
Written Ministerial Statement

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Social Development

Adverse Weather Emergency Planning Update

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The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): Members are fully aware of the recent, unprecedented spell of very cold weather which presented major challenges. I wish to update and draw Members attention to the action taken by DSD, NIHE and Housing Associations in the social housing sector before during and following the recent adverse weather conditions, and to outline actions taken to ensure that, in the provision of a good quality housing service, emergency procedures are fully fit for purpose.

I am making this statement further to preliminary information provided to the Social Development Committee on 20 January 2011, a lengthy attendance at the Committee on 27 January 2011, and further to enquiries from individual Assembly Members. I want to acknowledge the MLAs who brought to my attention individual cases, which helped inform my response as Minister in managing and helping others manage the situation.

I want to first acknowledge the scale of the problems experienced by tenants and homeowners and the scale of response of the DSD, NIHE, Housing Associations, contractors and others. In brief this is the character of what arose. Thousands of tenants experienced burst pipes, heating system failures and other difficulties. Some tenants had their homes flooded with ceilings etc collapsing and electrics being water damaged - causing considerable inconvenience to the tenants themselves - and requiring extensive repair work even after drying out work was completed. Over the period of the 'freeze' thousands of temporary heating

appliances (4,900) were distributed by the Housing Executive and others. After the first wave of repairs were responded to or were completed, a second wave connected to the restoration of water supply to many houses where bursts had not yet manifested was addressed.

I am firmly of the view, that even with difficult individual cases and failures that undoubtedly occurred – and from which lessons have been or are being learned – the overall response from a community of public servants and private contractors increasingly measured up to the scale of need.

I want to pay tribute to the many hundreds of people who manned the phones or carried out repairs day and night and who so willingly gave up much of their Christmas holiday to help their fellow citizens.

I have already stated and reiterate here, that the initial phase of collective response to the emergency, in terms of being able to handle all enquiries and respond quickly, could have been better. In subsequent phases the response improved very significantly and outstanding problems decreased rapidly. Ultimately however, it was tenants who endured the problems and it was tenants who showed great resilience and fortitude in difficult conditions.

I do not need to rehearse that the adverse weather was unprecedented and that its immediate and subsequent impacts were severe. No one should lose sight of that basic fact. However, my view of the role of the Minister is not to observe a gathering crisis and act belatedly.

Ministers need to be in government and in power and that was the approach I adopted in the days before Christmas. Consequently, from Tuesday 21 December, I met with and spoke to senior personnel in the NIHE, namely the Chairman, Brian Rowntree, Acting Chief

Executive, Stewart Cuddy, and other senior officials, in relation to their planned response to the weather and their Strategic and Emergency Plan. In doing so, I laid down a number of requirements in respect of the NIHE response and commented publicly on the situation on 23 December 2010. In addition, and in advance of Christmas, I requested an emergency meeting of the Executive because I knew we were facing very difficult challenges, not just in housing but across a range of important and vital public services. I was disappointed that a pre-Christmas Executive meeting was not convened. I also spoke with the Health and Environment departments about the possible need to have local government community facilities available over Christmas to cope with temporary accommodation needs should they arise. I also acknowledge Minister Poots who shared my concerns pre-Christmas and undertook to help in whatever way I considered necessary.

Also, mindful of the manifest financial pressures on people and families, I wrote to Iain Duncan Smith and spoke with the Welfare Reform Minister, Lord Freud, in relation to emergency payments and changes to cold weather payments to assist in a time of need. It is my firm belief that tenants now require particular financial help to address the impact and the legacy of the weather. This is not an exhaustive account of my initial action and that of DSD before Christmas, but it does demonstrate a different and strong approach to that deployed elsewhere.

Before Christmas, the processes put in place by the NIHE were upgraded as a result of their own deliberations and DSD input. This included relocating their Emergency Services Response capability to the Belfast Customer Service Unit to enable better telephone customer response. It was needed. From 17 December to 9 January, the NIHE received 24,777 'unique' telephone calls and tens of thousands more with repeat callers. On New Year's Eve there were 3,545 calls, New Year's Day 1,125, and New Year Holiday Monday 2,154 calls. As I have said publicly on a number of occasions, in the initial phase the call response could and should have been better. It was clear a further uplift in call answering was required, leading to the use of five Regional Customer Support Units. This also included being operational over the New Year weekend and second weekend in January. Running in parallel to the number of calls was the number of works orders placed with contractors, some 30,300 between 17

December 2010 and 2 January 2011 (14,400 with heating contractors, 16,000 with 'all traders' contractors). I have instructed that there is a full and deep evaluation of the work and response of contractors, many of which did a particularly good job but there are a number who have questions to answer. This issue and that of wider contract management is being addressed now and is part of the response to the recent gateway report.

Beyond the very regular contact with the NIHE before Christmas, I continued to manage the situation after Christmas, leading to a meeting on Tuesday morning 28 December, when I met the NIHE in their Great Victoria Street offices. In addition to laying further and additional requirements in response to the situation, I also instructed that a report be immediately prepared to reconfigure the NIHE response to an emergency. This has resulted in a revised three phase response, which shall include an upgraded telephone response to an emergency. There is no satisfaction in the performance of the water sector in their response to the crisis but it is of note that comparing telephone response rates on a day to day basis between the NIHE and NI Water, the NIHE response was dramatically much higher than that of NI Water. The figures tell the story. This is evidence of pre-Christmas mobilisation bearing results.

In relation to Housing Associations, there are two Emergency Call systems in place. From 20 to 30 December one emergency service centre dealt with 1,811 calls (double the number for the same period last year). 730 works orders were issued compared to 419 for the same period last year. Over the New Year weekend the out of hours monitoring service took 62 calls. In relation to the second emergency call system, 2,696 calls were handled over the period 24 December 2010 to 2 January 2011. This would be about four times the number of repair requests normally dealt with.

The NIHE has an Emergency Arrangements Booklet and a Strategic Emergency Plan in place which are updated to provide enhanced arrangements over certain periods. Housing Associations also have Emergency/Contingency Plans in place which are updated regularly. However, it was clear that the arrangements in place at the beginning of the adverse weather crisis needed to be enhanced to cope.

We must be ready for any future emergencies and ensure arrangements are in place and communicated before any emergency actually happens. For example, while weather conditions over the weekend of 7 January were not expected to be on the scale previously experienced, I insisted that the Housing Executive maintained significantly enhanced out-of-hours emergency services over that weekend and 133 staff manned three Customer Services Units which were open to answer any requests for maintenance works.

In order to review and upgrade emergency planning, I have been in regular contact with the Housing Executive's Chief Executive and I also met on 7 January with Housing Associations to ensure that lessons learned are applied; that Emergency/Contingency Plans are updated; and actions are developed to provide future emergency planning that is fit for purpose. I intend to provide full details to the Social Development Committee in this regard.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn. First, the public housing sector responded well overall to the situation but with important learning, particularly about management of the first phase of their response. Second, the public housing sector enhanced its response as the situation developed and turned around large volumes of work generally in a reasonable time. Third, the NIHE has already revised its levels of response to an emergency both in terms of telephone and contractor responses, and Housing Associations are working to the same outcome. Fourth, while DSD was active in advance of Christmas Day on the developing difficulties, it too has revised its response planning to an emergency situation. Fifth, the requirement for government departments and other bodies to be more co-ordinated and, where appropriate, integrated in terms of response to an emergency is self-evident. Sixth, emergency situations require leadership, at an Executive and departmental level, and neither the government nor a Minister, whatever the status of that organisation, should be slow in interventions necessary to reduce risk.

I will continue to work with the Housing Executive and Housing Associations to ensure that lessons learned over this difficult period are used to update and amend emergency and contingency planning for all social housing providers, to ensure it is fit for purpose and

ready to respond immediately in any future emergency situations.

Once again I am grateful to all those in the housing family who over this difficult holiday time put the needs of others ahead of their own comforts.

