

Town Planning Committee

Tuesday, 19th June, 2012

SPECIAL MEETING OF TOWN PLANNING COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor L. Patterson (Chairman);
Aldermen McCoubrey and Rodgers; and
Councillors Austin, Curran, Garrett, Hussey, Kingston,
Lavery, O'Neill and Spence.
- Also attended: Councillors Haire, Hendron and Reynolds.
- In attendance: Mrs. P. Scarborough, Democratic Services Section; and
Dr. J. McPeake }
Ms. S. McCauley }Northern Ireland
Mr. M. Johnston }Housing Executive
Mr. R. Hawe }
Mrs. A. Smyth }

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Aldermen Patterson and Smyth and Councillor Mullan.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Belfast District Housing Plan and Local Housing Strategy 2012-2013

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 2nd February, it had agreed to receive from representatives of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive a presentation in respect of its District Housing Plan and Local Housing Strategy 2012-2013. Accordingly, Dr. J. McPeake, Chief Executive, Ms S. McCauley, Director of Design and Property Services, Mr. M. Johnston, Belfast Area Manager, Mr. R. Hawe, Belfast Area Planner, and Mrs. A. Smyth, Information Officer, were welcomed to the meeting by the Chairman.

Dr. McPeake explained that, in June 2011, the Housing Executive Board had approved an approach to a structural review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and that the Minister's decision was imminent on the future arrangements for housing in Northern Ireland and the publication of a new Housing Strategy which would refresh the focus on housing issues. He referred to the growth of tenant arrears during the previous year and the anticipated difficulties which would arise with the introduction of the Welfare Reform Bill in Northern Ireland. Dr. McPeake advised the Committee that forty three percent of Housing Executive tenants were defined as being affected by fuel poverty. He reported that there was an increasing difficulty with the allocation of properties within particular areas of the City and furthermore he expressed concern about the condition of some of the housing stock.

Mr. Johnston updated the Committee in respect of progress achieved within urban renewal areas; the city centre waiting list; the training completed on community cohesion/shared communities issues and partnership working with the Council. He informed the Committee that the current housing market had remained sluggish; the market profile indicated that there had been two hundred and seventy six new private sector starts; average house prices were down to £143,000; there were forty five Housing Executive sales and there was growth in the private rental sector.

Mr. Johnston stated that, as of March, 2012, there were eight thousand eight hundred and ten applications on the housing waiting list, of which five thousand, seven hundred and sixty seven were in housing stress. The difference which existed between housing stress and allocations had been attributed to a number of factors, such as, the current shortfall in social housing provision; a shortage of opportunities in the private rental sector and more general difficulties for first time buyers in securing a mortgage.

Mr. Johnston concluded by outlining the Belfast Area Budget for the forthcoming year as being in the region of £95m, in comparison with the previous year's actual spend which amounted to £105m.

Dr. McPeake and the other members of the deputation then answered several questions from the Members in respect of the partnership arrangements which existed with Housing Associations; the consideration of possible measures to alleviate the impact of the Welfare Reform; the value for money received in connection with the work carried out by the maintenance contractors; the turnaround time for the re-allocation of vacant properties; the consideration of assistance for those previously displaced communities to return to their original localities; the rewarding of a response maintenance contract within one particular area and the arrangements which were in place to monitor such contracts; the city centre waiting list; efficiency savings which might be realised as a result of the outcome of the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the impact of fuel poverty.

After discussion, the Chairman thanked the deputation for their presentation and for the information which they had provided.

Chairman