

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 6th September, 2022

SPECIAL HYBRID MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor McMullan (Chairperson);
Councillors Bunting, Bower, Canavan,
Cobain, Michael Collins, Corr, Donnelly,
Garrett, Magee, Maghie and Murray.

Also Attended: Councillor Kyle.

In attendance: Mr. D. Bone, City Services Manager; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were recorded on behalf of Alderman McCoubrey and Councillors de Faoite, Flynn, Newton, O'Hara and Verner.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Housing Investment Plan 2022 Annual Update

The Committee was informed that the following representatives of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) were in attendance to provide the third annual update on the Housing Investment Plan for Belfast 2019-2023:

Grainia Long (Chief Executive)
Jennifer Hawthorne (Acting Director of Housing Services)
Elma Newberry (Assistant Director)
Leeann Vincent (Asset Management)
Andy Kennedy (Asset Management)
Carole Johnston (Area Manager)
Paddy Kelly (Area Manager)
Gerard Flynn (Area Manager)
Ailbhe Hickey (Regional Place Shaper)
Kevin Boyle (Housing Analytics Manager)
Lynda Hughes (Communications)
Martin Flynn (Communications)
Roisin O'Neill (Central Grants)
Alistair Mawhinney (Supporting People) and
Angela Brannigan (Housing Analytics).

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The NIHE Chief Executive commenced by providing an overview of Housing Executive spend across Belfast during 2021/2022, detailing that, of the £155.18m spent, £77.24m related to 'Investment New Build', £26.73m had been spent on planned maintenance and improvements, £20.54m on response maintenance, and £20.88m on the Supporting People Programme. She also detailed projected spend for 2022/23, including £36.87m allocated to planned maintenance including stock improvements, £22.26m for response maintenance and £20.84 to Supporting People. The Members were advised that the Housing Executive stock in Belfast was currently 25,239 homes.

Ms. Long emphasised the importance of the Community Planning Partnership and working together towards meeting the outcomes within the Belfast Agenda. She provided an overview of the following priorities and initiatives within the context of community planning, specifically the work of both the Living Here Board and City Development Board:

- A Housing Led Regeneration subgroup had been established in 2021;
- The aim being to increase housing supply across all tenures;
- Where necessary, assess the potential for land and public ownership to meet housing needs;
- Examine the barriers to delivery of new homes across the City; and
- To bring forward PlaceShaping pilots to ensure integration of housing and supporting infrastructure and encourage effective collaboration across both the public and private sector.

The Chief Executive explained that the Housing Investment Plan (HIP) provided an overview of the housing market in the Belfast City Council area and reflected Community Planning priorities locally. She confirmed that 55% of homes in Belfast were owner occupied, 19% private rented and 27% social rented. She advised that, currently, private landlords were leaving the rental market, this was having an impact on the number of people having to be placed in temporary accommodation.

The Members were presented with figures regarding waiting lists, which showed an increase in applications and those in housing stress, whilst the number of allocations had fallen in recent years, broadening the gap between supply and demand, which was deemed to require urgent intervention. She stated that with the current economic climate it was predicted that this gap would increase further.

Ms. Long reported on the figures for those presenting as homeless, in the period 2021/22, 4,553 people had presented as homeless, the level of acceptances had been 2,820 and the numbers placed in temporary accommodation 4,479. She emphasised that chronic homelessness was a real issue within Belfast and advised that it was a critical priority for the NIHE who were working closely with the other various statutory stakeholders, including the Council, and she specifically referred to the ongoing positive work in regard to Complex Lives Project.

The following points were highlighted as key housing issues within Belfast:

- Chronic homelessness – dealing with an increasingly vulnerable group of people experiencing homelessness;
- The ongoing impact of Covid-19 on waiting lists for services;

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- New social housing – mixed tenure, sustainable communities;
- Tower Block Strategy and Redevelopment;
- Change of Tenancy (COT) and scheme delivery timescales;
- Cost of living increase, impact on tenants;
- Ukraine Resettlement; and
- City Centre waiting list.

The Members were advised that, in Belfast, 113 new social homes had been completed during 2021/2022 and a further 1,784 homes were on-site (of which 108 were wheelchair accessible Units), a further 433 social homes had commenced. Ms. Long also commented on the redevelopments programmed, as follows:

- Upper Long Streets: 274 properties to be demolished, the improvement of 9 homes and a maximum of 123 new social homes to be developed (£37m);
- Kings Road Flats: approval for the demolition of 102 flats, a maximum of 50 new social homes to be developed (£10.3m);
- Building Successful Communities (BSC)
 - Corrib Avenue: 32 flats demolished, 24 new homes to be developed (£3.4m);
 - Ross Street: 34 flats demolished, 24 new homes to be developed (£3.6m).

The Acting Director of Housing Services provided an overview of the proposed Tower Block Strategy and highlighted that these would take place over the following proposed timescales: Phase One (Demolition/Disposal within a 5-year timeframe), Phase Two (Demolition/Disposal within a 6-10 year timeframe with repairs in the interim) and Phase Three (Demolition/Disposal beyond a 10 year timeframe with repairs and improvements in the interim).

The Chief Executive also referred to the provision of support across the Council area through the Affordable Warmth Scheme and Boiler Replacement Scheme.

She detailed the new Strategic Priorities, as follows:

- Prioritising sustainable development – essential for ensuring households can live in warm homes and achieving a path to net zero carbon housing;
- Building capacity to borrow, to invest in existing homes and adding to new supply;
- Extracting social value from spending power to deliver local inclusive economic development by investing in skills and supply chains;
- Inclusion and involvement of customers in decisions and services that affect their lives;
- Strategic shift towards prevention of homelessness and urgent re-housing; and
- Being a delivery partner for all of government. Working towards the reduction of economic inactivity, delivery of green growth and early intervention to improve lives.

In conclusion, the Chief Executive emphasised the importance of the Community Planning Partnership and working together towards meeting the outcomes within the Belfast Agenda. She added that it was essential that the HIP, Community Plan and the new LDP should all align and fit together and emphasised the need for the outcomes to be regularly monitored and reported on annually.

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A number of the Members spoke positively about working relationships with proactive NIHE staff and welcomed the success of the retro fit programme.

A Member welcomed the Community Planning linkages between the Council and Housing Executive and encouraged the Members to ensure their Party Groups were represented at the Belfast Agenda Refresh Workshop being held on Wednesday, 7th September.

In response to several issues which had been raised during discussion, the representatives confirmed that:

- the NIHE would be keen to work with Council officers to investigate ways that the Affordable Warmth Scheme could be better publicised to residents across the city;
- for any new housing developments, it was noted that there was currently an emerging planning policy to ensure that, after February 2023, for any new planning application submitted for more than 5 units, the developer would have a requirement to provide at least a 20% allocation of social and affordable housing as part of planning requirements which should ensure more mixed tenure housing;
- a demand existed for smaller units as well as family homes. Highlighted that when Place Shaping were considering housing schemes it was not just about addressing housing need but also building communities;
- the co-ownership programme was still going and advised that a scheme for the over 55's was due to launch shortly;
- noted that since the closure of the Regina Woman's Hostel the NIHE had endeavored to ensure that it had sustained levels of services for woman experiencing chronic homelessness through the provision of appropriate services and accommodation and provided an assurance that this commitment would continue until such time as a new service had been identified;
- the Housing Executive had no input into the rents charged by Housing Associations and that NIHE rents needed to be affordable and sustainable for both the tenant and landlord (NIHE), ensuring the correct balance for both;
- the Housing Executive favoured a mix of social and private housing in the city centre;
- negotiations were ongoing with the Trade Unions in regard to the ongoing strike over pay and it was noted that this action was likely to directly impact the response maintenance services in various areas, including North and West Belfast.

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- the Housing Executive was assessing the implications arising from the removal of welfare mitigation measures, but it had no remit in this decision;
- the Housing Executive recognised the need to keep tenants involved in decisions regarding the Tower Block Strategy and rehoming and noted that the schemes could not progress until the residents had all been rehomed;
- extensions to properties were usually only considered when all other options in terms of rehousing had been exhausted and only where there was an extremely unique set of circumstances; and
- the NIHE was currently working with the Department for the Economy on Pilot schemes for Electric Vehicle Charging Points and it was also focused on the sustainability of its own vehicle fleet.

Discussion took place regarding growing housing needs, particularly among young families, and poor housing standards, as well as instances of the unsuitable allocation of tenancies.

Detailed discussion ensued in regard to homelessness and the representatives from the Housing Executive advised that the level of those presenting with complex needs continued to grow, involving a combination of mental and physical ill health and addiction which had been exasperated further as a result of the Covid pandemic. They referred to the ongoing work and highlighted that the focus was on prevention and support, with the emphasis being on trying to prevent the incidences rather than continuously firefighting emergency situations.

The Assistant Director of Land and Strategic Regeneration provided detail regarding the schemes to address the aging housing stock in South and East Belfast.

The Chairperson thanked the NIHE representatives for attending and the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson