



HOUSING NEWS

Lower Oldpark

April 2023. Lower Oldpark Community Association, 9-23 Avoca Street, Belfast BT14 6EN. Tel: 028 96928293. Email: loweroldparkhousing@gmail.com

Long Awaited Social Housing Scheme Begins

A Lower Oldpark social housing scheme, first given the go ahead in early 2018, has finally started.

The building contractor for the ten houses and two bungalows, Kelly Brothers, went on site at Alloa Street just after Easter.

The scheme developer for the 8 three-bedroom and 4 two bedroom units is Clanmil Housing which refurbished 26 vacant and decaying houses in Mountview Street and Manor Drive a number of years ago.

Work on the 12 new homes is programmed to last 18 months which means that the houses, all being well, should be complete in autumn 2024.

Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) very much welcomes the start of work to a scheme that has been dogged by delays since it was first given the go ahead in early 2018.



LOCA thanks Clanmil Housing for maintaining its commitment to this Lower Oldpark housing development over the five year period and especially when the scheme was under threat due to the intervention of NI Water during the planning application process.

This social housing development is very important to the Lower Oldpark neighbourhood. It will provide much needed social housing.

The development will also play a very valuable role in the physical regeneration of the Lower Oldpark neighbourhood.

Find Out More

LOCA has lots more information on its housing website and Facebook page.

Website

<https://loweroldparkhousing.co.uk>

Our website includes the latest news, back copies of this newsletter, a brief history of the area, details of regeneration plans and much more.

Facebook

@loweroldparkhousing

Please follow and like.

Housing Advice Service

Help with housing problems is available from the LOCA Housing Project Worker, Gary Hughes.

Days: Monday to Friday.

Times: 8.30am-11.30am & 1.00pm - 3.30pm.

Phone: 028 96928293 or 077 13990976.

Easy Access To NIHE Services With Online Tenants' Portal

Housing Executive (NIHE) tenants can get secure, 24/7 access to a range of NIHE services on the 'My Housing Executive' online portal (the Portal). Tenants can:

- Check their rent balance and account statements.
- Make a payment.
- Order a new rent payment card.
- Update contact and personal details.
- Request and track a repair.

- Request a transfer, an adaptation to their property, or a self-help repair.
- Submit a garage application.

To register for the tenant portal, search:

<https://myaccount.nihe.gov.uk/nihe/www/dashboard>

When registering, you will have to provide the usual information such as name and date of birth, but you will also need your NIHE tenancy number (an 8 digit number on your rent statement),

a username (this should be an email address that is private to you) and a password (it must be between 5 and 20 characters, must contain a digit, and must contain an uppercase letter).

If you don't get a response, check your junk mail as the email response may be there. Contact the NIHE Customer Services Unit on 03448 920 910 if you do not find the email.

Clanmil Tenant Portal

Clanmil Housing tenants can access a range of Clanmil services online with a Clanmil Portal account.

With an account, tenants will be able to:

- Report a repair.
- View simple 'how to' repair videos.
- Check their balance and make payments online.
- View their account statement.
- Report issues such as ASB.
- Update their personal information.
- Manage their account and settings.

To set up a Clanmil tenant portal account, search:

<https://www.clanmil.org.uk/clanmil-connect/user/login>

You will need to provide your name, date of birth, tenancy agreement reference (which is on your tenancy agreement) and email address.

You will also need to create an account password.

Choice Tenant Portal

Choice Housing now provides a tenant portal called 'My Choice.' With it, Choice tenants can:

- Access their account online to view their rent account.
- Report a non-urgent repair and view current/past repairs.
- View their contact information and update their contact details.
- Report an issue or concern.

To register for 'My Choice', email Choices's Admin Team on tenantportal@choice-housing.org.

You will receive a username and password (which you can change).

After that, you will have access to the online portal.

How the NIHE Delayed Lower Oldpark Regeneration

Since 2018, Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) has been trying hard to secure housing development on the Mountview/ Beechnut/ Beechpark site (The Bonfire Site).

In 2018, the Department for Communities (DfC) refused LOCA's request to treat the land as a 'Catalyst Site' under the Building Success Communities initiative. If DfC had agreed, housing development might have been started by now.

During 2019, LOCA began meeting with the NIHE to look at the option of private housing development because the NIHE had said that a housing need assessment didn't support a social housing scheme.

In 2019, it was agreed that the NIHE would carry out an economic appraisal to decide the best option for the site.

LOCA supported the site being released on the open market for private housing development. The NIHE said that between 25 and 30 family homes could be built on it.

During 2020, LOCA told the NIHE that it wanted to ensure that all houses built on the site were bought by owner-occupiers and not by private landlords/ investors. LOCA also wanted to make sure that at least three-bedroom family homes, and not apartments, were developed. Achieving these would mean the NIHE including restrictive covenants in the land sale agreement.

From this point on, the NIHE obstructed progress. Efforts by LOCA to find out what was happening were unsuccessful. It even got to the point where the Chairman of the NIHE Board at the time, Professor Peter Roberts, ignored three letters from LOCA over a year.



Bonfire Site

The NIHE said that, due to legal advice, it couldn't include restrictive covenants controlling house types and who bought them.

The NIHE has refused to provide the legal advice it obtained but did set out weak arguments for why it couldn't include the restrictive covenants. LOCA has strongly challenged these arguments and continues to push for the use of restrictive covenants. On 27th March, LOCA wrote to DUP Leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson requesting his support. He had previously indicated his support for restrictive covenant use.

In mid-2022, the NIHE began, without any consultation with LOCA, to shift its approach. It informed LOCA that it had sought expressions of interest from housing associations about a possible affordable housing scheme on the site and that one had shown an interest. No further information was provided by the NIHE.

Responsibility for the delay to housing development on the 'Bonfire Site' rests squarely with the NIHE. The challenge of securing a private housing development on this peace line site has increased due to rising building costs and interest rates which have reduced the chances of a developer wanting to build houses for sale.

With the NIHE saying it can't support a social housing scheme on the site, the prospect of further Lower Oldpark regeneration looks grim.

NI Ombudsman Fails To Investigate NIHE Chairperson

Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) is very concerned at the decision of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) not to investigate complaints by LOCA against the NIHE, including complaints against previous Chairman Professor Peter Roberts.

LOCA's complaints against the NIHE were made to NIPSO at the end of May 2022. Seven months later, NIPSO told LOCA it had decided it was prevented by legislation from accepting LOCA's complaints and that it could take no further action.

NIPSO said that LOCA's complaints were to do with matters of general concern and were not made by a member of the public who claims to have sustained an injustice.

Firstly, the legislation governing NIPSO does allow organisations such as LOCA to complain about injustice they have sustained.

Secondly, LOCA is strongly of the view that its complaints were not issues of general concern but were about specific injustices towards LOCA by the NIHE.

At first, LOCA had made seven complaints to NIPSO about the NIHE but this was reduced to six. One was linked to the NIHE former Chairman, Professor Peter Roberts, who ignored three letters from LOCA, something LOCA saw as a deliberate act of non-engagement.

Professor Roberts completed his term as NIHE Chairman in November 2022. The previous NIHE Chief Executive, Clark Baillie, had also ignored letters from LOCA.

LOCA's other complaints were about the NIHE providing misleading information, withholding information and about creating avoidable delays.

All the complaints were connected with the release of sites for development in Lower Oldpark.

Complaints against public bodies such as the NIHE normally have to go through that organisation's complaints procedure before they can be submitted to NIPSO. However, the legislation governing NIPSO allows a complaint directly to NIPSO in special circumstances.

LOCA submitted its complaints directly to NIPSO on the grounds that any investigation by the NIHE would involve lower level NIHE officers investigating the NIHE Chairman and, potentially, other senior NIHE officers, and that the lower level officers would not find against the senior NIHE officers.

Strangely, NIPSO decided it was acceptable for lower level NIHE officers to investigate persons at or near the top of the NIHE organisation structure.

When LOCA submitted its complaint in May 2022, at the same time it told the NIHE it would be making the complaints to NIPSO and provided the NIHE with information about the complaint. LOCA did not submit any complaints to the NIHE.

The NIHE then contacted NIPSO and advised it of the NIHE's intention to deal with the complaints as a Second Stage Complaint. This assertive NIHE approach towards NIPSO is concerning. The NIHE did not seek NIPSO's agreement but simply told it what it was going to do.

Also concerning is that NIPSO simply accepted this from the NIHE and told LOCA that it should complete the NIHE complaints procedure.

LOCA asked NIPSO to review its decision and it agreed. However, it



never informed LOCA of the outcome of the review and LOCA is unaware if a review actually took place.

It is very worrying that up to the NIHE getting involved, NIPSO hadn't challenged LOCA on complaining directly to it.

LOCA had another concern about having to use the NIHE's complaint procedure.

LOCA learnt that the NIHE officer appointed to carry out its investigation of LOCA's complaints may have been involved in NIHE's decisions connected to LOCA's complaints. This would be completely unacceptable.

LOCA highlighted this to NIPSO as a further reason that the NIHE should not investigate itself. However, NIPSO did not indicate any concern.

LOCA provided NIPSO with the opportunity to respond to LOCA's above concerns but it chose not to.

The opportunities for LOCA to challenge NIPSO's management of LOCA's complaints against the NIHE are limited. NIPSO told LOCA it can seek a judicial review but this would be long, difficult and expensive.

LOCA believes that NIPSO has serious questions to answer and that there is a need for a new investigation of LOCA's complaints and how they were handled by NIPSO.

Are You A Pensioner and Missing Out?

Pension Credit (PC) is extra money to help cover your costs if you're over State Pension age and living on a low income. You might get it even if you have other income, savings or assets.

PC comes in two parts: Guarantee Credit and Savings Credit. You might be eligible for one or both. PC is separate from your State Pension.

Guarantee Credit (GC)

GC tops up your weekly income to a guaranteed minimum level. In 2023-24, this level is:

- £201.05 if you're single.
- £306.85 if you're a couple.

Even if your weekly income is higher than these amounts, you might still get it if you meet one of these criteria:

- You have a severe disability.
- You're a carer.
- You have to pay housing costs, such as a mortgage.

NIHE 'Making Your Money Work' Service

Who Can Use the Service?

NIHE tenants.

Type of Help Available

Free benefits' checks, help with making a budget and tips with making the most out of household income.

Contact Details

You can speak to a Financial Inclusion Officer by calling 03448 920 900. You can also make an appointment through the NIHE Lower Oldpark Patch Manager, Andrea McAleenan on 028 95 982749 or 0781 8427225.

More Information

Search online NIHE Making Your Money Work.

Savings Credit (SC)

If you reached State Pension age before 6 April 2016, or if you're a couple and one of you did, you might be able to claim SC.

There's no savings limit for PC. However, if you have over £10,000 in savings, this will affect what you get.

How To Claim

- Call the PC claim line on 0800 99 1234 (8.00am to 6.00pm). They can fill in the form over the phone.

- Apply online - <https://apply-for-pension-credit.service.gov.uk/start> (if there are no children/ young people included).

Social Landlord Contact Details

There are four social landlords providing housing in Lower Oldpark. They are:

- The NIHE.
- Radius Housing.
- Choice Housing.
- Clanmil Housing.

Set out below are contact details for each organisation's local housing officer.

NIHE

Patch Manager: Andrea McAleenan.

Phone: 028 95982749/ 0781 8427225

Radius Housing

Housing Officer: Ann Boyd.

Phone: 0330 123 0888 (choose Housing)

Choice Housing

Housing Officer: Carolyn Ferguson.

Phone: 03001112211.

Clanmil Housing

Housing Officer: Christopher Donnelly

Phone: 028 90876000 (choose Housing)

Help To Buy Food & Milk

If you're more than 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under 4, you may be entitled to get help to buy healthy food and milk under the Healthy Start Scheme.

If you get Universal Credit, you can apply online if:

- You're at least 10 weeks pregnant or have at least one child under 4 and;
- Your family's monthly take-home pay from employment for this period is £408 or less.

If you get Child Tax Credit, you can apply online if you:

- Have at least one child under 4 and.
- Have a family annual income of £16,190 or less and.
- Don't get Working Tax Credit.

If you're eligible, you'll be sent a Healthy Start card with money on it that you can use in some UK shops. Your benefit will be added onto this card every 4 weeks.

You can use your card to buy:

- Plain liquid cow's milk.
- Fresh, frozen, and tinned fruit and vegetables.
- Fresh, dried, and tinned pulses.
- Infant formula milk based on cow's milk.

You can also use your card to collect:

- Healthy Start vitamins – these support you during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Vitamin drops for babies and young children – these are suitable from birth to 4 years old.

To apply online, go to:

<https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/how-to-apply/>