

9th September 2020

Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Minister for Communities
Department for Communities
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7EG

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you on behalf of Take Back The City - an initiative involving practitioners and activists whose collective expertise is at the service of Build Homes Now campaigners to help them progress their ideas and actions for social, public and cooperative housing across the city of Belfast.

Take Back The City supports the development of a sustainable neighbourhood at the Mackie's site in west Belfast, which compliments Belfast City Council plans for a greenway through the site. We see it as an exciting opportunity to demonstrate a replicable model for how people can live, work and play in a neighbourhood constructed to the highest environmental specifications, and with the explicit goal of promoting equality, ending homelessness, and responding to climate change. We believe that such a development at this site offers an exciting opportunity for the Department for Communities, Belfast City Council, and others to demonstrate their commitment to creating equitable, sustainable, resilient and genuinely mixed neighbourhoods. We want to help make this vision a reality.

Given that land at Mackie's is currently under your Department's ownership, coupled with your Department's statutory responsibility for providing housing - and the fact that this site lies within the area of highest housing need in the state - we see no reason why social, public or cooperative housing directly addressing critical issues of sustainability and homelessness would not be on the agenda for development plans for this site. Indeed, Belfast City Council's solicitor John Walsh informed PPR in January 2020 that: "neither the Green & Blue Infrastructure Plan nor the Open Spaces Strategy would preclude or prevent an application for social housing coming forward in respect of the former Mackie's site. Nor would they necessarily preclude the Council from considering requests to rezone the land for social housing at the next stage of the LDP process."

Public consultation documents and responses to Freedom of Information requests have indicated that departmental land at Mackie's is being considered for transfer to Belfast City Council, after which a portion would be transferred again, to a '3rd party (apparently a housing developer building private housing inaccessible to those on the social housing waiting list). We understand that there are people living in approximately 18 homeless hostels in the vicinity of this site (three of these within a 1-mile radius) and over 3,167 households on the social housing waiting list - including at least 2,062 children officially recognised as homeless. Why is it that these lands are being deemed suitable for private home ownership but not for social, public or cooperative housing? We respectfully urge you to intervene to ensure that those in most need of housing are prioritised when determining the future use of land in such areas of chronic housing need.

As Minister for Communities we call on you to announce a moratorium on all current Departmental interests and plans for the site until such time as options

for sustainable social, public or cooperative housing on the site are given serious consideration, including a full Equality Impact Assessment to guide public resources and efforts appropriately.

Take Back the City partners have begun to develop innovative and participatory plans for a sustainable neighbourhood at Mackie's and we invite you and your Department to support this initiative. Our models for housing delivery – financing, ownership, management, architecture and planning – require a radical overhaul if we are to address chronic homelessness, inequality and climate breakdown. Given the city's history, Mackie's is an ideal place to prototype such an inspiring and hopeful model (we attach a brief Vision Statement with this letter). We hope you will support it and work in partnership with us to Build Homes Now.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely (on behalf of the Take Back The City coalition),

Hugh Ellis, Policy Director at Town and Country Planning Association
Dr Agustina Martire, Senior Lecturer at QUB, Chair Streetspace and Vicechair of Save CQ
Charlie Fisher, Programme Manager at Development Trust NI
Dean Blackwood, Town Planner & PhD Researcher
Dr Amanda Slevin, Co-Director of QUB's Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, Policy Fellow, Place-based Climate Action Network
Professor John Barry, Professor of Green Political Economy at QUB & Co-Director of the Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action
Dr Peter Doran, QUB School Of Law
Davie Philip, Co-founder of Cloughjordan Ecovillage, chair of Cloughjordan Co-Housing and Council Member & Co-President of ECOLISE - The European Network of Community-Led Initiatives for Climate Action and Sustainability
Hugh Brennan, CEO Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance CLG
Hannah Kenny, Housing professional & activist
Fran Bradshaw, Anne Thorne Architects
Aisling Rusk, CEO of Studio Idir Architects
James Orr, Director, Director Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland
Ciaran Mackel, Senior Lecturer in Planning at the University of Ulster
Professor Frank Gaffikan, School of Natural & Built Environment at QUB
Professor Geraint Ellis, QUB School of Natural & Built Environment
Professor Brendan Murtagh, QUB School of Natural & Built Environment

CC: Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive Belfast City Council Clark Bailie, Chief Executive, NIHE