

Minutes of Meeting of the Development Committee of Mid Ulster District Council held on Wednesday 6 December 2023 in the Council Offices, Burn Road, Cookstown and by Virtual Means

Members Present

Councillor McNamee, Chair

Councillors Bell*, Black*, W Buchanan, F Burton*, Clarke*, Corry, Gildernew*, McLernon, McQuade*, Milne*, Monteith*, Quinn*, Wilson

Officers in Attendance

Mr Black, Strategic Director of Communities & Place (SD: C&P)

Mr Gordon, Assistant Director of Health, Leisure and Wellbeing (AD: HL&W)**

Ms McKeown, Assistant Director of Economic Development, Tourism and Strategic Programmes (AD: EDT&SP)**

Mr O McGuckin, ICT Support

Mrs Grogan, Committee and Member Services Officer

Others in Attendance

Deputation:

Department for Communities – Affordable Warmth Scheme
Adrian Boyce and David Polley

Northern Ireland Housing Executive –
Emma Stubbs

* Denotes Members present in remote attendance

** Denotes Officers present by remote means

*** Denotes Others present by remote means

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm.

The Chair, Councillor McNamee welcomed everyone to the meeting and those watching the meeting through the Live Broadcast. Councillor McNamee in introducing the meeting detailed the operational arrangements for transacting the business of the committee in the chamber and by virtual means, by referring to Annex A to this minute.

D191/23 Notice of Recording

This meeting will be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast on the Council's You Tube site.

D192/23 Apologies

C Linney, Assistant Director of Development (AD: Dev).

D193/23 Declaration of Interests

The Chair, Councillor McNamee reminded Members of their responsibility with regard to declaration of interest.

Councillor F Burton declared an interest in Agewell as a member through Council.

Councillor Corry declared an interest in Agewell as a member through Council.

D194/23 Chair's Business

None.

D195/23 Deputation – Department for Communities – Affordable Warmth Scheme

The Chair welcomed to the committee Mr David Polley, Adrian Boyce from Department for Communities (DfC) and Ms Emma Stubbs from Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and invited them to make their presentation to members.

Mr Polley provided members with an update on the background to the whole situation and advised that we were coming to the end of the Affordable Warmth Scheme and a decision had to be made what to do. Mr Polley advised that a serious engagement had taken place with Councils alongside DfC deliberating setting their own budgets and although going through different stages, it was still happening at the same time between Christmas and the summer last year. Mr Polley said that the DfC were advised that they were going to have to work within an extremely difficult budget, both in terms of resource running costs and capital which included Affordable Warmth Scheme. DfC prioritised Affordable Warmth Scheme but nevertheless the capital was reduced in the end but were still talking to Councils to decide whether to extend the Affordable Warmth Scheme as the business case was running out in September 2023. A clear message was being received from Councils that given where we had been at the start of the Affordable Warmth Scheme, the amount of referrals they had been expecting there needed to be ability to provide a forward look for a referral model to see what future budgets would be, which would be difficult for Councils to keep involved with the Affordable Warmth Scheme. One Council had already dropped out of the scheme, with another threatening to do so, but other Councils had alluded to their willingness to keep working on the Affordable Warmth Scheme, but all Councils did point out that it was extremely difficult due to the number of referrals continuing to drop, resulting in the amount allocated dropping also, but none the less Council still had to retain staff to operate this scheme. It was going to prove difficult as DfC could not confirm a budget and at the beginning of the year, the DfC's EQIA advised of closing the budget for the Affordable Warmth Scheme, a strong message was received given that fuel prices were very high, the level of fuel poverty and the cost of living crisis that this wouldn't be acceptable. DfC had to do what they could to keep the Affordable Warmth Scheme open which was also the message that Council was giving them as it was costing them, research was carried out and this was confirmed as Councils were subsidising the scheme and were also under pressure. Mr Polley advised that DfC were looking at a budget just to keep the scheme open and at the minute managed to get £14m, although should have been £16m, but most of that was

actually referrals which were made in the previous year, resulting in the amount of referrals being put through to Councils were going to be extremely low and going to lean towards the good nature of Councils. DfC were in a position that they were beginning to lose Councils and along with the general pressure of budgets led them to a position that they decided to move towards a direct application basis for the scheme rather than a referral basis, from the addendum to the business case, and extend the scheme for a further 2 years on an application basis and stop working with Councils. Mr Polley advised that this had been an extremely difficult decision to make as DfC had been working very closely with colleagues in Council for years on the scheme, with a lot of work being done to change the features of the scheme to try and make it better for Councils including targeting so everyone was happy, but within a matter of months targeting was then stopped, which was a hard decision but had to be made due to budget risks and potential closure of the scheme altogether. Savings made the scheme more resilient as it could be kept open this year and, on that basis, worked out a business case from September and provided Councils with 3 months' notice under the Memorandum of Understanding, moving towards an application basis with NIHE from September. Mr Polley said that this had come to the NIHE at very short notice as time was contingent on the business case in order from stopping the scheme and restarting it again and commended the NIHE as they have worked very hard and done very well as this was a very difficult task. The reason it was an addendum and not extended longer, was to ensure that the scheme was kept running and next year a bid will be submitted for extra funding as it was meant to be £16m per year, this year allocation was £14m which was a very low level of activity, next year a business case is being made for £20m which would bring it back more towards the numbers which was in previous years. This would be for 2 years and then move forward towards a different scheme which would be ready for Net Zero as scheme now is about energy efficiency and getting people warmer but does not include carbon zero heat systems and money allocated is not sufficient to do those. In the future the new scheme needs to be much more comprehensive, to include carrying out work and spend on more houses and move up a scale.

The Chair thanked Mr Polley for his presentation and advised that Mid Ulster District Council was one of the most supportive of the Affordable Warmth Scheme and some members were very disappointed when Council lost control of it and transferred to the Housing Executive. The Chair said that members requested that an invite be issued to those running the scheme to come along to committee at a future date to compare stats to see if they have been doing the same equivalent or more than us over the period that was transferred. The Chair said that members were of the opinion that representatives would come along here tonight to compare statistics.

Ms Stubbs advised that it has been a very busy time in Affordable Warmth Scheme and from 1 September – 30 November, 3,740 requests for applications for the scheme had been received and these were all the people which were deemed as eligible on initial phone calls. Phone calls are coming through the Energy Advice line and even if people are not eligible for Affordable Warmth, some energy advice can be provided and direct them to other programmes for support or refer them to energy calculator which can get them insulation and help with energy efficiency costs. In regards to the number of applications which were issued, 8.7% were from Mid Ulster area, which equates to 309 applications, which was previously 9% when the Councils all split evenly. She stated that not as many applications have been returned but still a lot

more than referrals being received, in context within 3 months would have received 440 referrals from Councils, and within these three months NIHE have received 1,181 applications fully completed and returned, with 8.21% being from Mid Ulster which was very much in line with previous applications and referrals being receiving from Council at any case. Once applications are processed, approvals would be issued and under the single provider model, DfC have asked them to look at 'worst first' to include fuel poverty and the measures which need installed, with 12% from Mid Ulster having the overall approvals issued which was slightly higher than the number of enquiries which demonstrates the need and priority which was coming in from the area. Ms Stubbs said that it was still very early days and the full approval rates would be up to the end of August 24, and would continue to get full approvals issued within the budget confirmed for this year.

Mr Polley advised that Mid Ulster demonstrated an area for high fuel poverty and not surprising that there was a high number of approvals compared to other Council areas who may have less.

The Chair said that it would be beneficial to have the representatives back at the end of the year to compare their stats against Council stats.

Councillor F Burton enquired how elected representatives chase up on those still in the pipeline to get support through the Affordable Warmth Scheme, i.e. boiler replacement and asked who should be contacted as she was aware of a few people being still in the pipeline and asked if this could be chased up. The member advised that the applicants had been assured that they were eligible by Council Officers and were sitting waiting on them coming back to them to advise when things would be progressed. The member said that this could be as far back as June last year.

Ms Stubbs advised that Council would have still being making referrals up to the end of August, with 101 referrals being received from Mid Ulster with all of them having already being contacted and a technical inspection being carried out on their home. Anyone who did not get referred from the Council, the Council Officers were provided with a letter to pass on to anyone who was still on the waiting list and wouldn't have been referred, advising that they could contact the Energy Advice Line from 1st September regarding the new process. Anyone which contacted the Energy Advice Line, calls were being picked up and application forms issued and if there were specific people who haven't been contacted, or perhaps in contact with Council and not one of the referrals and unsure of the process, that she would be happy to liaise directly with members to get the relevant details and see where they were on the records. Contact can be made through the local Grants Office which she believed would be the West office who would be able to provide an update on any specific cases members may have.

Councillor F Burton said it may be useful for Ms Stubbs to liaise Council's Member Support Officer to provide a contact email for members. The member said that she couldn't be sure that the applicants have now received their new boiler, but the last time she was in contact with them they were still waiting on an update regarding the process but were confident they were eligible.

Councillor Bell said that given the popularity of the scheme and being able to make direct contact with someone within the scheme, felt that it would be a good idea to have a dedicated elected reps contact line and asked if this could be accommodated.

Ms Stubbs advised that there was not a direct line for elected members, but all of the applications were being processed through the Grants Office which was available to take phone calls and specific queries. Discussions has taken place with DfC on how regular engagements can take place with Councils to keep them up to date on statistics in their area and the level of interest. This would help Councils to promote the scheme to anyone who may benefit from the programme and provide support through the Energy Advice Line.

Councillor Bell agreed that this was very good but asked if it would be possible to inform staff in the Grants Office when elected reps make contact that they have the authority to enquire about specifics.

Mr Polley said that this would need to be checked out due to concerns around GDPR due to the fact of someone discussing another person's application, permission would be needed to do that.

The Chair advised that if time was afforded to Grants staff that they would come back to members with some clarity, as this would allow them the time to check the information which had been requested as there was a need to be careful around data protection.

Councillor Milne thanked the representatives for their presentation here tonight. The member enquired about when a referral is received, in what order do they be prioritised i.e. upgrading of heating, insulation or windows etc. The member also referred to comment in presentation regarding after the next two years and asked what the anticipated future regarding this would be.

Mr Polley advised that the scheme always had priorities with:

- Priority 1 – insulation/ventilation/ draft proofing - loft and cavity wall insulation, hot water jackets, draft proofing doors and windows
- Priority 2 - heating – replacement of solid fuels and boiler replacement
- Priority 3 - replacement windows
- Priority 4 - solid wall insulations

Mr Boyce advised that there would be a two-year policy bridge to allow DfC team to see what would essentially come next. He said that there was an issue in relation to construction inflation and capital costs currently in place which does not meet the measures required in the homes and the replacement of fossil fuels. There is a need to find a balance between carbonisation but also helping low income families with heat and find a whole inhouse approach to have as much insulation as possible without going out windows if ventilation isn't good. There is a concern regarding eligibility criteria as at the moment it is £23,000, the recent Treasury Statement which came out pushed the living wage up to a maximum of £22,800, pension inflation increases of 8% were almost going to lose the working poor within the scheme where it sits at the minute. There is now a need to look at the eligibility scheme at the minute to raise it to

a much more reasonable standard to capture more people and move the scheme forward as part of Net Zero and Climate Action Plan targets set in place. There will be changes and engagement taking place with Councils on public consultation and social reference groups to find out what is needed on the ground which will influence a set of options to hopefully go out this time next year.

Mr Polley said what comes after needed to be a lot more comprehensive in order to get to Net Zero in 2050 and make sure that transition is just which is really important to the Department as there was a need to be doing more houses and more things to the houses, costs to try and get some of the Housing Executive houses ready for solid wall dwellings is approximately £20k, there was a need to take a step back and look more comprehensively at the challenges in which we have and how to address that. He concurred with Mr Boyce regarding the work which has to be completed over the next two years and the challenges ahead regarding increased inflation costs and less funding available.

Councillor Burton said that it should not be lost in the comment regarding the 'working poor' and all the changes in money, it is ensuring that people have warm homes and that they are comfortable in their homes. The member said that for people who have worked all of their lives and all of a sudden when they hit pension age, they are ruled out of these things, we need to make sure that people are not ruled out over the head of things relating to that.

The Chair agreed that the member's comments were very valid.

Mr Polley advised that income criteria had just changed over the last number of years and agreed that this needed relooked at as part of the new scheme due to the fact that things cost more now and wages increased which was not people's fault. He said that there were always some people who just earned too much but there was a need to spend to get Net Zero ready and broaden out the scheme with a focus on fuel poverty as there was so many people who needed this.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance tonight and hoped to see them back at committee after the first year to compare their stats to Council stats and hoped that they would be in par with ours.

The Chair wished the representatives a very Happy Christmas at which they withdrew from the committee at 7.29 pm.

Matters for Decision

D196/23 Development Report

The Strategic Director for Communities and Place (SD: C&P) presented previously circulated report to seek approval for the following:

- Community Grants Rolling Programme
- DFC Hardship Funding – Allocation
- Development Report

Councillor Gildernew said that she would be happy to propose the report but wished to seek clarification on an issue. The member referred to the ten foodbanks in which funding has been allocated to but enquired if Officers could look at the gaps in provision in certain areas as she was aware of an area within Clogher Valley where two foodbanks are in one end of the Clogher Valley. She asked that in the future if funding was sought could communication be made to the people within DEA areas which were not covered to advise them where to go to look for this funding.

The SD: C&P advised the member that this work was already in hand, the ten networks which were selected were done so on the back of money becoming available quite quickly from Department for Communities. It was unknown if this funding was going to be still available within the next financial year but Council were preparing to adopt a new process to help strategic partners going forward should that money become available and would be coming before the committee for consideration in January.

Councillor Monteith said that his query was similar to Councillor Gildernew's as he had raised previously about the gaps in provision. The member said that it was difficult due to having to nearly know down to the very postcode where a person is living and where they go for help and who to contact looking that help. He said that this was not easy for people and extremely intimidating for anyone to reach out for help when you are in dire circumstances and the worst thing that can happen is when someone advises at the end of a phone 'no sorry we do not cover your area or handle that'. This person will not have the confidence or courage to make a second phone call and felt that this was a legacy of money which was coming in and get out the door during covid which he understood we were now long past getting out the door quickly, there needs to be an equity of provision and some indication to the level of support that a family or an individual can expect. The member stated that some of those organisations have different rules about how often they can be contacted, some will pay for some things and not others and were now in a situation where people will need ongoing support not just one-off interventions. The member felt that it was vitally important that we burrow down into this, which hasn't been done before and hoped that January may be an opportune time to do this as we owe it to the people to provide them a with a fair crack of the whip whatever limited resources which were there and everyone should have the opportunity to avail of them, but currently this is not the case.

The Chair said that all comments would all be taken on board.

Councillor Quinn declared an interest in SVP Coalisland as they share part of the funding with SVP Clonoe in which he is a member of.

Councillor Quinn referred to previous comments and advised that Torrent was well catered for but so much in the Ardboe area, although he wasn't 100% sure if Cookstown SVP covered that area but felt that this needed to be further investigated.

Councillor F Burton said that it was her understanding where it was previously stated that these foodbanks may have been chosen quite quickly, but may have possibly picked this up wrong. The member stated that during covid a group which were very key in supporting families and the elderly more so in the Fivemiletown area was not listed to her surprise. The member enquired if this was down to how many reside in the area in terms of the differences in allocation of money and asked how this was all divvied up as it was vitally important for people to know where to go and seek support. The member was aware of the Clogher group doing a lot of work down to the lower Clogher Valley also but was aware of Caledon and Benburb area not having the support unless they go to Dungannon. The member said that there most definitely was a need to look in terms of mileage to see what provision was out there.

The SD: C&P in response to Councillor Burton's point advised that the allocation model which has been used this last number of years, has been a model as far as he understood developed during the covid period on the back of money that became available relatively quickly from the Department for Communities. Taking on board all of the points that members has raised, the reason why from an Officer perspective, we are taking this through a review process should money continue to become available from the Department for 2023/24. The SD: C&P advised members that a more detailed report would be brought back in front of committee in January which will outline a revised approach that would allow organisations from across the district to submit information and proposals to make sure that there is reach right across all parts of the district and across all the DEA's. The SD: C&P stressed to members that this would be subject to funding continuing to be made available from the Department for Communities.

In response to Councillor Burton's query about how the money was divvied up, the SD: C&P advised that this was based on the allocation model which was developed and took into consideration the size of the organisations and the number of referrals that historically had been made. The SD: C&P said that he did not have the specific allocation model in front of him tonight but could share with members after tonight's meeting and certainly in advance of the discussion at the January meeting.

Proposed by Councillor Gildernew
Seconded by Councillor McLernon and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council -

- (i) Agree the Rolling Grant Grant Allocations
- (ii) Agree the Hardship Funding Allocations
- (iii) Note the Development Report Update

D197/23 Economic Development – Renewal of Membership with NI Chamber of Commerce 2024

The Assistant Director of Economic Development, Tourism & Strategic Programmes presented previously circulated report to provide an update on key activities as detailed below:

- **Renewal of Membership with NI Chamber of Commerce 2024**

Proposed by Councillor Wilson
Seconded by Councillor McLernon and

Resolved That it be recommended to Council to approve Corporate Membership with NI Chamber of Commerce costing £3,000+Vat for the period of 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024.

Matters for Information

D198/23 Minutes of Development Committee held on 16 November 2023

Members noted Minutes of Development Committee held on 16 November 2023.

Councillor Monteith referred to D177/23 Environmental Health Service Update, where it was proposed that a meeting be organised in relation to air pollution and enquired if a date had been arranged yet.

The Assistant Director of Health, Leisure and Wellbeing (AD: HL&W) advised that this was currently being worked upon as Principal Environmental Health Officers were trying to co-ordinate with external agencies to check diaries and afterwards cross-check members diaries to find a suitable date for everyone. The AD: HL&W said that it was unlikely that the meeting would take place before Christmas but the aim was to have a date in diaries before Christmas for a return early in the New Year.

D199/23 Gas Safety Initiative

Members noted previously circulated report which provided an update on Council's participation in a joint 'Gas Safety' initiative between Environmental Health, Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and Gas Safe Register which aims to raise awareness of gas safety and the importance of maintenance of gas appliances in commercial catering and in residential care/nursing homes.

D200/23 Economic Development – OBF

Members noted previously circulated report which provided an update on:

- NIBSUP/Business Start Up Performance 2022/23
- Tourism Development Group Minutes – 29.03.23

The live broadcast ended at 7.38 pm.

Local Government (NI) Act 2014 – Confidential Business

Proposed by Councillor McLernon
Seconded by Councillor Corry and

Resolved In accordance with Section 42, Part 1 Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 that Members of the public in accordance with Section 42, Part 1 Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 that Members of the public be asked to withdraw from the meeting whilst members consider items D201/23 to D202/23.

Matters for Decision

D201/23 Agewell Project – Contract Extension

Matters for Information

D202/23 Confidential Minutes of Development Committee held on 16 November 2023

The Chair wished everyone a very Happy Christmas and Peaceful New Year.

D203/23 Duration of Meeting

The meeting commenced at 7pm and concluded at 7.45 pm.

Chair _____

Date _____

Annex A – Introductory Remarks from the Chairperson

Good evening and welcome to the Council's [Policy & Resources/Environment/Development] Committee in the Chamber, [Dungannon/Magherafelt] and virtually.

I specifically welcome the public watching us through the Live Broadcast. The Live Broadcast will run for the period of our Open Business but will end just before we move into Confidential Business. I let you know before this happens.

Just some housekeeping before we commence. Can I remind you:-

- If you have joined the meeting remotely please keep your audio on mute unless invited to speak and then turn it off when finished speaking
- Keep your video on at all times, unless you have bandwidth or internet connection issues, where you are advised to try turning your video off
- If you wish to speak please raise your hand in the meeting or on screen and keep raised until observed by an Officer or myself
- Should we need to take a vote this evening I will ask each member to confirm whether they are for or against the proposal or abstaining
- When invited to speak please introduce yourself by name to the meeting
- For any member attending remotely, if you declare an interest in an item, please turn off your video and keep your audio on mute for the duration of the item
- If referring to a specific report please reference the report, page or slide being referred to
- Lastly, I remind the public and press that taking photographs of proceedings or using any means to enable anyone not present to see or hear proceedings, or making a simultaneous oral report of the proceedings are not permitted

Thank you and we will now move to the first item on the agenda

