Cliftonpark Avenue Site Goes On Open Market

The green space site bounded by Cliftonpark Avenue, Crumlin Road and Landscape Terrace has been placed on the open market for sale by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

The site will be sold by the NIHE for mixed-use development, namely, retail and/or residential.

In the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015, the site is designated for housing development. However, in December 2018, Belfast City Council (BCC) Planning Department gave planning approval for the development of a new petrol station, a retail unit and for 6 three-bedroom family homes.

When putting site on the open market for sale, the NIHE provides a development brief for those interested in buying and building on it. Following discussions with Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA), the NIHE has put a requirement in the development brief that housing built must be three-bedroom, 5 person houses.

The selected developer will have to complete their building work on the site within three years of signing a long lease that will allow them to build on the land. The long lease should be signed soon after the contractor is selected.

The nature of any development on the site will only be known after proposals have been submitted and a developer selected.

If planning approval for a new development is already in place, then things should move fairly quickly. If not, then a new planning application must be prepared, submitted to BCC Planning Department and approved. This would extend the development process significantly.

Progress with the development of this site was delayed by the NIHE which failed to take necessary action over a number of years.

Courts’ Project Expected Start Late April/ Early May 2020

The much delayed Lower Oldpark Courts’ Project environmental improvement scheme is now expected to start in late April/ early May 2020, according to the Department for Communities (DfC).

The courts affected by the scheme are Foyle, Shannon, (plus 1-11 Shannon Street), Bann, Liffey, Bandon, Manor and Southport.

The scheme will involve the removal of all existing hard surfaces and planted areas in each of the courts and their replacement with new shared pedestrian/ vehicle surfaces. In addition, new pedestrian walkways will ensure that there is wheelchair access to all homes. There will also be dedicated car parking areas, occasional trees and new street lighting.

Starting dates for work in each court will be contained in a scheme schedule of work which won't be finalised until a contractor has been appointed, hopefully in February 2020. The contract for the building work in all seven courts is expected to last 44 weeks from the contractor going on site. It is not currently known how long work in each court will take. The contractor will be permitted to work in up to three courts at a time.

The scheme will involve disruption to the movement of pedestrians and vehicles as well as to parking in each court. Lower Oldpark Community Association has asked that residents are invited to information sessions for their individual court before work begins. These sessions will give residents the chance to find out more about the scheme and to ask questions and raise any concerns they might have.
End of Building Successful Communities Forum

Friday 11th October 2019 saw the final meeting of the Lower Oldpark Building Successful Communities (BSC) Forum.

This Forum was established in 2014 by the Department for Communities (DfC) to develop and oversee the implementation of an action plan in the area. It was one of six established for six BSC Pilot Areas across Belfast and in Ballymena.

The Forum was intended to bring together representatives from Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA), the Housing Executive, DfC, housing associations, Belfast City Council and the education, health and the voluntary sector, as well as political representatives. In practice, participation in the Forum was more limited than this.

In August 2019, the DfC advised Lower Oldpark Community Association that BSC Forums had served their purpose. It also said that the three Lower Oldpark BSC sub-groups in existence were sufficient to continue to progress and implement the three local 'Catalyst' regeneration projects.

In response, LOCA advised BSC that it supported the ending of the quarterly BSC Forum meetings. LOCA also referred back to a letter it had sent to DfC in June 2018. In the letter, LOCA said that 'BSC sees itself, and not the Forum, as the decision-maker. It is clear to LOCA that its BSC Forum representatives and other non-BSC Forum members are only window dressing.' On 11th October 2019, the Lower Oldpark BSC Forum met and dissolved itself.

Work on pushing forward six local regeneration schemes is now being carried out by four regeneration groups. The focus of each group is summarised below:

Cliftonpark Avenue Regeneration Group deals with development of Housing Executive’s (NIHE) Lower Oldpark Road/ Crumlin Road junctions.

The Manor/ Alloa/ Annalee Regeneration Group deals with the development of 12 social houses on the open space site running along Manor Street, Alloa Street and the former Annalee Court.

The Courts’ Regeneration Group deals with the improvement work in seven courts across Lower Oldpark.

Lower Oldpark Other Sites Regeneration Group deals with the development of other open space sites in the neighbourhood. These include the large site bounded by Mountview Street and the Lower Oldpark peace wall. Also, the site running from 64 Cliftonpark Avenue to Alloa Street.

A programme of bi-monthly meetings covering the period November 2019 to April 2021 has been prepared for each group.

LOCA will do its best to ensure that progress is much better than during the years of the BSC initiative in Lower Oldpark. However, LOCA does not have any direct control over how the various Lower Oldpark regeneration schemes are managed. This is the role of Government and public and other bodies. LOCA does have the ability to identify the reasons for the delays and will continue to seek to do this.

Bathroom/ Kitchen Scheme Update

Work on Phase One of the Housing Executive’s (NIHE) Lower Oldpark Bathroom/ Kitchen Replacement Scheme is expected to start in March 2020, following a further delay.

The latest holdup arose after the appointed contractor for the scheme, M&M Contracts, raised concerns about carrying out work in properties in which existing or former tenants had removed some ground floor internal walls without permission from the NIHE. This issue affects a significant number of NIHE properties in the planned scheme.

Sixty homes in Phase One will benefit from the bathroom/ kitchen scheme work that is expected to last about 12 weeks in total.

New, modern kitchen units will be installed and new splash back wall tiles and new floor covering provided. Bathrooms will have new modern baths/ shower units (depending on what is currently in place), sinks, toilets, wall tiles and flooring.

Work in each home is expected to last no more than two weeks.

M&M Contracts has resumed calling at homes following a break. M&M will be surveying kitchens and bathrooms and providing tenants with choices on e.g. cupboard doors, wall tiles and floor finishes. They will also be agreeing layout with tenants.

In addition, a NIHE contractor is carrying out a sample survey of scheme properties to check for asbestos.

A second phase bathroom/ kitchen scheme is expected to start in May 2020. It will include 72 Lower Oldpark properties. Work on this phase is also expected to last about 12 weeks.

The NIHE has advised Lower Oldpark Community Association that removal of internal partition walls in their homes by some tenants has created a fire risk. Also, the removal of stud walls, resulting in the loss of internal hallways, means that an essential means of escape has been removed. As a result, the NIHE must reinstate all walls that have been removed.

The NIHE has also said that, for fire safety reasons, it is unable to allow bathroom and kitchen replacement work to go ahead in its properties if internal walls that have been removed by tenants without permission have not been reinstated. The NIHE has advised tenants that it will carry out the work to reinstate the walls and will cover the cost.
Affordable Housing Scheme Restarts

Building work on a Lower Oldpark affordable housing scheme started on 9th December 2019.

The development of five family homes at the Oldpark Road/Cliftonpark Avenue junction went ahead following a decision by the developer, Apex Housing. Building work is programmed to end on 26th October 2020.

The building contractor went off site before the Christmas break and returned at the end of January 2020. Apex Housing advised Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) that this was due to a hold-up in the delivery of pre-cast concrete floor components.

When complete, the new three-bedroom homes will be made available for purchase under the Fairshare Shared Equity Scheme. This is targeted at first-time buyers and those returning to the owner-occupation market. The scheme allows homebuyers who cannot afford to buy outright to buy a share of a new-build property directly from a housing association and to pay rent on the rest.

More information about buying with Fairshare is available on the website https://fairshare.org.uk/. Also, a copy of the brochure is available at https://loweroldparkhousing.co.uk/useful-info. It is also planned that a workshop on Fairshare for local people will be held in the Community Centre.

Apex advises that the new houses will go on the open market through an estate agent. LOCA will let Lower Oldpark residents know as soon as it knows.

Apex Housing is receiving Housing Development Grant (HDG) for the scheme from the Department for Communities (DfC). This reduces the cost of building the houses, therefore making them more affordable.

DfC began looking at the potential for introducing a development grant to encourage private sector development in early to mid-2015. Approximately three years later, in May 2018, LOCA was informed that all necessary DfC and Department of Finance (DoF) approvals for the HDG policy had been obtained. The length of time it took the DfC and DoF to put in place and approve a HDG policy was a major cause of the delay to the start of work on the five houses on the site. Planning approval for the building of the new homes was obtained in May 2016.

Social Housing Development Design Review

Clanmil Housing is reviewing the design of its planned social housing scheme in Lower Oldpark.

The 12 new homes will be built on the open green space fronting onto Manor Street, Alloa Street and the former Annalee Court.

The design review follows discussions about the type of houses to be built. Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) wanted more three-bedroom family homes in the new development. A housing mix of 8 three-bedroom and 4 two-bedroom was agreed. The architect for the scheme is looking at how the additional three-bedroom houses can be included.

When this is done, there will be a community consultation meeting on the scheme plans.

Clanmil will then submit the agreed plans for approval to Belfast City Council Planning Department. It isn’t clear how long the planning process will take.

LOCA hopes, in the near future, to be able to provide residents with details of when the planning application will be submitted and how long building work will take.

The Housing Executive informed LOCA in March 2018 that it had agreed to the inclusion of this Lower Oldpark social housing scheme in its Social Housing Development Programme. If the building of the 12 houses is completed by March 2022, it means the process will have taken four years.

Radius Flats Redecoration Work Update

It is hoped that redecoration work on the communal areas of four Radius Housing blocks of flats in Lower Oldpark will start during the early spring of 2020.

The four blocks of flats are 1-7 Avoca Street, 35-41 Avoca Street, 51-53 Avoca Street and 52-62 Cliftonpark Avenue.

The work will include repainting of internal and external communal parts, cleaning/replacement of rainwater gutters and replacement of internal communal floor finishes

The work in each block is expected to take no more than two weeks.

Radius has advised Lower Oldpark Community Association that necessary surveys of the communal areas have been completed. The next step is the appointment of a contractor to do the work. There will then be a pre-start consultation with Radius tenants affected by the scheme.
Crumlin Road Apartments Get Planning Go Ahead

A proposal for the development of a block of 14 apartments on the front of the Crumlin Road received planning approval from Belfast City Council Planning Department in June 2019.

The proposed four and a half storey development would take place on the vacant site (205-211 Crumlin Road) lying between Albertville Drive and Yarrow Street.

Vehicular access to the development would be from Yarrow Street while pedestrian access would be from the Crumlin Road.

The planning application was first submitted by GAD Developments Ltd of Tandragee in April 2017. An amended application was submitted in June 2018, while a further amended application was received by the Council in March 2019.

In May 2017, Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) and a number of Albertville Drive, Yarrow Street and Yarrow Court residents submitted letters objecting to the planning application. A number of residents submitted further letters of objection to the amended planning application in August 2018. LOCA informed local residents about the latest planning application and their right to comment on it in June 2019.

The concerns of LOCA and residents focused on the height of the building and the possible shading impact it would have on the homes to the rear. Also, the adequacy of parking provision for residents and visitors to the new apartments.

LOCA wrote to GAD Developments Ltd on 22nd August 2018 to request a meeting about the development proposals and to discuss the company’s letting/sales policy in the event of planning permission being obtained and the development going ahead. LOCA is keen that any apartment development on the Crumlin Road takes place in consultation with the local community and, once in place, is well managed, with minimum turnover and good behaviour on the part of the occupants. GAD Developments did not respond to LOCA’s letters.

LOCA Rejects Crumlin Road Housing Mix

Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) has said no to the housing mix of a proposed social housing development on the Crumlin Road.

NB Housing (formerly Flax and Filor housing associations) informed LOCA on 9th December 2019 that it wanted to build 14 properties on the vacant site, 197 – 203 Crumlin Road (between Century Street and Albertville Drive). These include 9 two-bedroom houses, 3 three-bedroom houses and 2 one-bedroom flats.

LOCA representatives attended a consultation session organised by NB Housing on 7th January 2020 at its Crumlin Road office. LOCA advised NB Housing that it wanted at least 10 three-bedroom houses to promote community regeneration. On 10th February 2020, LOCA received notice from NB Housing that it intended to submit a planning application for the scheme, based on the original housing mix. While keen to see housing development on the Crumlin Road, LOCA will oppose the application because the long-term regeneration of the area requires family homes.

LOCA is concerned that the Housing Executive (NIHE) failed to tell it about this proposed scheme during Building Successful Communities Forum meetings, something it was obliged to do.

LOCA Working For New Housing Development

Lower Oldpark Community Association (LOCA) is working for the development of more affordable owner-occupation housing in the Lower Oldpark neighbourhood.

LOCA wants to see new affordable, family homes on the open space site bounded by Mountview Street and the Oldpark Road peace wall. It also wants to see the same type of housing on the open space site between 64 Cliftonpark Avenue and Alloa Street.

Before such developments can happen, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has to go through a process to determine what it should do with the sites. This involves preparing an economic appraisal for each site.

The NIHE has been consulting with LOCA on the best way forward for both sites. LOCA will consult with the community about any future housing development.

LOCA hopes that the economic appraisals will enable the NIHE to release the sites on the open market with a requirement for the development of three-bedroom family homes. Before any development could happen, the selected developer would have to prepare final plans. These would be submitted to Belfast City Council for planning approval. After planning approval, it would then be some months before building work would start.