

Housing Services Committee
14 January 1999

Irvine, 14 January 1999 - At a Meeting of the Housing Services Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

Present

Samuel Taylor, Gena Seales, Thomas Barr, James Clements, John Donn, David Gallagher, Margaret Munn, Robert Rae and George Steven.

In Attendance

The Corporate Director (Property Services); F. Kelly, Head of Housing, J. Paul, Head of Technical Services and S. Good, Divisional Manager (Three Towns Area) (Property Services); D. Nibloe, Principal Officer, Accountancy (Finance); and S. Bale, Administration Officer (Chief Executive).

Chair

Mr. Taylor in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Thomas Dickie, Samuel Gooding, Jane Gorman and Irene Oldfather.

1. Minutes Confirmed

The Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 19 November 1998, copies of which had previously been circulated, were confirmed.

2. Housing Non-HRA Capital Programme

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on proposals for Housing Non-HRA Capital Expenditure.

The Housing Non-HRA Capital Programme is used almost exclusively to fund private sector housing grants, both mandatory and discretionary. The Programme focuses these grants on a number of key priority areas including (i) eliminating housing which is below the tolerable standard, through the ongoing Housing Action Area Programme; and (ii) Care in the Community, which covers discretionary grant assistance for disabled people and the promotion of Care and Repair Schemes.

Committed expenditure of £500,000 has been identified in 1999/2000, comprising carried forward expenditure on approved discretionary grants and grants in respect of committed Housing Action Areas. In order to maintain priority discretionary grant programmes, declare Housing Action Areas in respect of 42-50 Kirkland Road, Kilbirnie and 12-16 Brisbane Road, Largs, and commence a new Scheme for Nelson Street, Largs, additional expenditure of £1m is required. This makes a total bid of approximately £1.5m.

The Committee agreed to remit the draft Programme for Housing Non-HRA Capital Expenditure in 1999/2000 to the Corporate Strategy Committee for consideration.

3. Rent Arrears for Current Tenants

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on action proposed to deal with current tenants' rent arrears.

On 8 October 1998, the Committee received a report 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. The Committee noted that a full review of the Council's policy and procedures to address rent arrears was currently underway which would examine recovery and payment methods.

The level of arrears has continued to rise and over the period 23 September to 6 December has increased from £1.70m to £2.08m. It is evident that more resources are required to deal with rent arrears recovery which will allow a higher level of home visits and monitoring to ensure that arrangements for payment are kept. It is unlikely, however, that where people have multiple debts, the Council will be able to obtain large amounts of arrears.

Every effort will be made to tackle rent arrears as soon as possible in respect of those aspects which are under Council control, particularly IDC arrears transfer.

After a full discussion, the Committee agreed (a) that in the short term, all possible existing resources be directed towards rent arrears recovery with a view to halting the increase; (b) that ex-IDC tenants with high arrears be targeted as a priority; (c) that the sensitive nature of the issue be taken into account in letters being sent to tenants; and (d) that a report on the long term resourcing of rent arrears recovery and the implications of this be submitted to a future meeting.

4. Housing Benefit Decentralisation

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on Housing Benefit progress following decentralisation.

The housing benefit service was decentralised to the three housing management divisions in early November 1998. Each division now manages its own housing benefit workload with a specific housing benefit staff team. There also remains a central housing benefit support team reporting to the Finance Manager, which is responsible for ensuring a consistency of approach to housing benefits within the divisions, advising on new regulations and liaison with IT and Finance on systems development. The fraud team previously approved has also been set up, reporting to the Finance Manager and a policy on fraud investigation is being prepared for submission to the Committee. Overall, the decentralisation to divisions has gone smoothly and the link with the rent arrears function has been established.

Since the beginning of November over 8,000 items have been processed including new cases, changes of circumstances and cancellations. There are still high levels of ongoing caseloads, however, of between 1500 and 2500 per division. Efforts will be concentrated on decreasing this further and on ensuring that cases can be dealt with within required timescales.

Noted.

5. Mainstream Housing Allocation Policy/Sheltered and Amenity Housing Allocation Policy: Implementation

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on progress towards the implementation of the Mainstream Housing Allocation and Sheltered and Amenity Housing Allocation Policies.

On 27 August 1998, the Committee agreed that the implementation of the new Allocation Policies be delayed until the computer testing period had been completed. The delay was intended also to allow the large number of applicants who had failed to attend for interview to be

contacted.

Since then, the interviewing of applicants and inputting of application details has been completed, with the total number of live applications projected to be around 6,000. The software developers have now completed the required amendments to the system and a full programme of testing is underway. It is proposed that this exercise be continued into the New Year and a comprehensive report be submitted to the Committee advising on the test outcomes and any policy amendments required. It is still anticipated, however, that June 1999 will be the date for full implementation of the new system. The results and analysis of the tests will allow an assessment to ensure that the policy and system are appropriate for each other.

Noted.

6. New Housing Partnerships

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on bids submitted for New Housing Partnerships in 1999.

On 8 October 1998 the Committee noted a report on the availability of funding through the New Housing Partnership Initiative in future years. A Seminar was also held for Council Members on the implications of the Initiative. Since then several bids have been prepared, two of which have been submitted to the Scottish Office by the deadline of 15 December 1998 and are based on feasibility studies.

The first is a proposal for a single housing agency on Arran, in partnership with Kirk Care Housing Association Limited. This project would explore a stock transfer of the Council's 130 houses to Kirk Care, who currently own 119 houses on the Island, through consultation with the tenants. The second bid has a number of components and is intended to clarify the debt and investment framework for the Council's stock as a whole, allowing a stock strategy to be developed, which is identified as a requirement in the current Housing Plan. The bid consists of funding for (i) a stock condition survey; (ii) a broad consultative forum; and (iii) a stock options study. The bid also includes some funding for the proposed new housing organisation in the Irvine area, for the Scottish Homes stock transfer and for a market study in the Irvine area. All aspects will require to be explored and the risks and benefits of transfer of housing stock will require to be assessed, as well as consultation undertaken with tenants, before any decisions are taken. The bids, if successful, will provide much clearer information on which to base future decisions.

A number of aspects of the Initiative have still to be clarified by the Scottish Office. It is anticipated that the results of the bids will be announced around mid-February and will be reported to the March meeting of the Committee

Noted.

7. Rough Sleepers Initiative

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on the outcome of the recent Rough Sleeper's Initiative (RSI) Bid.

The Government established the Rough Sleeper's Initiative in early 1997 as a challenge fund for which Local Authorities could submit bids in collaboration with other organisations. At that stage, a joint project was approved for North and South Ayrshire working in partnership to fund two Outreach Workers for around 18 months, the aim of which was to establish the nature, scale and extent of rough sleeping across both Authority areas. The research has indicated that there are a wide range of people having to occasionally sleep rough, rather than a hard core of regular rough sleepers. Age ranges vary greatly, although the biggest single age group is young people aged 18-25.

A bid was submitted for direct access accommodation and support, in partnership with Rowan Alba Association, a voluntary association which provides support services. This joint bid

by North and South Ayrshire has been awarded £210,350, although funding for the direct access accommodation was not awarded. The award will allow the establishment of a support team to cover both areas in financial year 1999/2000, under the management of Rowan Alba, who will also be required to establish accommodation sources. The project is limited to one year, however, and it will be necessary to examine all sources of continued funding if the project is successful.

The Committee agreed (a) to establish a support team through Rowan Alba Association within the terms of the RSI funding for young people aged 18-25 who are at risk of rough sleeping; (b) that the provision of accommodation be considered by the Member/Officer Working Group on the Accommodation Strategy for Homeless Persons; and (c) that further progress reports be submitted in due course.

8. Redevelopment of Sites in Kilbirnie

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on the disposal of sites in Cochrane Street and Bankfaulds Avenue, Kilbirnie.

Two sites in Cochrane Street and one site in Bankfaulds Avenue, Kilbirnie, which are in Council ownership, are included in the Joint Investment Programme with Scottish Homes. These three sites will be developed by Cunninghame Housing Association Limited, with approximately 40 units being available for rent. Acquisition of the sites is programmed for this financial year.

The Committee agreed (a) to approve the redevelopment of the sites under the terms of the Strategic Agreement with Scottish Homes; (b) to approve the disposal of the sites to Cunninghame Housing Association for new build housing; and (c) to refer the matter to the Support Services Committee.

9. Land Surplus to Requirements: Closure of Pends, Stevenston

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on the disposal of surplus ground created by the closure of pends at various addresses in Stevenston.

Following repeated problems with vandalism and disturbance, access pends at 6/7, 10/11 Ashgrove Avenue, 16,18 Burnlea Place and 10/11 Kerelaw Avenue were closed. The closure has proved successful in combating difficulties experienced by local residents. There are now areas, however, to the front and rear of each property, as well as the pends themselves, which are no longer used as access paths and therefore require to be dealt with in terms of future maintenance etc. It is considered appropriate that the adjoining residents should take on tenancy or ownership of the areas due to the close proximity to their homes.

The Committee agreed (a) to declare the land at the Pends, Stevenston, as detailed above, surplus to requirements; and (b) to approve the incorporation of the land within the adjacent tenancies or within the title of adjacent owners, as appropriate.

10. Customer Comments Scheme

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on the management of the Customer Comments Scheme within Housing Services during the quarter 1 July to 30 September 1998.

Noted.

11. Care and Repair Scheme: Isle of Arran

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on progress regarding the Care and Repair project for the Isle of Arran.

The Council, in partnership with Scottish Homes and Ayrshire and Arran Health Board, has

developed a model of Care and Repair which has been implemented in an earlier project in West Kilbride and will be used in a project on Arran for which Kirk Care Housing Association Limited will act as managing agent. In line with the principles of Care and Repair, it is necessary to award a wider range of grants, specifically repair and improvement grants, to allow effective repair and improvement of Below Tolerable Standard properties.

The Committee agreed (a) to approve the Care and Repair grant levels for the Arran Scheme, as detailed in the annexed report (Appendix HS1); (b) to approve the decisions intimated in the final column of the annexed report (Appendix HS2); and (c) to delegate authority to the Head of Technical Services, in consultation with the Chair, to approve applications which require to be processed as a matter of urgency until 31 March 1999.

12. Private Sector Housing Grants

Submitted the annexed report (Appendix HS3) by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on grant applications for Improvement, Disabled Occupants and Lead Replacement.

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

The meeting ended at 3.05 p.m.