

Housing Services Committee
27 August 1998

Irvine, 27 August 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, Margaret Munn and Robert Rae.

In Attendance

The Director of Housing and Construction Services; E. McNaught, Head of Customer Services; F. Kelly, Head of Strategy and Development; J. Paul, Head of Property Services (Housing and Construction Services); M. Hewitt, Corporate Policy Officer and S. Bale, Administration Officer (Chief Executive).

Chair

Mr. Taylor in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

John Donn, Jane Gorman, Irene Oldfather and George Steven.

1. Minutes Confirmed

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 4 June 1998, copies of which had previously been circulated, were confirmed.

2. Scottish Homes Stock Transfer

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the transfer of Scottish Homes' housing stock.

The Committee has been advised at a number of previous meetings on progress in the transfer of the Scottish Homes' stock of around 200 houses in the Garnock Valley. Furthermore, in April 1998, the Committee agreed to pursue a new Housing Partnership approach to the proposed transfer of Scottish Homes stock within the Irvine area.

With regard to the Garnock Valley, following a tenants' preference vote, Cunninghame Housing Association went forward to a formal ballot in June 1998. The result of the ballot was that of 202 tenants eligible to vote 75.7% did so, and of those votes 84.3% elected to transfer to Cunninghame Housing Association. Scottish Homes has accordingly approved the transfer to Cunninghame Housing Association and this should now take place around October 1998.

With regard to the transfer of the Irvine area stock of around 840 houses, meetings have been held with local tenants under the auspices of the Scottish Homes Initiatives Unit. Scottish Homes has drawn up an outline timetable extending over the next eighteen months which proposes the establishment of a Steering Group in September 1998, with a view to transfer completion by March 2000 and includes a training programme covering aspects such as (i) the background to the transfer; (ii) types of organisation and scope for tenant involvement; and (iii) responsibilities of the Board. Scottish Homes has also confirmed that they would require any new organisation to be able to operate independently and would prefer the model of representation on the Board of one third Council, one third tenants and one third business/community/other interests. It should also be fundamentally a non profit-making organisation. It is now likely that the Steering Group will

commence in October, as the tenants have requested more time to discuss it with their Groups.

Arising from the discussion on this item, concerns were expressed about potential future transfers of Council housing stock. Assurances were however given that this report related solely to the transfer of Scottish Homes housing stock and that it would be the first time that the Council has had such a major involvement in the transfer of stock which does not belong to them. The Committee was also advised that the position nationally was likely to change in the light of the Government's latest paper on "New Housing Partnerships: The Next Phase", which sets out the range of projects which may be eligible for new funding and indicates the Government's intention to give priority to funding well founded proposals for transfer partnerships.

After discussion, the Committee agreed (a) to nominate Councillors J. McKinney and T. Barr to participate in the Irvine Steering Group; (b) to participate in the training schedule for the Irvine Steering Group; (c) that a report be submitted to the Committee on the outcome of discussions within the Steering Group following the training period; (d) that the Government's latest paper on the New Housing Partnerships be circulated to Members; (e) that a seminar be held for all Members of the Council on the New Housing Partnerships; and (f) that a further report be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

3. Longbar Option Appraisal and Garnock Valley Housing Market Study

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

On 4 June 1998, the Committee considered an interim report on progress on the Longbar Option Appraisal and Garnock Valley Housing Market Study and agreed that a further report be submitted once the studies had been finalised. Both studies have now been concluded.

The Longbar Study includes a number of options and costs ranging from £320,000 which is considered to be a minimum approach which may not be sustainable in the medium to long term, to over £8 million, based on varying levels of demolition, environmental works, rehabilitation and new build. The Study assumes that it is unlikely that the appropriate level of finance would be available from the local authority alone.

The Housing Market Study covers a much wider area looking at the Garnock Valley as a whole and concludes with a number of key findings comprising (a) a distinction between the relatively poor "health" of the market in the Kilbirnie, Glengarnock and Beith area and the more buoyant situation in Dalry; (b) an identification of the "fragility" of the market for both owner occupation and rented sectors and the need for intervention to ensure a robust long-term future; and (c) a clarification of demand for rented stock closer to town centres, mainly for smaller sized houses, as opposed to higher demand for owner occupation in semi-rural environments, which are still accessible by public transport to and from places of employment.

The results of both studies suggest that the way forward is to agree (i) that a new future for Longbar is possible, but within the Kilbirnie, Glengarnock and Beith context; (ii) that a radical approach to Longbar, including demolition, stock transfer and new build is likely to be the best long-term solution, but within that solution a number of options are available; (iii) that further work should be done to consider a package of sites which could form the basis of a partnership development, together with Longbar, to meet the housing market needs and demands; and (iv) that work be undertaken with local residents and other organisations to come up with a strategy and plan for the area and obtain commitment to funding and investment over an agreed timescale.

The Committee agreed (a) to set up the Steering Group already approved in April 1997, comprising local Members, Officers, the local community, Scottish Homes, Enterprise Ayrshire etc., to advance a Strategy and Implementation Plan based on the proposals detailed within the report; (b) to nominate Councillors Steven, Dickie, Jennings and Reilly to the Steering Group; (c) to instruct the Director of Housing and Construction Services to report to the Committee on progress and on the results of the Steering Group, prior to implementation; and (d) to make a presentation on the findings of the current report to the Garnock Valley Area Committee for its interest.

4. Housing Allocation Policies: Implementation

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the implementation of the Mainstream Housing and the Sheltered and Amenity Housing Allocation Policies.

On 30 October 1997, the Committee approved a new Mainstream Housing and Sheltered Amenity Housing Allocation Policy. On 4 December 1997, the Committee further identified a number of issues relating to the implementation of the policies, including (i) the requirement for I.T. systems; (ii) the need to undertake a full review of all existing applicants; (iii) the requirement for new procedures; (iv) the need for new documentation; and (v) a target implementation date of 31 July 1998. Implementation has not however been possible due to a number of factors. Firstly the development of the new I.T. system took longer than originally anticipated, since the suppliers had to tailor the system package to suit the requirements of the new policies. Secondly, as a result of the review exercise to date, the total number of applicants for housing in North Ayrshire has reduced from 11,450 to around 5,500, since many applicants have either found accommodation or have moved away from their contact address since the last review in 1998. Based on current information, the total number of applicants for housing in North Ayrshire is therefore likely to be around 6,000. The applicants who advised that they still wished to be considered for housing were invited to attend an interview to discuss in detail their application. There are, however, 2,500 who have failed to make contact or attend an arranged interview. Additionally, detailed procedures for implementing the new policies cannot be finalised until the data input exercise has been completed and an assessment has been undertaken of whether the policies require to be amended to achieve the Council's aims and objectives. Further work is also required to produce standard letters etc.

It is proposed therefore to delay implementation of the policies until full testing of the new system and the accuracy of the information provided by applicants has been completed.

It is anticipated that the review exercise will be completed by 30 September 1998 and any applicants who have failed to contact or attend an interview by then will be removed from the waiting list immediately following that date.

It is further proposed that a testing period of the new system should then commence before full implementation of the new policies. This will also provide an opportunity to undertake consultation with tenants, residents groups etc. and will ensure that Members can be advised of the full impact which the policies are likely to have on existing applicants, as there will be advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

After discussion, during which the need to publicise the cut-off date of 30 September to applicants was emphasised, the Committee agreed (a) that a testing period of the new system be undertaken; (b) that a report be submitted to the Committee in January 1999 on the outcome of the tests and any amendments required to the policies; and (c) that the implementation of the new Allocation Policies be delayed until the testing period has been completed.

5. Housing Finance System: Housing Benefits

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the processing of Housing Benefit cases.

On 4 June 1996, the Committee agreed that a further progress report be submitted to the next meeting. A commitment had been given to eliminate as far as possible, the accumulated caseload by July 1998. A dedicated team was set up to deal with the task. In addition to the accumulated caseload, however, the staff are still having to deal with (i) the development of the new HAF system; (ii) the continuation of a benefit service; and (iii) the carrying out of benefit reviews for both public and private sector tenancies. The anticipated caseload was 8,000. Since then the Council Tenant Review has been ongoing and caseload enquiries indicate that the demand for enquiries has recently doubled, taking the current total caseload now to 18,000. Whilst the team has achieved a remarkable input of cases averaging 1,000 per week enabling almost 13,000 cases to be processed by the end of

July, any ongoing demand at this level could result in a projected figure of 52,000 over 12 months representing an increase of 37%. A meeting has been held this week with the Benefits Agency who have indicated that due to adjustments in employment patterns in the district there is an increasing number of people on benefit. The situation has been further exacerbated by the holiday period and an increase in the sickness rate of staff employed in Benefits over the period although this rate has since reduced. Substantial progress has, however, been made and continues to be made. All cases are being dealt with in date order, although some require information from other agencies. The system is working well and training on the new system is being given to more staff. It is intended to keep the dedicated team in place to eliminate the outstanding cases, prior to the system being decentralised in October. It will never be possible, however, to process cases on the same day and a backlog will always remain.

The Committee noted the gratitude which had been expressed by both Irvine Housing Association and Cunninghame Housing Association for the assistance given to them by Housing Benefit staff.

Arising from discussion on this item, assurances were given that the Director of Housing and Construction Services is unaware of any cases of Housing Benefit which the Council is processing in an improper manner and that there are no cases of individuals being pursued for rent arrears whilst they are still awaiting a decision on Housing Benefit.

With regard to rent collection, the Committee previously agreed to reduce from two teams to one team covering the whole area comprising a Supervisor and four staff. The remaining Rent Collectors have been redeployed to form a Fraud Team who investigate Housing Benefit fraud involving Council tenants. There will be a number of agencies involved in close co-operation in the pooling of information and the Committee will be advised if the staffing resources are found to be inadequate.

After discussion, the Committee agreed that a report be submitted to the next meeting providing statistical information on rent arrears and the various reasons for these including the situation relating to Housing Benefit.

6. Home Energy Efficiency

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on promoting the benefits of Home Energy Efficiency through Look North.

The Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 places on local authorities a responsibility to improve the energy efficiency of all tenures of the housing stock in North Ayrshire through physical works to houses such as insulation and draft proofing and by changing the behaviour of the population in general with regard to the operation of appliances. On 4 June 1998, the Committee approved proposals for expenditure on home energy efficiency works in 1998/99 on Council housing stock. There is still, however, the requirement to promote home energy efficiency generally.

Following discussions with Strathclyde and Central Energy Advice Centre, which is funded by various bodies including the Council, it is proposed to include a general article on home energy efficiency in the winter edition of Look North together with a home energy survey form. All householders returning the survey form to SCEAC will receive an energy efficiency information pack and individual energy advice. The information provided on the survey forms will also provide useful statistical information. In order to encourage householders to complete the forms it is proposed to introduce prizes to the winning area in which the highest proportion of householders return forms and individual householders will be entered into a free prize draw.

The Committee agreed to approve (a) the proposals for a publicity campaign in Look North on home energy efficiency, including a community energy competition; and (b) to authorise the Director of Housing and Construction Services to continue to identify ways of conveying the benefits of home energy efficiency to the population of North Ayrshire through appropriate information, advice, education and promotion.

7. Cornmill House

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services updating Members on the situation with regard to Cornmill House.

On 4 June 1998, the Committee agreed (a) to withdraw Cornmill House, Kilwinning from the list of possible properties for supported accommodation for young people due to the high costs of conversion and upgrading; and (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. Following the site visit, several possibilities have been explored and advice and information sought from a number of sources. It is considered likely that on a detailed financial appraisal, demolition and new build will be the best option because of the high cost and limited lifespan of improvements relative to new build and because a cleared site is likely to be of more interest. The Scottish Homes programme for future years includes Cornmill House for possible funding, but funding is unlikely to be available within the next two years. It is proposed that a development plan be drawn up for the property including a strategic view of the likely contribution which the site can make to the housing stock of the area, a range of the likely transfer possibilities to enable investment to be drawn in and the results of a borehole survey identifying the developable land etc.

After discussion, during which concern was expressed about the continuing problems associated with Cornmill House and the length of time it would take for the redevelopment proposals to come to fruition, the Committee agreed that a report be submitted to the next meeting on the implications of demolishing the property at an early date and rehousing the existing tenants.

8. Largs: Nelson Street

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the condition of private dwellinghouses in Nelson Street, Largs.

Nelson Street contains one of the highest concentration of sub-tolerable housing in North Ayrshire. Although a number of Housing Action Areas for Improvement have been completed in this street, there are a further 93 dwellings which have been identified for Housing Action Area treatment at an estimated cost of £3m. In April 1997, the Committee in reviewing the Housing Action Area Programme acknowledged that improvement works in Nelson Street could not be funded from the Council's Non-Housing Capital Programme alone and that substantial funding would be required from other sources. The position has been discussed with Scottish Homes and Housing Action Area treatment has been included as a future project in the Joint Investment Plan. A Property Study has also been commissioned to update previous feasibility studies carried out in Nelson Street. There is, however, no guarantee of financial resources being available within a specific timescale.

After discussion, the Committee agreed that (a) the situation in Nelson Street be kept under review; (b) any opportunities for joint funding and partnership arrangements be explored; and (c) the suggestion that additional land may be available at the rear of some of the properties with potential for development be investigated.

9. West Kilbride: 75 and 79 Main Street: Repairs Notices

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the proposed service of Repairs Notices at 75 and 79 Main Street, West Kilbride.

During the course of the West Kilbride Care and Repair Project, the structural problems and poor condition of the north facing gable of the building at 75 and 79 Main Street, West Kilbride became evident. Arising from this, an elderly resident requested assistance to repair defects in her property under the auspices of Care and Repair. As the building is tenemental and the responsibility for repair is shared, the defects could not be dealt with utilising Care and Repair funding as the owners, who include a bank and a shop do not all qualify for grant aid. The bank have agreed to fund their share of the works and it is proposed that Section 108 Repairs Notices be served on the owners

of the six flats and two commercial properties, which would entitle the owner to Repairs Grant funding which can be met from the Private Sector Housing Grants, detailed at item 11.

The Committee agreed to authorise the service of Repairs Notices in terms of Section 108 of the Housing Scotland Act 1987 on the relevant properties.

10. Revocation of Closing Orders

Submitted reports by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the undernoted properties:-

- (a) Saltcoats: 11A Countess Street: 3 Apartment First Floor Flat
- (b) Saltcoats: 25 Countess Street: 1st Right, 2nd Left, 1st Left, 2nd Left
- (c) Irvine: 16 Townhead (G/R)
- (d) Irvine: 16 Townhead (1/R)

Following repair and improvement the properties now meet the tolerable standard.

The Committee agreed to approve the revocation of the Closing Orders.

11. Private Sector Housing Grants

Submitted the annexed report (Appendix HS1) by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on grant applications for improvements, disabled, lead replacement, repairs and environmental improvement grants.

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

The Meeting ended at 3.20 p.m.