

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 29th October, 2019

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Michael Collins (Chairperson);
Councillors D. Baker, Bunting,
de Faoite, Donnelly, M. Kelly,
Kyle, Magee and McLaughlin.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. N. Grimshaw, Strategic Director of City
and Neighbourhood Services;
Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

Also attended: Councillors Groogan, McKeown and O'Hara.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were reported from the Deputy Lord Mayor, Councillor McReynolds, and Councillors Black, Corr, McMullan, Mulholland, Smyth and Verner.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Anti-Social Behaviour in the Wider University and Lower Ormeau Area

The Chief Executive reminded the Committee that a motion highlighting the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) issues in the Holylands, which had been proposed by Councillor Groogan and seconded by Councillor McKeown, had been considered by the People and Communities Committee at its meeting on 8th October.

She provided an overview of the recent work which the Council had been involved in, including a number of interagency meetings with representatives from the PSNI, the Department of Justice (DoJ), the Department for Communities (DfC), the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and the two Universities, as well a Partners and Community Together (PACT) meeting last week. She advised the Members that an Action Plan had been in place for some time but that the overall consensus from all partners was that a new focus was now urgently required, both in response to recent trouble and given that the Halloween period was imminent.

She explained that better alcohol enforcement was required using existing legislation. She also advised the Committee that longer term actions were being implemented, including a bespoke piece of work which would be undertaken by PhD students and the DfC.

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The Members were advised that a further meeting had also been held last week, where the general sentiment was that “more feet” were needed on the streets in the area. She explained that there would be joint patrols between the Council and the PSNI over Halloween along with two noise teams, one each for the Holylands and the Lower Ormeau areas.

The Chairperson then welcomed Ms. J. Vaughn and Mr. L. Kielty, representing the Wider University Area PACT (Partners and Community Together), to the meeting. Together they outlined that:

- millions had been spent trying to tackle the anti-social behaviour (ASB) in the area but that the issues continued;
- it was important to treat the cause, not the symptoms;
- the area was the most multi-cultural in Belfast;
- the ASB and noise was from Sundays to Thursdays constantly;
- they wanted the area to receive Special Designation as an area for redevelopment and renewal, where a proper, balanced community was rebuilt, with families, young professionals and students living peacefully side by side;
- students were residents as well;
- the new Purpose Built Managed Student Accommodation (PBMSA) across the City wasn't attracting students away from the Holylands;
- some streets were 90% Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs);
- alleygates were required;
- there were licensing issues in the area, where bars were being granted licenses beyond 11p.m.;
- there were issues with the communal bins;
- Residents' Parking should be considered for other parts of the Holylands area given the success of the scheme in the Rugby Road/College Park Avenue;
- the Holylands/Botanic area had the highest crime rate in Northern Ireland;
- lessons should be learnt in preventing what was happening in the Holylands area from ever happening again;
- a multi-agency approach was required, with specific actions to be taken, and that it was important that the discussions did not just become another talking shop;
- residents were living in fear and no longer made complaints to the Police, as they would become a target for ASB; and
- the health of the residents in the area was being adversely affected.

The Chairperson welcomed Mrs. B. Ruddy, a representative of Holyland and Lower Ormeau (HALO), to the meeting. She outlined that:

- the Council did not have a written anti-social behaviour policy and that one needed to be tailored to the specific issues which existed in the Holyland and Wider University Area;

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- the overdevelopment of HMOs in the area had brought numerous social problems with it, including over-parking, criminality and drug dealing;
- the overdevelopment of HMOs had destroyed the cohesion of the community;
- the area had the highest crime rate, the highest level of Council spend on cleansing, the highest spend on security, highest level of over-parking and congestion and the highest housing density rate;
- residents were afraid to report crimes for fear of repercussions so the statistics were not a true representation;
- a riot of 100 people had taken place in the area in the past few weeks, where eight cars had been burned out and multiple other cars damaged, and it hadn't even featured on the news;
- families of 30+ nationalities resided in the area and racist abuse had increased significantly;
- Roma families self-patrolled the area for their own safety;
- there had also been a marked increase in sexist abuse;
- there was a lack of enforcement, and policies hadn't been refreshed;
- the CCTV system and wardens had been removed from the area in 2012;
- a rebalancing of the area was desperately needed as the party lifestyles of some of the younger residents conflicted with the families and young professionals living in the area, that the relationships between them were at boiling point and that this was a crisis situation;
- it was disappointing that an MLA had to leave a meeting with a local licensed premise earlier in the day, as the staff refused to discuss the concerns of the local residents;
- young people were being used as cash cows by landlords, licensed premises, fast food vendors and taxi companies;
- however, the progress which had been made by the Council in the past few weeks was promising;
- she believed a zero tolerance policy on ASB should be adopted with a complete review of current policies; and
- in relation to Planning powers, they would like to see a rebalancing of the area through a regeneration policy, in conjunction with the South Belfast Corridor.

The Committee was then advised that Ms. N. Brennan, a representative of the Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG), was in attendance and she was welcomed to the meeting. She provided the Committee with a presentation on the key local issues, including that:

- the large residential community had a busy night time economy which was more suited to the city centre, and was not conducive for families, the elderly or working people;
- the Lower Ormeau was within a Neighbourhood Renewal area;

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- according to Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), the area had a high density of children and young people, a large elderly population and high levels of social need, disability and minority ethnic families;
- it was in the top 1.4% in terms of Crime and Disorder, the top 3% of deprivation in terms of Living Environment, the top 6.51% in Health Deprivation and Disability;
- up until now there had been numerous reactionary initiatives but no proactive measures to tackle the ASB and noise disturbances;
- there was an increasing use of drugs in the area;
- in terms of Student Welfare, there were vulnerable young people coming into the area with little support;
- in addition to reviewing licensing in the area, limiting the opening hours of hot food outlets in the area would make a huge difference to noise levels;
- there was a critical under-reporting of crimes;
- over the past four years there had been a 55% increase in the number of HMOs in the area and that Airbnbs were now also commonplace, with little regulation;
- raised concerns regarding the proposed 20% cap on the number of HMOs in any area, stating that this was still too high;
- the transient nature of occupants of HMOs, Airbnbs or short term private rentals meant that they added little value to the community;
- consistent resources were required to tackle noise and ASB;
- conflict resolution, or something similar, was required as relationships between students, landlords, residents and businesses were at an all-time low; and
- the area could perhaps be used as a pilot scheme, through Community Planning and by linking in with the work of the Commissioner for Resilience, and create a long term vision for the area.

Lastly, the Chairperson welcomed Mr. R. Murtagh, President of National Union of Students – Union of Students Ireland (NUS-USI), to the meeting. He outlined to the Committee that:

- he was not in attendance to defend anti-social behaviour by students and that he wanted to provide a perspective from students;
- he had genuine sympathy with all residents of the area who were affected by the ASB, highlighting that students were also victims;
- threats were being made to students which were unfounded;
- he urged others to be careful of their language and not to make sweeping statements about students;
- affordability was a key factor why a large number of students lived in the area, given the high cost of living in the newly built Purpose Built Managed Student Accommodation (PBMSA) throughout the city;

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- unfortunately most students were forced into the private rented sector as accommodation was cheaper, but that living conditions were worse e.g. mould and single glazing;
- students were not getting their deposits back from landlords for no reason;
- there was a mental health crisis, with two unfortunate student deaths earlier in the year;
- a recent survey showed that 78% of students had experienced mental health difficulties while at university;
- in addition to poor housing conditions, many students were under financial and academic pressure, and, unfortunately, drugs and alcohol were an escape for some;
- he wanted to see long-term solutions – including regeneration and investment in the area; and
- both students and landlords should be involved in the conversations.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, thanked each of the deputations for their contributions.

A Member stated that a long-term solution was clearly required, with a regeneration programme and a masterplan of the area. He highlighted that the Council should be using its powers to consider how to reduce the number of HMOs in the area and to increase the number of family homes. He added that an Anti-Social Behaviour policy was required, and that, while the Council could deal with licensing and noise disturbance issues, the PSNI should be more closely involved given the criminal nature of a lot of the activity in the area. In relation to other parts of the City, he advised the Committee that ASB increased significantly in the Falls Park in the summer months.

A Member, who was not a member of the Committee, was granted authority to address the meeting. She agreed that a regeneration plan was needed in order to rebalance the area, and that the area should be given special designated status. She explained that the recent Members' Planning training on HMOs had been useful and she highlighted the importance of the Council's forthcoming Local Development Plan for the City. She raised major concerns with the proposed 20% limit of HMOs, explaining that she still felt this was too high. She reminded the Members that the licensing of HMOs was now within the Council's remit too, as of April 2019.

A number of Members stated that a multi-agency approach to the issues was key.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Baker,
Seconded by Councillor Bunting and

Resolved – that the Committee agrees to designate the Wider University and the Lower Ormeau area as a Special Action Area under Community Planning and to develop a long term vision and development plan for the area to include a housing plan, a spatial planning approach and a regeneration

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programme. This must be jointly developed with the stakeholders and jointly agreed with the Council, DfC, NIHE, DOJ and DfI.

In response to a Member's question regarding the PSNI's graduated response towards students, Mr. Murtagh stated that he was in favour of it, as he did not believe that placing students into the criminal justice system for one offence was a good idea for anyone. He added that the trouble tended to be from visitors to the area, not residents within the area, and that students were often the victims.

A Member requested whether additional resources could be put towards more Safer Neighbourhood Officers or wardens in the area. The Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services advised the Committee that work was ongoing to alter certain roles within his Department to allow for greater flexibility in that regard and that he was trying to expedite that process. He also advised the Members that discussions were ongoing with the DOJ and PSNI, regarding the potential for an enhanced Warden-type role to close the existing gaps in the legislation.

A further Member added that Residents' Parking Schemes should be considered for other areas within the Holylands and wider university area, given the improvement it had provided in the College Park Avenue area.

Another Member stated that the PBMSA in the city centre was too expensive for most students.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Michael Collins,
Seconded by Councillor de Faoite and

Resolved – that the Committee agrees to write to the Vice Chancellors of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and to the owners of privately-owned Purpose Built Managed Student Accommodation throughout the city, to ask them to reduce the price of their accommodation in the city centre to make it more affordable for students.

A Member requested information on why there was such a mass concentration of HMOs in the Holylands area. The Chief Executive explained that it was an inherited problem, as planning powers only transferred to Council in April 2015. She advised the Members that a Subject Plan for the Belfast City Council area was published by the former Department of the Environment (DoE) in 2008 which introduced control limits but, by that time, the numbers of HMOs in areas such as the Holylands were far in excess of the guidance. She emphasised the need for the Local Development Plan to be formally adopted as quickly as possible.

A further Member stated that the prevalence of HMOs and Airbnbs in the Holylands area invariably raised the house prices in other areas. The Chief Executive agreed that a report would be submitted to a future meeting on the increase in Airbnbs across the City and what enforcement powers were available to agencies for those who were operating a property as an Airbnb without the appropriate certification from the NI Tourist Board.

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A further Member added that she had major concerns relating to the Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Act 2016 which stated that if the application was for a renewal, planning permission was not required. She also stated that there were health and safety concerns relating to the re-definition of an HMO, in that lot of properties which were formerly classified as HMOs were no longer, and were therefore no longer protected by the HMO legislation and safety standards. The Chief Executive agreed that a further briefing would be offered to all Members on HMOs, including the redefinition in legislation and the impact on fire safety and building control issues which had been raised.

A number of Members highlighted that the high concentration of HMOs was a key factor in the ongoing issues in the area and that the NI Housing Executive and local housing associations should be approached in relation to considering “buying back” properties in the area.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Michael Collins and

Resolved – that the Committee agrees that the Department for Communities, and other agencies such as SOS Bus and Sure Start which work with vulnerable communities in the area, be invited to join the ongoing conversation; and

that the Council writes to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to social housing operators regarding the potential of them “buying back” properties in the area.

After further discussion, a number of Members stated that the Council and its partners should review the approach towards informing a City Anti-Social Behaviour enforcement policy, given how ASB could impact upon the health and well-being of residents living in areas which were heavily impacted by it.

Chairperson