

Housing Services Committee

4 June 1998

**IRVINE, 4 June 1998** - At a Meeting of the Housing Services Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

**Present**

Samual Taylor, Gena Seales, Thomas Barr, James Clements, Samual Gooding, Jane Gorman, Margaret Munn, Robert Rae, Patrick Browne

**In Attendance**

The Director of Housing Services, F. Kelly, Head of Strategy and Development, J. Paul, Head of Property Services, M. MacPherson, Research Manager (Housing Services), H. Hunter, Senior Accountant (Financial Services), M. Hewitt, Corporate Policy Officer and S. Bale, Administration Officer (Chief Executive).

**Chair**

Mr. Taylor in the Chair.

**Apologies for Absence**

Thomas Dickie.

**1. Minutes Confirmed**

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 23 April 1998, copies of which had previously been circulated, were confirmed.

**2. Housing Plan**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services summarising the draft Housing Plan for 1999-2004.

Local authorities are required to produce a 5 year Housing Plan for submission to the Scottish Office on a scheduled basis and the Council is required to submit its Plan for 1999-2004 by the end of June 1998. The Plan sets out the strategic direction for housing investment, through the Council's Capital Programme, Scottish Homes investment and funding from other sources such as the private sector or new housing partnerships and aims to identify the needs and demands relating to all housing sectors within North Ayrshire over the five year period. The Plan will replace that of the former Cunninghame District Council approved in 1994 and adopted by this Council in 1996. Discussions have been held with a variety of other stakeholders such as tenants, residents, housing associations etc. in the preparation of the Plan. It is in the main a strategic document summarising needs and demands, identifying gaps and focusing on the structure of the five Housing Market Areas, viz. the North Coast, Arran, the Garnock Valley, the Three Towns and the Irvine/Kilwinning New Town area, but emphasising that the needs of these areas may change over the period.

The four main policy areas which the Plan covers are (i) meeting housing needs and demands; (ii) housing quality and the environment; (iii) economic development and housing activity; and (iv) inclusion and accessibility. The needs cannot be met without adequate resources

and it will be necessary therefore to draw on the widest range of funding provision available.

The Committee sought further information on a number of matters relating to the Plan and received clarification on the points raised and after a full discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to approve the Housing Plan for 1999-2004 for submission to the Scottish Office by the end of June 1998; and (b) to authorise the Director of Housing Services to (i) use the Housing Plan as the basis for completing a new Strategic Agreement with Scottish Homes; (ii) pursue a programme of Housing Market Area studies jointly with Scottish Homes; and (iii) distribute the Housing Plan to representatives of all stakeholders.

### **3. Draft Programme for Scottish Homes: Investment in North Ayrshire**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the draft Programme for Scottish Homes investment in North Ayrshire.

The Council agrees annually a programme of projects in which Scottish Homes will invest and which aims to fulfil the policy priorities set out within the Strategic Agreement with Scottish Homes. The priorities have been reviewed through the Housing Plan and the new joint priorities will emerge from that review over the coming months. The current proposals are therefore an interim programme and a new Strategic Agreement during 1998/99 may result in changes to the following year's programme. The Programme covers a 3 year period and the annual level of investment in North Ayrshire is likely in the region of £3m, although this is not guaranteed beyond the current year. The focus of investment will be within each of the five Housing Market Areas fulfilling the four main policy priorities. The Programme also takes account of the carry forward from 1997/98 and new site starts within 1998/99 and although the investment covers each of the five Housing Market Areas, the priorities within them relate to Small Urban Renewal Initiatives.

After discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to approve the draft Programme for Scottish Homes investment in North Ayrshire, as detailed in the annexed report (Appendix HS1); and (b) to instruct the Director of Housing Services to negotiate with Scottish Homes to progress the specific projects contained within the Programme and ensure that they fulfil Strategic Agreement objectives.

### **4. Longbar Option Appraisal and Garnock Valley Housing Market Study**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the Longbar Option Appraisal and Garnock Valley Housing Market Study.

The Committee previously agreed to appoint a consultant to appraise future options for Longbar in the Garnock Valley, due to the problem of the high number of voids in the area. The consultants' brief included a wide range of assessment of options, covering the physical design, layout and condition of the estate, as it related to the current and future demand for either rented or owner occupied housing and included a first stage discussion with local community groups on their views on the future of Longbar. The study was later expanded to cover the whole Housing Market Area of the Garnock Valley. A proposal was also submitted to the Scottish Office for an early start on Longbar through the New Housing Partnership funding for 1998/99, but this bid was unsuccessful. The completion of the option appraisal and the integration of the results of the housing market study were held back until the New Housing Partnership bid result was known. The appraisal and study can now be completed, following structured interviews with community groups. The intention is to raise the issues involved but not to reach a conclusion and it is proposed therefore to await the completion of the studies and consultant's final report, before progressing the matter further.

The Committee agreed that a further report be submitted to the August meeting of the Committee.

## **5. New Housing Partnerships 1998/99**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the results of the 1998/99 round of bidding for New Housing Partnerships.

Three bids were submitted on behalf of the Council viz. (i) a regeneration proposal for Longbar; (ii) an island initiative for Cumbrae covering social rented and private tenure; and (iii) a feasibility study into the transfer of Irvine's multi-storey flats to a partnership company. The results have now been announced with the bids for (ii) and (iii) being successful, whilst the bid for (i) as reported at item 4 was unsuccessful. The essential criteria related to stock transfer, private sector funding and a partnership approach. Whilst the bid for Longbar met the criteria, it was at too early a stage. The Irvine multi-storey block proposal has been awarded £62,000 for a feasibility study in partnership with Irvine Housing Association to establish whether an independent partnership vehicle could draw in long-term sources of investment which are not available to the Council acting alone. The Cumbrae proposal relates to a unified approach to all housing issues on the island recognising the outstanding private sector renewal investment requirements, the shortfall in special needs housing, the small number of public sector houses matched by similar numbers in Cunninghame Housing Association ownership and the potential for a small amount of employment related spin-offs for the island. This proposal has been awarded £340,000 for tenant consultation costs and for the redemption of debt for Council owned properties. Since this figure accounts for less than half of the bid submitted the proposal must now be reviewed and the outcomes re-assessed before undertaking the tenant consultation. Both the Irvine and Cumbrae projects will now be progressed in consultation with the tenants.

Arising from this, it was further reported that an award of £141,300 has recently been announced for the Countess Street, Saltcoats Housing Action Area.

The Committee agreed (a) that the feasibility study on the future ownership and management of the Irvine multi-storey blocks be undertaken jointly with Irvine Housing Association; (b) that the tenants be fully informed of the exploratory nature of the proposals; (c) that the original proposal for a unified approach to housing in Cumbrae be reviewed; (d) that a resultant consultation with tenants be undertaken to establish a future direction compatible with their wishes and the interests of the Council, together with Cunninghame Housing Association; and (e) that further reports be submitted to the Committee in due course.

## **6. Development Proposals**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the outcome of early proposals for Cornmill House, Kilwinning and Shore Road, Stevenston.

As part of the Homeless Persons Accommodation Strategy, a number of properties were identified as possible supported accommodation for young people. These properties included Cornmill House, Kilwinning and 14-20 Shore Road, Stevenston. A feasibility study carried out on Cornmill House has shown that the estimated capital costs of between £850,000 and £1.15m to convert the property into suitable accommodation would be prohibitive and difficult to accommodate within the Capital Programme. On this basis the conversion of Cornmill House to supported accommodation would not be feasible. For various reasons it would also be inappropriate to convert the properties at Shore Road into supported accommodation. Given that the original difficulties with both properties still remain in terms of their contribution to the housing stock and to the local environment, it is proposed to look more widely at potential uses for both properties, possibly in conjunction with other housing providers to enable resources to be attracted. The possibility of converting the properties at Shore Road to student accommodation, due to their proximity to the railway station, was suggested.

After a full discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to withdraw Cornmill House, Kilwinning and 14-20 Shore Road, Stevenston from the list of possible properties for supported accommodation for young people; (b) that a site visit to Cornmill House be undertaken by the Chair, Vice-Chair and appropriate local Members, in the first instance, to consider the development possibilities; (c) that development plans be prepared for Cornmill House, Kilwinning and 14-20 Shore Road,

Stevenston; and (d) that a meeting of the Homeless Persons Accommodation Strategy Working Group be called immediately following the recess to look at how the strategy can be implemented.

## **7. Home Energy Efficiency Works**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on proposals for expenditure on Home Energy Efficiency Works in 1998/99.

There are three sources of funding for energy efficiency works.

Firstly there is the Government funded Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (H.E.E.S.) to which network installers are appointed with whom the Council liaises and who are authorised to carry out energy efficiency works to the Council's houses for qualifying tenants in receipt of benefit.

Secondly within the Housing HRA Capital Programme for 1998/99, £250,000 has been allocated for energy efficiency works to the Council's housing stock. Previously such provision has been spent on cavity wall insulation. With the virtual completion of the cavity wall insulation programme, however, only £50,000 is likely to be required for such work in 1998/99, allowing the remaining £200,000 to be spent on other energy efficiency works.

Thirdly the Government has made available a further special allocation of £3m to Scottish local authorities for home energy efficiency works in 1998/99, conditional on the Council making available places for young people under the New Deal. The Council has previously allocated funding from the special allocation in 1997/98 to Best Energy and Solas Insulation, the two major network installers operating in North Ayrshire, to carry out energy efficiency works to the Council's housing stock. Both companies already carry out works under H.E.E.S and both have indicated that they are interested in employing New Deal labour.

Since not all tenants qualify for energy efficiency works under H.E.E.S. a more co-ordinated and comprehensive approach is required to ensure that the energy efficiency of the whole stock is improved. Proposals include allocating further funding to Best Energy provided the company make available the maximum number of places for young people under New Deal and to Solas Insulation to fund works in co-ordination with work under H.E.E.S. In terms of quality of work, it was emphasised that both organisations are closely vetted by the relevant government agency and that in terms of price they would be subject to scrutiny by the Architectural Services Manager.

After discussion, the Committee agreed (a) that the anticipated special allocation for Home Energy Efficiency Works in 1998/99 and £100,000 of the amount allocated to energy efficiency in the Capital Programme be made available to Best Energy, through a negotiated tender in accordance with Standing Order 17b of the Council's Standing Orders relating to contracts, on condition that the company make available the maximum number of places for young people under the New Deal to the satisfaction of the Director of Housing Services; (b) that the remaining £100,000 allocated for energy efficiency within the Capital Programme be made available to Solas Insulation through a negotiated tender, also in accordance with Standing Order 17b; (c) that the Director of Housing Services ensure that the energy efficiency works funded jointly under H.E.E.S and by the Council are properly co-ordinated and address the Council's priorities; and (d) that a further report be submitted to the Committee in due course on the results of these arrangements for the provision of energy efficiency works and how they may be continued in future years.

## **8. Introduction of Housing Finance System - Position With Housing Benefits**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on the current position in respect of the processing of Housing Benefit cases.

On 12 March 1998, the Committee considered a report on progress on the implementation of the new computerised housing benefit system and agreed that a further progress report be submitted to the Committee in June 1998. The new system which went live on 16 March 1998, is operating satisfactorily and there is every reason to believe that it will deliver what is expected of it in the fullness of time and thereby provide a valuable tool in the Council's delivery of a

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comprehensive and decentralised benefit system. The full capacity of the system cannot be utilised, however, until the loading of data has been completed. This has been a mammoth task, with a dedicated team being set up to process the loading. At the beginning of May the accumulated caseload was approximately 4,000 Council Tax claims, 900 private tenant claims and 3,100 private tenant reviews. To date 56% of Council Tax claims have been completed, 93% of private tenant claims and 62% of private tenant reviews. The loading exercise is on target and is expected to be completed, as previously specified by July 1998. The rent arrears initiative has been suspended until all relevant information is fully loaded on to the system to ensure that those being pursued are in arrears and it is anticipated that this initiative can be renewed in July/August.

After discussion the Committee agreed (a) that a further progress report be submitted to the next meeting; (b) that a report on the position regarding the DSS subsidy received in relation to processing housing benefits be submitted to the Support Services Committee.

**9. Broomlands No. 7 Shaft, Lewis Crescent, Bourtreehill**

Submitted report by the Architectural Services Manager on the proposed extension of an existing mine shaft consolidation contract to include a further mine shaft.

Within the Irvine area, many disused mine shafts were previously treated by Irvine Development Corporation and their subsequent monitoring is now the responsibility of the Council. One such mineshaft, Broomlands No. 9 at Lewis Crescent, Bourtreehill exhibited signs of settlement. A contractor, Norwest Holst Soil Engineering Limited, was appointed to undertake the consolidation contract required and work commenced on the site on 23 March 1998. Investigations have now indicated that the Broomlands No. 7 shaft also requires to be consolidated. It is proposed therefore that the current contract for the Broomlands No. 9 shaft be extended to include the No. 7 shaft, thus ensuring that these essential works are completed in the shortest practicable timescale and also resulting in savings on site establishment costs.

The Committee agreed to authorise the Architectural Services Manager to negotiate a contract with Norwest Holst Soil Engineering Limited to extend the existing contract.

**10. Irvine: 37 Gigha Terrace**

Submitted report by the Legal Services Manager on proposals to "irritate the feu" with a view to obtaining possession of the fire damaged property at 37 Gigha Terrace, Irvine.

The property at 37 Gigha Terrace, Irvine, which was sold by the former Irvine Development Corporation in June 1991 and subsequently re-sold to its present owner in 1994, has been extensively damaged by fire. It forms part of a terrace block with the properties on either side belonging to the Council. The property is not insured and the owner has failed to take any steps to reinstate it. The Council are the Superiors of the property and it is possible to institute proceedings in the Sheriff Court to return the property to the Superiors for breach of the feuing conditions. This type of action is known as "irritating the feu". The present owner is considered to be in breach of certain conditions of the feu disposition and such action would be appropriate.

The Committee agreed (a) to authorise the Legal Services Manager to institute proceedings to irritate the feu in this case; and (b) that a further report be submitted to the Committee in due course.

**11. Customer Comments Scheme**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on customer comments dealt with during the period 1 January to 31 March 1998.

Noted.



## **12. 1998/99 Housing (Non-HRA) Capital Programme: Discretionary Grant Programmes**

Submitted report by the Director of Housing Services on proposals in relation to grant levels and grant eligibility criteria.

On 23 April 1998, the Committee having been advised that capital allocation for the Non-HRA Programme in 1998/99 is insufficient to allow the Discretionary Grants Programme to continue at its previous funding level, agreed to review how the limited funding can be distributed more widely.

The Discretionary Grants Programme relates to repair grants for lead plumbing, improvement grants for private water supplies and improvement grants for disabled applicants. Three aspects have been considered viz. grant levels, ability to pay and in relation to disabled grants, need.

With regard to grant levels, the Council currently awards grants at the statutory maximum possible rates which are 90% for lead replacement, 75% for improvement and 75% for disabled grants, without any reference to the applicant's ability to pay. It is proposed that the percentage of grant in each case be reduced to 50%, except for applicants in receipt of Income Support who would continue to be entitled to the maximum grant level. In the case of improvement grants for the disabled, the Social Work Directorate are also able to provide grants which are allocated on the basis of various criteria relating to the applicant's personal circumstances.

With regard to eligibility, the rules can, as well as applying to the circumstances of the applicant, can apply to the nature of the work itself. In the case of private water supplies, it is proposed that grants be restricted to situations where the Environmental Health Section have certified that the water quality is sub-standard. In the case of lead plumbing, this is a standard operation with minimal scope for limiting approved works, other than to ensure that the most cost-effective method and route is taken. In the case of improvement grants for the disabled, there is a mandatory requirement to provide grants for specially adapted standard amenities as required, which relate only to baths/showers, wash hand basins, sinks and toilets being accessible to disabled occupants. It is proposed to restrict grants to the standard amenities and to the provision of suitable access to the property itself. The Social Work Directorate assess applicants occupying Council houses, for aids and adaptations on a scale of 1 to 10. It is proposed that this assessment method be introduced in respect of private sector applicants in order to prioritise grant awards in the event that this is necessary to contain expenditure within budget limitations.

After discussion, during which concerns were expressed about having to limit the discretionary awards available, the Committee agreed (a) to approve the proposals in relation to grant levels and grant eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Grants Programme, as detailed within the report; (b) that the revised grant levels be applied to the grant applications listed at item 13 below; (c) that the revised grant levels and eligibility criteria be applied in full to all future applications; and (d) to make representations to the Scottish Office and to the two local MPs.

## **13. 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 3.35 p.m.