



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Room 412  
Parliament Buildings  
BELFAST  
BT4 3XX

Email: kevin.pelan@niassembly.gov.uk

Tel: 028 9052 1864

Fax: 028 9052 1667

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Ms Margaret Sisk  
Department for Social Development  
Lighthouse Building  
1 Cromac Place  
Gasworks Business Park  
Ormeau Road  
Belfast BT7 2JB

Dear Margaret,

**Corporate Plan 2011 – 2015 and Business Plan 2012 - 2013**

At its meeting of 3 May 2012, the Committee for Social Development received a briefing from the Minister and senior Departmental officials on the Corporate Plan 2011 – 2015 and the Business Plan for 2012/2013.

While Members recognise these plans as very important documents and welcomed the availability of them at this time, they expressed some concerns which are outlined below.

Yours sincerely

**Dr Kevin Pelan  
Clerk, Committee for Social Development**

## Housing

### Warm Homes Scheme

- Loft Insulation

The Committee highlighted in the PfG Delivery Plan that the Warm Homes Scheme is the main vehicle to address fuel poverty with a target to assist 9000 homes per year. The Committee has previously raised the issue around local councils charging building control fees in relation to loft insulation. This issue has now become a very real problem as some councils are charging fees while others, for the time-being, are not. Members expressed concerns that as a result of these fees, the target of 9000 homes to be improved per year up to an including 2014/2015 will have to be reduced by an estimated 600 homes per year. The Committee recommends that a collaborative approach is taken between the Department for Social Development, the Department for Finance and Personnel and the Department for the Environment to provide clarity and an urgent resolution to this issue.

- Social and Affordable Homes

The Programme for Government states that there will be 8000 new social or affordable houses built over the period of the PfG. Members acknowledged financial constraints but believe that 6,000 houses in the social sector will not make an impact on the current waiting list of over 40,000, 20,000 of whom are deemed to be in housing stress. Members expressed concerns that there was no mention in the Corporate Plan on the recent review into the waiting lists, how that will be handled and how people are appointed in the common selection scheme.

The Committee would like to see detailed practical measures to address these issues included in the Housing Strategy which the Department is currently drafting.

Members recognise that within the current social housing development programme there are questions to be asked in respect of how decisions are reached in the numbers of houses to be built, when they are to be built and where they are built. The Committee therefore welcomes the Performance and Delivery Efficiency Unit's consideration of this issue and would request that the Committee is notified of the outcome of this review.

The Committee recognise the economic impact that the building of new social housing can have in terms of job creation and would see this as a reason for further investment in social housing.

## **Welfare Reform**

Members drew attention to the period of 2011 – 2015, when much of the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 will be underway. Members questioned whether the Department, in particular the Social Security Agency, will be in position to deliver the added weight of welfare reform. Members expressed concerns around the possible reduction of staff as part of the 'efficiencies' being made in the next Comprehensive Spending Review. Members therefore questioned if it will be more difficult to deliver some of the serious consequences of what welfare reform represents.

Members commented that there should be more detail in the plan regarding efforts that are being made to help mitigate the impact of welfare reform here in Northern Ireland. Members questioned what, if any, variances there might be in Northern Ireland regarding the Welfare Reform Bill without breaking parity.

Members would also like to see a bigger commitment to advice services and raised the question of how these services will be funded in the future.

The Committee recommend that the Department uses any flexibility it might have during negotiations with Westminster on welfare reform.

Members acknowledged that the Welfare Reform Bill is one of the main priorities for the Department but that there are potentially a number of other pieces of legislation that the Committee will need to consider. The Committee would therefore like to see a prioritised timetable for legislation. The Committee ask for Department officials to work with the Committee staff to facilitate longer term forward planning of the work programme.

## **Urban Regeneration and Community Development**

- Policy Framework

The Committee expressed concern that while one of the milestones in the Plan is to adopt a new Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy Framework, this is only scheduled to be delivered by December 2012. Members raised concerns around the length of time it has taken to adopt a new Framework as the Department previously advised the Committee that this would be available in autumn 2011. The Committee is therefore disappointed that it will be nearly two years into the current mandate when a Policy Framework will be available.

However, the Committee welcomes the prospect of an overarching framework that aims to bring the various elements of community development and urban regeneration together.

The Committee is scheduled to have a briefing on 7 June on this Framework '*subject to Ministerial approval*'. Given the delay to date the Committee fully expects that this briefing will go ahead on 7 June.

- Neighbourhood Renewal

Members expressed concerns that the Department is not engaging with Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships at an early enough stage when developing plans, including the Corporate Plan. Members recommended that the Department should engage with Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (rural and urban) at an early stage to give it a better understanding of how things work on the ground. Members believe that this insight would help avoid the prospect of a constantly changing plan which has been a cause of concern for those involved in Neighbourhood Renewal projects.

## **Tackling Disadvantage**

The Committee is of the view that tackling disadvantage should be central to the Corporate Plan and would like to see more detail on how the proposals will specifically address this.

While welfare reform will be considered in the coming months more formally by the Committee there is concern that aspects of the proposed Bill may in fact make disadvantage even worse. The Committee is of the view that the proposals contained in the Corporate Plan as well as possible mitigating measures in relation to welfare reform, must be sufficiently robust to ensure this does not happen.

## **Budget Allocation**

While the Committee welcomes the specific targets and milestones set out in the Business Plan there are no specific budgets allocated to these. The Committee would like to see more detail on the budgets allocated to specific targets and milestones.