



Minutes of the 483rd Meeting
of the Northern Ireland Housing Council held on
Thursday 9th September 2021 at 10.30 am via Webex

Present by Video Conferencing:

Anne-Marie Fitzgerald	Fermanagh & Omagh District (Chair)
Mark Cooper	Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough (Vice Chair)
Nick Mathison	Ards & North Down Borough
Jim Speers	Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough
John Finlay	Causeway Coast & Glens Borough
Allan Bresland	Derry City & Strabane District
Amanda Grehan	Lisburn & Castlereagh City
Michelle Kelly	Belfast City
Mickey Ruane	Newry, Mourne & Down District
Catherine Elattar	Mid Ulster Borough

In Attendance:

Paul Price	Department for Communities
David Polley	Department for Communities
Grainia Long	Housing Executive

(For Item 7 on the Agenda – Joined the Meeting @10.45 am)

Frank O'Connor	Regional Director, North
Leeann Vincent	Assistant Director Asset Management
Paul Kane	Senior Contract & Performance Manager (Programme / Planned)
Paul McCarthy	Senior Contract & Performance Manager (Response / M&E)
John Gillespie	Regional Project Delivery Manager (Belfast)
John McIntyre	Regional Project Delivery Manager (North)
Stephen Moore	Regional Project Delivery Manager (South)

(For Item 8 on the Agenda)

Catherine McFarland	Director of Finance, Audit & Assurance, NIHE
Andrew Barbour	Assistant Director, Housing Benefit, NIHE

(For Item 9 on the Agenda)

Ben Collins Chief Executive from NIFHA (joined @11.15 am)

Kelly Cameron	Secretary (Housing Executive Secretariat)
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Apologies:

Tommy Nicholl	Mid & East Antrim Borough
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<p>1.0</p>	<p><u>Welcome</u></p> <p>The Chair welcomed Paul Price and David Polley from the Department for Communities and Grainia Long from the Housing Executive.</p> <p>She also welcomed the Presenters, as listed above.</p>	
<p>2.0</p>	<p><u>Declarations of Interest</u></p> <p>None.</p>	
<p>3.0</p>	<p><u>To adopt the Minutes of the 482nd Housing Council Meeting held on Thursday 12th August 2021</u></p> <p>It was proposed by Alderman Amanda Grehan, seconded by Councillor Mark Cooper and resolved, that the Minutes of the 482nd Meeting of the Housing Council held on Thursday 12th August 2021 be approved and signed by the Chair.</p>	
<p>4.0</p> <p>4.1</p> <p>4.2</p>	<p>Matters Arising from the Minutes</p> <p>Page 2 Item 4.2 – Co-ownership</p> <p>It was noted that a letter had been sent to the Chief Executive of Co-ownership inviting them to attend the October Meeting, a reply was awaited.</p> <p>Members requested that a Presentation by the Department on Intermediate Rents consultation, could coincide with the Co-ownership presentation.</p> <p>Information had been sent to Members, as requested throughout the Month</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmation on the Housing Executive’s Housing Options team signposts the Co-ownership scheme to tenants. • Details regarding the number of co-ownership clients who were on the social housing waiting list. 	<p>D Polley Secretary</p>

<p>4.3</p>	<p>Members Queries</p> <p>Members had received responses to their queries, as follows:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alderman Nicholl - Latharna Tower Blocks • Alderman Speers – Catherine’s Court, Armagh 	
<p>5.0</p>	<p><u>Forward Workplan</u></p> <p>The Paper was noted.</p>	<p>Secretary</p>
<p>6.0</p>	<p><u>Report by the Housing Executive’s Chief Executive, Grainia Long on Housing Executive Business</u></p> <p>Ms Long provided the Housing Council with an update summarising a range of strategic, major or routine matters, including any emerging issues. A summary of the current / emerging issues were outlined under the headings as follows:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of Business Plan 2021-22 • 2021/22 Budget Bid submission • Revitalisation • Sustainable Development Plan • Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan • Social Housing Development Programme • Response and Planned Maintenance • Mice Infestation • Housing Investment Plans (HIPS) - Presentations to Councils • Other Emerging Issues: Bonfires & Fire at Ulsterville Avenue Temporary Accommodation <p>It was agreed that the Review of the Temporary Accommodation would be subject to a future Presentation.</p>	<p>Secretary</p>
<p>7.0</p>	<p><u>Contractor Performance Management</u></p> <p>Members received with their papers the Presentation on the Housing Executive’s Contractor Performance Management.</p> <p>Members noted the challenges and severe impacts being faced the Housing Executive and Contractors, due to Brexit and Covid.</p>	

	<p>Members also recognised that this was a huge problem, throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.</p> <p>Concern was expressed by Members on the issue of Contractors being awarded schemes and due to the increase of prices for materials etc, the Contractors were not receiving enough to cover their costs and unable to fulfil the work commitments.</p> <p>It was explained that the Housing Executive are seeking to pay Contractors additional costs to deal with this spike in rising costs universally. The Housing Executive will bid for additional funds to the Department, may be successful but the money will have to be taken from other budgetary areas in order to meet these costs. Members noted that the Housing Executive Board have approved an uplift for Contractors.</p> <p>It was noted that this an issue throughout the Province and other bodies are experiencing the same pressures, the Northern Ireland Executive has issued guidance to all public sector organisations setting out how to deal with the current inflation in the industry. .</p> <p>Members felt that communication is the key between the Housing Executive and tenants, the need to being open and transparent, in particular ‘change of tenancy’.</p> <p>Members were assured that Contract Management and communication with tenants are being addressed by the Housing Executive as significant changes are having to be made as a result of the issues arising over the pandemic and Brexit.</p> <p>The Chair thanked all the Housing Executive Officers for their attendance and responding to Members questions.</p>	
<p>8.0</p>	<p><u>Update on Welfare Reform</u></p> <p>Catherine McFarland and Andrew Barbour from the Housing Executive gave Members an update on Welfare Reform (Copies of the slides are appended to these Minutes - Appendix A).</p> <p>The Chair highlighted the on-line process for Welfare Reform claimants which often proves very difficult, particularly for the elderly and the most vulnerable in our society and it was felt that more collaborative work needs to be done to address this issue.</p>	

	<p>Members commended the Housing Executive staff in the Welfare Team for their hard work, especially through Covid and the collaborative working between the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities.</p> <p>In response to the question, in relation to an influx of claimants once furlough ends, Mr Barbour assured Members that the Housing Executive are prepared and planning for the eventualities and will be able to manage any significant increases.</p> <p>In relation to wrap around services, it was explained that there is a lot of partnership working internally and range of close networks between community groups to give people as much help, support and advice as possible and signpost tenants to support services.</p> <p>Members welcomed the additional help of 13 week protection via Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) for Universal Credit customers. It was noted that DHP was a stop gap to allow those in Private Rented Sector (PRS) time to find alternative means to meet the shortfall, it was explained this is now not the case, the Housing Executive appreciate the need to sustain tenancy. It was also noted that the average DHP is £13 per week, which has increased significantly.</p> <p>Members expressed concern at the shortfall of rents that claimants are facing in the PRS and asked was there any scope for Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to be increased as it was extremely low and as a result pushing people into poverty.</p> <p>It was noted that the LHA is determined by the 30 percentile of the rents and changes would be require legislation changes by DWP. Mr Polley explained that there is lobbying at Westminster for LHA to be increase to 50 percentile again.</p> <p>The Chair thanked Mrs McFarland and Mr Barbour for a very comprehensive presentation.</p>	
<p>9.0</p>	<p><u>Ben Collins Chief Executive from the Northern Ireland Federation for Northern Ireland (NIFHA)</u></p> <p>It was noted that Ben Collins had been invited to explore how NIFHA and the Housing Council can develop a closer partnership on housing matters.</p>	

	<p>The Chair explained that Members currently receive alternate bi-monthly updates from both the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and felt it would be beneficial if they could also receive quarterly updates from the Housing Associations.</p> <p>At the request of Members, Mr Collins undertook to provide Members with a list of contacts for each of the Housing Associations, in order for Members to build up a working relationship with Housing Association staff, similar to that build up with the staff in the Housing Executive.</p> <p>Mr Collins also accepted the invite to attend Housing Council Meetings on a quarterly basis to give an update on Housing Associations activities.</p>	<p>B Collins B Collins</p>
<p>10.0</p>	<p><u>Social Housing Development Programme Progress Quarterly Report</u></p> <p>Members noted the report as circulated.</p>	
<p>11.0</p>	<p><u>Housing Executive’s Scheme Starts August 2021</u></p> <p>Members noted the report as circulated.</p>	
<p>12.0</p>	<p><u>Date and Venue of Next Meeting – Thursday 14th October 2021 at 10.00 am via Zoom</u></p>	

The Meeting concluded at 12.15 pm.

Appendix A



Welfare Reform Update

Housing Council September 2021

www.nihe.gov.uk



Introduction and overview of the Housing Benefit Service

The response during Covid

www.nihe.gov.uk

Housing Benefit Facts and Figures 2020/21



- **Caseload 117,676**
- **HB Expenditure £532.7m**
- **DHP Awards 18,025**
- **DHP Expenditure £4.16m**

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Housing Benefit Facts and Figures 2020/21



- **New Claims Processed 18,023**
- **Change of Circumstances 241,449**
- **ATLAS transactions 4.1m**
- **Telephony managed approx. 135k calls**

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Managing Welfare Reform

- Universal Credit*
- Social Sector Size Criteria*
- Benefit Cap*
- Discretionary Housing Payments*
- Northern Ireland flexibilities, bespoke solutions and lessons learned*

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Universal Credit

Current position

- **Roll out commenced in NI Sep 2017**
- **Working age customers naturally migrate to UC if they have a significant change in their circumstances which ends entitlement to legacy benefits (including HB)**
- **Customer may choose to move to UC at any time**
- **Transition to UC much slower than anticipated**
 - At the end of May 2021, there were 134,070 UC claimants in NI
 - Of these, 20,336 were HE tenants
 - 78,401 working age customers still receiving HB

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Universal Credit



Move to UC

- The next phase of UC ('Move to UC') will require those claimants who continue to receive any of the 6 legacy benefits UC is replacing to be managed across to UC.
- The Move to UC phase was temporarily paused in March 2020 in response to Covid-19
- Anticipated Start date of Jan 2022 is unlikely and best estimate is early 2023
- End date moves from Sep to Dec 2024
- HE is a trusted partner in Move to UC
- GB approach on voluntary Move to UC

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Social Sector Size Criteria

(Bedroom Tax)



- This continues to affect 23,891 (17,869 HE; 6,022 HA) customers of working age who are deemed to have a greater number of bedrooms than their family requires
- Vast majority affected receive mitigation from DfC via Welfare Supplementary Payments
- 205 HE and 41 HA tenants have lost mitigation where they have moved to accommodation with the same or greater number of bedrooms
- Mitigation payments have continued beyond the 31st March 2020 deadline through the budget act

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Benefit Cap



- The Benefit Cap rules restricts the total amount of benefits customers can receive and is administered through Housing Benefit
- Benefit Cap per week is £384.62 for a family or £257.69 for single claimants
- At the end of May 2021, a total of 1,830 households had their benefits capped
- Of these, 1,210 were UC capped households and 620 were HB capped households
- Customers affected receive mitigation from DfC via Welfare Supplementary Payment but can be reduced as circumstances change
- Discretionary Housing Payments may be awarded to meet shortfall
- Mitigation payments have continued via budget act

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Discretionary Housing Payments



- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are mostly paid where a private tenant has a shortfall in rent
- DHP's can be awarded to customers on UC or HB
- Additional help via DHP introduced in 2020 for UC customers previously able to afford rent – 13 week protection
- 8,336 HB and 4,032 UC claimants have received a DHP award in current year
- 257 Ben Cap affected claimants receiving DHP

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NI flexibilities, bespoke solutions & lessons learned



- **Partnership approach with DfC on Welfare Reform has been acknowledged as best practice in collaborative working throughout the NI Civil Service network**
- **This collaborative working has resulted in a number of significant improvements for our customers.**
 - **UC housing costs are designed by default to be paid to the claimant. Default changed to Landlord for NI**
 - **Change of address in NI does not trigger transition to UC**
 - **Additional 2 week HB run on process changed to fit with NI practice**

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NI flexibilities, bespoke solutions & lessons learned



- **Ex Stat approval at start of UC roll out to allow Housing costs for temporary accommodation to be met by HB**
- **Development of a bespoke UC Housing Costs report to help manage tenants rent accounts and arrears**
- **Housing Executive 1st major Local Authority in UK to pilot new UC payment process reducing delay in Housing costs payments and eliminating issues on technical residual debt**
- **Fully utilised a new Landlord Portal which streamlines the verification of tenants rent details and enables a bulk upload of rent increases to be made rather than relying on individual customer notifications which simplifies the process for claimants**

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NI flexibilities and bespoke solutions



- **An issue regarding a UC design problem in which an additional weeks rent is not eligible in a 53 week annual cycle has now been resolved in collaboration with DfC**
- **Development of systems and processes to ensure the accurate and timely payments of Welfare Supplementary Payments for those claimants potentially impacted by Bedroom Tax**