

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 2nd November, 2021

SPECIAL HYBRID MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Cobain (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Baker, Black, Bunting, Michael Collins, Corr,
de Faoite, Flynn, Garrett, Magee, McAteer, McCusker,
Newton, Smyth and Verner.

In attendance: Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An Apology was recorded on behalf of Councillor Kelly.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

Update on JMC Contract

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 meeting commenced with the Committee being informed of the recent liquidation of JMC Mechanical and Construction Ltd. The Company had been the repairs contractor for NIHE tenants in the Lisburn and Castlereagh area and the contractor for a number of improvement schemes across Lisburn and Castlereagh and the Belfast area.

The Regional Manager advised that from notification of the collapse, on Monday 11th October, the Housing Executive’s immediate aim had been to ensure minimal disruption to services for tenants and to ensure that the maintenance works which had started were completed in as timely a manner as possible.

She reported that the response maintenance emergencies for the Lisburn and Castlereagh Area (LCA) had been picked up through the NIHE’s direct labour section, that usually covered the north and west of the City. To date, over 300 emergency response jobs had been carried out in the LCA and this had obviously impacted the Belfast maintenance work schedule. She further advised that she was pleased to report that a new maintenance contract was pending, prior to the liquidation JMC had been unsuccessful in the award of the new tender, and a new contractor, Greenview, was due to commence on 1st December and, thankfully, the company had agreed to advance its start date to the second week of November.

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She advised that JMC had also been the contractor for over 1200 properties in Belfast for planned maintenance works, most had not commenced, but works had started on 23 properties throughout east and west Belfast, many of the homes had been left without bathrooms and kitchens. She continued that thankfully the Housing Executive's Direct Labour Teams had commenced on site the very next day as many of the families had no cooking or bathroom facilities and within a fortnight most of the works had been completed.

The Committee was advised that the main priority of the NIHE at present was the appointment of a contractor to ensure the delivery of planned maintenance works to the remaining 1200 properties in Belfast (kitchens and bathrooms), with these works having been due to start and finish before the end of the financial year 2021/22. The NIHE representative advised that officers were currently in discussions and negotiations with adjacent contractors to see if they would be willing to pick up some of this workstream, she undertook to keep the Members updated and to also to forward a list of the areas affected.

During discussion it was noted that the building industry was currently experiencing unprecedented rises in material costs and also difficulty in accessing materials. The Regional Manager advised that, to address the rise in material costs, the NIHE, along with other public sector organisations, had agreed an uplift to its contractors which had been subsidised by the Department for Communities.

A number of the Members thanked the representative for the Housing Executive's proactive approach in addressing the problems that had arisen as a result of the liquidation.

Noted.

Update on New Build (Social Housing Development Programme)

The Committee was advised that the proposed new build scheme was one of the largest that the NIHE had undertaken in quite a while.

The Head of Place Shaping Belfast advised the Members that the update report on the New Build Programme for the period 2021/22 had been circulated with the agenda and she drew their attention to the following highlights within the scheme:

- social housing completions 2021/22 (78 units completed to-date, commencing April 2021);
- social housing units under construction currently (boosted by Glenmona) (1,170 units); and
- 1,285 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. She also referred to the New Lodge Longstreet major urban renewal project that had recently been announced and undertook to update the Members as the scheme progressed.

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In response to a Member's question regarding the ongoing antisocial activity at Ross Street, the Regional Manager advised that, due to the presence of asbestos, it was unlikely that works on the site would commence prior to the end of November. She added that its presence also meant that 24 hour security was not possible. She assured the Members that the works to remove the asbestos were ongoing and, if possible, the start date would be accelerated and that in the meantime the Housing Executive would try to secure the site as best as it could.

The representative concluded by thanking the Members for their ongoing work on the ground to try and help to alleviate the problems.

Noted.

Update on Homelessness in Belfast

Mr. O'Kane commenced by advising that the numbers presenting as homeless had fallen during the initial stages of the pandemic, but unfortunately at the end of September homelessness numbers had started to rise again. He reported that there had been a 11% increase in homeless presenters during the first 6 months of this year and that demand was continuing to rise. He advised that the reasons for people presenting continued to be the same, and he anticipated that the numbers of people needing placed in temporary accommodation would exceed that of last year. He referred to the difficulties still faced in placing people in temporary accommodation as a result of reduced capacity due to Covid restrictions (guidance from Public Health Agency (PHA) in regard to social distancing) which had resulted in a number of voluntary sector hostels operating well below capacity. He advised that discussions regarding updating the current guidelines were ongoing but currently many of the restrictions on bedspaces remained.

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 the supply of approximately 400 lets within the private rental sector. However, he reported that this approach had also become much more challenging as both the demand for such properties and the rental price had increased significantly, with the supply of rental properties now significantly being outstripped by demand.

The representative also referred to the staffing pressures within the voluntary sector in terms of difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff which was also impacting the running of voluntary hostels.

The Members were advised of the new telephone system that had been installed in May 2021 and noted that this had been helpful as the level of calls had risen significantly.

Mr. O'Kane referred to the important role of the Council and its various Partners on the work of the Complex Lives Approach initiative, explaining that this specifically aimed to tackle the many addiction and mental health issues using an inter-agency and voluntary approach. This was a collaborative project with the NIHE, Public Health Authority, the Health and Social Care Board, Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, along with voluntary agencies, and reported that that it was working well and he drew specific reference to the usefulness of the weekly multi-agency meeting. The organisations were endeavouring to work together to try and ensure that the necessary arrangements were in

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place, however, he stated that he anticipated that the next six months (winter pressures) would be an extremely challenging period.

Mr. O’Kane stated that whilst there was currently a homelessness crisis the statutory agencies emphasis continued to be on prevention and to this end the NIHE had recently approved just over 1 million of Homelessness Prevention Funding. This funding would help to provide financial assistance to voluntary and community sector organisations to aid those individuals who had been particularly affected during the pandemic. Emergency accommodation was not a long-term solution and the statutory organisations priority was to prevent someone becoming homeless. 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.

The representative also advised that the Housing Executive was working very closely with the Home Office in terms of housing asylum seekers.

The Committee was advised that the Housing Executive had just approved its new Homelessness Strategy, and this would be being circulated for consultation in the near future.

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

Chairperson