



Department for

Communitieswww.communities-ni.gov.uk

From: Tracy Meharg
Permanent Secretary

Level 9
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
BELFAST
BT2 7EG

Telephone: 028 90 823301
E-mail: tracy.meharg@communities-ni.gov.uk
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Cllr Martin Kearney
Mid Ulster District Council
Burn Road
Cookstown
BT80 8DT

Via e-mail info@midulstercouncil.org

Dear Cllr Kearney

FUTURE OF THE WELFARE MITIGATION SCHEMES BEYOND MARCH 2020

Thank you for your letter of 4 November 2019 to David Sterling, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, in which you ask for an update on the future of the welfare mitigation schemes beyond March 2020. As it is the Department for Communities that has responsibility for these schemes your correspondence has been passed to me for reply.

Mitigation schemes post 31 March 2020

As you may be aware, the legislation made following the Fresh Start Agreement which provides authority to make welfare supplementary mitigation payments will end from 31 March 2020. In the continued absence of the Assembly the Department is not able to make amendments to the existing legislation to extend the schemes beyond this date as regulations would be subject to Affirmative Resolution, which means there must be a confirmatory vote in the Assembly.

You refer to the Westminster Joint Inquiry into welfare policy in Northern Ireland which acknowledged the fact that - *"The Department for Communities cannot change the legislation to extend the payments as it would need to be approved by the Assembly"* (page 4).

It was on this basis that the Joint Inquiry recommended that the UK Government bring forward appropriate legislation for specific welfare mitigation schemes to be continued for a period of four years. It will be a decision for the Secretary of State whether the required legislation will be taken forward at Westminster in the absence of an Assembly.

The Department is aware of the challenges likely to arise from the termination of the welfare mitigation package and continues to assess all available evidence of the potential impact from the schemes ending to ensure that appropriate advice is available for an incoming Minister.

I would also highlight that officials are taking the necessary steps to prepare for a possible extension of the existing welfare mitigation schemes should appropriate legislation be made either by the Assembly or at Westminster. Simultaneously, the Department is working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on preparatory work to broaden the eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme should that become necessary (i.e. should an extension of the existing schemes not be feasible). This alternative would ensure that if the Social Sector Size Criteria mitigation scheme ends on 31 March 2020 then affected claimants will be able to apply for financial support.

Any change to the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme would be made using the authority of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 on the basis that such a change would be in the public interest. This is potentially possible as the relevant legislation is subject to Negative Resolution, that is, any legislative amendments can be passed without an Assembly vote.

However, I must stress that Discretionary Housing Payment provision would not be an extension of the existing welfare mitigation scheme. It requires an application from the claimant and it is a discretionary scheme therefore a payment cannot be legally guaranteed. These issues were also highlighted in the Westminster Joint Inquiry report.

Finally, it should be stressed that no decision has yet been made on the issue, and that officials continue to work on exploring all options.

I trust you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tracy Meharg', written in a cursive style.

**TRACY MEHARG
PERMANENT SECRETARY**

Muintir Na Mointeach Ltd

c/o 15 Ferry Rd
Coalisland
Dungannon
Co. Tyrone
BT71 4QT

Tel : 028 87 740636
Email: thebay15@gmail.com

Anthony Tohill
Chief Executive
Mid-Ulster District Council
Burn Road
Cookstown
Co Tyrone
BT80 8DT

7th Nov 2019

Dear Mr Tohill,


Re: Washingbay Development Proposals

As you are aware Muintir na Mointeach, the local community group in the Washingbay ward, has been working closely with Council, the Mid Ulster RDP, the Lough Neagh Partnership and with Sport NI to establish a number capital development programme at the Washingbay that would facilitate a range of heritage, access and recreational focused activities. We recently completed phase one of our site Masterplan programme and are on target to complete the remaining projects by March 2020. Phase one included the creation of a 1km, £250k Walking route which Council maintains and which transverses over both Council and local GAC property and which was officially launched earlier this year with the Council Chairperson Mr Kearney in attendance.

As the Council Development Committee were instrumental in providing match funds and permissions for this project to go ahead last year, we would be delighted to invite some of the former Committee officers down to the site to witness at first hand the remarkable success the project is having in the community. It would be great if the Chair and Vice Chairperson or indeed any Council member were able to visit as without your assistance, the Walking route project would not have been possible nor the incredible user numbers achieved.

We wish again to thank Council for its support and look forward hopefully to hosting a visit in the near future .

Yours Sincerely


Conor S.P. Corr,
Projects Officer, Muintir na Mointeach

cc. Adrian McCreesh (MUDC)