



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Housing Strategy Action Plan: DSD Briefing

9 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Pam Brown
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Fra McCann

Witnesses:

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| Dr Heloise Brown | Department for Social Development |
| Ms Deirdre Ward | Department for Social Development |

The Chairperson: I formally welcome Heloise Brown and Deirdre Ward. There are some useful questions that members may wish to avail themselves of in their packs, although I am sure they will have plenty of their own. As the housing issue is of keen interest of the Committee, some work has already been done, so we are just trying to give the Committee a focus on that. Heloise and Deirdre, without any further ado, I invite you to make your presentation.

Ms Deirdre Ward (Department for Social Development): Thank you, Chair. I am here to present to the Committee our draft housing action plan following on from our presentation on 28 February on the results of the consultation exercise. The Committee also provided us with additional written comments on 12 March, and we thank the Committee for those.

The strategy was launched for public consultation from October to December last year. We sent out over 400 copies, either hard copy or by e-mail, and it was available on the departmental website. We also held two events at which we presented the draft strategy to stakeholders and listened to their views, and 45 individuals attended those events. We received quite a large volume of written responses to the consultation from organisations representative of section 75 groups, private individuals and a wide range of industry stakeholders. Their responses reflect the vital role that government has in strategic housing issues in Northern Ireland and the importance of housing issues to everyone in our society.

In total, we received over 700 pages of comment from 90 respondents as part of our consultation. That feedback was recorded in a separate summary of responses report, which the Committee has previously considered and which will be published alongside this action plan.

The housing strategy, Facing the Future, set out our proposals under five themes: ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures; meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable; housing and welfare reform; driving regeneration and sustaining communities

through housing; and getting the structures right. The strategy also set out four main roles for government in relation to housing: helping to create the right conditions for a stable and sustainable housing market that supports economic growth and prosperity; providing support for individuals and families, particularly the most vulnerable in society, to access housing; setting minimum standards for the quality of new and existing homes and for how rented housing is managed; and driving regeneration within communities, particularly those suffering from blight and population decline.

A number of stakeholders and consultees acknowledged the responsibility of government under section 75 to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. They told us that government's statutory duties under section 75 should be explicitly referenced in the strategy. Therefore, in response to those comments, a fifth role for government in relation to housing has been added to the draft housing strategy action plan, namely to promote equality of housing in Northern Ireland and to promote good relations.

In the strategy, we gave a commitment that each of the policies set out would be equality screened as they are developed and that, where appropriate, equality impact assessments would be undertaken. In addition to those general comments on equality issues, we received comments on the equality impacts of three of our proposals. I will return to those specifically as I talk through the content of the action plan.

The action plan explains what we will be doing to deliver on the commitments in the strategy, with the actions distributed across the five themes. Under theme one — ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures — we will renew the fitness standard across all tenures; establish a housing supply forum which can promote innovative ways of increasing housing supply; review the regulation of the private rented sector; increase the supply of affordable housing; and deliver innovative solutions for improving the worst of the Housing Executive stock.

Under theme two — meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable — we will establish a working group that will identify ways to prevent or mitigate the impact of repossessions; work with others to implement the homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland; provide a rented sector access scheme for those in need of additional support; review the Supporting People programme; and lead a fundamental review of social housing allocation policy. On that proposal, the strategy gave a high-level commitment that we would lead a review of the policy, but did not give any further detail about the direction that review would take. We received comments from two stakeholders about the potential equality impacts of such a review. One stakeholder was concerned that allocation of social housing should continue to be based on individual need, and the other made a general comment that selectivity in allocations could not be based on religious belief. We accept those points and can confirm that those issues are receiving full consideration by the independent consultants who are working on the first stage of the review.

In the strategy, we also proposed an additional form of tenancy for adapted dwellings, to get the best use of those properties by ensuring that they are available to people who need them. One stakeholder raised an equality concern that people who need adapted dwellings should not be offered a less secure tenancy arrangement, and the Department accepts that view. However, we also accept that we need to do more to make sure that dwellings that have been adapted for people with disabilities are available to those who need them. That work is at an early stage, and we will be very aware of the equality impacts as we move forward.

The final area of concern in respect of equality was a question over whether owner-occupiers should make greater financial contribution to adaptations. Our stakeholders raised concerns that that created an inequity based on housing tenure and that further research was required on the issue. The Department accepts that further research is required, and will consider the matter after further consultation. A joint consultation with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is open, and the Committee is scheduled to receive a briefing on that issue on 4 July. I think that consultation finishes on 15 May.

To return to the strategy, theme three is housing and welfare reform. In the action plan, we commit to gather information on the housing-related changes of welfare reform; develop criteria for access to passported benefits; work with the Housing Executive and other social landlords to provide additional housing advice and support to those affected by welfare reform; and increase the availability of smaller social housing units.

Under theme four — driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing — we will take forward an empty homes strategy and action plan; work with the Housing Executive to pilot a housing-

led approach to regeneration in four areas; review Living over the Shop (LOTS); further develop social clauses in contracts for new house building; work to investigate opportunities for generating employment and training opportunities; develop a shared community programme; and further develop the framework for tackling antisocial behaviour.

Under theme five — getting the structures right — we will support business improvement in the social housing sector; transfer responsibility for regulation of houses in multiple occupancy and housing unfitness to district councils; and take forward the social housing reform programme.

In conclusion, the draft action plan that we have submitted for your consideration is the first of its kind in its timescales, cross-tenure approach and strategic planning to help to develop our economy and better meet social need. It reflects the ambitious programme of work that is under way to deliver better housing, more effective regulation and improved housing support for everyone in Northern Ireland. We have taken on board the views of political representatives, housing professionals, service users and the public — who all have a stake and an interest in the success of the work. We will be happy to answer your questions on the draft action plan and take any comments that you have.

The Chairperson: In the last paragraph of your paper, you refer to taking forward a social housing reform programme, and you identify year 1, year 2, and so on, for implementation, but there is a significant amount of work in relation to the social housing reform element of all of this. That is a lot of work. How do you see that implementation by year 1 in 2013-14?

Ms Ward: I think we have a slot with the Committee before the summer recess to brief you specifically on the social housing reform programme. You are quite right; it is enormous, and we are in the planning stages at the moment. We have held a number of planning workshops with our colleagues from the Housing Executive, across the Department and in the Strategic Investment Board to begin to scope out the work to see what the timescales will be for delivery and how and what we can get done by when. We hope to come to give you an overview of that specifically. This action plan is quite large as it is. We felt that if we put social housing into it, it would be the mother of all action plans, so we hope to come to talk to you separately on each of the areas of the social housing reform programme and brief you that way.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that.

Mr F McCann: Thank you very much for the presentation. I think you are right; there seems to be quite a lot of stuff condensed into the report and it is hard to pick out anything, but all of it is equally important. In question three, you talk about the reduced costs of social housing provision, and then it goes on to talk about minimum standards. What does that mean?

Dr Heloise Brown (Department for Social Development): It is partly looking at a new fitness standard for all tenures and harmonising the standards between the social housing sector and the private rented sector. We tend to build to different standards, and the proposal is to harmonise those — effectively to build homes so that it is not seen that there is such a disparity between the private homes and the social rented homes.

Mr F McCann: I have raised this a number of times, but my understanding is that it all operates under one standard. However, the private sector builds to the lowest end of the standard and the social sector to the highest end. Are we talking about relaxing standards for social houses so that they are built to the lower end of the standard?

Dr H Brown: It is partly relaxing the standard and partly reviewing the fitness standard across all tenures to make it more appropriate. The fitness standard that we work to has been in place for about 30 years and is, perhaps, not the most appropriate. There are other standards that operate in other jurisdictions. At the moment we monitor fitness across all tenures and across some of those different standards so that we can see what the different implications of them would be. We need to have a review to determine which of those would be most appropriate for all housing tenures to be built to.

Mr F McCann: Do you not think that that is a backward step? At the end of the day, you are storing up trouble for somewhere down the line when you have to pick up the pieces. One of your difficulties is that the Housing Executive and housing associations have been praised for the standards that they have met over considerable time. If you tamper with those standards on a downward trend, it will

cause major problems. That sends out all the wrong messages, which is that people who apply for social housing can expect less than we would expect in our own homes.

Ms Ward: Some of the new fitness standards that we want to take into consideration and that have moved ahead in other jurisdictions are things like the health and safety elements and areas around thermal efficiency. Our standards have slightly not moved, particularly the health and safety elements. We want to make sure that if people are living in the private rented sector, there is a reasonable expectation that all those standards are met.

Mr F McCann: What is expected of the private rented sector at present falls far short of what you would expect of any other sector. I have not seen any move to enhance that. In fact, Mickey Brady and I tried to put amendments down for the last housing Bill that private rented sector houses should meet the decent home standards that are expected of the social sector before they are rented. However, that is a debate and argument for another day. The Chair said to me that all that stuff about thermal protection and heating is something that we should expect in this day and age. However, to lessen the standards actually lessens the quality of the build.

Ms Ward: We are proposing to do a review of the standards to see what they should be across all tenures. We have not predetermined the outcome of that review. We need to see what is appropriate for Northern Ireland and what is the best that we can do. It is to commence that work, not to predetermine the outcome.

Mr F McCann: If you talk about relaxation, you are near enough predetermining that there will be a different outcome in a downward trend in standards.

Ms Ward: Just to be clear, this is a draft strategy. We are keen to hear what the Committee has to say. We have not published the strategy and have no intention of doing so until we have the comments back from you to inform what we are doing. Once we get this action plan clarified, we will assign resources to it and move on to do those pieces of work. We need to be clear that if there are any gaps or wrong things in it, we get those clarified now before we start work on things that may not be sensible.

Mr F McCann: I think there have been three Housing Executive reviews of the housing selection scheme over the past number of years, and the Department has carried out a couple of reviews. In fact, I have met about five Ministers for Social Development, going back to direct rule, because the housing selection scheme has not worked for the community that I represent in West Belfast since it was brought in. It condemns two and three families to live in the one house. It condemns people to lengthy stays in hostels. It takes twice as many points to get a house in that constituency as it does in most other constituencies, yet all we hear about is review after review after review. Nothing concrete has ever come out of this to start to tackle the difficulties and problems that there are. All that it seems to do is to put back the day when people, certainly the people that I represent, can expect a bit of equality in how their homelessness is dealt with.

Dr H Brown: Some of the reviews that have been done were driven by some of the changes under welfare reform and some of the amendments that, maybe, the Department and the Housing Executive wanted to see made. The review proposed under the draft action plan is very much a fundamental review that will look at everything. It will look at whether the shape of the current system is right, the ways in which we could set up a selection scheme that could move applicants more quickly into homes where those homes are available, and other ways of managing high- and low-demand areas better. It will look at much bigger questions than those that were addressed by the past couple of consultations the Housing Executive ran.

Mr F McCann: Obviously, that is a point that we need to go continuously back to. There does not seem to be any of that. Any review has to recognise the need for housing to be built and allocated on objective need. When you talk about objective need and housing-led regeneration, what is the difference?

Dr H Brown: One of the things that the fundamental review is very actively considering is what objective need is and how we define that. We will want to get a consensus on that and everybody's views of what they consider housing need or housing stress to be.

Mr F McCann: To me, it is fairly clear. Objective need is about building houses where they are required to deal with the serious problems of overcrowding and homelessness. Housing-led regeneration is about building houses in areas that may not require them and encouraging people back into communities. For me, there is a clear difference between how you deal with objective need and housing-led regeneration.

Ms Ward: The work has not been done on that review yet. We have not had the conclusions back and we cannot comment. Obviously, we will bring the results of the review to the Committee; as soon as the consultants have finished the work, we will absolutely come here to brief you on it.

Mr F McCann: The other thing is the LOTS scheme, and I am sure you are glad to hear that I will finish on this, Chair. That has proved fairly successful in many different towns, and if we are ever to start to deal with populating the towns and cities, the LOTS scheme will play a crucial role in many ways. That needs to be pushed. It obviously needs to be resourced, and it goes back to the other question. Quite a lot of the stuff in the action plan is resource-led, but there does not seem to be any indication of what resources will be available and how they will be allocated.

Ms Ward: We have not put moneys in this yet. We have begun to think about how many staff resources and skills will be needed to take some of the work forward in the housing division in the Department for Social Development. As the work commences, and as long as we are all agreed that this is the right work to do, business cases will have to be attached to those individual bits of work and bids will have to be made for the resources to take them forward. We have not put money against those at this point, but, of course, that does not mean that we would not be bidding for them. At the minute, we have identified a starter for 10 staff resource that we would need to begin the work to take all of the action plan work forward. That is in addition to all the other work that the housing division continues to do and will not stop doing. This is additional work.

Mr F McCann: There is just one final thing. The present position with the landlord registration scheme and deposits are mentioned in the report. There has been a delay with the registration scheme. Why is that? Secondly, how is the tenancy deposit scheme working at present?

Ms Ward: I have to say that I am not very sighted on why there is a delay on the registration scheme. I will get a written update back to the Committee as soon as I can.

The Chairperson: Fra, I thought that you were going to tell us earlier that you had met every housing Minister as far back as partition, not just direct rule.

Mr F McCann: The way I feel sometimes, I probably have.

The Chairperson: Deirdre, given the importance of the private rented sector, why are we talking about not doing a review of it until 2014-15, with further implementation in 2016-17? That seems a long way off to look at the regulation of a very important sector in our housing market. Will you give us a wee bit of a rationale for that long-termism? That would take us well into the next mandate.

Ms Ward: We just had a discussion within housing division about where we thought the priorities lay but, as I have said, this is a draft action plan, so what we can do is take it back and move that item up the scale to be done earlier, based on your comments. We were just trying to balance across all the priorities what we felt were the urgent things, but we can certainly move things around.

The Chairperson: At the end of this, I was going to suggest that the Committee formally responds to your invitation to do that. I have a date in mind. We will do that within the next couple of weeks, I think, anyway.

Mr Brady: Thank you very much for your presentation. Surprisingly, I am going to ask you about theme three, which is housing and welfare reform. You have five headings, one of which is:

"Gather information on the impact of the housing-related changes".

Presumably, that is about underoccupancy/bedroom tax. So that is in abeyance at the moment?

Ms Ward: Work is being done by consultants, and I think that they are awaiting the final results on that to give some of the impacts of housing-related changes. I will get you an up-to-the-minute status report on where that research has got to.

Mr Brady: Presumably that is predicated on the notion that underoccupancy will actually come in?

Ms Ward: I think it was, yes.

Mr Brady: That is OK.

Ms Ward: We will get you a status report on where that research has got to.

Mr Brady: And:

"develop criteria for access to passported benefits"?

That will obviously be premiums, or the equivalent of premiums under universal credit. And

"Work with the NIHE to provide support for the development of additional housing advice".

Although housing advice is very important, it will not solve the problem of welfare reform. It will not provide any extra money. Under the proposed changes in underoccupancy, much has been made about the money that can be given —

Ms Ward: The discretionary housing benefit?

Mr Brady: Yes. That is limited; it is short-termism and it will not solve the problem. The other thing is:

"Work with social housing landlords to support those impacted by Welfare Reform."

I am not sure what that means; maybe you can explain. And finally:

"Increase the availability of smaller social housing units".

When the representatives of the Housing Executive were before the Committee, they made it very clear that if underoccupancy was introduced in the morning, they simply could not deal with it. Historically, we do not have such houses.

Ms Ward: We do not have the supply.

Mr Brady: So we are talking about probably five, 10 or 15 years into the future. Take the old pensioners' dwellings, or as they are now, single person's dwellings, which were subsidised: very few of them are available. The issues are smaller housing and the way that housing works here, particularly in areas like north Belfast, where there may be smaller units simply because of the prevailing situation and the fact that people could not move. I am sure that you have thought about those issues and factored them in.

The private rented sector is important because it now supplies about 70% of social housing. It gets about £100 million per year and it is totally unregulated. That is something that we have been asking about since 2007. It strikes me as peculiar that there is a sector that gets all that public money and is totally unregulated. What are your views on that?

Ms Ward: Hence the work on the action plan to begin regulation. We take the Chair's points, and we will prioritise where that comes in the timetable. On the housing advice issue, yes, you are right. If everyone came tomorrow and said "I need a one bedroom or a two bedroom", the supply or stock of houses of that nature would not be there. I am not a particular expert, but I think discretionary housing benefit is planned to be introduced over the course of three or four years. There are single units, single-bedroom units and two-bedroom units in the new development programme. It is hoped that people who might be affected by the bedroom tax will be supported until alternative accommodation that meets their needs can be found, but, yes, that is a short window in which to do that.

Mr Brady: Even if it the money is over three or four years, for an individual, it is 13 weeks and then a further 13 weeks, I think, so the most an individual could hope for would be 26 weeks.

The other issue is that the actual supply of housing is simply not available. We — or certainly I — have already spoken to people who have gone to the Housing Executive and said if this is brought in, they want to downsize. Those who have registered to downsize have been told very clearly that they could be on the waiting list for the next 20 years. The issue around this strategy is that although it may be visionary in the short term, it has to be strategic in the very long term, because we are talking about a housing strategy for the next 30 or 40 years. That is important.

Ms Ward: We will take that comment on the length of time of the discretionary housing payment back and get some clarification on that, but certainly that was the approach suggested: that people would be supported until alternative accommodation could be found.

Mr Brady: Again, that is all predicated on whether the underoccupancy comes in.

Ms Ward: Yes.

Dr H Brown: There is demographic evidence, as well, that there is increased demand for smaller social housing units. It is a step that we want.

Mr Brady: Again, it is a long-term objective.

Just in finishing, with the effects of welfare reform, it has already happened with the single-room rent. Has any monitoring exercise been done to find out the number of people who have been affected or who have had to move out? I have two points: first, that the Executive have told us that up to 6,000 people a year have become homeless as a result; and, secondly, this notion that only people on benefits are affected. Of the people affected by the single-room rent, 37% are working. I think that is important. I wonder whether any monitoring exercise has been done or proposed, because you said that you were going to monitor the impact, and that has already been in place for a year.

Ms Ward: I believe that monitoring has been done, but I am not aware of what the latest position on that is. We will get that information to you.

Ms P Brown: Thank you for your presentation today. I just wanted to ask about theme two, meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable. In paragraph 18 on page 21 of your submission, you talk about working with the Department of Health to identify the best use of resources to support independent living. Mickey and I are both on the Health Committee, and Transforming Your Care is a huge issue. The importance of the Supporting People programme has grown more, especially considering recent events and all the talk around residential care homes. What discussions or outcomes of discussions have you had with the Department of Health?

Ms Ward: We are in discussion with the Health Department very frequently, practically weekly, and we are meeting next week to begin a discussion about how we get some sort of comfort around regulation across domiciliary care as well as in residential care, so there are always ongoing discussions on that.

In relation to the Supporting People programme, there was a review of the commissioning work that we completed last year, but this is to look on a more general and policy level as to whether Supporting People is still the right policy to have, whether it meets the needs of the vulnerable and whether we are doing it the right way. We will look at it in a very strategic, policy-led way and then consider the best way to deliver that. We have planned the timing of that based on the changes that are happening in Transforming Your Care and all that, because the two things need to fit very closely together. We have said before that people get a package of solutions that includes their housing, their housing advice, their Supporting People support and their health support, and for them, it has to be a holistic package that wraps around them. They do not need to know, nor should they, which Department pays for what, but we need to understand whether we are delivering in the right way, whether it is still a fit-for-purpose policy and whether it still does what we need it to do, hence the timing of doing that now when all the other changes are taking place.

Ms P Brown: It is vital that we get this right. Thank you for that.

The Chairperson: Michael has conceded that one of his questions has already been addressed, so thank you for that, Michael. You have clocked up a brownie point for yourself there. No other members have indicated that they want to speak, so I thank Deirdre and Heloise for making the presentation this morning and dealing with the questions from members. As I said earlier, we will take up the invitation to respond formally to you. Your presentation has been very helpful to guide us in that response. Thank you, and good luck with your work on your strategy.