



SOUTH BELFAST PARTNERSHIP BOARD

Karen Mills
Department for Social Development
Housing Director's Office
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Dear Ms Mills

Facing the Future: Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland, Consultation Response

The following consultation response has been prepared by the South Belfast Partnership Board in consultation with a number of local community organisations in South Belfast, including the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership and the South West Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership.

Broadly speaking, we welcome the overarching vision that everyone should have the opportunity to access good quality housing at a reasonable cost, which serves to sustain and support economic recovery, create employment opportunities and help to regenerate some of our most deprived and neglected communities. In particular, we welcome the proposals outlined to promote the development of affordable homes, including greater competition and partnership working in the delivery of new social homes.

However, in this regard, we would note that the document is heavily focussed on the role of the statutory sector and private sector, including social landlords and housing associations. It consequently fails to acknowledge or address the valuable contribution the community and voluntary sector (CVS) plays in the provision of housing advice and support, addressing housing problems arising within communities and in leading the regeneration process. And that is without the Department funding directly a vast number of CVS organisations in relation to physical regeneration and housing under the cross-Government Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.

Within this context, we have sought to set out a number of more specific comments in relation to the five themes identified within the draft Strategy.

South Belfast Partnership

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Ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures

Broadly speaking, we welcome the range of proposals outlined within this theme, including increasing access to affordable homes, funding new social housing, making the private rented sector more attractive, providing much better regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), improving housing standards across all sectors and improving energy efficiency of all housing stock.

A number of these matters have been recognised as priorities within South Belfast, through the Strategic Regeneration Framework for South Belfast and the Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans. In the South West Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan, for example, Action 6A.5 commits the Neighbourhood Partnership to lobbying for the delivery of “high quality new housing within the South West area, including high standards of fuel efficiency and carbon reduction technologies.”

However, South Belfast is unique in terms of housing issues and there are a number of matters that we feel have not been effectively considered as part of the strategy. For example, the presence of Queen’s University, whilst bringing significant economic and social benefits to this area of the City, also brings a range of issues connected with anti-social behaviour and the transient nature of students, particularly within the Holylands, but also impacting upon most of the inner-city South Belfast communities. Linked to this, is the presence of high concentrations of ethnic minority groups within South Belfast. It is well documented that such groupings may have different housing needs, as well as introducing complex community relations issues in the NI context.

It is disappointing that the word student only appears twice within the draft Strategy and in both cases this is in relation to training and employment opportunities. This is despite the expansion of the University of Ulster including the opening of a new campus in the north of Belfast, as well as the construction of a new Metropolitan College in the Titanic Quarter and the presence of Queen’s and two teacher training colleges in the City. Black and minority ethnic communities do not feature at all within the Strategy.

Whilst the section relating to the improved regulation of HMO is to be welcomed, we believe this could move much further. For example, whilst we welcome the introduction of a landlord’s registration scheme, a tenancy deposit scheme and a dispute resolution service, the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership have suggested under Action 1B.3 that a Landlord’s Charter could be prepared to set out the expectations of how landlords should manage their properties and interact with the communities within which their properties are based. Alongside this, the Inner South Belfast area have also recognised significant social problems, such as crime and anti social behaviour, associated with high concentrations of other non -standard residential accommodation types, such as hostels. Again, this is not addressed within the Housing Strategy.

Within the Holylands, recognition of these issues has led to the establishment of an Inter-Agency Group, led by Belfast City Council, who have undertaken a specific study looking at how a number of issues associated with students and HMOs could be more effectively addressed. As part of this, there are a number of recommendations that may be of relevance to a higher level strategic Housing Strategy. These include:

- The need for a student housing strategy, particularly given the growing numbers of students in Belfast;
- The need for HMOs to be better controlled, managed and regulated, including the introduction of an accreditation scheme for student housing;

- The need for a coherent policy and approach to purpose built student accommodation, which may reduce over-reliance on the private rented sector; and
- Implications for other Government Departments such as DOE and Planning Service if more focused planning policies are needed with regards to the provision of purpose-built student accommodation and the management of HMOs. DSD can play a strong role in helping bring about these broader improvements in the policy framework.

Clearly, in advance of the transfer of responsibility for regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupancy to the District Council under the review of public administration and local Government reform, as well as wider regeneration powers, there is a need for a stronger strategic policy framework within which the new Council's should operate.

Meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable

We are fully supportive of the provision of social housing based on need, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable. Desired outcomes within the two Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans in South Belfast include the need to supply housing that “meets the recognised needs” (Inner South Belfast) and the need for “good quality and affordable housing across the range of tenures that meets the needs of those living or wishing to live in the area” (South West Belfast).

In particular, it is noted that we need to build a good evidence base for housing need in the area and we welcome the proposal to undertake a review of social housing allocations and making better use of existing social housing stock. However, it should also be recognised that other long-term vacant premises could be better utilised to meet housing needs (see Action 1C.3 of the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan), which will also tie to the proposals recognised under the ‘driving regeneration and sustaining communities’.

Housing and Welfare Reform;

We welcome the recognition that changes to housing benefit, being introduced as part of Welfare Reform, pose particular challenges and opportunities over the next few years. We welcome the commitment to providing additional support to households affected through the transition to ensure that everyone continues to have access to affordable and sustainable housing.

We would highlight the important role that the CVS plays in this regard in terms of providing advice and support to individuals in relation to housing issues and would emphasise the need to continue to invest in these vital front-line services in advance of and during the implementation of the welfare reform agenda. However, the draft Housing Strategy focuses solely on the on the statutory sector and fails to acknowledge the role our sector can play in partnership with statutory providers to deliver better targeted and effective services.

Driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing;

We welcome the recognition that housing plays an important role in the wider regeneration of our neighbourhoods and are supportive of the proposals to bring more long-term empty properties back into use, better address anti social behaviour in housing and providing more opportunities to build integrated, sustainable and shared communities.

Within the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Area, the Action Plan specifically outlines an initiative at Action 1C.3 to “use long-term vacant properties locally as family-type social housing”. We therefore support the proposal to develop an Empty Homes Action Plan leading to an Empty Homes Initiative and would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department and Housing Executive in taking some of these proposals forward locally.

To this end we are pleased to see that the Strategy proposes collaborative working within DSD, across Government and with local communities to address blight and reverse community decline through housing-led regeneration. Again, we look forward to continuing to work in meaningful partnership with the Department in the delivery of regeneration across South Belfast. We would note that the communities are a valuable resource and source of information in relation to information on housing issues and about empty homes, etc.

In this regard, there has been a constant struggle within the community sector in how we can best flag up and help address some of the causes of anti-social behaviour to the statutory sector. We understand that protocols are now in place to allow for better sharing of information within the statutory sector; however, the community sector are able to feed information into statutory sectors, but are not often, due to data protection legislation, able to assist in addressing some of the problems that emerge. We would therefore urge the Department to consider as part of the Housing Strategy how the community can be more effectively involved in addressing the matters that they are aware of within their own areas, in partnership with the statutory sector.

Getting the structures right

As outlined throughout our response, we would encourage the Department to see the CVS as a valuable resource and partner within the delivery of housing and broader social objectives. We would therefore welcome greater commitment from the statutory sector in engaging effectively with community partners when taking forward proposals. We have often been frustrated at the difficulties in engaging the housing associations within the Neighbourhood Renewal and regeneration processes and would welcome and encouragement, perhaps through contractual obligations, for social housing providers to engage effectively with community structures in addressing housing needs and problems that arise.

Conclusion

We trust that you find these comments useful and look forward to seeing how they help shape the final Strategy in due course. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised within this response with the Department, so please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like any further information or clarity in relation to any of our comments.

Yours sincerely



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on behalf of the South Belfast Partnership Board