

Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods – ‘Options Appraisal’ meeting, 20 April 2016

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Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods

Attendees

Rick Bamford, Landlord Liaison Officer, SeAscape Ayr

Gordon Campbell, Tenant Participation Officer, South Ayrshire Council

Chris Carroll (Theme Group Leader), Private Sector and Landlord Registration Officer, South Ayrshire Council

Paul Dougall, Waste Management Officer, South Ayrshire Council

Andrew Filby, Project Coordinator (HEEPS ABS), Energy Agency

Heather Fraser (Theme Group Leader), Team Leader (Housing Services), South Ayrshire Council

Rhonda Leith, Team Leader (Community Learning and Development), South Ayrshire Council

Ross McCrindle, Housing Officer, South Ayrshire Council

David McGivern, Head of Housing Services, Ayrshire Housing

Kyle McKay, Tenant Participation Assistant, South Ayrshire Council

Ross Morris, Policy Officer, South Ayrshire Council

Linda Warwick, Coordinator (Community Safety), South Ayrshire Council

Introduction

The latest meeting of the Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods steering group met on Wednesday 20 April 2016 at County Buildings, Ayr (Prestwick Room). This followed on from the previous steering group 'Options Generation' meeting in February 2016. The purpose of the 'Options Generation' session was to develop a range of possible actions to achieve the group's agreed outcomes while giving consideration to the comments given throughout the LHS consultation process thus far. Separate sessions were held for the Access, Advice and Support and Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods steering groups. The Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods steering group 'Options Generation' session produced 31 possible options, all of which could be said to have relative merits.

The meeting of 20 April, then, was designed to give delegates the chance to discuss and reflect on these options, and to appraise them based on a number of criteria. Ross Morris began the meeting by welcoming everyone before giving a short presentation on the LHS development process so far and the purpose of the session.

AIM: To review the range of actions suggested at the previous meeting, in order to influence the strategic direction taken by South Ayrshire Council and its partners over the next five years.

Following on from this, it was explained that delegates would be separated into two groups in order to consider the actions thematically. This was both to save time and to allow those most able to comment on a particular topic to have their say. Each group appraised 15 or 16 questions. Delegates were asked which group they would want to be a part of based on their work role and experience, and were separated accordingly.

- **GROUP 1:** Social housing stock, the PRS and owner-occupation (HQN1, HQN2 and HQN3) – **Heather Fraser**, Rick Bamford, Ross McCrindle, David McGivern.
- **GROUP 2:** Fuel Poverty, Neighbourhoods and Community Engagement (HQN4, HQN5 and HQN6) – **Chris Carroll**, Gordon Campbell, Paul Dougall, Andrew Filby, Rhonda Leith, Kyle McKay, Linda Warwick

Delegates were then advised of the Options Appraisal process, and how this would work in practice. Groups were to discuss each possible action in turn and rate the extent to which it met various criteria. These criteria were as follows, and were given the following weighting based on their agreed importance to the development of the LHS;

PRIORITY	Score out of 5	Weighting
Meets agreed LHS Outcomes		20%
Addresses local needs		30%
Deliverability		30%
Potential cost effectiveness		20%

Each group had one of the theme group leaders present in order to guide discussions and record each score agreed for each element following discussion. The group wouldn't move on from a question until a consensus on scores for each category was reached. The scores were entered into a specially developed Options Appraisal Tool as the session progressed that calculated the relative scores for each outcome out of 5, using the system of weighting highlighted above. This allowed for direct comparison between outcomes on their relative merits. Following on from the discussion in groups, the group as a whole met to discuss each possible action in turn, with both groups being asked to justify the scores they gave for their questions. If there was disagreement, there would be discussion as a group and the score would be amended accordingly once consensus was reached.

At the end of the session when all scores had been entered and agreed, the Appraisal Tool was used to rank the options by priority based on their overall score, and also by priority within the Outcomes associated with this theme. The remainder of this document will present these ranked actions by Outcome and provide discussion of the priority allocated.

Options Appraisal

HQN1: South Ayrshire’s social housing stock continues to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard

OPTION	SCORE
Develop guidance materials for Council tenants on how to maintain their properties well (possibly as part of the Tenants’ Handbook.)	4.80
Develop an action plan to ensure all social housing properties in South Ayrshire meet the EESSH (Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing) by 2020.	4.50
Review procedures for monitoring the status of SHQS abeyances and ensure housing management staff are aware of these.	4.20
Examine options for developing intelligence-based, strategic approaches to asset management, supporting the continued achievement of the SHQS.	4.00
Review void lettings standard for Council tenancies and associated quality assurance procedures.	4.00

The first outcome relating to this theme group concerns the quality of South Ayrshire’s social housing stock, the extent to which it meets national benchmarks as well as considering the void lettings standard currently applied. Delegates gave many of the proposals related to this outcome a high priority. First among these was the suggestion that guidance materials could be developed for social housing tenants on how to maintain their properties well. Delegates felt this proposal had the potential to have a positive impact on meeting local needs and LHS outcomes, and would require a relatively limited allocation of resources to complete. Delegates noted, however that the current wording should be amended from “Council tenants” to “social housing tenants” due to this outcome being equally applicable for RSL tenants. The proposed new wording is as follows;

Develop guidance materials for social housing tenants on how to maintain their properties well.

With regard to property condition and energy efficiency, delegates recognised the need for social housing providers in South Ayrshire to develop an action plan to work towards achieving the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (EESSH). The Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (EESSH) set a target for all social housing stock to meet the EESSH by 2020, and seeks to drive improvements in the energy efficiency of social housing in Scotland. This measure is intended to help reduce energy consumption, fuel poverty and the emission of greenhouse gases. The potential difficulties of achieving this standard were recognised given more restricted finances and the difficulties posed by mixed tenure blocks. While meeting the EESSH is likely to require further investment for some properties during the lifetime of the LHS, it was recognised that this would have positive outcomes for tenants in reducing fuel poverty and would generally provide good value for money in maintaining properties in the long run.

Related to this, delegates supported proposals to review procedures for monitoring the status of Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) abeyances. While South Ayrshire Council achieved the Scottish Housing Quality Standard for the vast majority of its mainstream Council stock by 2015, there remain a small number of properties held in abeyance that have yet to be upgraded. Delegates agreed that we should continue to monitor these abeyances, and that procedures should be reviewed to ensure they will allow us to bring these property up to standard at the earliest opportunity. Some delegates noted that the wording of the proposed action should be amended, as it seemed to downplay the positive role played by housing management staff in achieving this standard. The proposed amended wording is as follows;

Review procedures for monitoring the status of SHQS abeyances.

Delegates were also supportive of proposals to look into new intelligence-led, strategic approaches to asset management. A number of systems for this purpose are currently available on the market, and these would allow for the condition of local authority properties to be monitored, supporting a range of outcomes including improving property condition, meeting the EESSH and reducing fuel poverty. In addition, such systems would allow the local authority to plan ahead with regard to strategic acquisitions and disposals in order to make best use of scarce resources. Delegates agreed that this would effectively meet local needs and contribute significantly to the outcomes associated with the LHS, but may be more difficult to deliver given resource constraints, and would potentially incur significant resources to establish. Delegates were unsure as to whether this would represent Best Value in the long run.

A similar priority was afforded to proposals to review the void lettings standard currently in operation with South Ayrshire Council. This proposal also suggested that options could be considered relating to quality assurance procedures, including the introduction of tenant-led inspections to ensure the void lettings standard was being met. Delegates were broadly supportive of these measures, but it was pointed out that there may be value in local authorities and RSLs working together to try to establish a common South Ayrshire letting standard that would apply across the local authority area. In any event, the proposed action was focussed exclusively on 'Council tenancies' and as such, delegates felt this should be amended to apply to 'social housing tenancies', meaning that RSLs operating in this area would also be encouraged to review their standards. As such, the proposed changed wording is as follows;

Review void lettings standards for social housing tenancies and associated quality assurance procedures.

Delegates also suggested that, as this outcome was now concerned with social housing condition generally (rather than just the SHQS), as well as void letting standard, the outcome should be expanded as follows;

HQN1: South Ayrshire's social housing stock continues to meet local and national property condition standards.

HQN2: Properties in the private rented sector meet the Repairing Standard.

OPTION	SCORE
Develop a voluntary accreditation scheme in partnership with Landlord Accreditation Scotland to ensure landlords are aware of their responsibilities with regard to property condition.	4.30
Review joint-working procedures between Landlord Registration and Enforcement, Environmental Health and Housing Benefit to identify unregistered landlords and those who are failing to meet their obligations.	4.20
Review the enforcement arrangements and actions associated with South Ayrshire Council's Landlord Registration and Enforcement duties.	3.90
Explore options for the Council carrying out repairs where the landlord is unwilling or unable to do so and recharge.	3.80
Introduce a pro-active, voluntary property inspection service to ensure compliance on landlords' behalf.	3.50

The next group of proposals related to property condition in the Private Rented Sector (PRS) throughout South Ayrshire. There was agreement in the group that there was a need for the local authority to take a more pro-active approach to regulation and improvement in the private sector, however there was also a recognition that limited resources and the wider national policy context meant that this was not always going to be possible. Nevertheless, delegates gave their support to a number of proposals aimed at encouraging improvement in the sector.

Delegates gave significant support to the proposed development of a voluntary accreditation scheme for landlords, to be developed in conjunction with Landlord Accreditation Scotland with the intention of improving property condition and management standards in the PRS. The group agreed that this was a proposal that could be readily achieved, and group members noted that steps have already been taken to make this a reality. This was seen as offering good value for money with relatively limited financial commitment required from the local authority. Some delegates noted that while this was a positive step towards improvement in the sector, the success of this measure would very much depend on landlords' willingness to be involved in the scheme. Furthermore, there was a view among delegates that voluntary schemes like this would tend to attract landlords who were already providing a good service. Nevertheless, the potential contribution this measure could make towards improvement in the sector was acknowledged.

Similar points were raised about the introduction of a pro-active, voluntary property inspection service for PRS landlords to ensure compliance with national standards. While delegates agreed this would potentially have a positive impact on improving conditions locally and contributing towards the LHS outcomes, there was less certainty as to whether this would represent a good use of resources. Using public resources for this purpose was viewed with some cynicism, raising questions about the extent to which this would achieve a good return on the potential investment while delegates equally questioned how likely landlords would be to take up this scheme.

Proposals for the local authority to carry out repairs to PRS properties where landlords were unwilling or unable to do this and recharge them were also viewed critically. While delegates considered that this proposal would have many benefits, there was again uncertainty as to whether this proposal would offer the best use of public funds. Although the Council would be able to reclaim these funds, there was an acknowledgment that this could take years to recoup and as such may offer poor value for money.

Delegates gave more support to proposals to review the existing enforcement arrangements and actions associated with South Ayrshire Council's Landlord Registration and Enforcement team. The group felt a more pro-active approach could be taken to enforcement, and gave examples including more spot checks on properties and an

increased requirement on landlords to produce certain documents – for example gas and electrical safety certificates. While it was felt this would contribute towards the LHS outcome and would go some way to meeting local needs, there again a recognition that limited resources would be likely to constrain this, coupled with the relatively light touch approach to regulation encouraged by the Scottish Government. There was also a recognition that over-regulation may also have an impact on landlords’ willingness to continue to provide accommodation.

In addition, delegates were very supportive of reviewing joint working procedures between Landlord Registration, Housing Benefit and Environmental Health with a view to identifying unregistered landlords as well as those who are failing to meet their obligations. It was felt that improving these arrangements could have a range of positive outcomes for landlords and tenants, and would support many of the aims of the LHS.

HQN3: Home-owners, landlords and tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities and are supported to uphold them.

OPTION	SCORE
Review the assistance and materials provided to private owners through South Ayrshire Council’s Scheme of Assistance.	4.50
Develop a property condition page on South Ayrshire Council’s website, and if possible integrate the Scottish Government’s forthcoming “Under One Roof Scotland” website.	4.30
Develop specific targeted materials on property condition for older owner-occupiers.	3.00
Develop and regularly review guidance for appropriately signposting homeowners and private landlords when they make contact through the Customer Service Centres.	3.00
Produce and distribute ‘rights and responsibilities’ materials that provide information for PRS landlords and tenants about property condition obligations.	0.00

Following on from discussion of the private sector, delegates next considered a relatively broad outcome that related to the rights and responsibilities of homeowners, PRS landlords and tenants with regard to property condition. This outcome is concerned with ensuring the appropriate support is available to individuals to enable them to fulfil their obligations. This is particularly pertinent given the considerable number of mixed-tenure blocks throughout South Ayrshire, as well as the demographic shift towards an ageing population in South Ayrshire.

Delegates were broadly supportive of proposals to carry out a major review of South Ayrshire Council’s Scheme of Assistance to ensure it continues to meet the needs of households in the area. In the context of increasingly constrained budgets in this area, it is vital that the existing funding is used as efficiently as possible to help those in the greatest need and to support projects that will have a positive impact on local communities. In addition, it is anticipated that the review of the Scheme of Assistance will consider how best older people and people with disabilities can be supported in considering alternative housing options to ensure the best long-term option is selected for the person. Group members felt this should be awarded a high priority, as it was felt this would contribute towards meeting local needs, and would support the effective use of resources in improving private sector property condition and in providing disabled adaptations.

Support was also given to the development and regular maintenance of a specific page on South Ayrshire Council’s website relating to property condition. As the Scottish Government is in the process of developing a resource website named “Under One Roof Scotland” that will allow for significant local customisation, it is proposed that this

resource be utilised when this becomes available. If possible, this should be integrated into the Council’s website as far as practical.

Group members were less supportive of proposals to develop materials on property condition specifically for older people. It was felt that reviewing and updating existing materials around property condition would be sufficient, as there are few issues around this that would relate to older people specifically. It was felt that existing materials could relatively easily cover any additional need, and as such this was given a low priority. Proposals to develop further materials to support homeowners and PRS landlords through advice and signposting were equally felt to offer unnecessary duplication to pre-existing materials, and as such were again given a relatively limited priority.

Similar views were given about producing ‘rights and responsibilities’ materials for PRS landlords and tenants, as it was felt this was already adequately covered in the existing materials landlords are required by law to provide in the Tenants Information Pack. As such, delegates awarded this a score of 0 to indicate that this should not be a priority for the LHS.

HQN4: Advice is available to help households reduce the risk of experiencing fuel poverty, and people in South Ayrshire are aware of how to access assistance.

OPTION	SCORE
Examine options in taking a proactive approach to assisting and supporting tenants to switch suppliers.	5.00
Review procedures for referring clients to Money Advice, credit union and Energy Agency when financial issues are identified by housing staff.	5.00
Produce or supply basic step-by-step operating instructions for common heating systems to maximise fuel economy.	4.70
Review the relevance and availability of promotional materials advertising the availability of energy efficiency measures and refresh/redistribute these if necessary.	4.50
Explore and pursue options around sustainable energy generation for homes and communal areas, including community heating systems and renewables.	3.00
Develop specialist fuel poverty materials and services targeted at older people and people vulnerable to ill-health.	2.50

Delegates next considered a range of proposals relating to fuel poverty and energy efficiency. Recent statistics have showed that a high proportion of households in South Ayrshire continue to experience fuel poverty or extreme fuel poverty in South Ayrshire. The work of the Energy Agency in concert with South Ayrshire Council, RSLs and other partners have made significant positive contributions to improving energy efficiency, but this was nevertheless seen this was seen as being an area where significant improvements could be made over the next five years.

A high priority was given to a number of possible actions that sought to achieve this outcome. First among these included a proposal to examine options for supporting tenants in switching suppliers. A number of firms currently provide this service, and this offers an opportunity to assist people to access low cost energy, potentially helping people avoid fuel poverty.

A review of existing procedures for offering holistic advice to households experiencing financial difficulties was also proposed and this again found very considerable support among delegates, as did ensuring the availability of promotional materials relating to energy efficiency.

A further proposal around the production or distribution of generic instructions for common heating types also received support from delegates as a means by which fuel economy could be maximised. This was seen as representing best value and being readily deliverable within the lifetime of the LHS, but delegates were less sure about the extent to which this would address issues locally.

Less support was seen for a proposed action to produce specialist materials for older people and people with disabilities, for similar reasons to those cited previously in relation to property condition. Delegates felt this would have only limited impact on achieving LHS outcomes and would represent best value only to a limited extent. The deliverability of such materials were also questioned, while there was a feeling this would require unnecessary duplication.

Delegates also questioned the deliverability of considering options around sustainable energy systems, such as community heating systems and renewables. While it was felt these would meet local needs, there was uncertainty about how these could be delivered in practice, beyond what is already available in South Ayrshire through the Energy Agency. The context of reducing renewable subsidies also means that the incentives on individuals to install renewable energy sources are going to be limited in the years to come.

HQN5: People in South Ayrshire live in safe, clean and sustainable neighbourhoods.

OPTION	SCORE
Review estate management, tenancy management and anti-social behaviour policies and practices to ensure robust sanctions are in place.	5.00
Create a programme of area-based improvement projects in partnership with other services, tenants and residents, looking at litter, gardens, public areas, property condition and anti-social behaviour.	5.00
Develop incentive schemes to promote community involvement and positive actions taken by tenants and residents to improve areas or blocks.	5.00
Develop and promote awareness of funding schemes to support the work of local community groups.	4.00
Review procedures around cooperation between police, community safety and housing with regard to neighbourhoods, estate management and anti-social behaviour.	0.00

The next outcome is relatively broad, and relates to anti-social behaviour, estate management and community engagement. Delegates reviewed 5 key proposals in relation to this outcome. The vast majority of these found considerable support in the group. First amongst these was a review of estate management and anti-social behaviour procedures to ensure these are as effective as possible. It was felt that ensuring these policies and procedures were operating well was critical in improving the quality of our neighbourhoods, and this proposal received considerable support. Delegates believed a review of these processes would represent good value for money and would help to meet both local needs and LHS objectives. Delegates did, however, feel the wording of this action should be changed, removing the reference to “robust sanctions” and replacing this with “robust and effective processes”, as it was felt the original wording didn’t fully cover the range of options open to staff.

Review estate management, tenancy management and anti-social behaviour policies and practices to ensure robust and effective processes are in place.

A proposal to develop a revolving scheme of area-based improvement projects was also met with much support from delegates, again receiving the maximum score across all possible criteria. This proposal involved working together with a wide range of other services as well as tenants and residents to try to improve the area as far as possible using existing resources. This was seen as having a positive impact on local communities but also on community relations, as well as promoting a greater sense of ownership in each area.

On a related point, delegates were again very supportive of the development of incentive schemes aimed at encouraging and supporting community involvement in South Ayrshire, and there was also support for raising awareness of existing funding streams that community groups may be able to access.

Delegates awarded a score of 0 to a proposal to review cooperation procedures between services, as it was felt this was covered in outcome 22, "Review estate management, tenancy management and anti-social behaviour policies".

HQN6: People in South Ayrshire have the opportunity to have their say on issues affecting the communities where they live.

OPTION	SCORE
Explore options to better formalise the ways we report on the outcomes of consultation and involvement.	5.00
Develop and support tenant and resident-led events aimed at improving services and neighbourhoods.	5.00
Consider alternative approaches to community engagement, including our engagement with and support for existing groups and use of online resources.	5.00
Review procedures for involving young people in community activities and decision-making.	5.00
Review community involvement arrangements with regard to decision-making and budgeting in housing and neighbourhoods.	4.00

The final outcome relating to the Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods group relates to community engagement and tenant/resident participation in relation to housing and neighbourhoods. A high priority was given to most of the actions in relation to this outcome, including introducing measures to formalise reporting on consultations and providing feedback to communities. A number of actions for increasing community involvement were also proposed and given support, including introducing tenant and resident-led events aimed at improving the delivery of services and increasing engagement with existing groups. This option was amended to focus on tenant involvement in budgeting.

Review tenant involvement arrangements with regard to decision-making and budgeting in housing and neighbourhoods.