public and private sectors to ensure that public land is utilised strategically to deliver more homes.

Confidence to build for the future

Building homes is a long-term project, and both private and social housing developers need confidence that there is a pipeline of work. The number of new homes being built by private developers has reduced significantly in the last few years, and looking ahead there has been a worrying drop in planning applications.

It was agreed that critical to solving this problem is multi-year government budgets so that infrastructure and social housing development could be better planned. The private sector needs a more predictable and supportive planning system to help them plan their pipeline of delivery and create momentum.

Through growing confidence in the market, construction companies and others will invest in their workforce planning, and this will support the skills development. This will ensure Northern Ireland has a construction workforce which is able to meet the needs of the future.

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The cost of materials and inflation have increased, while builders get paid three times the amount in the Republic of Ireland than they would receive in the North.

Ciara Ferguson
MLA



Recommended next steps:

The government needs to focus on building confidence to ensure that house builders will invest in building the homes we need. Long-term plans, multi-year commitment to infrastructure and funding of new social homes, and a supportive planning system will provide this confidence and should provide the platform to deliver the growth in new homes that is needed.

Recommended next steps

Here is a summary of the recommended next steps:

- There is a significant skills gap and capacity issue within the construction sector and in central and local government. The NI Executive and local government need to work together to develop a skills strategy to address this to ensure we have the right people to deliver the homes needed.
- Infrastructure challenges go beyond the current capacity issues with Northern Ireland Water. To address these, we need a proactive and holistic approach to planning, infrastructure and services to build successful and sustainable communities.
- Local Development Plans should be implemented in all council areas as soon as possible. This will require removing barriers such as resourcing within the Planning Appeals Commission.
- Greater levels of collaboration between public and private sectors to ensure that public land is utilised strategically to deliver more homes.
- The government needs to focus on building confidence to ensure that house builders will invest in building the homes we need. Long-term plans, multi-year commitment to infrastructure and funding of new social homes, and a supportive planning system will provide this confidence and should provide the platform to deliver the growth in new homes that is needed.



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The social housing sector could support people who wish to downsize from homes larger than they need, but there isn't the available housing stock. This can contribute to fuel poverty, as some people struggle to afford to heat larger homes, switching off heating in rooms they don't use, potentially leading to issues such as mould and other health issues.

Andy Allen
MLA



Summary

Mark Graham summarised “Co-Ownership facilitated the coming together of this diverse panel as we believe that to solve our housing crisis will need a coordinated effort across all sectors – government, private and housing associations. Inevitably, the panel discussed the barriers and frustrations with infrastructure, planning and funding, but there was also a real desire to find solutions. One of the strongest themes to come across was the transformational impact of government working effectively with the private and social sectors not just to build more homes, but also to create vibrant and sustainable communities.

It is clear to me that around the table, and across the housing sector, there is great passion and commitment to tackling our housing crisis, and I would like to thank all our panel members for their input and their insights.

Co-Ownership is focused on playing its part in delivering more affordable homes, and will look forward to working with our partners to achieve the goals set out in the draft Programme for Government and the Housing Supply Strategy.”



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Co-Ownership is focused on playing its part in delivering more affordable homes and we look forward to working with our partners to achieve the goals set out in the draft Programme for Government and the Housing Supply Strategy.

Mark Graham
Chief Executive of Co-Ownership

About us

Co-Ownership is the regional body for shared ownership in Northern Ireland. We are a registered housing association, an industrial and provident society regulated and funded by Department for Communities.

Our purpose is to enable people to become homeowners and our vision is to lead the way on affordable home ownership. We operate on a not-for-profit basis to help people get onto the property ladder who cannot do so by themselves.

We have three ways to help people: Co-Own, Co-Own for Over 55s and Rent to Own. Since 1978 we have helped over 33,000 people buy a home in Northern Ireland, and currently have over 10,500 co-owners.

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