

“The Minister was unable to meet the UN Special Rapporteur due to diary commitments, however officials from the Department did attend a meeting and provided background on the housing sector in Northern Ireland including the reform programme. It is disappointing that the discussion has not been reflected in the comments made today.

“To ensure Northern Ireland’s situation is reflected fully and evidenced, the Department would like to address some inaccuracies.

“The Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that social housing reform proposals will not impact on the allocation of housing and the principles of fairness, transparency and openness that underpin the current systems which has support across political parties.

“A Regional Housing Body, which will take forward the non-landlord function of the Housing Executive, will continue to have responsibility for the assessment of need and maintenance of the common selection scheme which all social housing landlords, as currently is the case, use for allocations.

“The current allocations scheme has been created to be fair and open and to give applicants a choice of where they wish to live. The fundamental tenet of the scheme is that the assessment and prioritisation of applicants, and allocation of accommodation, are undertaken on the basis of meeting the greatest housing need.

“There are also comments on housing inequality which conflict with statistical evidence.

“It should be noted that there is widespread recognition that the Department, the NI Housing Executive and the NI Federation of Housing Associations have improved housing conditions, housing services and access to affordable housing for all communities in Northern Ireland. In its 42-year history the Housing Executive has never had a case of religious discrimination upheld against it for running of its housing services. The current structures are accepted by all communities in Northern Ireland, meeting the housing needs of people irrespective of their community background.

“There is no evidence that Catholics in Northern Ireland face discrimination or inadequate access to affordable housing. The most recent figures for the waiting list show that 42% are Catholic, 37% Protestant and 22% ‘other’ (at 31 March 2013).

“Specifically in relation to North Belfast, more than £358 million of public money has been invested in housing in North Belfast since with £222m spent on new build since 2001. In this period 2,494 additional new social homes have been provided; not only the lion's share of new social housing in the city but across Northern Ireland.

“In relation to welfare reform, the Minister has, on several occasions, expressed his concerns about the social housing size criteria and the particular challenges for Northern given the nature of our stock. That is why Minister McCausland is working with Executive colleagues to mitigate the impact of these reforms for Northern Ireland. Further the Minister has challenged social landlords to provide a range of support measures for households that could be affected, including increasing the supply of smaller units.”