



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Housing Reform: Central Housing  
Community Network/Supporting  
Communities NI Briefing

4 July 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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### Housing Reform: Central Housing Community Network/ Supporting Communities NI Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Paula Bradley  
Ms Pam Brown  
Mr Gregory Campbell  
Mrs Judith Cochrane  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Mark Durkan

**Witnesses:**

Mr Michael Kelly	Central Housing Community Network
Ms Patricia McQuillan	Central Housing Community Network
Mr Brian Holmes	Supporting Communities NI
Mr Colm McDaid	Supporting Communities NI

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Michael Kelly, Patricia McQuillan, Brian Holmes and Colm McDaid, you are all very welcome. Brian, will you begin?

**Mr Brian Holmes (Supporting Communities NI):** Thank you very much for inviting us to come along and speak to the Committee.

We have some concern about what we have been hearing this morning because the most important people, we believe, are those who live in the communities: the tenants, the residents and the community at large. As an organisation, we have been working, along with the housing providers in Northern Ireland for many years, on trying to develop groups and individuals, supporting active citizenship and building up relationships with the housing providers.

Over the years, we have developed a number of structures, particularly with the Housing Executive, and although we heard some of the things that were said this morning, there are a lot of positive things that the executive does in the community. Its staff work with the community at large. At the moment — although it will change to suit the structural changes in the Housing Executive — we have a three-tier system, whereby at each of the Housing Executive's local outlets or district offices, there is a housing community network. That sends representatives to an area housing community network, and, in turn, area networks send representatives to a central one. All the people who are elected to the district network are all elected by their own community and they represent their community. In most cases, they are not there just on the one issue of housing. They do not look at housing on its own, but at what happens in the community at large. All those elected to the district are elected by their communities to represent their communities. In most cases, they are not there just on one issue —

housing, for example — but they are looking at housing not as an island on its own but at what happens in a community at large. If we do not get housing right, we do not get volunteers into the community to become active in other areas of work.

With that in mind, at a district housing community level, the members meet the district manager and other staff who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the service. That can be anything from the counter service that is provided when you come into the office to dealing with some of the stuff that you have been talking about, whether it is planned schemes or response maintenance schemes, but also looking at community safety, community cohesion and antisocial behaviour — everything that affects a community. One of the things that we are also trying to do with the housing providers is sustain tenancies, because we want to build up communities. We know that there is a debate about whether you should have a secure tenancy at all, but if we do not, will we have communities at all?

When we look at an area, we look at the quality of services. Those people have met the contractors and discussed their concerns about what is good and what is bad. They have also developed systems and consultation standards that are implemented by the contractor and by the Housing Executive so that there is the best possible delivery of service. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, they do not get involved with some of the things that are being talked about this morning, such as finance and contracts, but they do get involved in the delivery of the service. They are becoming the eyes and ears of the Housing Executive, as well as becoming the eyes and ears of the community that is getting the service.

They monitor other services. Over the past few years, the executive has changed the system to the customer service unit. I remember that the executive took the Central Housing Community Network over to England to look at how a customer service unit would run. We would love the opportunity, as the Minister and others have been saying, to look at how other people deliver services. There seems to be a gap. In many ways, we are hearing what Ministers or officials want us to hear. Perhaps we should get the community to go to look. Perhaps we should also look inward, because there is a great deal of good practice. Whatever happens to housing in future, we do not want to lose existing good practice because somebody has seen something across the water.

Part of the role of the Area Housing Community Network is to develop good practice and share it across an area, and, in turn, to share it through the Central Housing Community Network. The group meets monthly with senior members of executive staff. It looks at policies that affect tenancies, and it gives its views and opinions, we hope, before they go to the board for approval. There are other things that it has done over the years. During the bad weather a few years ago, it developed an adverse weather policy at local level to help the Housing Executive and other statutory bodies to help people at risk, such as the elderly and the disabled, to ensure that they were OK should there be similar problems in future. People sign up to that.

We spoke to the Minister about welfare reform and have had an input to how it might affect the residents of a community. I keep mentioning residents because I do not think we should just talk about tenants. They make up a community. The executive is responsible directly for the tenant, but antisocial behaviour affects the whole community. Grass-cutting affects the whole community. If you are in a block of flats and some are sold, you, the resident, are involved in the service that is being provided. So please be careful about just mentioning tenants: it is a community that we are trying to build.

There are other things that we do with the Housing Executive. We have developed mystery shopping exercises, which cover every district office. They give the community reps the opportunity to go in and look at the services that are being provided. They either go directly to the district office or they make phone calls. They have a checklist of what the policy is so that they can see whether it is being met. We have done other things, such as tenant-led inspections, where we look at a service, such as housing benefit, from the eyes of the person on that benefit. We go through the system and see how we can improve it.

We also develop estate inspections, which goes back to what I said earlier about the community. When a community group is formed, we want to ensure that it represents the entire community. Therefore, we do estate inspections involving the Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development, the Housing Executive, the council, the PSNI and everybody who has an input into a community. Then we form inter-agency groups that try to deal with those issues because, often, due to the way in which we are set up in Northern Ireland, several agencies are involved in delivering or resolving a service. I am sure that members are well aware that we try to find out who

owns a piece of land, although, sometimes, it can become very difficult to find out who is responsible for it.

We also monitor grounds maintenance. We have a system whereby each time the grass is cut, the community group will send a pro forma to the district office, because if it is done well, we want to hear that it was done well. If there are problems, we want them to be resolved there and then. Again, the community reps are the eyes and ears of the housing provider, whether it be the Housing Executive or a housing association. I refer to Professor Paddy Gray's recent remarks about the future: can and should tenants have a greater say in housing management? Should housing organisations do more to support their tenants through employment opportunities, etc? To some degree, that is what the Minister was talking about. He talked to us about that as well. Housing is not an island on its own. How can we engage with the community?

I referred a few weeks ago to the old ACE scheme, for those who remember it. We employed local people to work for the benefit of a community. To some degree, we have lost that. The debate that you had this morning highlights that as well. We have a model of participation in which tenants can play a key role in scrutinising and, indeed, an enhanced role as we develop. Again, contrary to what has been said this morning, tenants would say that they would prefer, if not the executive, at least a similar body. I do not want to generalise about housing associations. However, in many cases, they do not deliver the service that the Housing Executive delivers; they do not have local offices; they manage from a distance; and it can be very difficult for people to contact them. That is due to their size and where their headquarters are. Whatever happens, we would like to see the models that have been developed with the executive continuing. When we are working, we need to look at housing; however, we also need to look at social, environmental and economic issues — everything that makes up a community. We cannot just put housing on an island and say, "Well, that is OK. That has solved the problem." It has not. We have to engage with all those other issues.

Tenants and community residents' reps need to have an input into the strategic role that is being played. We met Jim Wilkinson, who was here earlier, and got a commitment from him that the Department will engage. However, we are concerned about whether it will engage with the community when decisions are made. Will community reps be part of decision-making? One thing that we suggested, which did not go down particularly well, was whether there should be a shadow board of residents and communities. We have heard that in future we will have a board member or perhaps two, but is that tokenism? Often, when housing associations get their community involvement strategy together and get a chairperson, the chairperson automatically goes on to the board and everything else stops. There is no mechanism for engagement with the people whom they represent. Therefore, we need to ensure that, whatever happens in future, there is engagement right down into the community that is something similar to what we already have.

Whatever happens in future, we must ensure that it is legislated for. Do not hope that someone will do it: ensure that it is embedded in legislation and that the community has a say, whether on a shadow board or whatever other mechanism that is put in place. Otherwise some people will do it and some will not. There are some very good housing associations that engage with their tenants and the community at large; they are part of interagency groups, and it is important that they play that role from day one.

There are concerns about the transfer of stock. We have seen the lists of some of the estates or areas that have been transferred. The community has not been engaged; the announcement is there; those areas are picked; the criteria that were used; and why they were not asked. If those people were offered new kitchens and new heating systems, they would probably jump at it, but what guarantees do we have that the rent will not jump at the same time? Welfare reform is coming in and there will be all sorts of problems.

We have included it in our briefing, and I do not want to go through it again, but we met the Minister and we looked at the regulation and the inspection side, and he has given us the commitment that it will be transparent, etc, but transparent in what way? When we are involved with communities and when we look at any tenant participation, there are a number of levels that that can be played at. Over the past year or two, we carried out an exercise with the community about where they want to be involved. In some cases, when we looked at planned maintenance, response maintenance, allocations and selections, some people felt that it was down to the individual and that we should be involving the individual. At what level should the community groups become involved? Should they be informed about the information, should they be involved in it, should they be consulted about it or should they be partners in it? We have forwarded, through the Committee Clerk, the information that we got from the community about when they would like to be informed, when they would like to be

consulted, when they would like to be involved, and when they would like to participate. There are not many cases where they want to take control because they are happy with the Housing Executive's service, and they are happy with the relationship that has been built up over the years with executive staff. What you are talking about today was at a certain level. However, in many, many cases, the delivery of the service is excellent as is the relationship.

We are concerned about the rent-setting regime. Will the community have any input into it and what will happen? There will be an increase, but how quickly will it take place, and when will the housing associations' rents meet the Housing Executive's rent? With welfare reform coming in, there is a great deal of concern.

The Minister talked about the regional housing body. Will the community have any input into that or will it be set aside completely and run through the Department without any input from the community? There are concerns that the community would like to have input into that.

There are good practices with regard to the landlord functions, and we are more than happy to share that good practice. That is what we want to maintain, and let us build on the existing good practice and good relationships with existing housing associations and the Housing Executive. Let us not lose it.

If we go down to four, five, six or seven housing associations, will we parachute in some housing associations? Will they understand the relationship in the Province? At one stage, I heard it mentioned that if you are living in Belfast and you get an offer in Dungannon, people in England would see that as a reasonable offer. It is not reasonable here because of the infrastructure and how we are made up. Again, we need the community to have an input.

The Minister made a commitment that his officials would continue to involve us. We are not sure what that involvement will be, when it will be or at what level. However, it is important that they be involved at all levels for the future. Thank you very much.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much. Patricia, Michael and Colm, do you want to add anything?

At a recent information day that the Committee had, the role of tenants and the community was at the forefront, and that is recognised. With regard to some of your remarks, my association and contact with the Housing Executive over many years has been satisfactory at local level, and I put that on record. I have a few questions. I am not sure whether other members have indicated that they want to come in, but if they have, I will certainly bring them in.

The Department provided a briefing paper on social housing reform. The Central Housing Community Network has agreed to act as a forum for engagement with existing Housing Executive tenants. Can you update us on the discussions that the committee has had with the Department? How do you intend to engage with tenants?

**Mr Holmes:** The problem is that we have had only one meeting with the Department, which was a fortnight ago. Colm attended the seminar at the La Mon Hotel and Country Club; it was a stakeholders' meeting. It was at that meeting that we told the Department how we feel we should be involved. We are waiting for the Department to come back to us to say when, where and how. That is the stage that we are at. From some of the things that were being said this morning, we are concerned that many decisions are being made, or have perhaps already been made, with no engagement with the customers.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** The Committee, as, I am sure, you are aware, has been very focused on housing and on facilitating the likes of the meeting at the La Mon hotel. It was a very useful meeting, and I think that everyone who participated agrees with that. Hopefully, that engagement will continue.

Has the Department said anything about your proposals for community participation? What are the barriers to better community participation, and how can they be addressed?

**Mr Holmes:** Your first question is on what the Department has said on community participation. We have done that exercise with between 400 and 500 community groups that are engaging with the Housing Executive. We looked at all areas that they are engaged with. I mentioned planned schemes, response, community cohesion, the modernising service, customer service units — all the

areas that are on the day-to-day delivery of services. Out of that, we have highlighted where the community wants to be involved. We have, therefore, put down a marker for the Department on the day-to-day delivery of services.

We have a number of methods of involving the community. As I said, there is a housing community network in each district, and every bona fide group can participate in that or in an inter-agency forum. Where there are areas in which there are no groups, we have been developing village voices or community champions, but, again, those people have to be elected by the community that they represent. Therefore, it is important that we have information coming and that people know who represents them. We provide an e-biz and an e-zine on a weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis. That keeps all the members up to date on any process and progress, not only on housing but on all issues that affect the community. For example, the Minister's initial statement was put in full so that the whole community could see what had been said. However, there is perhaps still a gap between Stormont and the people who live in the estate. We need to work on getting the message out to people because we need to engage. People will see 'Spotlight', and they will form their own opinion, but, at the end of the day, they are concerned about their estate, their area, the service that is being delivered to them, who is delivering it, how it is being delivered and whether they are happy with it. As you said, Mr Chairman, on the whole, the customer is happy with the service provided.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Do you acknowledge that in areas where there is a very strong community and voluntary infrastructure, as there has been for many years in my constituency and in the Newry area, it is easier to get participation and engagement with communities in estates and to get feedback on what people are looking for in housing, particularly social housing?

**Mr Holmes:** One of the problems that we have found is that many groups form for one issue; they succeed or fail and then disappear. Over the years, we have been trying to look at the global picture in an area, so that it is not just one issue. There are also people who are happy to participate but who do not necessarily want to sit on committees. We need to make sure that we engage with those people.

You asked about Michael and Patricia. We did a little exercise a year or two back on what the Housing Executive or housing providers get in return. Do you want to mention your findings?

**Ms Patricia McQuillan (Central Housing Community Network):** I am one of the volunteers in a couple of groups in a wee place called Moneydig.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that I have heard of it.

**Ms P McQuillan:** You have? You might have walked past it, blinked and missed it. It is a fabulous wee place. We are just finished the scheme because we got the windows.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I hope that you got the right type.

**Ms P McQuillan:** We are one of the groups that got the windows. It took a long time to get them, but that is another story. The Central Housing Community Network alone has 10 meetings a year and at least 12 people attend. Travel and the meeting take approximately four and a half hours, so those are 540 hours committed by members a year for just the Central Housing Community Network. To be in the Central Housing Community Network, you have to be in the Area Housing Community Network as well, and there we have five meetings per area and 25 meetings in the 37 districts, with a minimum of approximately two representatives.

There is a 75% attendance rate, which is quite good; that equates to 56. The average number of hours involved, including travel, is about three, which gives a total of 4,200 hours for everybody at the area meetings. To be elected for area meetings, you have to be involved in the District Housing Community Network. That is at the very local level, and there are 35 District Housing Community Networks. On average, we meet five times a year unless there is something special, with an average of 10 members, although there are usually far more. The meetings last for two and a half hours, so there is 4,375 hours for just the District Housing Community Networks.

That is all fine, but every person in the housing community networks is a volunteer or community worker. At least 500 groups are involved in the housing community networks. If a volunteer works a minimum of just one hour per week, which seldom happens, and there are 52 hours per week, that

gives an estimated 260,000 voluntary hours done by community people involved in the housing community networks.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** You have convinced me of the importance of volunteers — not that I needed to be convinced.

**Mr Holmes:** What Patricia has shown is that there is a very valuable asset out there.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Absolutely.

**Mr Holmes:** If that asset is not used or is pushed aside, the loser will be the housing provider.

Michael is involved in a social economy project in Omagh. Michael, do you want to mention that quickly?

**Mr Michael Kelly (Central Housing Community Network):** I live in Strathroy, Omagh, which is a large estate and is in the top 10 for social deprivation figures. We worked with the Housing Executive, which had old garages when it had its DLO depot there. We got the lease from the Housing Executive and turned those garages around, forming them into Strathroy Enterprise Ltd. We have a number of projects such as Sure Start and Strule Recycling.

We have seven units fully occupied now for 12 years. A number of years ago, the Housing Executive entered them for the Citizens' Advice Bureau award, and we came third. The enterprise is important for the community because 57 people from that community work there, which starts a wee social economy. We have a profit of about £20,000 per year, which goes back into the community for the senior citizens' club, a youth club, a playgroup and an after-school club. We have a wee project with the Housing Executive that supports people between the ages of 16 and 25 who experience difficulties living at home or who are leaving care, and we refurbish flats with some of that money. It helps those young people who have not had a contract for two years. The idea is that they will move on and live independently in the community. That is an important part of people's lives.

The thing about the Central Housing Community Network is that we all live on housing estates. We are there the whole time, and everything that happens there affects tenants and residents alike. It took us a long time to get to where we are in the Central Housing Community Network and to get the Housing Executive to recognise that we really did represent tenants and communities. We have got there now and, as both Brian and I have said, it is important that communities are not left behind or put aside no matter what new structure comes into place. That is where the heart of the community lies.

I know, Chair, that you gave a presentation in Omagh recently. We are facing welfare reforms that will leave many people gasping, we have experienced awful fuel poverty in communities, and Brian talked about the severe winters that we have had. Some community representatives were out on Christmas Day and Boxing Day seeing people who had burst pipes, and I am sure that, as elected representatives, you were probably doing the same. That cannot be lost. It is vital in the restructure that the community side be kept there. No one is here because they are being paid to be here: they volunteer in their communities because they want to improve them. That means dealing with antisocial behaviour and everything that happens; weekend parties, and so on. We do not get invited to them, but we end up having to sort them out.

**Mr Holmes:** What Michael is saying is key, in that if we do not engage with the community, if they do not feel part of it, if they do not feel part of the development of the process, we will lose everything that Patricia and Michael talked about; we will just be counting numbers and not have communities at all. That is critical to the future of whoever the housing providers may be.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** That is something that we are all aware of. No other members have indicated that they have any questions, so I would just like to thank you all very much for a very informative presentation.

I knew I recognised Michael from somewhere.

**Ms P McQuillan:** Once seen, never forgotten.

**Mr Holmes:** Thank you.