

# Council

## SPECIAL MEETING OF BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

Held remotely, via Microsoft Teams, on  
Monday, 17th January, 2022 at 4.00 p.m., pursuant to notice.

Members present: The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor;  
(Councillor Nicholl) (Chairperson);  
The Deputy Lord Mayor, (Alderman Haire);  
Aldermen Dorrian, Kingston,  
Rodgers and Sandford; and Councillors Baker,  
Beattie, Black, Bradley, Brooks, Bunting, Canavan,  
Carson, Cobain, Matt Collins, Michael Collins, Corr,  
de Faoite, Donnelly, Ferguson, Flynn, Garrett,  
Gormley, Groogan, Heading, Howard, Hussey,  
Hutchinson, M. Kelly, T. Kelly, Lyons, Magee,  
Magennis, Maskey, McAllister, McAteer, McCabe,  
McCullough, McDonough-Brown, McKeown,  
McLaughlin, McMullan, McReynolds, Mulholland,  
Murphy, O'Hara, Pankhurst, Smyth, Spratt, Verner  
and Walsh.

### **Summons**

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted the summons convening the meeting.

### **Apologies**

Apologies for inability to attend were reported for Alderman Copeland and Councillors Hanvey and Long.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were reported.

### **Request for Deputation**

The Deputy Chief Executive informed the Council that a request had been received from Ms. E. McCann, Support Worker, Regina Coeli House, Ms. C. Kingham, Senior Support Worker, Regina Coeli House, and Ms. S. Fitzgerald, from Unite the Union, to address the Council in advance of the motion on the proposed closure of Regina Coeli Hostel, which was being proposed by Councillor McCusker.

The Council approved the request and the deputation was welcomed to the meeting.

Ms. McCann informed the Council that she had been a Support Worker at Regina Coeli House for five years, that her mother had been a volunteer for 20 years, and that she spent many hours there since she had been ten years old. She stated that she and her colleagues were fully committed to supporting the women who reside at the hostel and that it had been inspiring to see those women grow stronger and rebuild their

**Special Meeting of Council,  
Monday, 17th January, 2022**

confidence to go back into society following the circumstances which had led to them seeking refuge at the hostel.

She reported that Regina Coeli House provided a safe, secure and calm environment for women, and was vital in providing support following traumas such as domestic abuse, addiction, mental health issues, complex needs and assisting them with their individual roads to recovery.

She informed the Members that provision of women only hostels should be increased due to a sharp rise in domestic abuse and femicide and stated that herself, Ms. Kingham, the staff and residents, were calling upon the Council for support as they continued their sit-in to save Regina Coeli House.

Ms. Fitzgerald pointed out that the recent murder of Ms. Aisling Murphy had given rise to mass mobilisations to stand collectively as a society against gender violence and harassment. She added that Ms. Kingham, Ms. McCann and their colleagues had taken a brave and selfless stand against the decision to close the only hostel of its kind in Northern Ireland.

She highlighted that the campaign to save the hostel was supported by the entire trade union movement, women's groups, political groups and by the local community where the hostel was based and that she was supporting her members in addressing their concerns with the management committee.

She added that Unite the Union understood that the property was owned by the Legion of Mary and that if the organisation could no longer run or manage the upkeep of the building, it should hand the building over to an organisation that could, such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, supported by the Minister for Communities.

Several Members voiced their support of staff of Regina Coeli House and pointed out the importance of the facility and its impact on the many women who had used the facility.

**Motion**

**Proposed Closure of Regina Coeli Hostel**

In accordance with the notice on the agenda, Councillor McCusker proposed:

"This Council notes the proposed plan by the owners of Regina Coeli to close the hostel and reduce the availability of accommodation for homeless women in the City of Belfast.

This Council therefore calls upon Department of Communities Minister, the NIHE, as a matter of urgency, to meet with the owners and management Committee of Regina Coeli hostel to discuss the withdrawal of this service. This meeting will also include staff, their representatives, and Councillors about its planned closure.

**Special Meeting of Council,  
Monday, 17th January, 2022**

The meeting will discuss all options on how to secure the future of this facility as accommodation for homeless and vulnerable women in the City of Belfast.”

The motion was seconded by Councillor Ferguson.

**Amendment**

Moved by Councillor McLoughlin,  
Seconded by Councillor Beattie,

That the motion standing in the name of Councillor McCusker and seconded by Councillor Ferguson be amended as follows:

To delete the wording:

*“This Council therefore calls upon Department of Communities Minister, the NIHE, as a matter of urgency , to meet with the owners and management Committee of Regina Coeli hostel to discuss the withdrawal of this service. This meeting will also include staff, their representatives, and Councillors about its planned closure.”*

And replace it with the following:

*“This Council is disappointed and angered by the lack of response by the site owners the Legion of Mary to meet with staff, union representatives, elected members and DfC officials to try and resolve this issue.*

*This council believes that if the Legion of Mary continues not to live up to its own values and continues to ignore those trying to find solutions then it’s the ultimate responsibility of the Diocese of Down and Connor to step in.*

*Therefore this council will seek an urgent meeting of all interested Elected officials across the city, NIHE/DFC officials, management committee of Regina Coeli, Bishop of Down and Connor and the Legion of Mary.”*

The motion, as amended, therefore reads:

*“This Council notes at the proposed plan by the owners of Regina Coeli to close the hostel and reduce the availability of accommodation for homeless women in the City of Belfast.*

***This Council is disappointed and angered by the lack of response by the site owners the Legion of Mary to meet with staff, union representatives, elected members and DfC officials to try and resolve this issue.***

**Special Meeting of Council,  
Monday, 17th January, 2022**

***This Council believes that if the Legion of Mary continues not to live up to its own values and continues to ignore those trying to find solutions then it's the ultimate responsibility of the Diocese of Down and Connor to step in.***

***Therefore, this Council will seek an urgent meeting of all interested Elected officials across the city, NIHE/DFC officials, management committee of Regina Coeli, Bishop of Down and Connor and the Legion of Mary.***

*The meeting will discuss all options on how to secure the future of this facility as accommodation for homeless and vulnerable women in the City of Belfast."*

Councillor McCusker acceded to the proposed amendment and to a further request from Alderman Kingston, that the amended proposal, standing in the name of Councillor McCusker, seconded by Councillor Ferguson, would include a specific reference to the Minister for Communities. The proposal, as amended, therefore reads:

*"This Council notes at the proposed plan by the owners of Regina Coeli to close the hostel and reduce the availability of accommodation for homeless women in the City of Belfast.*

*This Council is disappointed and angered by the lack of response by the site owners the Legion of Mary to meet with staff, union representatives, elected members and the **Minister for Communities** to try and resolve this issue.*

*This council believes that if the Legion of Mary continues not to live up to its own values and continues to ignore those trying to find solutions then it's the ultimate responsibility of the Diocese of Down and Connor to step in.*

*Therefore, this council will seek an urgent meeting of all interested Elected officials across the city, the **Minister for Communities**, NIHE/DFC officials, management committee of Regina Coeli, Bishop of Down and Connor and the Legion of Mary.*

*The meeting will discuss all options on how to secure the future of this facility as accommodation for homeless and vulnerable women in the City of Belfast."*

**Further Amendment**

Moved by Councillor Groogan  
Seconded by Councillor Smith

That the motion standing in the name of Councillor McCusker and seconded by Councillor Ferguson be amended as follows:

**Special Meeting of Council,  
Monday, 17th January, 2022**

To remove everything after the first sentence and replace it with:

*“We recognise the difficulty and anxiety this situation is causing for staff and the current residents of Regina Coeli House. This Council calls upon the Minister for Communities and the NIHE to meet with the staff and their representatives as a matter of urgency to help secure alternative employment for them.*

*This Council, however, regrets that hostel accommodation provided by an external organisation has been one of the only options for women who find themselves homeless until now. We are deeply concerned about the NIHE’s over-reliance on hostels, largely provided by 3rd parties, to discharge their legal duty to those in need of emergency housing. The impact of hostel accommodation on anyone who finds themselves in this situation can be serious and long-lasting and this is compounded by the fact that it is very rarely a short-term placement.*

*As such, this Council urges the Minister for Communities and the NIHE to provide housing to those women who are currently reliant on Regina Coeli and ensure they get the wrap-around support that they need at this time. We also call on them to use this situation to urgently move to a Housing First model as a more appropriate and effective model for responding to homelessness, while securing emergency accommodation facilities specifically for women and families in Belfast on an interim basis until this model is fully operational.”*

The motion, as amended, therefore reads:

*“This Council notes the proposed plan by the owners of Regina Coeli to close the hostel and reduce the availability of accommodation for homeless women in the City of Belfast.*

***“We recognise the difficulty and anxiety this situation is causing for staff and the current residents of Regina Coeli House. This Council calls upon the Minister for Communities and the NIHE to meet with the staff and their representatives as a matter of urgency to help secure alternative employment for them.***

***This Council, however, regrets that hostel accommodation provided by an external organisation has been one of the only options for women who find themselves homeless until now. We are deeply concerned about the NIHE’s over-reliance on hostels, largely provided by 3rd parties, to discharge their legal duty to those in need of emergency housing. The impact of hostel accommodation on anyone who finds themselves in this situation can be serious and long-lasting and this is compounded by the fact that it is very rarely a short-term placement.***

**Special Meeting of Council,  
Monday, 17th January, 2022**

***As such, this Council urges the Minister for Communities and the NIHE to provide housing to those women who are currently reliant on Regina Coeli and ensure they get the wrap-around support that they need at this time. We also call on them to use this situation to urgently move to a Housing First model as a more appropriate and effective model for responding to homelessness, while securing emergency accommodation facilities specifically for women and families in Belfast on an interim basis until this model is fully operational.”***

The Council agreed to vote on the amendment to the motion, when twelve Members voted for the motion and forty against and it was declared lost.

The Motion standing in the name of Councillor McCusker, as amended by Councillor McLoughlin and Alderman Kingston, was thereupon put to the Council as the substantive motion and passed.

Lord Mayor  
Chairperson