

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 26 September 2022 at 7.00pm in Downshire Chamber and via Microsoft Teams

In the Chair: Councillor M Savage

In attendance in Chamber: (Councillors)

Councillor T Andrews
Councillor A Finnegan
Councillor A Lewis
Councillor A McMurray
Councillor D Murphy
Councillor B Ó Muirí
Councillor M Rice
Councillor G Sharvin

In Attendance via Teams: Councillor P Byrne
Councillor C Casey
Councillor W Clarke
Councillor D Curran
Councillor L Devlin
Councillor V Harte
Councillor R Howell
Councillor M Larkin
Councillor D Lee-Surginor
Councillor L McEvoy
Councillor J Tinnelly

In attendance in Chamber: (Officials)

Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Mrs D Starkey, Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance: Mrs G Long, Chief Executive, NIHE
Mr J McCartan, Regional Manager South Region, NIHE
Mr L Gunn, Area Manager, NIHE

In Attendance via Teams: Mr A Kennedy, NIHE
Ms S Collins, NIHE
Ms R O'Neill, NIHE

SC/24/2021 APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

There were no apologies recorded.

SC/24/2021 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

Councillor Rice joined the meeting during the following presentation – 7.15pm.

SC/25/2021 PRESENTATION FROM NIHE – HOUSING INVESTMENT PLAN 2022

The Chairperson welcomed the delegation from Northern Ireland Housing Executive and invited them to make their presentation.

Mrs Long thanked Council for the opportunity to meet and then delivered a presentation on the Housing Investment Plan Annual Update 2022 (copy of which is appended to these minutes).

The Chairperson thanked Mrs Long for her presentation and suggested it would be of great value to hold another Housing Symposium to build on the relationships and work already done.

The Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members as follows:

- Concerns were highlighted relating to the Place Shaping Team and a number of small developments in Newry where commitment had been given from the team and once landowners and contractors were ready to go, they were getting feedback from the team that they were at capacity.
- Acknowledgement was given for the difficulties faced by NIHE with a diminishing budget however it was important to deliver a good service for the people.
- An update on the window replacement scheme for Ardcairn, Newry with people living in terrible conditions with windows needing replaced.
- Problems associated with grass cutting service and grass being left to lie. Could contractors ensure that sides to areas of grass cutting were maintained also?
- Entry ways under the ownership of NIHE were not being maintained to a reasonable standard.
- Concerns were raised regarding service provision from some general maintenance groups with an example provided of problems associated with a property in Dominic Street, Newry.
- How many NIHE houses were being lost through selling off every year?
- What impact were blockages on planning applications from NI Water where NIHE were seeking to build? E.g., Dundrum and other areas within the District.
- Have NIHE taken into consideration the current housing stock and with many houses built in 1950/60s were there plans to build more houses with disability awareness incorporated in design.
- Request for an update on maintenance schemes in the Rowallane area.
- How to address lack of new builds within rural areas? Reference was made to areas such as Lecale, Newtownhamilton, Cullyhanna etc.

People seeking housing in rural housing villages tend not to be put these down as a choice due to a perceived lack of available properties available, this was causing families being forced to move away from their local area with family and friends or seek private rentals. The knock-on effect on education, cultural, emotional needs and sporting facilities within these rural areas was highlighted as a real concern.

- Concern for the levels of homelessness with private landlords selling properties and rising costs within the private rental sector.
What levels of readily available stock was there within the South Down for people who found themselves homeless?
- There was a massive shortfall for temporary/interim housing in this area.
Was there anything Council and the voluntary sector could do to assist with temporary accommodation?
- Was there a process in place to review NIHE properties were ready for new tenants moving in?
- Concerns regarding energy efficiency with NIHE form of heating being gas which was being charged at an extortionate rate. There was a need for NIHE to think about this and if possible keep options available for oil and open fires given today's costs.
- CCTV installation for Bracken Avenue flats in Burrendale Park required to make the accommodation safer and expanded throughout the Burrendale estate, Newcastle.
- Difficulties for residents getting a contractor for adaptation work. How often does the contractors select list be updated?
- Could help be afforded for people requiring an Occupational Therapist assessment in order to get adaptations.
- Thanks to all staff in the Downpatrick and Newry NIHE offices for the support provided to Members. A word of thanks was given to Ms Magorrian from the Downpatrick office for the outstanding work done in the Model Farm area.

The delegation responded to queries as follows:

- Mrs Long to follow up with Chairperson on the issue of Place Shaping Capacity and problems referred to in relation to developments within the Newry area.
- There was no question that since Covid and with the economic headwinds being faced that ensuring contract works were continuing and were effective was extremely challenging. NIHE was facing significant inflationary costs and difficulties with labour supply both locally and regionally.
There were clear and strict targets for contractors and whilst the majority work well NIHE wanted to hear about instances when contractors were not performing.
- Planned Maintenance Contract had been delayed for a range of reasons since Covid in particular with uplifts with some delays but not across all areas. NIHE happy for Members to follow up on any local issues.
- Aware of issues locally regarding grass cutting and entryways with some successes also noted.
- Approximately 500 NIHE houses were sold under the high sale scheme per year (21 local units sold). The net effect of which was that last year 1900 homes were commenced.
- New builds were impacted by NI Water constraints. Meetings held regularly and NI Water were trying to undertake design led solutions in an attempt to unpick the challenges. Ultimately longer term investment was required.
- Powers had not yet been transferred to NIHE to build, hopefully by 2025.
- NIHE aware of maintenance issue at property in Dominic Street, Newry and work was ongoing to resolve.
- Discussions were ongoing regarding Ardcairn replacement windows project to find a resolution within this financial year.

- NIHE was aware of grass cutting issues with sub-contractor contract discontinued and encouraged Members to report problems so issues could be resolved through Grounds Maintenance.
- NIHE had an Adaptations Programme ongoing with purpose built accommodation factored in for families with specific needs.
- Rural housing need was a critical priority for NIHE with a Rural Housing Strategy to increase the supply of rural housing.
A number of significant pieces of work were being undertaken and work with the Housing Association to identify suitable sites etc. whilst working with Council and NI Water to unblock barriers.
NIHE encourage people to take part in the latent demand testing.
There was a need to take a Place Shaping approach and reference was made to Community Planning and the importance of the Housing Symposium in identifying how best to grow need and demand.
- Acknowledged homeless figures were alarming with the scale of demand for temporary accommodation being unprecedented and a direct result of Covid and that NIHE were not out the other side yet with no let up in demand. A number of pieces of work were underway on where to place people locally with (521 placed locally in the last year).
- Work was ongoing with Housing Association to identify voids in properties.
- NIHE would prefer a multi year budget to allow the leasing of accommodation long term and have responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of those properties.
- NIHE encouraged Members to inform offices of any issues regarding change in tenancy arrangements.
- NIHE was required to retrofit 84,000 energy efficient homes in the next 30 years, and it was difficult to comment on issue of gas versus oil. NIHE took a fabric first approach with provision of good insulation on properties and approximately £40million had been spent this year on energy efficiency in NIHE homes.
- A successful CCTV programme undertaken in North Belfast for the Mount Vernon and New Lodge areas was to be replicated within the Burrendale, Newcastle with progress being made regarding that. The Scheme would afford residents a high degree of safety and security and it was hoped this would take place in 2023, subject to programme issues.
- The administration of the Grants Programme for adaptations to homes rests with NIHE however it was led by the individual applicant with an Occupational Therapist report required sometimes. A Housing and Health Team had been set up to help progress the Grants Programme and it was acknowledged there needed to be a policy that did not place the onus on the applicant to navigate a difficult market to have adaptations undertaken.
- NIHE did not endorse contractors for works only provide a contractors list on its website for applicants.

Councillors Lewis and Sharvin left the meeting during the above discussion – 7.35pm and 7.55pm respectively.

The Chairperson thanked the delegation from NIHE for their presentation and the comprehensive answers to the queries on behalf of the Council. He commented that he hoped the close working relationship with NIHE would continue and thanked the NIHE staff in the Downpatrick and Newry Offices.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 8.07pm.

For adoption at Meeting of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to be held on Monday 7 November 2022.

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive