

People and Communities Committee

Monday, 26th June, 2023

SPECIAL HYBRID MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Murray (Chairperson);
Councillors Bell, Black, Bower, Brooks,
Canavan, Doherty, M. Donnelly, R-M Donnelly,
Flynn, Kelly, Magee, McCusker, Ó Néill and Verner.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Mr. I. Parker, Building Control Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Bunting, Cobain, de Faoite and Maghie.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Affordable Warmth Scheme Update and Service Level Agreement

The Building Control Manager reminded the Committee that Belfast City Council had been engaged in a partnership with the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) in the delivery of the Affordable Warmth Scheme (AWS) since 2014.

It was reported that the scheme aimed to address fuel poverty for the most vulnerable households in the city by targeting those households that met certain criteria, as identified by Ulster University, to provide home improvement measures such as loft and cavity wall insulation, replacement boilers and new double-glazed windows.

The Building Control Manager reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 13th June, it had considered a report to bring forward a request from the DfC regarding the signing of the interim Service Level Agreement (SLA) from the period 1st April, 2022 to 31st March, 2024 and to inform the Committee that communication had also been received from DfC on 1st June, 2023 giving Councils 3 months' notice, ending the Council's role in the administration of the Affordable Warmth Scheme on 31st August, 2023.

Furthermore, at its meeting on 13th June, the Committee had agreed to defer the decision of the request from the DfC to sign the interim SLA provided for the period 1st April, 2022 to 31st March, 2024, acknowledging that the DfC had put the Council on

notice terminating the arrangement on 31st August, 2023, and that representatives of DfC and the NIHE be invited to attend a Special meeting of the Committee.

He highlighted that Building Control Officers had liaised with Legal Services regarding the implications of signing or not signing the SLA as requested by the DfC. Legal Services had confirmed:

- Council officers could ask the Committee to consider the request from the DfC to sign the SLA from 1 April 2022 until 31 March 2024, as the notice period had been written into the SLA; and
- There would be no implications for Belfast City Council if the Committee decided not to authorise approval to sign the SLA, as an SLA was not legally enforceable.

The Chairperson introduced Mr. D. Polley, Director of Housing Supply Policy, and Mr A. Boyce, Head of Affordable Warmth and Energy, representing the Department for Communities, Ms. E. Stubbs, Assistant Director of Regional Services, and Ms. R. O'Neill, Energy Efficiency Schemes Manager, representing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to the Committee and they were admitted to the meeting.

Mr. Polley provided a summary of the changes to the Affordable Warmth Scheme. He advised that the decision to remove targeting and therefore council involvement from the AWS had been approved by the Permanent Secretary under the Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions Act. He explained that the impact on public services included a severe pressure on both the AWS 2023/24 capital and resource budgets with capital reduced by 12.5% and resource reduced by 5%. The associated EQIA detailed the potential savings measures, which would allow the Department to live within its Budget allocation including the closure of the AWS. He highlighted that any proposal to close the scheme would significantly impact those people living in fuel poverty, in particular vulnerable, low-income households. Therefore, the decision to remove targeting had been a difficult decision but had been made to mitigate against the risk of closure and to make the Scheme more resilient.

He highlighted the need to simplify the process due to the high administrative costs of the targeted approach and work involved by Council's to find out who would benefit most from the scheme. He stated that the Councils were incurring more expenses than they were being funded for. This had resulted in one Council dropping out of the scheme and another giving notice. He pointed out that the timing of the changes to the scheme had coincided with the budget and the need to give Councils three months' notice.

He explained that, from 1st September, 2023, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive would act as the single delivery provider for the AWS. As part of their proposal, the NIHE would also confirm the contact details for the Scheme going forward. He advised that the Council would submit the approved number of 20 referrals per month up to the 31st August, 2023.

During discussion, the Committee raised concerns to the change to an application process, in that the most vulnerable resident would not be provided for within the application process. The Council staff were praised for their work on the scheme and the difference that it had made to residents across Belfast.

The representatives answered a range of questions in relation to the scheme changes and closure. Mr Polley explained further how the change to a non-targeting approach would save money in administration costs. He pointed out that referrals were inconsistent across the Council areas and the current referral scheme took a lot of time and staffing costs.

He stated that it was anticipated that more funding would become available for the scheme next year and there were plans to spend more money on energy efficiency work and fuel poverty over the next 10/15 years. He emphasised the need to plan for the future and a larger scheme to ensure a fair transition to net zero for residents. He also highlighted that the DfC would prefer if the Council signed the interim SLA as requested.

In response to a Member's question in relation to current waiting list positions, Ms. Stubbs advised that the NIHE planned a seamless transition for customers and reiterated that the NIHE would continue to receive 20 referrals per month up to the end of August which the Council would prioritise and after that, the application process would start in September.

Ms. Stubbs explained further the transition of the scheme to the NIHE. She advised that they had been working alongside Councils on the Scheme for a number of years so were aware of the needs of the customers. She highlighted that a free phone advice line would be in operation, together with sign posting for other assistance, postal applications, and visiting residents.

One Member highlighted the work being undertaken on an Anti-poverty strategy in the Springfield/Whiterock area, together with the difference that the retrofit scheme in Ballymurphy had made to residents' homes, and reiterated concerns in relation to residents being made aware of the changes to the scheme.

In response, Mr Polley explained further the future of energy efficiency schemes and the maximum budget requirements of the current scheme per home. He highlighted that serious discussion was required to examine what scheme came after the AWS.

One Member suggested that, to reduce the impact of the changes to the scheme, DfC could potentially administer the scheme differently for some of the Councils who would prefer the scheme to remain in its current form. Mr. Polley advised that, as the decision had already been made, and as the Councils had been given the SLA notice period, it could not be revisited.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed not to accede to the request from the Department for Communities to sign the interim SLA provided for the period 1st April, 2022 to 31st March, 2024.

Chairperson