



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Our Ref: CSD/017/2011/SK

Mr Billy Crawford
Department for Social Development
Lighthouse Building
1 Cromac Place
Gasworks Business Park
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Belfast BT7 2JB

Dear Billy,

Committee response on Draft Action Plan for Housing Strategy

At its meeting on 9 May 2013, the Committee for Social Development received a briefing from the Department on the draft action plan for the Housing Strategy.

Please find in Annex A a response from the Committee on the draft action plan.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Pelan

Dr Kevin Pelan
Clerk, Committee for Social Development

Annex A

Government Roles: The Committee welcomes the department's inclusion of a fifth role for Government relating to equality of opportunity:

Role 5: To promote equality of opportunity in housing in NI and to promote good relations

The Committee note the importance of this role particularly in the light of the recent OFMdFM announcement on good relations. The Committee views the development of shared communities based on good practice as key to the development and promotion of good relations.

Theme 1- Ensuring Access to Decent, Affordable, Sustainable Homes Across All Tenures

Action 1: The Committee welcomes the action to review the statutory fitness standard across all tenures and the aim to establish a new enhanced minimum standard. However, the Committee believes that this should be conducted in conjunction with the Committee's proposed timescales for regulation of the private rented sector.

Action 2: The Committee welcomes the action to review the private rented sector but suggests that this should be referred to as a 'comprehensive' review of the sector. In addition, given that the Housing Executive pays out more than £250 million to tenants on low incomes in the private rented sector and the potential reduction to housing benefit as a result of welfare reform, the Committee believes that the review of the private rented sector is a priority and should therefore begin in 2013-2014 with implementation in 2015-2016 a year early than proposed in the current draft.

Action 3: The Committee notes that in 2013-2014 the department intends to agree proposals on HMOs and also take forward new legislation, yet it intends to identify the 'legislative vehicle' to take proposals on HMOs forward in 2014-2015. It appears to the Committee that it will be necessary to have identified the legislative vehicle before it is possible to take the legislation forward. The Committee therefore fails to see why the legislative vehicle cannot be identified in 2013-2014 and therefore taken forward sooner than outlined in the current draft.

Members of the Committee recognise the proliferation of Houses in Multiple Occupancy in certain areas and are in favour of a stricter regulation scheme that includes placing a cap on the number of HMOs in an area.

Action 4: The Committee has some concerns about the harmonisation of standards between social housing builds and private housing development. In particular it is concerned that this will entail the relaxation of standards in

social housing. The Committee does not support reducing standards in the social housing sector.

Theme 2: Meeting Housing Needs and Supporting the Most Vulnerable

Action 14: The Committee will be hosting a stakeholder event on 6th June to consider the pressing issue of negative equity and repossessions in the local housing market. The Committee therefore welcomes the department's intention to establish a taskforce to investigate this and to advise on courses of action for potential Government intervention. The Committee hopes its event will contribute to the department's consideration of this issue.

However, the Committee notes that there are no targets set for implementation of any identified actions relating to the taskforce despite the proposed objective to reduce the impact of repossessions on both vulnerable households and the wider housing market. The Committee would therefore welcome the inclusion of such targets.

Action 16: The Committee supports the fundamental concept of need as the basis of any future housing allocation policy.

Action 18: The Committee believes that the Supporting People Programme should be reviewed as a matter of urgency and dealt with in a cross-cutting way to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately to support independent living. The review should therefore take place in 2013-2014 rather than 2014-2015.

Theme 3: Housing and Welfare Reform

Action 19: The Committee note that the department intends to gather information on the housing-related changes of Welfare Reform and welcomes this. However, at the Committee's recent housing event stakeholders felt that the cumulative impact of all the welfare reform changes should be considered, not just the housing-related changes, given that these are likely to affect the overall income of benefit recipients.

The Committee would therefore like to see this action changed to include the 'Gather information on the cumulative impact of all welfare reform changes'.

The Committee would also like to see the objective changed to 'enable the most effective implementation of mitigation measures to address welfare reform'.

Action 22: The Committee notes the action to work with social housing landlords to support those impacted by Welfare Reform but also notes that there is no mention of tenants. The Committee would like to see the inclusion of tenants in this action.

Action 23: The Committee agrees that to encourage housing associations to deliver more single units the number of single units to be built should be

based on those figures provided by housing associations and confirmed by the department. Given that this is scheduled for 2013-2014 the Committee therefore questions why a figure of 200 single units is specified within the SHDP for 2013-2014.

Theme 4: Driving Regeneration and Sustaining Communities Through Housing

Action 26: Members welcomed the proposal to review Living Over The Shops (LOTS) programme and viewed this as an important aspect of town centre regeneration.

Action 28: Although this action refers to generating employment and training opportunities by working with registered housing associations and 'others' there is no reference to the Department of Employment and Learning. The Committee believes that collaboration between the two departments will be necessary if the objective to support social housing tenants to enter training or employment is to be achieved.

Action 29: The Committee supports the development of the Shared Community Programme but it would wish to emphasise that building a 'shared community' means focussing on people in order to help build good relations. Therefore while the delivery of housing schemes within Belfast City Centre shared community boundary is to be welcomed the residents of these areas should be given support to help nurture and develop good relations. The Committee also believes that the department should base this programme on existing best practice schemes and continue to strongly support these.

Theme 5: Getting the Structures Right

Action 33: This relates to taking forward the Social Housing Reform Programme. The Committee acknowledges that a briefing is scheduled for early July on how the department intends to take forward this programme. However, it has concerns that this is itself a very significant work programme and it questions whether the department has the capacity to take this forward as well as the other elements of the draft action plan concurrently. The Committee would therefore like to be assured that the targets and timescales noted in the action plan will not be impacted by the roll out of work relating to the Social Housing Reform Programme.

