

The Executive of North Ayrshire Council
19 August 2008

IRVINE, 19 August 2008 - At a Meeting of The Executive of North Ayrshire Council at 2.30 p.m.

Present

David O'Neill, John Reid, John Bell, Tom Barr, and Margaret McDougall.

In Attendance

I. Snodgrass, Chief Executive; B. Docherty, Corporate Director (Social Services); C. Kirk, Corporate Director and B. Gardner, Head of Educational Resources (Educational Services); O. Clayton, Head of Housing and Building Services (Property Services); A. Herbert, Assistant Chief Executive (Finance); I.T. Mackay, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Protective); G. Lawson, Corporate Support Manager, A. Osborne, Policy Officer, M. McKeown, Corporate Support Officer, and A. Wattie, Communications Officer (Chief Executive's).

Chair

Councillor O'Neill in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Peter McNamara.

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor O'Neill declared an interest in item 9 on the agenda, vacated the Chair, and took no part in the discussion thereon. Councillor Reid assumed the Chair for this item of business.

2. Revenue Budget: Budgetary Control Statement

Submitted report by the Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) on the budgetary control position of the Council at the end of June 2008.

The Revenue Estimates for 2008/09 were set by the Council on 7 February 2008. In terms of General Services, the Council budgeted for an end of year deficit of £0.319m and agreed to fund various one-off projects from balances. Based on current expenditure levels, it is projected that the Council will have a net surplus of £58k at the year end. With a favourable balance of £10.154m brought forward from 2007/08, a cumulative surplus of £10.212m is projected to 31 March 2009. The report and appendices provided details of major variances in the budget to the end of June 2008. Action will be taken to address any potential overspends where these arise.

The accumulated surplus on the Housing Revenue Account is projected to be £1.277m. This will be reinvested in the Council's housing stock.

Noted.

3. Post Office Network Change Programme: Area Plan

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on a proposed Council response to the Post Office Ltd., Network Change Programme Area Plan for Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire.

In May 2007, following a national public consultation, the Government announced a range of proposed measures to modernise and reshape the post office Network and put it on a more stable footing for the future. Post Office Ltd has now put in place a Network Change Programme to implement the Government's proposals. The Programme will involve the compulsory, compensated closure of up to 2,500 Post Office branches, with the introduction of about 500 service points known as "Outreaches" to mitigate the impact of the proposed closures.

Post Office Ltd have now published, and are consulting on, an Area Plan for Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire. The Plan proposes that the following sub offices in North Ayrshire should be closed:

- Irvine: Thornhouse Avenue
- Stevenston: Station Road
- Kilwinning: Baird Avenue
- Fairlie: Main Road
- Saltcoats: Gladstone Road
- Glengarnock: Main Road

A proposed Council response to the Area Plan was appended to the report. The response highlights the Council's concern that the Area Plan proposes the closure of Fairlie Post Office which serves a distinct rural community and is 2.8 miles from the nearest Post Office in Largs. There is also concern over whether the Largs Post Office would be able to cope with increased custom resulting from the closure in Fairlie. In the case of Glengarnock, the population catchment of 3767 includes the Longbar estate and has a below average percentage of households with a car (57%). The post offices proposed for closure in Stevenston, Kilwinning, and Saltcoats, together with the Thornhouse Avenue Branch in Irvine, are all in areas of deprivation within the Irvine Bay Urban Regeneration Company boundaries.

The response highlights the Council's concerns that the proposed closures will remove 4 small businesses from an area where great efforts are being made to promote regeneration. In all these cases the Council urges Post Office Ltd to reconsider their proposals. The proposed response also highlights the impact that the closures will have on transactions carried out for the Council through the post office network and indicates the Council's support for the concerns outlined by Postwatch over the standard of service and access provided by the nearest branches to those being closed.

The Executive agreed to (a) approve the Council's response to the Area Plan proposals, as set out in the report, with the inclusion of a reference to the loss of the post office being the only shop in Glengarnock; (b) commend the local campaigns in support of Post Offices staying open; and (c) urge Post Office Ltd to reconsider its proposals in the light of the issues raised in the Council's response and in submissions from local communities and individuals.

4. Future Funding Method for Four Community Centres

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Educational Services) seeking the views of the Executive on the future funding method for four Community Centres.

At its meeting on 11 March 2008, the Education Executive approved awards totalling £129,026 to four voluntary organisations i.e. Redburn and Vineburgh Community Association, Fullarton Community Association, Vineburgh Community Centre Management Committee, and West Kilbride Public Hall Committee. A call in request was subsequently received and considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 25 March 2008. The Scrutiny Committee declined to scrutinise the 2008/9 awards but requested that a further report be prepared on possible options for the future funding to these groups.

The report presented three possible options. The Executive indicated a preference for Option 2 which involves transferring appropriate funding to the Community Learning and Development mainline budget and requiring the Service to enter into a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with each of the organisations to ensure a suitable programme of delivery. Under this arrangement, the organisations will require to invoice the Service for appropriate financial resources. The SLAs will be agreed by the Principal Officer, Community Learning and Development and the appropriate Head of Service, and will include a requirement for monitoring reports to the Scrutiny Committee. The voluntary organisations will continue to be the responsible employers for any staff working within the Centres.

The Executive agreed that the Corporate Director (Educational Services) should proceed on the basis of Option 2, as set out in the report.

5. Display of Election Posters on Council-owned Street Furniture

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on the outcome of consultations with regard to the display of Election posters.

During election campaigns, North Ayrshire Council, operates a policy which permits election posters to be attached to street furniture, such as lighting columns, subject to conditions. At a meeting of the Council held on 25 June 2008, Councillor Kirkwood, seconded by Councillor McPhee, submitted a motion in the following terms *"We move that it will no longer be permitted to display election campaign posters on any item of street furniture such as lighting columns. This is for reasons of not misusing resources at a time when the council are trying to cut down on waste and to not be seen as failing in our environmental aims."* As an amendment, Councillor O'Neill, seconded by Councillor Reid, moved that consideration of the matter be remitted to the Executive, and that appropriate consultation be carried out by the Chief Executive. Councillor Kirkwood withdrew the motion and the amendment was unanimously approved by the Council.

Following the meeting of the Council, the Chief Executive consulted with other local authorities in Scotland to ascertain their policies on the display of election campaign posters on Council owned facilities. Of the 25 authorities that responded, 14 permit the display of campaign posters on Council owned property e.g. street lighting columns, albeit subject to conditions. The leaders of the political groups on the Council were also consulted with no consensus emerging.

The display of posters by political parties has been an accepted part of election campaigns in North Ayrshire for a considerable period of time. Having the policy in place introduces an element of control and ensures that local political parties, candidates and agents, are aware of their responsibilities in terms of when and where they can erect posters and when posters must be removed. Overall the policy has worked satisfactorily over the years and goodwill between the Returning Officer and local political parties has ensured that the policy is adhered to. Any change in policy would have implications for political parties and independent candidates during election periods. Moreover, changing the existing policy without broad political agreement could prove counter-productive by leading to avoidable "policing" problems for the Returning Officer during the busy period in the run up to the date of poll.

The Executive agreed (a) that the existing policy permitting election campaign posters to be attached to Council owned street furniture should be retained, subject to the policy document being amended to take account of the minor points discussed at the meeting; and (b) to encourage the use of recyclable materials.

6. Children 1st Directions Project

Submitted joint report by the Corporate Directors (Social Services) and (Educational Services) on the future of the Children 1st Directions Project.

The Children 1st Directions project in Irvine is an early intervention service aiming to prevent offending behaviour. The project works with children aged 5-12 years and provides individual support for children and their parents, parental education, and development support activities. Work is carried out in the project base at Townhead, Irvine, and also within service users' homes and schools.

From the project's inception in 2005 until March 2008, annual funding of £189,000 had been provided directly to Children 1st from the Scottish Executive's Crime Prevention Fund. Under the Concordat Agreement, the Scottish Government advised that funding for projects like 1st Directions was included in the GAE for local authorities in 2008/09. Children 1st sought funding from North Ayrshire Council to continue their services beyond March 2008. Contingency funding was provided for 6 months in order for an internal evaluation to be completed by the Council.

The report set out the conclusions of an evaluation of the project undertaken jointly by Educational Services and Social Services in June 2008. The evaluation revealed that the 1st Directions programme was valued highly by social workers and schools. Nevertheless whilst positive in the short term, it is not yet possible to measure the impact of interventions in the longer term. The evaluation also indicated an uneven use of the project both geographically and professionally. Critically the evaluation indicated that the system currently in place was not targeted at the children in most need of the project. There was also wide variation across the Council area in terms of referral agencies knowledge and use of the project. The project operates a waiting list and children and families can wait substantial periods before receiving a service.

Although the external and internal evaluations of the project were generally positive, continued funding for the project requires to be considered in the context of service wide savings required to be made by Social Services and Educational Services. Following detailed discussions between the two Services it has been agreed that the 1st Directions project should not be seen as a priority for continued funding.

The Executive agreed that funding for the Children 1st Directions Project should cease from September 2008.

7. Dalry: Town Centre Strategy

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on progress made in developing a town centre strategy for Dalry.

On 25 September 2007, the Executive approved a Town Centre Regeneration Framework designed to regenerate North Ayrshire towns, to make significant improvements to the built environment, and to tackle issues such as business training, marketing, and signage. Dalry was chosen as the pilot for the Framework and work has been ongoing to formulate a regeneration strategy for the town centre.

Vector Research, who were commissioned to carry out a town centre healthcheck, consumer/business research, and a marketing analysis, have now delivered their final report and action plan which follows extensive consultations with local businesses and residents. The consultants' report presents a long-term plan for Dalry based around five strategic themes i.e. Retail and Visitor Offer, Boosting Enterprise, Quality of Place, Community and Responding to Youth, and Marketing and Branding.

The Council has committed £300,000 to pilot the Town Centre Framework and the report provided details of the projects that will be taken forward in Dalry immediately within the available funding. The aim is to make significant progress in achieving the stated outputs of impacting trade and economy, structure and physical environment, civic pride, supporting town centre trade and community groups, aesthetics, accessibility and public safety.

The Executive agreed to (a) approve the implementation of the Town Centre Strategy for Dalry, as set out in the report; and (b) receive progress reports at future meetings as appropriate.

8. Dalry: Conservation Area: Shop Front Improvement Scheme

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on a proposed shop front improvement scheme for Dalry Conservation Area.

Part of Dalry was designated a Conservation Area in December 2006 in recognition of its architectural and historic character. However, in many instances, unappealing shop front alterations over the years, and general degradation, have gradually diminished the character and appearance of the town centre and the Conservation Area. As part of regeneration of the town it was proposed that a Shop Front Improvement Scheme be implemented. Improvements to the appearance of shop fronts will provide a range of benefits such as enhancing the attractiveness of the town centre as a whole, creating a better impression to encourage more custom, attracting passing trade, restoring, enhancing or saving historical features from decay, and enhancing the Conservation status in the town.

The Shop Front Improvement Scheme will operate by offering local businesses funding for up to 75% of the eligible cost of improvements up to a maximum of £7,500 for a single standard shop unit. The scope of the works covered by the Scheme were set out in the report. Design Guidance has been prepared to set standards for any works carried out and supporting literature will be prepared and distributed to shop owners to encourage applications. The Town Centre Regeneration Framework is being piloted for one year in Dalry and subsequently other North Ayrshire towns will be targeted. The Council has committed a budget of £100,000 to be spent by March 2009 on the Shop Front Improvement Scheme. As the Scheme will initially operate for a period of one year, a speedy turnaround of applications, from submission to the completion of works, will be essential. The report set out arrangements for determining applications.

The Executive agreed (a) to approve the introduction of a Dalry Conservation Area Shop Front Improvement Scheme as set out in the report; (b) to adopt the proposed Design Guidance appended to the report; (c) to delegate authority to the Chief Executive or his nominee(s) to determine applications; and (d) that biannual reports on grant awards to be submitted to the relevant Area Committee.

9. Ardrossan: 4-8 Harbour Street and 10 Princes Street: Transfer of Land to North Ayrshire Ventures/EDI

Submitted report by the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Protective) on proposed changes to the agreement with North Ayrshire Ventures Limited in respect of the above-mentioned properties, and seeking approval for variation of the terms of transfer.

On 23 April 2007, the former Corporate Policy Committee approved the transfer of land and properties at 4-8 Harbour Street and 10 Princes Street, Ardrossan to North Ayrshire Ventures Limited as part of a development for a new health facility to be undertaken by NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The Committee agreed to the transfer of its interests to North Ayrshire Ventures Limited, the Joint Venture Company established with the EDI Group. As with previous transfer transactions involving North Ayrshire Ventures Limited, the Council through its North Ayrshire Ventures Trust would receive loan notes equivalent in value to the full value of the land transferred.

Negotiations have been ongoing for several months between North Ayrshire Ventures Limited and NHS Ayrshire and Arran regarding the project. Recent indications are that the project is considered now to be only marginally viable and the Health Board have expressed concerns regarding the value of the land for which payment would be required to be made to the Venture Company. NHS Ayrshire and Arran have approached North Ayrshire Ventures Limited seeking the waiving of any price for the land thereby making the project viable. In turn, North Ayrshire Ventures Limited has approached the Council to seek agreement to this proposal. This would mean that North Ayrshire Ventures Trust would not receive any value for the transfer of land, which could be re-used in regeneration projects in the future.

The Council has identified that it only has a leasehold interest in the site resting on a 999 year lease from 1847. Discussions are underway with the agents for the landlord/superior, seeking terms to buy out their interest. North Ayrshire Ventures Limited has confirmed that it would contribute funding up to an upper limit, to assist the Council in this regard, thereby relieving the Council of most or all of such costs. Given the uncertainty of the project proceeding under its present terms and the Council's declared obligations regarding regeneration of this part of Ardrossan, it was proposed that the Council should waive claim to value for the site and agree to transfer it at nil cost, subject to receiving the consent of the Scottish Ministers for a less than full value sale.

The Executive agreed to (a) re-affirm approval for the transfer of the land and properties at 4-8 Harbour Street and 10 Princes Street, Ardrossan to North Ayrshire Ventures Limited at nil value, subject to the approval of the Scottish Ministers in terms of Section 74(2) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973; (b) dispense with the requirement for receipt of loan notes for the market value of the site; and (c) accept the offer from North Ayrshire Ventures Limited to underwrite part or all of the costs of acquiring a title to the land.

10. Corporate Grants: Financial Support to Outside Bodies

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on applications for financial assistance received from Outside Bodies.

The Executive agreed to make the following awards:

Organisation	Award
North Ayrshire Cats Protection	£ 400
Highlands and Islands Arts Limited (Hi-Arts)	£1,000
Ayrshire Huntington's Disease Family Support Group	£ 400
Ayrshire Advanced Drivers	£ 300

The meeting ended at 3.25 p.m.