

LISBURN & CASTLEREAGH CITY COUNCIL

Minutes of Special Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber and at Remote Locations on Monday 16th October 2023 at 6.04 pm

PRESENT IN CHAMBER:

Alderman J Tinsley (Acting Chair)

Aldermen A Grehan and P Porter

Councillors D Bassett, P Burke, P Catney, J Craig, A Ewing, G Hynds, P Kennedy, U Mackin, A Martin and C McCready

PRESENT IN REMOTE LOCATION:

Deputy Mayor, Councillor G McCleave

Aldermen A Ewart MBE, M Gregg, M Guy and S Skillen

Councillors S Burns, R Carlin, N Eaton, A Givan, C Kemp, J Lavery BEM, S Lowry, M McKeever, N Parker and G Thompson

IN ATTENDANCE:

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

Chief Executive

Member Services Officers (RN & EW)

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Ms Grainia Long, Chief Executive

Mr Des Marley, Lisburn & Castlereagh Area Manager

Ms Fiona McGrath, Head of Place Shaping, Belfast Region

Mr David Brown, Strategic Planning Manager (Remote)

Mr Andy Kennedy, Assistant Director Asset Management
(Remote)

Ms Aisling McDermott, Area Manager Housing Solutions
(Remote)

Ms Leeann Vincent, Assistant Director Asset Management
(Remote)

Chair

In the absence from the Chamber of both The Right Worshipful The Mayor and the Deputy Mayor, the meeting was chaired by Alderman J Tinsley.

Commencement of the Meeting

The Member Services Officer read out the names of the Elected Members and Officers in attendance at the meeting.

The Acting Chair requested that all mobile phones be put on silent or switched off for the duration of the meeting and pointed out that, in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders, whilst the meeting was being live-streamed, unauthorised recording was not permitted.

The Chief Executive outlined the evacuation procedures in the case of an emergency.

1. Apologies (00:02:04)

It was agreed to accept apologies for non-attendance at the meeting on behalf of The Right Worshipful The Mayor, Councillor A Gowan; Councillors T Beckett, K Dickson, J Gallen and R McLernon.

2. Declarations of Interest (00:02:38)

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Deputations (00:02:48)

3.1 Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Lisburn & Castlereagh Housing Investment Plan 2023 - 2026

The Acting Chair, Alderman J Tinsley, welcomed the following officials from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to the meeting:-

- Ms Grainia Long - Chief Executive
- Mr Des Marley - Lisburn & Castlereagh Area Manager
- Ms Fiona McGrath - Head of Place Shaping, Belfast Region.

The Acting Chair also welcomed a number of other NIHE officials who were in attendance at the meeting on a remote basis.

The meeting was paused from 6.08 pm – 6.12 pm to allow for a technical issue to be addressed.

3.1.1 Presentation (00:05:25)

Members had been provided with a copy of the Lisburn & Castlereagh Housing Investment Plan 2023 – 2026. With the aid of PowerPoint, Ms Long made a presentation in respect of the Housing Investment Plan, during which she highlighted the following:-

- Community Planning – Strength of Partnership Working
- Lisburn & Castlereagh Tenure Breakdown and Total Homes
- Lisburn & Castlereagh Housing Executive Spend 2022/2023 and Projected Spend 2023/24

3.1.1 Presentation (Continued)

- Affordable Warmth Scheme
- Boiler Replacement Scheme. (Paused as from 21st September 2023. Applications submitted before that date and meeting the criteria would be honoured.)
- Waiting List Trends 2020-2023
- Summary of Temporary Accommodation Costs. (Any available housing stock in the Council's area should be notified to the NIHE.)
- New Build/Social Housing Development Programme
- New Build/Social Housing Development Programme (completed in the last year)
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) - Update. (Enquiries in relation to such payments should be directed to the DHP Team.)
- Key Housing Challenges
- Key Housing Opportunities
- Next Steps

During the presentation:-

Councillor R Carlin joined the meeting on a remote basis. (6.18 pm)
Ms Leeann Vincent (NIHE Assistant Director Asset Management) joined the meeting on a remote basis. (6.22 pm)

3.1.2 Questions

After the presentation, a number of Members' questions were responded to by the NIHE representatives.

The following questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting with responses being provided at the meeting.

(1) Seymour Hill – Damp issues in houses & flats

Councillor J Craig had referred to damp issues within the housing stock at Seymour Hill and had enquired when this might be remedied and a scheme put in place to re-insulate the dwellings. Some properties had been surveyed on a private basis.

Mr Marley reported that damp and insulation issues were a key focus of the NIHE's work and that the Seymour Hill housing stock had been included in the scheme for re-insulation. Ms Long asked that the NIHE be informed of those addresses which had been privately surveyed.

(2) Moynes Tower Blocks, Dunmurry - Demolition

Councillor J Craig had enquired as to when the Moynes Tower Blocks might be fully vacated and then demolished.

Mr Marley stated that only six leaseholders remained in the Moynes Tower Blocks; all NIHE residents had been rehoused. Demolition was obviously dependent on the Tower Block being fully vacated and – given that leaseholders were involved – it was difficult to give an exact time-scale. The NIHE would hope to continue to make significant progress towards demolition between now and early 2024. The overall project of having the Tower Blocks vacated had progressed quicker than what was initially projected.

(3) Moynes site – Working Group

Councillor J Craig had enquired as to when the working group in regard to the Moynes site would be established.

Mr Kennedy advised that once a housing association had been identified to progress any housing on the site, the local community would become involved.

(4) Response Times

Alderman P Porter had referred to the somewhat slow response times to e-mails and letters which he was experiencing in the Lisburn/Castlereagh and Belfast offices.

Ms McDermott acknowledged that there were issues about communication but that these were being addressed in a number of ways so as to gain an effective solution. Such measures included recruitment processes being in place; two additional staff in the Antrim Street office; routine admin work being undertaken by an appropriate level of staff so as to enable more senior staff to deal with decision making; allocation of dedicated staff to deal with enquiries from public representatives; bespoke e-mail box for elected representatives; revision of telephone system so as to allow for a longer waiting time (as opposed to the call being terminated automatically after a certain length of time); increase in the number of call handlers. The guideline for response times is a reply within 10 working days – however the complexity of an enquiry could make this longer.

The following questions were posed at the meeting:-

(1) Local Development Plan

The Acting Chair enquired from the NIHE officials, their opinion on the adoption of the Council's Local Development Plan. Ms Long welcomed the adoption of the Plan as it would provide many opportunities for the provision of housing by the NIHE, housing associations and developers.

(2) Mr Angus Hannaway

Alderman P Porter asked to have recorded his appreciation of the service provided by Mr Angus Hannaway (Belfast Regional Manager) and extended best wishes to him on his retirement.

Ms McDermott (Area Manager Housing Solutions) thanked Mr Marley (Lisburn & Castlereagh Area Manager) for his support.

(3) Single Lets in Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council area

Alderman P Porter enquired about the effect of single lets on the rental process.

Ms McDermott stated that the number of single lets available remains a significant challenge. She added that private rental issues were challenging for the NIHE in acquiring single let properties. Private landlords could secure high rentals on the private market. The challenge to the NIHE was to negotiate such rents down to an acceptable level. The use of bed & breakfast accommodation by the NIHE is avoided if at all possible.

(4) Temporary Accommodation

Alderman P Porter enquired about temporary accommodation.

Ms McDermott stated that the supply of temporary accommodation was challenging and that the NIHE was putting in place, procedures to maximise the supply of such accommodation, eg long term leasing.

(5) Damp –v- Condensation

Alderman S Skillen enquired as to how an inspection could categorically state if a problem was damp or condensation related.

Ms Long stated that the fabric of the house is always investigated in the initial part of the process. After that, the inspectors would progress to anything that the tenant might be doing to inadvertently create a damp or condensation problem. Tenants should not be made to feel that they are responsible for issues which are related to the fabric of the building.

Ms Long advised that the NIHE has information in regard to damp and condensation which it can and does provide to tenants. This information could be provided to the Council and a workshop session for Elected Members could be considered.

(6) Response Times to Enquiries

Alderman S Skillen advised that she was awaiting responses to a number of communications with the NIHE. Ms Long asked for details of specific matters to be conveyed to her office.

(7) Grass Cutting & Tree Maintenance

Alderman S Skillen referred to the standard of grass cutting evident in certain areas which she considered to be less than satisfactory.

Mr Marley stated that – contrary to a lot of public perception - the NIHE was not responsible for all grass and tree maintenance in its estates or in the environs of its estates. Some areas were the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure.

In regard to areas of the Ballybeen Estate, Dundonald – Mr Marley would be meeting Alderman Skillen on site and – thereafter - would raise any issues with the DfI where necessary.

Mr Marley asked that any specific areas which were of concern to Members in regards to grass cutting and tree maintenance be made known to him.

(8) Housing Officer staffing complement

Councillor A Ewing asked if the number of Housing Officers was sufficient to deal with the demand on their services and for gaining effective and timely solutions.

Ms McDermott advised that the structure to deal with such issues was being reviewed as it currently was insufficient. As previously indicated in the meeting, recruitment exercises were in place as were other steps to make the service more efficient.

The NIHE also recognised the experience that existed within the community sector and that was another avenue being explored to recruit people.

(9) Reasons for persons having to leave their houses

Councillor J Lavery highlighted the difference in people having to leave their homes either for reasons of being the victims of intimidation or of domestic abuse/violence. Councillor Lavery sought such statistics in respect of the Council's area. Ms McDermott undertook to revert to Councillor Lavery with such information.

Ms McDermott agreed that the allocation of points for intimidation and domestic abuse/violence differed and that this matter was under review policy-wise with a Departmental consultation also underway.

Ms Long further advised that the housing options for those households affected by domestic abuse/violence were being looked at. Better accommodation options for such households was required.

(10) Response Times to Enquiries

Councillor D Bassett outlined the circumstances surrounding an enquiry on behalf of a constituent which he had made in July 2023 and to what he considered to be the unacceptable level of response and communication which he had experienced in this regard.

Ms Long asked that Councillor Bassett provide the details of this case to her office.

(11) Rent Reviews

Councillor D Bassett enquired if there was likely to be a rent increase as from 1st April 2024 and – if so – the level of increase that was envisaged.

Ms Long advised that – based on the revenue required for the operation of the NIHE on an annual basis– recommendations are made to the Board of the Housing Executive and thereafter to the Department. It is the investment requirement which dictates if a rent increase is needed.

(12) Inspection of Repairs

Councillor D Bassett enquired if there was a timeframe within which works carried out by a contractor were inspected by an NIHE official, or if it was in fact the responsibility of the tenant to notify the NIHE when repairs had been done so that they might be inspected.

Mr Marley advised that there is a robust inspection programme in place for both planned and response maintenance.

Mr Marley asked that Councillor Bassett inform him of any situation where maintenance had not been inspected soon after completion, and then the problem in question had arisen again.

(13) Direct Labour Organisation

Councillor P Catney enquired as to the input of a Direct Labour Organisation and if it was more beneficial than external contractors.

Ms Long advised that the NIHE did in fact have an active Direct Labour Organisation in place and that it works exceptionally well.

(14) Funding from Department for Communities

Councillor P Catney enquired about the funding from the Department for Communities in the long-term.

Ms Long responded that the challenge for long-term planning over a 10-year period remained. Whilst Ms Long considered that the ability to borrow money would transform its activities, the funding of the NIHE was largely acceptable at present on a year-on-year basis.

(15) Temporary Accommodation

Alderman A Grehan welcomed the temporary accommodation that had been put in place in Lisburn which in turn relieved the pressures on the Simon Community.

Ms Long acknowledged that temporary housing accommodation is a challenge for all Council areas, and not just for Lisburn & Castlereagh.

(16) Waiting Lists/Local Development Plan

Alderman A Grehan referred to the fact that it was likely that some people would never be allocated NIHE property. Alderman Grehan asked that the NIHE speak with the Council's Planning Unit to ensure that social housing was planned for as by the time that planning applications came before the Planning Committee, it may be too late to ensure that such housing is included in plans.

Ms McGrath confirmed that the Council's adoption of its Local Development Plan was to be welcomed and that NIHE officials were meeting with the Council's Planning Unit later in the week. Ms McGrath stated that it was important for developers to understand the benefit of social housing.

In response to comments from Alderman A Grehan about the importance of a mix of social and co-ownership housing, Ms McGrath suggested that this be borne in mind when the Planning Committee was considering planning applications. The use of Section 76 agreements could be put in place.

(17) New means of construction

Alderman A Grehan enquired about the use of modern means of construction and enquired if this could be piloted.

Ms Long confirmed that a building project using a modern means of construction was about to be piloted in Belfast.

(18) Maintenance – Backlog of work

Councillor U Mackin referred to delays which NIHE tenants were experiencing in having maintenance works carried out, even those of a minor nature. Councillor Mackin stated that he was being told this repeatedly by NIHE tenants.

Councillor Mackin advised that he would speak directly to Mr Marley about an issue he was aware of in the Drumbo area.

Ms Long reminded Members that – in recognition of the delays experienced by the NIHE in having work done by external contractors due to the high levels of inflation since the award of their tenders – the NIHE had re-tendered for contracts valued at millions of pounds. Whilst this would mean delays for some works in the short term, it was hoped that it would be a beneficial solution in the long-term.

Mr Marley confirmed that the planned maintenance budget was a "healthy" one. There were 27 schemes programmed for the Lisburn & Castlereagh area of which eight were already on site.

(19) Boiler Replacement Scheme

The Acting Chair, Alderman J Tinsley, sought clarification on the suspension of the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

Ms Long confirmed that the NIHE had been unable to secure funding for this scheme but that applications submitted before the 21st September 2023 and meeting the criteria would be honoured.

(20) Summary of Temporary Accommodations Costs

The Acting Chair, Alderman J Tinsley sought further information in relation to the "Summary of Temporary Accommodation Costs". Ms McDermott agreed to revert to Alderman Tinsley with such information.

(21) Damp/Condensation/Reinsulation

Councillor J Craig sought clarification as to how re-insulation could take place when no insulation was actually in place. Third party contractors had shown this to be the case. Councillor Craig also asked how issues of damp and condensation could be addressed when the real problem was a lack of insulation.

Ms Long stated that it was important to get the balance correct about the fabric of the property and possible misuse of the property by the tenant in terms of creating damp and condensation. Some insulation works would be undertaken in the current financial year.

Mr Marley stated that the NIHE was in touch with the Housing Community Network to make tenants aware of hints, procedures etc to deal with or to avoid damp and condensation issues.

Ms Long stated that information on damp/condensation/insulation could be provided to Members and that she would give consideration to a workshop on these matters being provided for Members.

Mr Kennedy stated that it was the NIHE's intention to replace cavity wall insulation in all of its properties but that funding for this would be a challenge. Mr Kennedy stated that some years ago, a firm had been commissioned to survey properties in relation to cavity wall insulation. 800 NIHE properties had been surveyed and of those, only 1% displayed evidence that damp and condensation could be attributed to the lack of or the condition of the cavity wall insulation.

Councillor Craig was asked to contact Mr Marley about any further information he would wish to have on this matter.

During the question and answer session:-

The Deputy Mayor, Councillor G McCleave, left the meeting on a remote basis. (6.40 pm)

Alderman M Guy left the meeting on a remote basis. (6.46 pm)

Councillor N Eaton left the meeting on a remote basis. (6.53 pm)

Councillor S Lowry left the meeting on a remote basis. (6.55 pm)

Councillor R Carlin left the meeting on a remote basis at 7.00 pm. Councillor Carlin later re-joined the meeting on a remote basis at 7.39 pm and left it at 7.42 pm.

Alderman S Skillen left the meeting on a remote basis. (7.19 pm)

Alderman P Porter left the Chamber. (7.40 pm)

Councillor J Craig left and returned to the Chamber. (7.40 pm and 7.43 pm respectively)

Councillor G Thompson left the meeting on a remote basis. (7.42 pm)

Alderman A Ewart left the meeting on a remote basis. (7.47 pm)

Councillor C McCready left the Chamber. (7.47 pm)

Councillor U Mackin left and returned to the Chamber (7.47 pm and 7.50 pm respectively)

Councillor A Givan left the meeting on a remote basis. (7.49 pm)

Alderman M Gregg left the meeting on a remote basis. (7.54 pm)

3.2 Northern Ireland Housing Executive Place Shaping

Issues in relation to this item were addressed within the main presentation on the Housing Investment Plan.

Conclusion of the Meeting

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Acting Chair, Alderman J Tinsley, thanked the NIHE officials for their attendance and informative presentation. During the course of the meeting, a number of Members had expressed their appreciation for the works carried out and the service provided by the NIHE officials and their teams.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 7.57 pm.

Mayor/Chair