

People and Communities Committee

Monday, 16th September, 2019

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Kyle (Deputy Chairperson) (in the Chair);
and Councillors D. Baker, Black, Bunting, Corr,
Donnelly, M. Kelly, Magee, McLaughlin and Smyth.

Also attended: Councillors Ferguson and Heading.

In attendance: Ms. V. Brown, City Services Manager;
Mr. I. Harper, Building Control Manager; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of the Chairperson (Councillor Michael Collins), the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor McReynolds) and Councillors McCusker, Mulholland and Newton.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Committee was informed that representatives of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive were in attendance to brief the Committee on the Housing Investment Plan for Belfast 2019-2023 and to discuss the recent Cavity Wall Insulation Research Report and the motion on Homeless Status, which had been passed by the Council on 1st July.

Accordingly, Mr. C. Bailie, Chief Executive, together with Mrs. J. Hawthorne, Assistant Director, Housing Services, Mr. R. Hawe, Senior Principal Officer, Regional Services, Mr. P. Isherwood, Director of Asset Management, and Mr. D. Moore, Director of Corporate Services, were welcomed to the meeting.

Housing Investment Plan

Mr. Bailie submitted for the Committee's consideration the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Housing Improvement Plan for Belfast for 2019-2023.

He reported that the Plan, which was the second four-year plan to be formulated, provided an overview of the housing market within the Belfast City Council area and examined cross tenure housing issues and detailed social housing investment at a local level. The Plan reflected four high level outcomes, as identified by the Housing Executive, namely, helping people to find housing support and solutions, delivering new and better homes, fostering vibrant sustainable neighbourhoods and delivering quality public services.

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He drew the Members' attention to the following key issues for Belfast, which had been identified within the Plan:

- the Housing Executive accounted for 25,653 housing units, whilst housing associations accounted for 13,500 units;
- there were 10,747 applicants on the waiting list, with 8,011 of those in housing stress;
- 5,457 households presented as homeless;
- 3,790 were accepted as homeless;
- there had been 1,998 social housing allocations in 2018/19;
- 386 new social homes had been completed in 2018/19 and work had commenced on another 344; and
- 555 new social housing units were programmed for 2019/20.

A number of other key housing issues were also identified, around land availability, the continued growth of the private rented sector, affordable housing/City centre opportunities, the impact of Brexit, chronic homelessness, bonfires/site clearance, the Tower Block Strategy and the relocation of the Belfast Regional Office to Adelaide Street.

Mr. Bailie confirmed that the total Housing Executive spend for 2018/19 had amounted to £133.29 million and reviewed the projected spend for 2019/20. He concluded by confirming that the Housing Executive would regularly monitor progress against the objectives set out within the Housing Investment Plan and would report to the Council on an annual basis.

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

- the Housing Executive was putting in place measures to increase its stock of key components and fuel in the lead up to Brexit;
- the Housing Executive had no input into the rents charged by Housing Associations;
- the Housing Executive favoured a mix of social and private housing in the City centre and recognised that there were potential issues around sewerage and water infrastructure;
- the Housing Executive had been tasked with bringing forward an implementation plan for delivering a City centre waiting list;

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- the Housing Executive was examining ways of boosting housing supply in areas of high demand;
- the Housing Executive was assessing the implications arising from the removal of welfare mitigation measures;
- cladding in Housing Executive tower blocks met the required fire safety standard and any cladding being removed during demolition works would be handled in accordance with the requisite regulations; and
- a toilet was available on the ground floor of the office in Adelaide Street office for use by the public and baby changing facilities would be provided;

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Motion – Homeless Status

The Committee was reminded that the Council, at its meeting on 1st July, had passed the following motion on Homeless Status, which had been proposed by Councillor Hargey and seconded by Councillor Walsh:

“This Council commends the #FDANODELAY campaign and recognises that people living in hostels and other temporary/emergency accommodation across our society are homeless and deserve to be legally recognised as such by having Full Duty Applicant status awarded.

The Council calls upon the NIHE’s Chief Executive to meet with an all-Party delegation to outline the measures which the NIHE will now take to accurately audit the extent of the problem regarding homeless people who are not recognised as such and what steps will be taken to remedy these oversights.”

The Democratic Services Officer reviewed the response which had been received from Mr. Bailie and reminded the Committee that it had, on 10th September, agreed that the matter should be placed on the agenda for this meeting, given that Mr. Bailie would be in attendance to address other issues.

It was reported that Ms. M. McMahon, representing the #FDAnoDelay/Homeless Not Voiceless Campaign, together with Ms. J. Carberry, had sought approval to address the Committee.

The Committee agreed to hear from Ms. McMahon and Ms. Carberry and they were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. McMahon informed the Members that the #FDAnoDelay campaign sought to ensure that people who found themselves to be homeless and living in temporary accommodation were recognised as being in priority need of housing and awarded Full

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Duty Applicant status. She reviewed the ongoing difficulties being experienced by homeless people in relation to securing accommodation and stated that Mr. Bailie's response had been unsatisfactory and had provided them with no reassurance.

Ms. Carberry explained that she had been homeless since March, 2019 and was currently living in a hostel outside the City, away from her family, friends and support network. She referred to the four criteria for assessing homelessness referred to within Mr. Bailie's response and pointed out that she, like others, had met those criteria, yet had failed to secure Full Duty Applicant status. It was only when she had lodged a human rights based complaint that her case had been reassessed and she had attained Full Duty Applicant status. She confirmed that the #FDAnoDelay campaign was neither calling for the adoption of a blanket approach to awarding Full Duty Applicant status nor for a change in legislation but was requesting that Mr. Bailie engage fully with the Council and with the campaign group to ensure that the Housing Executive met its obligations regarding homelessness.

With the permission of the Chairperson, Councillor Ferguson affirmed her support for the #FDAnoDelay/Homeless Not Voiceless Campaign and raised concerns around the legal test underpinning the homelessness scheme. She expressed her disappointment at Mr. Bailie's response to the Council's motion and at the fact that he had failed to meet with the campaign group, despite being invited on several occasions to do so.

Mr. Bailie explained that any person who was deemed to be homeless was subjected to a robust legal test, which was fairly and equally applied. He pointed out that the Housing Executive sought at all times to meet its legal obligations and stressed that no one who was entitled to Full Duty Applicant status would be refused it, providing that all of the required information was available. He added that officers would be content to meet with Ms. Carberry to determine if lessons could be learned and that he had no issue with homelessness being raised at the Committee meeting or through another forum.

Mrs. Hawthorne informed the Committee that the homelessness scheme was a statutory scheme and that it was administered by the Housing Executive, in accordance with the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. She pointed out that the Housing Executive funded a number of organisations, including Housing Rights, to support applicants through the process and those who disagreed with an outcome had a statutory right of appeal, including through the court. They could avail also of the Housing Executive's complaints process and, ultimately, could contact the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

After discussion, the Committee agreed that an all-Party delegation from the Council should still meet with the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to discuss in greater detail the issues which had been raised.

Cavity Wall Insulation Research Report 2019

Mr. Isherwood informed the Committee that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had in 2017 commissioned research into the condition of cavity wall insulation and any impact which it was having in terms of thermal efficiency and associated technical defects.

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He explained that a report on the outcome of that research had been published on 9th May, 2019 and provided an overview of its findings in relation to the 825 dwellings from the Housing Executive's social housing stock and 113 private homes which had been surveyed. He confirmed that the report had made a series of recommendations which, for social housing stock, had focused primarily on the monitoring of work, professional development training, competency and compliance, advice for residents and contracts and guarantees. Recommendations had been made also for private homes around remediation costs, property maintenance and guarantees.

Mr. Isherwood confirmed that a draft action plan, addressing the issues highlighted within the research report, would be formulated over the next two months and would be followed by an extensive consultation process. He added that, whilst the Housing Executive would be seeking to address the immediate issues highlighted within the report, there were competing priorities in the longer term.

During discussion, several Members welcomed the report. However, it was felt that there was a need to consider it in the wider context of, for example, affordable warmth, fuel poverty, health and lifestyle.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed that a meeting, involving the Council, the Department for Communities, the Department of Health, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the National Energy Association and other relevant stakeholders, be convened to consider these issues in greater detail.

(The Northern Ireland Housing Executive representatives left the meeting at this point.)

Department for Communities

Affordable Warmth Scheme

The Building Control Manager informed the Committee that the Department for Communities had confirmed that the business case to extend the Affordable Warmth Scheme to 2024 had recently been approved. He drew its attention to a draft Service Level Agreement which had been formulated for 2019/20, details of which are set out below:

- referral targets had been set at 18 per month;
- funding would be reduced from £68,780 in 2018/19 to £41,256;
- there remained no flexibility with the monthly target for referrals;
- the home improvement measures remained the same and in the same priority order of insulation, heating, windows and solid wall insulation;
- the Department for Communities had reinforced the targeted nature of the scheme, with only 20% to be self-referrals; and
- funding for the scheme remained equally split across the eleven councils.

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He pointed out that, given the current levels of funding provided , the Council could now only recruit one officer to the scheme, was not permitted to make up any shortfalls in referrals in subsequent months and , given the targeted approach, would be unable to deal with the historical increase in self-referrals as winter approached. The Council was also of the view that the equal split in funding between Councils did not reflect the levels of deprivation in Belfast or meet the desire for inclusive growth set out within the Belfast Agenda.

It was reported that two representatives of the Department for Communities, namely, Mr. D. Polley, Director of Housing Policy and Supply, and Ms. A. Hiles, Principal Officer with responsibility for Fuel Poverty and Homelessness, were in attendance to address any issues surrounding the Affordable Warmth Scheme and they were welcomed to the meeting.

In relation to the proposal to again split funding equally across all eleven councils, Mr. Polley confirmed that research had indicated that fuel poverty was more prevalent in rural areas and pointed to higher energy costs due, for example, to a lack of access to the gas network and a higher proportion of older houses with solid walls.

Ms. Hiles confirmed that the proposal not to allow referrals to be carried over to subsequent months was primarily an operational issue and reflected considerations such as programme planning, processing times and contractors' availability.

In terms of funding, Mr. Polley pointed out that the capital budget for the Affordable Warmth Scheme for 2019/20 had been set at £12 million and confirmed that officers were working to identify and bid for funding from other sources.

The Chairperson thanked Mr. Polley and Ms. Hiles for their contribution, following which the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson