

People and Communities Committee

Wednesday, 6th September, 2023

SPECIAL HYBRID MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Murray (Chairperson);
Councillors Bell, Black, Bower, R. Brooks,
Bunting, Canavan, Doherty, M. Donnelly,
R-M Donnelly, Flynn, Kelly, Magee, Maghie,
G. McAteer, McCusker, Ó Néill and Verner.

In attendance: Ms. V. Donnelly, City Protection Manager;
Mr. A. Ferguson, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. P. Conway, Regeneration Development Surveyor; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were recorded from Councillor Cobain and de Faoite.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Housing Investment Plan 2023 Annual Update

The Committee was informed that the following representatives of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) were in attendance to provide the annual update on the Housing Investment Plan for Belfast 2023-2026:

Grainia Long (Chief Executive)
Aengus Hannaway (Regional Manager)

Joining remotely:

Jennifer Hawthorne (Acting Director of Housing Services)
Andy Kennedy (Asset Management)
Leeann Vincent (Asset Management)
Liam Gunn (Regional Manager – Deputy)
Fiona McGrath (Head of Belfast Place Shaping)
Gerard Flynn (Area Manager)
David Brown (Area Manager)
Paul McCombe (Area Manager)
Aisling McDermott (Area Manager)
Theresa Maguire (Area Manager)

The NIHE Chief Executive commenced by thanking the Members for their commitment to Housing, Dhe emphasised the importance of the Community Planning Partnership and working together towards meeting the outcomes within the Belfast Agenda. Ms. Long then provided an overview of the following priorities and initiatives within the context of community planning:

- that the new four-year Belfast Agenda draft Action Plan was currently out for consultation;
- Advised that Housing Led Regeneration in the City was being explored through the Housing Led Regeneration Subgroup. Fits within the “Our Place” theme in the new draft Action Plan;
- Collaboration was supported to increase housing supply across all tenures, including through the mixed tenure approach in the Local Development Plan where 20% affordable housing would be required;
- this work included the assessment and identification of a pipeline of housing development sites, including public and privately owned land; and
- that a partnership with the private sector was critical to this work to understand barriers to housing delivery and bring forward solutions to unlock delivery.

The Chief Executive then provided a tenure breakdown of the housing across the city, She explained that the Housing Investment Plan (HIP) provided an overview of the housing market in the Belfast City Council area and reflected Community Planning priorities locally. She confirmed that 51% of homes in Belfast were owner occupied, 23% private rented and 26% social rented. She advised that, relative to other Councils, there was a lower level of owner occupation in Belfast and higher level of private rental, however, that was not unusual for cities.

She then provided an overview of Housing Executive spend across Belfast during 2022/2023. She stated that the NIHE had invested more in tenants’ homes, over the past 12 months, than in any of the previous 15 years, this demonstrated the NIHE’s commitment to improving the health and well-being of its tenants by keeping their homes safe, warm and dry.

She advised that, of the £158.5m spent, £64.58m related to ‘Investment New Build’, £26.01m had been spent on planned maintenance and improvements, £22.07m on response maintenance, and £22.48m on the Supporting People Programme. She also detailed projected spend for 2023/24, including £23.24m allocated to planned maintenance including stock improvements, £26.28m for response maintenance and £21.76 to Supporting People.

She specifically referred to the success of the retrofit programme and noted that unfortunately the funding for this programme was now coming to an end.

The Committee noted that in 2022/23 the NIHE had:

- Managed over 83,500 social homes;
- Allocated almost 5,800 homes;
- Approved 822 disabled facilities grants;

- Invested £95.05m in Planned Maintenance and Stock Improvement;
- Started 1956 new social homes;
- Paid out £470m in Housing Benefit;
- Invested £371m in new build social homes;
- Provided over 19,000 housing support places to the most vulnerable through the Supporting People Programme and invested £75.23m;
- Sold 554 homes;
- Completed 85% of repairs within target; and
- Invested approximately £55.1m in Rural Communities.

She provided an overview of the success of the Boiler Replacement Scheme, which unfortunately was also coming to an end. In terms of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, she advised that this was now a reduced programme and highlighted the changes that had been made to the administration of this scheme, with the NIHE now having sole responsibility for its delivery. This would no longer be a targeted scheme, however, eligibility and income eligibility for the scheme both remained the same.

The Members were presented with figures regarding waiting lists, which showed an increase in applications and an increase of those in housing stress. The number of allocations had fallen in recent years, broadening the gap between supply and demand, which was deemed to require urgent intervention. She stated that with the current economic climate it was predicted that this gap would increase further with many private landlords leaving the sector and she emphasised the need for new builds.

She provided an overview of the New Build/Social Housing Development Programme, as follows:

In 2022/23

- 405 new social homes completed; and
- 1,680 new social homes under construction at end of March 2023.

Future Housing Requirements

- 7,984 new social housing units would be needed over the next five years.
- 2023/26 SHDP – 1,985 (gross) new social housing units were programmed.

5 Year SHDP Performance

- 2,963 starts was the SG target for Belfast during the 5-year period.
- 2,157 starts were achieved against the target.
- Resulting in 73% of the SG Target being achieved.

Ms. Long reported on the figures for temporary accommodation costs and those presenting as homeless, in the period 2022/23, advising that the NIHE now had 10,000 placements annually in temporary accommodation which had grown rapidly since the onset of the pandemic. She emphasised that chronic homelessness was unprecedented within Belfast and advised that it was a critical priority for the NIHE which was working closely with the other various statutory stakeholders, including the Council, to try and address the ongoing issues.

The following points were highlighted as key housing issues within Belfast:

- 4605 placements in temporary accommodation. Increased reliance on non-standard accommodation, including hotels and Bed and Breakfasts;
- 12,175 Total applicants on Waiting List for Belfast at March 2023, with 9,531 (78.3%) in housing stress;
- Just over 1,580 social housing allocations in 2022/23. An identified need for new 7,982 new social units over the next five years;
- Investment requirement of £123k per dwelling or £4k per annum; and
- Challenges with the delivery of planned and response maintenance including major adaptations.

She detailed the Key Housing Opportunities, as follows:

- Across Northern Ireland, the NIHE had completed more than 1300 retrofits of its existing stock;
- Increased investment in stock, provided positive impacts for local supply chains;
- Regionally, £250m in new work had received approval and was commencing in Autumn 2023;
- New Modern Methods of Construction Pilot, a significant opportunity;
- Progress ongoing to enable the NIHE to borrow in order to invest in its stock and add to new supply; and
- Strategic partnerships on homelessness, for example, 'Homewards'; systems change.

In conclusion, the Chief Executive emphasised the importance of the Community Planning Partnership and working together towards meeting the housing outcomes within the Belfast Agenda. She advised that she Chaired the Housing Led Regeneration Group, which specifically focused on identifying the right land in the right location to satisfy housing need with other public sector partners. She advised that this group had been working closely at identifying and overcoming barriers to use as levers to bring forward other public sector lands, stating that she was hopeful that a further update, detailing the top 10/15 sites that had been identified across DfC, NIHE and BCC sites, would be available in the Autumn, with progress to be made as a matter of urgency. In addition, the Regeneration Group was also considering the stumbling blocks that were preventing other organisations getting involved and using it to try and encourage other public partners to sign up to the initiative.

Several of the Members spoke positively about the working relationships between the Council and the NIHE staff, however, highlighted the demands and pressures that staff vacancies were putting on the service.

A Member noted the success of the retro fit programme and expressed disappointment that it was ending.

In terms of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, the Chief Executive reiterated that the eligibility for the scheme had not changed, and she undertook to provide a written update to Members on the detail of the Scheme.

During discussion a Member highlighted that a demand existed for smaller units as well as family homes. She stated that when Place Shaping were considering housing schemes it was not just about addressing housing need but also building communities.

The Members also discussed the growing housing need, particularly among young families and single people, along with issues associated with poor housing standards. They also discussed the high cost of private rentals in specific areas of the city now often making it impossible for people to private rent in some areas. During discussion it was noted that single persons represented 46% of the waiting list in housing stress, this was a significant % of the overall figures.

A Member sought the latent demand figures for each Common Landlord Area, stating that she did not feel that the NIHE accurately recorded the data for people's preferential area. She cited East Belfast as an example, with residents of Tullycarnet and the Tower Blocks having priority over other applicants in this area, this often resulted in people having to choose another area if they wished to be housed quicker, however, their preferential area would not actually be recorded as they 'opted' to be housed elsewhere. She stated that, in terms of shaping places, this data would be crucial to understanding the need for each of the Common Landlord Areas.

The NIHE representative confirmed that a pilot of latent demand had been successful in the Sandy Row area.

Detailed discussion ensued in regard to housing need and demand and it was agreed that a separate workshop would be convened with the NIHE and Committee Members to discuss this specific matter.

In response to several others issues which had been raised during discussion, the representatives confirmed:

- that the NIHE continued to prioritise work with a range of partners to secure additional temporary accommodation provision, with particular consideration for the needs of those with addiction.
- that the NIHE rents needed to be affordable and sustainable for both the tenant and landlord (NIHE), ensuring the correct balance for both;
- the paving of gardens was not usually considered but the NIHE officer undertook to discuss the specific case with the Member;

- that officers were aware of the Build Shankill initiative and knew of the desire to redevelop the area with social housing;
- the NIHE had a policy on Electric Vehicle Charging Points and agreed to forward this for circulation to the Members;
- the Housing Executive was committed to delivering housing across all housing tenures and confirmed the LDP's 20% affordable housing policy;
- the powers that the NIHE had to bring vacant/dilapidated properties back into use and also noted the age of a lot of the current stock;
- in terms of the large number of vacant houses throughout the City, that the NIHE relied on landlord single let properties being presented for rental; and
- that the NIHE Chief Executive had scheduled a meeting with the Council's Chief Executive to discuss the potential loss of housing providers in the market due to the impact of HMO legislation on short-term accommodation.

The Chief Executive highlighted the budget constraints for the next financial year and the impact this would have on the investment into additional homes, specifically a 25% reduction in capital funding for new build housing. She reported that, historically, the NIHE would seek to deliver circa 2,000 new starts on site, but with this reduction to the programme, realistically this would equate to 1,500 per year. This was on the back of waiting lists increasing by approximately 19%, therefore, people would inevitably have to wait longer to access a new home.

She detailed that there was a need for 7,984 new homes over the next 5 years with 1,985 homes programmed, this would require additional capital funding to support as well as ensuring that housing associations had the capacity to deliver this need, this would obviously only add to the housing stress situation.

Detailed discussion ensued regarding homelessness, the Members were advised that the level of demand was unprecedented and that the NIHE staff were seeking to identify additional temporary accommodation from every source possible. Those efforts, however, were set against circumstances in which accessing temporary accommodation options was more difficult than ever. This was in part due to demand in the private rented sector, an option which via single lets had traditionally provided a large proportion of the temporary accommodation portfolio. Unfortunately, due to the numbers of those presenting, the NIHE was now having to spend most of the homelessness budget in providing temporary accommodation (£9.2m out of a total £23.71m across the region), as opposed to spending this money on tackling homelessness.

During discussion the Members highlighted the lack of suitable accommodation for those who live with an addiction.

The Chief Executive advised that officers at both operational and strategic levels continued to explore options to increase provision across a range of potential types of temporary accommodation. In addition, the NIHE's Complex Lives Team was working closely with accommodation partners to create planned and supported moves on options for those in temporary accommodation to encourage turnover and create space within low threshold accommodation providers. Partners were committed to supporting the further development and expansion of this model.

The Members were also advised that the Housing Executive could only discharge its statutory duty to those who had FDA via the acceptance of a social rented property or refusal of two reasonable offers. She detailed that in cases which had yet to have their duty discharged, the NIHE would continue to meet its statutory duty via the provision of temporary accommodation.

The Chief Executive concluded by advising the Members that every effort was being made to source additional temporary accommodation.

The Chairperson thanked the NIHE representatives for attending.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed to convene a workshop to further consider housing supply and demand.

Chairperson