

Housing Services Committee
12 March 1998

Irvine, 12 March 1998 - At a Meeting of the Housing Services Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

Present

Samuel Taylor, Gena Seales, Thomas Barr, Patrick Browne, James Clements, David Gallagher, Samuel Gooding, Jane Gorman, Margaret Munn and George Steven.

In Attendance

The Director of Housing Services, F. Kelly, Head of Strategy and Development, J. Paul, Head of Property Services, J. Hartley, Finance Manager (Housing Services), H. Hunter, Senior Accountant (Financial Services), G. Lawson, Principal Officer Policy/Administration and S. Bale, Administration Officer (Chief Executive).

Chair

Mr Taylor in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Thomas Dickie, John Donn and Robert Rae.

1. Minutes Confirmed

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 29 January 1998, copies of which had previously been circulated, were confirmed.

2. Housing Services Directorate: Alteration to Structure

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on a revised staffing structure for the Housing Services Directorate.

In September 1996, the Committee approved a revised structure, with service delivery grouped on a divisional basis, to allow further decentralisation as well as taking into account the transfer of property and staff from Irvine Development Corporation. Since then, a number of policy reviews have been undertaken in areas such as finance, allocations, estate management and homelessness etc. A major change has occurred in the design and implementation of new financial systems, particularly those dealing with housing benefit and further decentralisation of the staffing structure could not take place until the new financial systems were in place. The full implementation of the new financial systems is due to commence shortly and it is now necessary to review the staffing arrangements again to provide a service at a more local level. The proposals do not fully decentralise the functions, but in due course the Divisional Managers will take on more responsibilities.

All of the changes proposed fall within the remit of the Head of Customer Services. There have been 9 posts identified as being surplus to requirements, a number of which are either vacant at present or expected to become vacant. Three posts shown as supernumerary on Appendix 1 to the report can be slotted into the new structure. The proposed new structure, as shown in Appendix 2 to the report, focuses on areas of activity which will become more important such as housing benefits and also includes proposals to set up a Fraud Section to pursue arrears and identify fraud in respect of housing and council tax benefit claims. The rent collection scheme has also been reviewed and it is proposed to move from two teams to one team by reorganising routes. The proposed new Area Benefits Teams can be set up from 1st April 1998 and will be

based in Irvine initially, although it is proposed to relocate them into their own areas within approximately 3 months, once suitable accommodation has been identified. The accommodation situation is currently being looked at. The overall proposals will result in revenue savings in a full year of approximately £200,000.

Assurances were given that there remains within the proposed structure sufficient staff at local level to deal with caseloads and that staff will be fully trained and supported in managing the changes.

After a full discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to approve the proposals for the alterations to the staffing structure of the Housing Services Directorate as detailed in the report; (b) to remit to the Support Services Committee to consider the detailed staffing implications; and (c) to remit to the Chair and Director of Housing Services to consult the Marketing Section on appropriate arrangements for publicising the Council's proposals in the local press.

3. Housing Benefit: Update

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on progress on the implementation of the new computerised housing benefit system.

As agreed previously by the Committee, a new computerised system of housing benefit administration is being developed to replace the current archaic and complex system. There has been a considerable amount of work for staff over the last 6 - 8 months in developing the new system to deal with a caseload of around 40,000 claimants, as well as maintaining existing services. As agreed previously, 4 temporary staff were recruited to assist during the period. Their contracts currently run until 31 March 1998. It is proposed however that their contracts be extended until June 1998.

The new system is scheduled to go live on 16 March 1998. A large amount of data will have been automatically transferred from the old to the new system but there will still remain a substantial amount of information to be loaded manually. There will therefore be a transfer period of several weeks, but targets and priorities have been given to staff in getting every case known on to the new computer system. Full training will be given to staff as appropriate on the new system. The situation of backlogs of cases has been addressed, although there is still a backlog to December 1997 for some cases. It is anticipated that the problems of out of date information should be addressed within one month of commencing the new system and that these should be eliminated in future under the new system.

After a full discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to authorise the flexibility to allow the temporary staff to continue beyond June 1998 if necessary, to address the backlog situation; and (b) that a further progress report be submitted to the Committee in June 1998.

4. Customer Comments Scheme

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on Customer Comments dealt with during the period 1st October to 31st December 1997.

There were 59 complaints, 1 suggestion and 3 compliments. Approximately half the number of comments received related to the delay in processing Housing Benefit claims, but this situation should be addressed following the introduction of the new computer system. The majority of the remaining complaints related to both waiting list and allocation issues. The recently revised policy on these matters should alleviate some of the problems.

Noted.

5. Housing Needs and Investment

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on a remit from the Infrastructure and Environment Services Committee to report on matters arising from the Sub-Committees on the Irvine/Kilwinning and Garnock Valley Replacement Local Plans.

On 10 December 1997, the Infrastructure and Environment Services Committee requested (a) that the Director of Housing Services report to the Housing Services Committee on the need for rented, low cost and sheltered housing in Irvine and Kilwinning and clarify the case being made to Scottish Homes to secure appropriate funding and implementation; and (b) the need for rented, low cost and special needs housing in the Garnock Valley; the delay in the implementation of the housing redevelopment scheme at Cochrane Street, Kilbirnie including the case being made to Scottish Homes in respect of this project; and the need to secure resources from Scottish Homes for housing projects in the Smaller Urban Renewal Initiative areas of the Garnock Valley.

In 1996, the Council adopted the Housing Plan drawn up by the former Cunninghame District Council and the Strategic Agreement between Cunninghame District Council and Scottish Homes, to enable programmes to roll forward and to update the policy priorities and strategies for implementation. The new Housing Plan is due to be submitted to the Scottish Office by the end of June 1998 and the Strategic Agreement with Scottish Homes is also being drawn up at the same time.

In June 1997, an agreed Investment Programme was adopted by the Council to ensure that the case for appropriate funding had been made to Scottish Homes and the Director of Planning, Roads and Environment was involved in the preparation of that programme. The Investment Programme was agreed in detail for 1997/98, but only in outline for future years, as Scottish Homes were unable to clarify resource planning assumptions for future years. It was emphasised that it would no longer be possible to assume that Scottish Homes funding would be available for all Council priorities for rented, low cost and special needs housing and it was important therefore that efforts be made to explore all other options of funding e.g. private sector, challenge funds, stock transfer routes etc. Such options are currently being explored but will take time to develop and implement.

The need for the various types of housing in Irvine and Kilwinning is being reviewed as part of the Housing Plan and the need for Special Housing is also being reviewed in the Community Care Plan, which is being prepared for June 1998.

The Cochrane Street, Kilbirnie redevelopment and the need for rental, low cost and special needs, including elderly housing in the Garnock Valley, are being looked at as part of the Housing Market Feasibility Study, for which funding was obtained in January 1998 under the new Housing Partnership Initiative. Discussions have also taken place with the Planning, Roads and Environment Directorate on the specification for the Cochrane Street sites.

Noted.

6. Aids and Adaptations: Progress Report

In response to the Committee's request at their meeting on 29 January 1998, submitted a report by the Director of Housing Services on the current position of the waiting lists for Aids and Adaptations.

In 1997/98, £250,000 was allocated for the Aids and Adaptations Programme within the capital budget. The programme covers both applications for handrails/banisters specifically and a qualifying list of referrals from the Social Work Directorate on the basis of a points system in relation to the degree of need for the adaptation. The qualifying list can also include a variety of aids such as showers and switches as well as hospital discharge adaptations which are awarded the highest priority. In addition the programme includes any major extensions to housing which are required to meet the specific needs of a family where a member or members have physical disabilities and in 1997/98, £90,000 was required from the capital allocation to cover the cost of

three major extensions. The budget has been increased by 20% for 1998/99. There are 226 applicants currently on the waiting list for handrails/banisters and 135 on the qualifying list. All applicants on the waiting lists and some new cases are likely to be accommodated in 1998/99.

The issue of co-ordination between the Housing and Social Work Directorates and the Works Department in progressing the aids and adaptations has been addressed.

Noted.

7. Kilwinning: Montgomerie Terrace: Strategy for Action

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on progress with the Strategy for Action for Montgomerie Terrace, Kilwinning as approved by the Committee on 30 October 1997.

In relation to the void properties, there has been substantial progress. A further 3 properties have been vacated, taking the total number of remaining vacancies to 9. As a result of promoting these remaining vacancies to the Outwith Needs Group queue, potential tenants have been selected for 5 of the houses and in addition, a further 4 general housing waiting list applicants have been selected for the remainder. All have severe dampness problems, but as soon as the necessary work is completed, the properties will be let to those pre-selected applicants. As at 19 February 1998 therefore 22 new tenancies have been created as a direct result of the strategy for action.

With regard to the setting up of a Tenants' Association, there has been little response to date, but once all the properties are let, further contact will be made with the tenants in an effort to progress this matter.

Arising from the discussion on this item, the issue of the maintenance of a large area of ground at Fergushill Road, Kilwinning was raised.

The Committee agreed (a) to approve the continuation of the Special Letting Status for Montgomerie Terrace, Kilwinning for a further 12 months; and (b) that the large area of land at Fergushill Road, Kilwinning be looked at to determine whether it could be developed for amenity housing by Scottish Homes or a local house builder or alternatively landscaped.

8. Stevenston: No. 3 (11 - 17 Fullarton Place) Housing Action Area for Demolition: Final Resolution

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the proposed final Resolution in respect of the 3 shops and 3 flats within the Stevenson No. 3 Housing Action Area for Demolition.

On 18 September 1997, the Committee agreed (a) to make a Draft Resolution in respect of the Stevenston No. 3 Housing Action Area for Demolition at 11 - 17 Fullarton Place, Stevenston; and (b) to authorise the service of Draft Resolution Notices on the owners of the three shops and three flats.

No objections have been received within the 2 month statutory period for representations.

The Committee agreed (a) to make a Final Resolution declaring a Housing Action Area for Demolition in respect of the properties at 11 - 17 Fullarton Place, Stevenston as detailed in Appendix HS1; and (b) that the Director of Housing Services liaise with the Director of Planning, Roads and Environment on action to remedy the possible infestation of these properties.

9. Scottish Homes: Review of Rents 1998/99

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the review of rents undertaken by Scottish Homes.

Scottish Homes have reviewed their rents for 1998/99 and agreed to increase them by an average of 5.6%. This will result in an average increase of £2.10 per week over 52 weeks from

April 1998, with the increase for individual tenants varying from a minimum of £0.95 per week to a maximum of £3.47 per week over 52 weeks, dependent on the size, type and standard of house.

Noted.

10. Private Sector Housing Grants

Submitted the annexed report (Appendix HS2) by the Director of Housing Services on grant applications for improvements, disabled, repairs and lead replacement grants.

The Committee agreed to the decisions intimated in the final column of the said appendix.

The meeting ended at 3.10 p.m.