

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 2nd March, 2021

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Baker (Chairperson);
Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, Corr, Flynn, M. Kelly,
Magee, McAteer, Mulholland, Newton, Pankhurst,
Smyth and Verner.

Also attended: Councillor Kyle.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. Stephen Leonard, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. Jim Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer; and
Ms. Katharine McCrum, Democratic Services Officer.

External attendance:

NI Housing Executive: Mrs. Jennifer Hawthorne, Regional Manager for Belfast
Mr. Brian O’Kane, Senior Principal Officer
Ms. Fiona McGrath, Head of Place Shaping Belfast

Apologies

Apologies were recorded on behalf of Councillors Cobain, Collins, de Faoite, Garrett, McCusker and McReynolds.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Updates from Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Mrs. J. Hawthorne (Belfast Regional Manager), Ms. F. McGrath (Head of Place Shaping Belfast) and Mr. B. O’Kane (Senior Principal Officer), representing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

Presentation on Dealing with Homelessness during the Pandemic

Mr. O’Kane provided Members with statistics regarding homelessness in Northern Ireland during 2019/2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic:

- 16,802 households presented as homeless last year (11,323 accepted);
- 36 rough sleepers were identified in the 2019/2020 street count;
- There were 4,527 temporary accommodation placements;

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- 21,955 households were on the social housing waiting list as homeless;
- The top 3 reasons for presenting as homeless were accommodation not being reasonable, breakdown or family dispute, and loss of rented accommodation;
- 52% were single, 32% families, 12% older people and 4% were couples.

Mr. O’Kane explained that, since the outbreak of Covid-19, the number of homeless presentations had fallen while demand for temporary accommodation had increased. He added that young people had been disproportionately impacted and that the availability and throughput of temporary accommodation had reduced, necessitating an increase in the use of hotel and B&B accommodation.

The Members were advised that the aim of the NIHE Covid-19 response was to safeguard as many homeless people as possible from the virus, ensuring that they had the same opportunities as other vulnerable people to self-isolate, receive care, protection and treatment where possible. The key impacts on customers were identified as physical health, financial pressures, mental health, relationship breakdowns, reduced access to support and social isolation.

Mr. O’Kane then provided details of their ‘Everyone In’ approach to accommodate rough sleepers, including those with no recourse to public funds.

In terms of the NIHE response to date, the following elements were outlined:

- Increased supply of temporary accommodation;
- The lockdown of night shelters and day centres;
- Additional support provided and a shift made from in-reach to assertive outreach;
- Publication of ‘The Way Home’ Reset Plan;
- The appointment of a Coordinator and an Emergency Relief Panel;
- The ‘Everyone In’ approach;
- New arrangements for multi-agency consultation and collaboration.

Mr. O’Kane explained that their aim now was to prevent people returning to rough sleeping and to work to prevent the loss of homes in the private rented sector. He also noted that they were working to acquire additional temporary accommodation units with block bookings made in order to respond to emergency scenarios.

The Committee was provided with information on a Strategic Review which would remodel and reconfigure services whilst looking at the long term suitability of accommodation, private sector leasing and reducing reliance on non-standard accommodation (hotels and B&Bs).

In conclusion, Mr. O’Kane detailed the challenges moving forward, including securing the budget for the year ahead, anticipating demand, the rollout of vaccines and testing, and the next steps for the ‘Everyone In’ approach.

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Mrs. Hawthorne noted the strain on staff, particularly those with young families, as a result of the ongoing working from home arrangements and the increased demand on services.

A Member commended the work of the staff and voiced his understanding of the issues they were facing. He then questioned what could be done to support new residents to an area, including asylum seekers, who might only come to the attention of community groups or representatives if an issue was to arise. He suggested that it was important to connect with people at an earlier stage as this could prevent isolation and improve the chances of sustaining tenancies.

Mrs. Hawthorne welcomed the increase in asylum seekers who had been granted leave to remain in Northern Ireland. She noted however that there were a number of pressures on the system, including delays to the construction of new builds, repair issues and a rise in the need for permanent accommodation. She agreed that wrap around services for asylum seekers was a key issue and noted that a number of other agencies were responsible for Sustainable Integration work to support that.

Mr. O’Kane confirmed that, despite the difficulties in travel over the last year, a record number of people had presented as seeking asylum in December 2020. He outlined the work that the NIHE was doing with partner agencies to provide support but agreed that additional work could be done to support that transition.

With regards to getting people ‘tenancy ready’, Mrs. Hawthorne explained that staff were seeing an increase in 18-25 year olds with extreme vulnerabilities and without the skills to maintain a tenancy. She added that tolerance levels also appeared to be lower now that more people were working or staying at home all day. She also pointed out that people were often at a point of crisis when they presented as homeless and in need of a range of support, with housing often being an isolating factor that could compound the other issues. Both representatives underlined the learning points from the last year and reiterated the importance of not losing this and continuing with outreach support.

A Member queried how an applicant would be defined as suitable for temporary accommodation as opposed to permanent accommodation, and what statistics existed for the move through to permanent tenancies. He also questioned why there had been a rise in the 18-25 age range.

Mr. O’Kane explained that anyone who presented for housing assistance, if they met the statutory definition, would be provided with temporary accommodation (if needed) alongside other services. He advised that people often made their own temporary arrangements to stay with family or friends while they made their way through the permanent waiting list, however, as a result of Covid-19, this was now less likely. Mrs. Hawthorne added that the final solution was always to offer permanent and suitable accommodation.

With regards to statistics, Mr. O’Kane suggested that around 70% of those in temporary accommodation were offered permanent accommodation by the Housing Executive or a social housing partner but the process had slowed during the pandemic resulting in increased time in temporary accommodation.

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A Member reiterated previous comments about supporting those who were new to an area by using the community sector in a GDPR compliant manner in order to offer practical advice and support. She also noted the need to include open spaces in new designs as their importance had become so apparent during periods of lockdown. Finally, she recommended that honest conversations were had with those on the housing waiting list about demand levels and the likelihood of permanent housing as frustrations were growing.

Mr. O’Kane confirmed that conversations had recently taken place with partners about the idea of Community Navigator roles. He suggested that those honest conversations were had, but agreed that additional work could be undertaken, whilst not putting people off joining the waiting list. He suggested that additional initiatives could be included in the Reset Plan and stated that sustaining tenancies was key.

In response to a query as to whether the Executive was equipped to deal with increased demand from young families or other fall outs from the pandemic, Mr. O’Kane advised that they continued to look at demand and the emerging pressures. He suggested that demand from the private rented sector was likely to increase due to rent arrears, and unemployment and changes to benefits were also likely to have an impact. He also commented on the needs of young families, couples, and larger blended families, as well as the lessons learnt over the past year.

New Build Update and City Centre Waiting List

The Committee was presented with an update report on the Social Housing Development Programme for Belfast during 2020/21, which included the following details:

- Units completed 2020/21; 255;
- Units under construction; 907; and
- Units programmed to start; 1636.

Ms. McGrath drew attention to a number of the larger schemes within the Development Programme, including Glenmona, Hannahstown, the St Gemma’s High School site, Brookfield Mill, Visteon Blacks Road and Upper Dunmurry Lane. The Members were advised that a draft programme for 2021/22 had been developed but would not be published until it received DfC Ministerial approval.

In terms of the City Centre, the Members were advised that:

- Work was ongoing with the developer at the Waterside/Sirocco site, however, development had slipped to a 2021/2022 start but discussions were scheduled regarding the delivery of shared housing under the Housing For All programme;
- NIHE was continuing to work with Castlebrook on the social housing units at the Tribecca site;
- The developer of a Titanic Quarter site had proposed 106 units of social housing, with a mixture of 1, 2 and 3 bed units, however no housing association had been appointed as yet.

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A Member provided an example of a family in his constituency in a single let for 5 years with no offer of permanent accommodation, and questioned what advice could be given in this instance.

Ms. McGrath noted that there were a number of new schemes under development in the area and confirmed that they were aware of the high need. Ms. Hawthorne added that the same number of points could be considered high in some areas but low in others, and so she recommended that Members speak to the relevant NIHE Area Manager to find out what the allocations for an area were in order to have realistic conversations with their constituents and manage expectations. She also explained that often people were offered permanent housing but turned it down as it was not in the area that they were now established in.

A Member commented that there was still some fear from communities and families around moving to apartment living in the City Centre. She questioned whether a branding exercise was needed between the Council and the NIHE in order to make the move more appealing in terms of promoting green spaces, connectivity, regeneration, and the emerging availability of permanent housing.

Ms. McGrath agreed that, while it was common in other cities, it was not yet the norm in Belfast although an encouraging number of families had expressed an interest in living in the City Centre, similar in number to those on the general waiting list. She stated that, once schemes were ready for allocation, people would be able to see what was available and it might be appropriate to undertake some branding work at this stage. She also confirmed that housing would be provided to those with the highest points but it was too soon to know what the points level would be at this stage.

Another Member noted the positive lifestyle available to those living in the City Centre and questioned how the revitalisation of areas could be reimagined to include family homes which could make use of the increasing retail vacancies. She also questioned whether planning rules dictated whether balconies could be included in new developments as this too may encourage apartment living.

Ms. McGrath confirmed that NIHE worked closely with Belfast City Council whose Local Development Plan foresaw a huge increase in the city centre population with up to 8,000 housing units. She confirmed that the NIHE ask was for 20% of these units to be made up of social and affordable shared housing. With regards to balconies, she confirmed that developers had insisted upon them at the Sirocco site but this was not standard a requirement. The Members were also advised that DfC was working on increased space standards for apartments and flats, including additional storage spaces. Ms. McGrath suggested that in time the area could be suitable for older populations too, with retirement villages offering social opportunities alongside apartment living.

A Member observed that the majority of new builds in East Belfast were apartments, and underlined the need for more family housing. Ms. McGrath suggested that they did their best to provide a mix of housing, with most families requiring 2 or 3 bed accommodation. Mrs. Hawthorne agreed that there was a lack of new building in East Belfast but noted that most existing housing in the area was family housing. She explained

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that half of the waiting list was made up of single people and so the development plan needed to reflect this. In conclusion, she raised the issue of under occupation, advising Members that there were a substantial number of single elderly people living in family accommodation and so it was important that support was provided to those who were willing to downsize in order to free up family accommodation.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the NIHE representatives for their attendance and noted the updates provided.

Chairperson