

Dr Kevin Pelan
Clerk, Committee for Social Development
Room 144
Parliament Buildings
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

4th September 2015

Dear Dr Pelan

Housing (Amendment) Bill

NILGA would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to give views in relation to the Housing (Amendment) Bill, and particularly welcomes the initiative of legislating for better cross-departmental working on the issues covered by the Bill.

District councils work closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services to address the issue of empty properties, and an intensive exercise was carried out by council Building Control Officers in the recent past in relation to this issue, with very positive outcomes.

Additionally, councils have responsibility for investigation and regulation of public health and neighbour nuisance, which can require close collaborative working with the Housing Executive in dealing with tenants' antisocial behaviour.

NILGA expects that the Committee will apply our comments when considering the draft Bill, and thanks it in anticipation.

Commentary on Clauses

Clause 1: Sharing of information relating to empty properties

NILGA is supportive of the intent of Clause 1, which will require the Department for Finance and Personnel, the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive to share information about empty properties and certain rating information. Local councils are keen to see vacant properties brought back into use; the legacy councils actively worked with both Departments in attempts to address this issue.

NILGA would highlight to the Committee that councils often hold relevant information at local level and it may be appropriate, should this Bill be enacted, for both Departments to contact the 11 new councils with a view to enhancing the collaborative effort.

Clause 2: Disclosure of information relating to anti-social behaviour

Council Environmental Health Departments have specific functions under the Noise Act 1996 and the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2011 to deal with noise nuisance and other types of statutory nuisance (in addition to dealing with defective privately rented dwellings) such as

- Drainage complaints
- Offensive odours
- Smoke, dust, and fumes
- Accumulation of household waste
- Accumulation of dog foul
- Ruinous and dilapidated premises

Councils have always worked closely with the Housing Executive at local level on these issues when they arise in Housing Executive properties, and this will continue post-reform. There is often a link between (particularly, noise) nuisance and anti-social behaviour, including illegal activity, and this requires sharing of information by a number of different agencies, including the police and other emergency services.

NILGA is supportive of Clause 2 as it provides legal comfort in cases where data protection may be an issue and will enhance the activity already taking place locally to share information across agencies, to deal with anti-social behaviour issues more effectively and target resources, using a 'One Public Purse' approach.

An example of information sharing of this kind can be seen in Newry Mourne and Down, where the then Newry City Council worked with other organisations locally to target anti-social behaviour in specific areas through a 'data hub'. They then developed this approach, originating from their Community Safety Partnership, to create an evidence base for their new community planning responsibilities.

They state that; *"In looking at how we move forward on community planning, it is important to remember what we are trying to achieve. Irrespective of the definition of community planning, which is sometimes contested, we all wish to use the resources we have in the best way to achieve the best quality of life for the communities we serve.*

This may mean, planning differently, working differently, thinking differently, being willing to collaborate and being willing to truly evaluate the impact of our actions. It also means that an environment needs to be created to promote innovation and creativity to try a different approach.

Newry and Mourne District Council, like many other organisations, has supported new approaches to development. In doing so, the quality of life of our citizens has been improved which was, and should be, our chief aim.

Newry and Mourne District Council has developed an evidence based planning tool to assist with identifying need in our communities. It is called the Development Management Planning site and can be viewed at www.nmdmp.com

NB: Users of the NMDMP site are required to register to access the information.

Clause 3: Registration as statutory charge of certain loans

NILGA is supportive of the DSDNI and Housing Executive intent to operate a pilot scheme of loan assistance for private sector housing repairs and improvements, and the proposal to enable the Housing Executive to register a statutory charge in respect of grants by way of loan. NILGA is satisfied that this is the most economic way to protect public finances where such loans have been made.

Clauses 4 and 5

NILGA has no comment to make in relation to these clauses.

Conclusion

NILGA is keen to see the development of local government as a partner in government and is working to establish a Programme for Local Government to complement the forthcoming 2016 – 2020 Programme for Government. As noted above, councils are willing partners in collaborative efforts to improve public services, within resource constraints, provided liabilities are not conferred.

Should you require any further information in relation to the above comments, please do not hesitate to contact me at the NILGA Offices, which will move to Bradford Court, Upper Galwally, Castlereagh, BT8 6RB from 1st September. My email and phone number will remain k.smyth@nilga.org and (028)90798972.

Yours sincerely



Karen Smyth
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