

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 3rd August, 2021

SPECIAL MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Cobain (Chairperson);
Councillors Baker, Black, Bunting,
Michael Collins, Corr, de Faoite, Magee,
McAteer, McCusker, Mulholland, Pankhurst,
Smyth and Verner.

Also attended: Councillor Kyle.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Ms. V. Brown, City Services Manager;
Mrs. S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer; and
Ms. K. McCrum, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported on behalf of Councillors Flynn, M. Kelly, McReynolds and Newton.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were recorded.

Housing Investment Plan 2021 Annual Update

The Committee was informed that representatives of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) were in attendance to provide the second annual update on the Housing Investment Plan for Belfast 2019-2023, as well as an update on their Revitalisation Programme.

Accordingly, Ms. G. Long, Chief Executive, together with Ms. E. Newberry, Assistant Director Land and Strategic Regeneration, Mrs. J. Hawthorne, Regional Manager Belfast, Ms. F. McGrath, Head of Place Shaping Belfast, Mr. P. Reid, Land and Housing Analytics Manager, Mr. K. Boyle, Housing Analytics Manager, Mr. B. O'Kane, Senior Principal Officer, Mr. P. Kelly and Mr. P. McCombe, Area Managers, and, Mr. A. McKenna, Assistant Manager, were welcomed to the meeting.

The Chief Executive provided an overview of Housing Executive spend across Belfast during 2020/2021, detailing that, of the £177.6m spent, £116.7m related to 'Investment New Build', £18.08m had been spent on planned maintenance and improvements, £15.41m on response maintenance, and £20.62m on the Supporting People Programme. She also detailed projected spend for 2021/22, including £24.18m allocated to planned maintenance, £18.11m for response maintenance, £21.16 to Supporting People, and £13.46m for stock improvements. The significant challenges in accessing material supply chains and labour

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shortages were touched upon, and the Members were advised that the Housing Executive stock in Belfast was 25,407 homes.

The following priorities from within the NIHE 2021/2022 Business Plan were highlighted as of interest to the Members of the Committee:

- Working with the Department for Communities to revitalise the Housing Executive;
- Managing and maintaining over 85,000 homes;
- Providing £72.8m Supporting People funding for 19,000+ housing support places;
- Delivering the Homelessness Strategy actions to find housing solutions for those facing homelessness;
- Planning and managing a programme to increase the supply of new social homes with 1,900 starts and 1,400 completions;
- Investing £216m to improve tenants' homes;
- Delivering 11 Housing Investment Plans and contributing to Community Planning Partnerships to help create vibrant sustainable communities;
- Developing a new Climate Change Strategy to reduce carbon emissions, helping to sustain the environment for future generations;
- Launching a new apprenticeship learning scheme and introducing social clauses into contracts to provide local skills and employment;
- Processing Housing benefit applications to help tenants in both the public and private sector to meet their housing costs (in 2020/21 £532.7m was paid out).

In addition, an overview of the work undertaken as part of the Covid-19 recovery was provided, including the 'Everyone In' approach which supported rough sleepers, the acquisition of temporary accommodation, and bringing back into use void properties.

The Chief Executive 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 55% of homes in Belfast were owner occupied, 19% private rented and 27% social rented, with a growth in the private rented sector seen in recent decades, in line with other cities.

The Members were presented with figures regarding waiting lists, which showed an increase in applications and those in housing stress, whilst the number of allocations had fallen in recent years, broadening the gap between supply and demand, which was deemed to require urgent intervention.

Ms. Long reported an increase in those presenting as homeless, with a high level of acceptance (63%), with an increase in younger people, single females and those with higher levels of complex needs. She added that the growth in use of temporary accommodation and the length of time that people were required to stay there was unsustainable.

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

- Ensuring that housing drives sustainable and inclusive growth and meets the city's net zero ambitions;

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- Investing in existing housing stock to increase health and wellbeing and help reduce inequalities, including retrofitting and energy efficiency;
- An ageing population – 18% of population 65+ by 2029;
- Responding to gap between supply and demand;
- Welfare Reform – 13,856 NIHE tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit and 5,360 NIHE tenants in receipt of Housing Cost element of Universal Credit at March 2021;
- The long term impact of Covid-19 on demand for services.

The Members of the Committee were advised that, in Belfast, 303 new social homes had been completed during 2020/2021 and a further 1,464 homes were on-site, meeting the targets for both Northern Ireland and Belfast despite the challenges experienced. Ms. Long commented on the extensive developments programmed for the years ahead and underlined the need to ensure that planning applications were brought in a timely manner. She also provided an update on the Tower Blocks Strategy.

In conclusion, the Chief Executive emphasised the importance of the Community Planning partnership and working together towards meeting the outcomes within the Belfast Agenda. She added that progress against the HIP outcomes would be regularly monitored and reported on annually.

A number of the Members spoke positively about working relationships with proactive NIHE staff, but questioned how Community Planning linkages between the Council and Housing Executive could be improved at a more operational level, as well as how visibility within communities could be increased alongside a more person-centred approach. Questions were also posed regarding 40-day exclusions for those who turned down housing, and, what policies existed to prevent homelessness.

The Chief Executive suggested that it may be useful for her to more clearly set out and articulate how their day-to-day business was delivering on the outcomes of the Belfast Agenda, and agreed to look at how this could be done. The Assistant Director of Land and Strategic Regeneration added that the HIP had been aligned with the Belfast Agenda at a strategic level and that good working relationships existed between NIHE and the Council's Community Planning Officers.

The representatives suggested that, whilst they were one of the largest landlords in Europe, they continued to have a very local approach and were committed to better outcomes for their tenants. The Chief Executive commented that the current demand for temporary accommodation was unprecedented and so difficult decisions were having to be made. In terms of prevention, she advised of the investment through the Supporting People Programme which was a key area of focus. The Regional Manager for Belfast provided details regarding communication routes that had been improved recently and undertook to reflect on the comments made and look at areas for improvement.

Other issues raised during discussion included queries about mixed tenure housing, the percentage set aside for affordable housing within large developments and the reasons behind the increase in single people presenting as homeless. The need to work with other landowners to deliver local solutions, and keep tenants involved in decisions regarding the Tower Block Strategy were also raised.

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Representatives from the Housing Executive advised that the level of those presenting with complex needs, particularly amongst young people, was growing, involving a combination of mental and physical ill health and addiction. The work being undertaken to support young people into secure accommodation and reintroduce them to employment and training opportunities, alongside other partners, was outlined.

The Chief Executive emphasised their view that all developments should contain a 20% allocation of social and affordable housing and agreed that partnership working was necessary with other landowners to improve sites. The Assistant Director of Land and Strategic Regeneration provided examples of the opportunities that Community Planning had presented at a development level and undertook to explore similar partnership working at sites prior to that stage.

Discussion took place regarding growing housing needs, particularly among young families, and poor housing standards, as well as instances of the unsuitable allocation of tenancies. Examples of social problems, such as drug and alcohol misuse, and their destabilising effect, were also raised.

The Assistant Director of Land and Strategic Regeneration provided details about ongoing work to look at need verses land availability in the areas raised. The policies for dealing with anti-social behaviour were outlined, as were schemes to address the aging housing stock in South and East Belfast.

In response to a query as to the impact of material supply issues, Ms. Long reiterated her concerns regarding the rising costs of materials and the impact that it could have on building, but assured the Members that proactive contract management was in place.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to note the update provided.

Housing Executive's Revitalisation Programme (Verbal Update)

Ms. Long advised the Members of the Committee that the Housing Executive's Revitalisation Programme had been launched by the Minister for Communities in November, 2020, as part of a larger set of policy announcements, with the core goal of enabling NIHE to borrow to fund sustainable investment in existing stock and to enable it to build new housing.

She added that the Programme had a strong focus on co-design and engagement with tenants and the wider community and was vital to meet the levels of challenge outlined as part of the HIP Update. She explained that their immediate priority was to prepare an Outline Business Case determining what level of investment was required, alongside a Landlord Business Plan, Engagement and Communications Plan, and to develop governance procedures which would involve tenants. She confirmed that the nature of the borrowing was not for NIHE to determine but would be a decision for the Minister.

A Member of the Committee raised concerns regarding the future plans, in particular, an anticipated move towards privatisation. In response to a question as to whether tenants would be given a say about the future status of NIHE, specifically, giving up its status as a

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landlord, the Chief Executive confirmed that the Housing Executive did not have a preferred model and that the nature of borrowing would be a ministerial decision, as would the role of tenants. She did however reiterate that the NIHE was a tenant centred organisation and undertook to provide ongoing updates to the Council regarding the Programme.

The Members of the Committee recommended that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to note the update provided.

Chairperson