

Housing Services Committee
8 October 1998

Irvine, 8 October 1998 - At a Meeting of the Housing Services Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

Present

Gena Seales, Thomas Barr, Patrick Browne, John Donn, Samuel Gooding, Jane Gorman, Margaret Munn and George Steven.

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); D Nibloe, Principal Officer, Accountancy (Financial Services); A McEvoy, Marketing Officer and J Bannatyne, Administration Officer (Chief Executive).

Chair

Mrs Seales in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Samuel Taylor Thomas Dickie, David Gallagher and Robert Rae.

1. Minutes Confirmed

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 27 August 1998, copies of which had previously been circulated, were confirmed.

2. Rent Arrears

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on rent arrears levels giving details of the reasons for these arrears and of the action proposed to reduce arrears levels in terms of the current recovery policy.

A number of developments have taken place over the past two years which have influenced rent arrears levels. These include Housing Benefit over payments, and the level of local unemployment. Organisational changes have also taken place and details of how these have affected arrears levels were given in the report.

When responsibility for recovering rent arrears was decentralised, the level of arrears was £1.55m. At the end of the 1997/98 financial year, current tenant arrears were £1.66m and the levels at 29 September 1998 show arrears of £1.70m, an increase of £150,000 over a twelve month period and will remain at this level unless corrective action is taken.

A full review of the Council's policy and procedures to address rent arrears is currently underway which will examine recovery and payment methods. On completion of this review, training will be provided for all staff involved in rent arrears recovery. Preparatory work is also being undertaken to allow full implementation of the escalation policy and procedures immediately following the decentralisation of the Housing Benefit service and the return of redeployed staff to their posts in the Area Office. Attention will focus on those tenants in high arrears where action has reached pre-court stage and on those tenants newly in arrears with a view to the prevention of an increase in arrears. Adequate measures will also be introduced to address Housing Benefit fraud. Closer monitoring will be undertaken to enable early intervention when tenants initially fall

into arrears.

Noted.

3. Aids and Adaptation Policy for Council Housing Stock

Submitted joint report by the Directors of Housing and Construction Services and Social Work on a number of measures proposed to effect improvements following a recent review of the Aids and Adaptations Policy for Council housing stock.

The report outlined the fundamental principles of the Aids and Adaptations Policy and gave details on the issues identified during the review of the assessment and prioritisation of applicants. Details were also given on the timescale targets established within the Policy and confirmation given that following the mid-term review of the Policy in October 1997, it was proposed that the total budget for aids and adaptations in 1998/99 be increased to £304,000. During the current financial year this allocation has been sufficient to ensure that no significant waiting lists have developed for hospital discharge cases and applicants for handrails and banisters. The cost of extensions is also currently within budget figure. In the case of the qualifying list to date, all applications with ten and nine points and a number of applications with eight points have been processed. Applications continue to be received however, and it is unlikely that this degree of progress through the waiting list can be sustained under the current budget.

Although it is generally concluded that the current policy is operating satisfactorily, the review of the Policy has highlighted a number of areas for improvement on the assessment and prioritisation of need, aids and adaptations, housing considerations, handrails and banisters and extensions. It is further proposed that subject to finance being available, the total budget for aids and adaptations be further increased in future years to reduce the number of applicants on the qualifying list requiring to wait over one year. Waiting lists will be placed on the Intranet, tenants will be notified when works have been instructed and tenants on the waiting lists for more than one year will be notified of their position every 12 months and advised that they should contact the Social Work Directorate if they consider their needs have increased. Any increase in funding for aids and adaptations will require to be considered when determining priorities for inclusion within the Housing (HRA) Capital Programme.

The Council has vigorously pursued a policy of addressing the needs of the elderly and, while the costs to help the elderly and disabled are very high, a proportion of the budget has been increased to address adaptations, handrails etc.

After discussion the Committee agreed (a) to approve the proposals in relation to the procedures for assessment and prioritisation of applicants in the terms indicated in the report; (b) that further proposals by the Social Work Directorate with regard to the prioritisation of need be submitted to the Committee in January 1999 for consideration; and (c) that the Aids and Adaptations Policy continue to be reviewed every two years.

4. Irvine: Multi-storey Flats

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the proposed review of the Multi-storey Accommodation Strategy in the light of a successful Housing Partnership Bid.

In January 1998 the Committee approved a Housing (HRA) Capital Programme for 1998/99 which included provision of £750,000 for Phase I of the multi-storey programme comprising all maintenance requirements for one multi-storey block in Irvine and the refurbishment of the lifts in the multi-storey blocks in Saltcoats. In June 1998 the Committee was advised that the Council had been successful in its bid under the Government's New Housing Partnership Programme to fund a feasibility study proposal for the transfer of ownership of the Irvine multi-storey flats to a partnership company. Work on the feasibility study is now progressing and a Steering Group has been formed. It is considered that the Council do not carry out any major Capital investment in one block at this stage.

It is therefore proposed that the provision of £400,000 in the 1998/99 Housing (HRA) Capital Programme earmarked for expenditure on the Irvine multi-storey flats be deleted pending the outcome of the current feasibility study on the future ownership of the multi-storey flats and that authorisation be given to make any necessary adjustments to the Capital Programme in the light of this deletion.

Having heard the Chair report on the views of the Local Member, the Committee agreed that the provision of £400,000 in the 1998/99 Housing (HRA) Capital Programme earmarked for expenditure on the Irvine multi-storey flats, be retained in the Capital Programme until the outcome of the feasibility study in relation to the proposal for the transfer of ownership of the Irvine multi-storey flats into a partnership company is known.

5. Kilwinning: Cornmill House: Resident Re-housing Requirements

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services outlining the implications of re-housing the tenants from 10 - 56 Cornmill House, Kilwinning .

Steps are being taken to rehouse the tenants of the 16 flats at Cornmill House which are still occupied. The level of suitable vacancies for those choosing Kilwinning will determine the timescale to complete the re-housing of the Cornmill House tenants and it is estimated that this can be achieved by January 1999. The maximum sum payable to the tenants in respect of Homeloss and Disturbance payments is £2,000 per tenant. On this basis the maximum required to re-house all tenants from the block would be £32,000 and this sum can be contained within existing budgetary resources. Every effort will be made to keep the site in a tidy condition when the property has been vacated.

Noted.

6. Housing and New Deal

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the implementation of the Government's New Deal in relation to Housing Services.

The first North Ayrshire Council Housing Plan was produced earlier this year for the period 1999-2004. In terms of housing and economic development, planned activities involve developing employment opportunities including the use of New Deal labour and the intermediate labour market in connection with energy efficiency and environmental schemes. Details were given on partnership arrangements between the Council and home energy efficiency companies who have agreed to take on New Deal labour. Moorpark House will supply labour for a number of projects associated with environmental schemes and the Building Services Section will also continue to provide work experience for employees at Moorpark House. The use of New Deal labour for Housing Services will be accommodated within existing budgets.

Noted.

7. New Housing Partnerships: 1999-2002

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on the availability of funding through the New Housing Partnership Initiative in future years.

The latest set of directives from the Scottish Office on this matter require to be fully clarified and further, discussions are required at member and officer level. A report will therefore be submitted on the outcome of these discussions.

Noted.

8. Customer Comments Scheme

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services giving details on the operation and management of the Customer Comments Scheme in the Housing Services Directorate during the quarter 1 April to 30 June 1998.

Noted.

9. Housing Action Area Programme

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on proposals to make draft resolutions in respect of the undernoted Housing Action Areas:-

(a) The Largs No. 1

12/16 Brisbane Road, Largs - 10 properties; and

(b) The Kilbirnie No. 1

42/50 Kirkland Road, Kilbirnie - 19 properties.

The Committee agreed (i) that Draft Resolution Notices be made in respect of the aforementioned properties; and (ii) to authorise the Director of Housing and Construction Services to serve Repair Notices on all properties within these Housing Action Areas.

10. Kilbirnie: 34 Bridgend: Ground Right: Revocation of Closing Order

Submitted report by the Director of Housing and Construction Services seeking authority for the revocation of a Closing Order served on 26 January 1982 in respect of the property at 34 Bridgend, Kilbirnie: Ground Right which now meets the Tolerable Standard.

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

11. Private Sector Housing Grants

Submitted the annexed report (Appendix HS1) by the Director of Housing and Construction Services on grant applications for Improvements, the Disabled, Lead Replacement, Repairs and Environmental Improvement Grants.

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

12. The Chartered Institute of Housing Annual Conference and Exhibition: Invitation

Submitted invitation to attend The Chartered Institute of Housing Annual Conference and Exhibition to be held in Dundee from 9 to 12 March 1999.

The Committee agreed that the Chair and Vice-Chair (or nominees) be authorised to attend.

13. Central Heating Programme 1998/99

Submitted report by the Head of Architectural Services on tenders received in respect of the installation of central heating in 134 houses at Girdle Toll, Irvine (Contract No. IRV/510).

Tenders were received from Thomson Construction, CFM Building Services, Drake and Scull Engineering (UK) Limited, D Campbell and Company Limited and Scottish Gas Services, details of which were given in the report.

The Committee agreed to approve acceptance of the lowest tender, amounting to £245,679

submitted by Thomson Construction.

The meeting ended at 3.05 p.m.