

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 5th February, 2019

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor McCusker (Chairperson);
Aldermen Copeland, Rodgers and Sandford; and
Councillors Black, Corr, Corr Johnston, Heading,
Magennis and Pankhurst.

Also attended: Councillor Garrett.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services;
Mrs. G. Long, Council's Commissioner for Resilience;
Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were recorded on behalf of Alderman McCoubrey and Councillors McReynolds, Newton and Nicholl.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Restricted Item

The information contained in the report associated with the following item is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the Press and public from the Committee meeting during discussion on the item as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Section 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

City Recovery – City Picnic

The Committee considered a report which provided an update in relation to a request to provide additional funding to City Picnic to enable it to undertake activities associated with the re-opening of its premises in Castle Street.

The Commissioner for Resilience advised the Committee that, in keeping with the Strategic Policy and Resources decision to assist businesses to relocate and continue trading if they had been located within the cordon, City Picnic had been provided with a temporary trading location in Donegall Place. She advised that trading at this temporary location had been challenging and it was unlikely to be sustainable for City Picnic to continue to trade. Other options had been discussed and it was suggested that City Picnic would cease trading

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at the temporary location and concentrate its activities on the re-opening of the original premises.

In response to a query from a Member, the City Solicitor explained that, due to the urgency associated with the decision, it had been necessary to submit the report to the Special People and Communities Committee rather than the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Magennis,
Seconded by Councillor Corr,

That an offer be made to City Picnic to increase the limit on the £25,000 originally agreed, by a further £5,000, to add to the remaining balance of approximately £6,000 for spend on marketing/branding activities associated with the re-opening of its premises in Castle Street.

On a vote by show of hands seven Members voted for the proposal and two against and it was declared carried.

It was further agreed that, in accordance with Standing Order 47(2)(c), the decision would not be subject to call-in because it would cause an unreasonable delay which would be prejudicial to the Council's and the public's interests.

Presentation - Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Update Presentation on the New Build Programme 2018/19

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).

The Members were presented with an update report on the New Build Programme for the period 2018/19 which included the following details:

- social housing completions 2018/19 (245 units completed to-date);
- social housing units under construction (773 units); and
- 2,439 units programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).

Ms. McGrath outlined the current demographic trends and the resultant social waiting list needs and she apprised the Committee with regard to the performance by the Housing Executive in relation to new build start and completion and future delivery timescales.

In response to a Member's question regarding the weekly rent of a Housing Association property often being much higher to that of a Housing Executive property in the same location, Mrs Hawthorne advised that Housing Association only received a percentage of Government funding towards housing schemes, therefore, rentals were commensurate with the final cost of the scheme and often varied to ensure financial viability. She then provided an overview of

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the top up allowance scheme and encouraged the Members to promote the scheme to constituents as it was often not claimed.

Noted.

Update Presentation on Homelessness in Belfast

Mr. O’Kane commenced by drawing the Members’ attention to the Belfast Region Homeless Presenters for April – December 2018 as follows:

- 4,505 people presented as homeless – 65% of those presentations had been accepted;
- accommodation not being reasonable was the biggest reason for presentation (23%), followed by a sharing breakdown (21%) and loss of rented accommodation (14%);
- the average length of stay in temporary accommodation was 40.6 weeks.

He also detailed the Presenters by household group:

- single female 16-25 years – 7.32%;
- single female 26-59 years – 10.37%;
- single male 16-25 years – 8.72%;
- single male 26-59 years – 27.57%;
- couples – 4.06%;
- families – 29.68%; and
- pensioners – 12.19%.

The representative advised that, during the annual street count by the NIHE on 6th November 2018, sixteen people had been found on the street between 2.00 a.m. and 5.00 a.m. All of the 16 people were known to the service and only two had been willing to accept the offer of temporary accommodation. He stated that rough sleepers often faced many complex challenges and they required intense packages of support alongside access to accommodation. Many individuals found it difficult to engage with services and often declined offers of assistance.

The representative then proceeded to outline to the Members the range of options available for temporary accommodation to try and meet the demand which included a supply of single lets within the private rental sector, units for single households with alcohol problems, and homeless Services for young people and women at risk of domestic violence.

Mrs. Hawthorne referred to the important role of the Housing Executive and its various Partners, including the Council, in addressing the problems with an inter-agency approach. She detailed that this included collaboration with the Public Health Authority, the Health and Social Care Board, Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. These 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. She outlined that emergency accommodation was not a long term solution and the statutory organisations priority was to prevent someone becoming homeless.

Mr. O’Kane highlighted the vulnerability of people who found themselves in a housing crisis situation and advised that dedicated housing officers were automatically appointed to

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work with people who had spent the night in temporary accommodation to try and assist them with a long term housing solution.

A Member welcomed the introduction of the Housing Solutions Team by the NIHE and stated that the introduction of Housing Advisors had helped to provide specific points of contact within the organisation.

The representative stated that the statutory organisations were committed to improving the access and provision of services to vulnerable individuals by supporting their health and social care needs.

Another Member highlighted the invaluable outreach work provided by the voluntary community sector and outlined the stress that the volunteers faced in trying to provide vital assistance to the most vulnerable people in society. He stated that the agencies working on the streets had seen a marked increase of street activity with new people presenting and having to spend time on the streets and stressed that this situation was not improving.

A Member informed the Housing Executive representatives of the details in respect of a Motion which he had submitted to the previous night's Council meeting and which had been referred to be considered at the monthly meeting of the People and Communities Committee on Tuesday, 12th February.

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

- homelessness status and priority need;
- the quality and number of single lets;
- sofa surfing;
- maintenance of properties;
- re purposing of buildings; and
- mitigating against the impact of universal credit.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the NIHE representative for the update.

It was agreed that the presentation would be e-mailed to all Elected Members and uploaded to the Members' Portal.

Chairperson