

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 3rd September, 2024

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Brooks (Chairperson);
Councillors Abernethy, Black, Bower,
Bunting, Doherty, M. Donnelly, R-M Donnelly,
Flynn, Garrett, Magee, Maghie, McKeown and Verner.

In attendance: Mr. D. Bone, City Services Manager;
Ms. P. Conway, Development Manager; and
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were recorded from Councillors Bradley, Bell, Cobain, Canavan, Maskey and I. McLaughlin.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Housing Supply and Demand

It was agreed that Party Groups would contact Mr. L. Gunn, Regional Manager, directly should they wish to arrange meetings with their Party and the NIHE to discuss housing need and demand with the Belfast Housing Solutions Team

Housing Investment Plan 2024 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)
Liam Gunn (Regional Manager)
John Gillespie (Belfast Programme Manager)

Joining remotely:

Andy Kennedy (Asset Management)
Fiona McGrath (Head of Belfast Place Shaping)
Paul McCombe (Area Manager)
Theresa Maguire (Housing Manager)
Anthony McKenna (Housing Manager)
Patricia Rice (Housing Solutions)

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The NIHE Chief Executive commenced by thanking the Members for their commitment to Housing, she emphasised the importance of the Community Planning Partnership and working together towards meeting the outcomes within the Belfast Agenda 2024 - 2028. Ms. Long then provided an overview of the following priorities and initiatives within the context of community planning:

- the NIHE continued to lead the various actions across the theme “Our Place” in the 2024-2028 Action Plan via Housing-led Regeneration;
- work continues with the Housing Led Regeneration Subgroup that had been established to support collaboration to increase housing supply across all tenures; and
- the NIHE was continuing to work with its statutory partners, the Council and DfC to look at public sector sites and give consideration to Place Making approaches.

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 outlined the tenure breakdown of the 149,210 households in the city with 51% of these homes 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 2023/2024. She advised that, of the £347.33m spent, £107.52m related to ‘Investment New Build’, £25.24m had been spent on planned maintenance and improvements, £30.77m on response maintenance, and £23.29m on the Supporting People Programme, which she added was no longer available in the United Kingdom. She also advised that £8.04m had been spent on temporary accommodation with this figure just about meeting the growth and scale of this demand. She also detailed projected spend for 2024/25, including £37.59m allocated to planned maintenance including stock improvements, £31.60m for response maintenance and £23.74 to Supporting People.

The Committee noted that in 2023/24 the NIHE had:

- Managed over 83,000 social homes;
- Allocated almost 5,700 homes;
- Approved 805 disabled facilities grants;
- Invested £83.88 in Planned Maintenance and Stock Improvement;
- Started 1508 new social homes;
- Paid out £470m in Housing Benefit;
- Invested £304.3m in new build social homes;
- Provided over 19,000 housing support places to the most vulnerable through the Supporting People Programme and invested £788.75;
- Sold 355 homes;
- Completed 85.2% of repairs within target; and
- Invested approximately £57.9m in Rural Communities.

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The Members were presented with figures regarding waiting lists, which again unfortunately showed an increase in applications and an increase of those in housing stress. She reported that since the covid pandemic the number of allocations had fallen in recent years, broadening the gap between supply and demand, which was deemed to require urgent intervention. She advised that, as predicted last year, this gap had increased 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 2023/24

- 419 new social homes completed;
- 1,756 new social homes under construction at end of March 2024; and
- Housing Executive pilot build of 6 new homes at been completed at Sunningdale.

Future Housing Requirements

- 8,551 new social housing units would be needed over the next five years; and
- 2023/26 SHDP – 2,084 (gross) new social housing units were programmed.

3 Year SHDP Performance

- 1,729 starts was the SG target for Belfast during the 3-year period;
- 1,222 starts had been achieved against the target; and
- Resulting in 507 fewer starts against the SG Target.

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

- 11,368 placements in temporary accommodation. Increased reliance on non-standard accommodation, including hotels and Bed and Breakfasts;
- 12,726 applicants on Waiting List for Belfast City District area at March 2024, with 10,307 (80%) in housing stress;
- Just over 1,647 social housing allocations in 2023/24. An identified need for 8,551 new social units over the next five years;
- Projected 30-year NIHE stock investment requirement of £2,985.8 million;
- Challenges with the delivery of planned and response maintenance including major adaptations; and
- Reduced budget for Affordable Warmth Scheme which supports fuel poverty households in the private sector.

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She detailed the Key Housing Opportunities, as follows:

- Across Northern Ireland, the NIHE had recently completed a programme of 'fabric first' retrofits in 1,400 of its homes, had had commenced a programme of 300 – 400 low carbon heating installations;
- Increased investment in stock, provided positive impacts for local supply chains;
- 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;
- Supporting local communities through its Community Investment grants;
- New Procurement Legislation in October which should lead to greater agility, efficiency and transparency in procurement; and
- Strategic partnerships on homelessness, e.g. 'Homewards'; system change.

Ms. Long reported on the figures for temporary accommodation costs and those presenting as homeless, in the period 2023/24, with the 11,368 placements provided representing a 151% increase demand from 4,527 placements in 2019/20. She explained that this increase in demand had resulted in significant additional funding pressures with a spend of £34.4m required to meet the statutory duties for temporary accommodation in 2023/24. 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 Members discussed the fragile nature of temporary accommodation and the need to try and ensure that families did not end up in nonstandard accommodation (for example, hotels). The Chief Executive stated that unfortunately, on occasions, there was no alternative but assured the Members that when this happened every other avenue had been explored. She reported that currently there was 242 placements in nonstandard accommodation in the Belfast area, of which 22 placements needed a 3-bed requirement and 16 needed a 4 plus bed requirement. She advised that the NIHE continued to prioritise work with a range of partners to secure additional temporary accommodation provision and also to mitigate the issues for families, including liaison with both the Education and Health Authorities.

Several of the Members spoke positively about the working relationships between the Council and the NIHE staff and specifically commended the work of the Housing Solutions Team advising that the new dedicated email system had worked well.

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During discussion a Member highlighted that demand also existed for smaller units for single people as well as family homes. She also referred to the need to build communal areas for people who did not have access to gardens and to help build communities amongst residents.

The growing housing crisis particularly among young families and single people was also discussed, during which, a Member referred to the need for the evidence required for single fathers who had shared custody of their children to be consistent with that of single mothers. The Regional Manager undertook to raise this specific matter with the Housing Solutions Team.

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

- that it would forward information on tenancy succession to Elected Members to enable them to share this with their constituents to help explain the process;
- that the cost of requested adaptations to properties was often prohibitive due to the cost of the build works, often coming in more expensive than the value of the property, and therefore not viable;
- that it would investigate further the specific requirements for Occupational Therapist and Architects for requested adaptations;
- that officers would consider and discuss with the NIHE Chief Executive further a suggestion previously put forward to the Housing Executive by Councillor Magee in regard to a joint NIHE, BCC community initiative for improving alleyways and go back to him directly;
- that the NIHE would look at mapping alleyways under its ownership;
- that, in terms of tower blocks, it would liaise directly with Councillor Bunting in regard to when building works should be scheduled to commence on new social housing in these areas;
- that where there was vacant homes it was likely that these were privately owned as the NIHE endeavored to ensure that its homes were turned around within 21 working days, although with contractor challenges this was not always possible;
- that the cavity wall pilot had been delayed until the start of 2025 and officers undertook to forward more details when available;
- that there was still issues with grounds maintenance in some areas, however, a new contractor had been appointed and it was hoped that these

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issues would start to resolve in due course and encouraged the Members to log any areas where they had concerns;

- that they would forward a breakdown of the areas known as 'Inner, Mid and Outer areas' for the Members' information; and
- that officers were aware and shared the concern of the Members regarding the problems with NI Water and it would continue to meet to discuss design led solutions on a case-by-case basis;

The Chairperson thanked the NIHE representatives for attending and the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson