

People and Communities Committee

Wednesday, 31st January, 2018

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Alderman Sandford (Chairperson);
the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Copeland);
Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors Armitage, McCusker,
McReynolds, Milne and Newton.

Also attended: Councillor Magee.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Toland, Assistant Director;
Mr. D. Elliot, Principle Environmental Health Officer Public
Health and Housing Team; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Alderman McCoubrey.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Presentation

Northern Ireland Housing Executive – Update Presentation on new Heating Contract

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Mrs. J. Hawthorne (Belfast Regional Manager), Mr. P. McCarthy (Senior Project Manager) and Mr. B. O’Kane (Senior Principal Officer), representing the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

Mr. McCarthy commenced by advising that the Housing Executive had a new heating service contract that commenced on 1st November, 2017. He outlined that the NIHE had a requirement as Landlord to meet its statutory obligations by ensuring that it protected both the customer and the asset. The NIHE had to ensure both the safety and continuity of operation, this required the prompt repair of heating installations in its properties, regular servicing and when necessary the replacement of heating systems.

The representative detailed that the service applied to gas, oil, electric, biomass, LPG, solid fuel, gas pipework installations for customer’s cookers and other appliances, open fires, focal point fires, renewable sources (solar thermal panels, solar PV roof tiles and panel), oil spillage remediation works and asbestos services (surveying and removal). He stated that it would not cover tenants gas cookers or other appliances, tenant installed oil/electric heating systems or tenant installed wood burning/multi-fuel stoves.

**Special People and Communities Committee,
Wednesday, 31st January, 2018**

He then proceeded to highlight the key changes in the new contract as follows:

- the contract and its delivery were now managed by the Regional Heating Units;
- local maintenance staff no longer had a formal role; and
- the local office role in relation to customers (refusals, access etc.) remained unchanged.

He concluded the presentation by outlining the contractors working hours and he explained the text message facility that the contractor used to contact the customer. He stated that the contractor appointed to undertake any required works must try to accommodate the requirements of the customer in order to gain access to a property.

In response to a Member's query, the representative confirmed that carbon monoxide detectors were fitted to all properties. He advised that they were located within 1 metre of the boiler and were tested and serviced regularly.

Following a further query, the representative explained the process regarding the installation and maintenance of gas appliances. He stated that, as a landlord, the NIHE were legally responsible for the safety of its tenants in relation to gas safety and he assured the Members that any contractor involved with the installation of gas was Gas Safety Registered and had to leave a CP12 Gas Safety Certificate.

Several Members stated that, following the changes to the frontline services in the NIHE, there appeared to be much confusion as to who tenants now needed to contact to report issues.

The representative advised that the NIHE had endeavoured to communicate these changes effectively to the community. Housing Executive representatives had attended meetings of the Housing Community Networks to explain the changes and he stated that he would be willing to facilitate meetings to community groups if it would be helpful.

Mrs Hawthorn referred to a 'Who, What, Where' contact information booklet that had previously been circulated to Members and she undertook to forward an updated information pamphlet. The Democratic Services Officer advised that she would ensure this was circulated to all the Elected Members of Council and suggested that this be uploaded to the new Members' Portal where it would be available for all the Members to access.

Noted.

Update Presentation on Homelessness in Belfast

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 5th December, it had considered a Notice of Motion in relation to the growing homelessness problem in the City and it had agreed that the Committee would receive an update presentation on how the NIHE addressed homelessness in Belfast at its next quarterly meeting.

**Special People and Communities Committee,
Wednesday, 31st January, 2018**

Mr. O'Kane commenced by advising that the Housing Executive as an organisation took homelessness very seriously. He then drew the Members' attention to the Belfast Region Homelessness Statistics for 2016/17. He stated that, whilst the problem was still very serious and figures overall remained high, there had been a very slight reduction in the number of people who presented to the Housing Executive as homeless, most recent figures had been 4500 people (up to the end of December 2017).

The representative then proceeded to outline to the Members the range of options available for temporary accommodation to try and meet the demand:

- twelve family hostels across the City (self-contained units/on-site support);
- fifteen homelessness projects for single people (self-contained units/on-site support);
- supply of single lets within the private rental sector (furnished accommodation which is demand led – currently just over five hundred properties).

In terms of people sleeping rough in the City, the representative referred to the important role of the Housing Executive and its various Partners, including the Council, in progressing the inter-agency response that had been implemented. He detailed that the following resources were now available in the City:

- thirty 'crash beds' (emergency placements open throughout the night to receive people);
- the Welcome Organisation provided five beds for vulnerable women; and
- Morning Star House provided an additional four units.

He advised that when the provision of this support was under pressure the Salvation Army had undertaken to open up an additional six units. He stated that the organisations were endeavouring to work together to try and ensure that the necessary arrangements were in place to prevent any individual having to sleep rough, however, due to the high level of demand this sometimes proved to be challenging.

The representative highlighted the vulnerability of people who found themselves in a housing crisis situation and advised that dedicated housing officers were automatically appointed to work with people who had spent the night in temporary accommodation to try and assist them with a long term housing solution.

The representatives then provided clarification in respect of a number of issues, some of which are set out hereunder:

- the quality of single lets;
- sofa surfing; and
- mitigating against the impact of universal credit.

A Member reiterated the need for greater clarity in terms of points of contact within the organisation.

**Special People and Communities Committee,
Wednesday, 31st January, 2018**

The Belfast Regional Manager accepted that this appeared to be a recurrent theme and undertook to update the relevant points of contact and to forward to information to the Democratic Services Officer as soon as it was available.

A further Member requested a breakdown of the most recent homelessness statistics and the percentages of people currently living in the various temporary accommodation options and it was agreed that these would be forwarded to the Democratic Services Officer and uploaded to the Members' Portal.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, praised the work and efforts of the staff within the NIHE in trying to tackle homelessness in the City and also in assisting with the progression of the longer term/multi-agency approach that had been adopted in an attempt to try and tackle this ongoing problem.

Noted.

Update on Tower Blocks

The Regional Manager advised the Committee that, following the recent publication of the independent inspection report which the NIHE Board had commissioned following the Grenfell tragedy, a leaflet had been prepared that contained details in respect of the recommendations and this would be hand delivered to tenants living in tower block buildings within the next week.

She assured the Committee that the NIHE Board was committed to progressing a detailed action plan to remedy building regulation contraventions and to implement Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service recommendations.

Noted.

Date of Next Meeting

The Committee noted that the next quarterly meeting was scheduled to be held at 4.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 16th April, 2018.

Chairperson