

There May Be Changes Soon In Housing Policy Christchurch Council To Reconsider Commitments

C.T. December 26, 1952

The impact of the Housing Minister's recent statement giving a greater freedom to those who want to build their own houses made itself felt at Tuesday's meeting of Christchurch Town Council, and as a result of two lengthy debates it is probable that there will be some alteration in the Council's housing policy in the near future.

First question to come under discussion concerned the list of applicants for Council houses, and Councillor S. Kermode, in a lengthy letter circulated to all members, sought to prove that the number of applicants genuinely in need of accommodation was much smaller than that shown on the official list.

The second question concerned the Council's proposal to build another 100 houses and a recommendation of the Housing Committee that this number should be increased to 124. Coun. W. E. Morgan moved a notice of motion "that having regard to the recent decision of the Government to grant unlimited licences for the building of houses up to 1,000 feet super, the Council defer consideration of all further commitments for building subsidised houses for a period of one year".

At the end of the debate he made it clear that he was referring only to the extra 24 houses mentioned in the recommendation.

Ald. E. J. Slinn, chairman of the housing committee, was unable to attend, but in a letter to the Mayor, suggested that in the light of the Government's recent decision it might be advisable for the Housing Committee to reconsider their recommendation. The Council agreed to this course by ten votes to four. There were cries of "hear, hear" When Coun. Morgan said: "I have a profound conviction that the ratepayers of this town are already overburdened with the payment of housing subsidies and that the majority desire a halt to be called".

He said that probably 20 to 25 per cent of the town's population were being subsidised by the remainder. "How much further are we to go?" he asked. "Is it our intention to try and satisfy the demands of all applicants?"

Referring to what Coun. Kermode had said earlier about the smaller number of genuine applicants, Coun. Morgan said this came as an anti-climax to what the Council had been told before.

"I want to know whether it is our policy to force on an unwilling community this monotonous uniformity which seems to be inherent in most Council schemes I have seen until one half of the community is paying for the other," he continued.

He went on to show what subsidies were costing Christchurch. On the houses completed or building the ratepayers had to find each year £5,580, and the taxpayers in general had to pay three times as much, namely £16,740. The proposed additional 100 houses already agreed, to meant another £890 a year on the ratepayers and £2,670 on the taxpayer. Worked out over a period of 60 years the figures were astronomical. The ratepayers would have paid £401,040 and the taxpayers £1,203,120—all from the public purse for the little town of Christchurch.

Coun. Morgan submitted that in the light of changed circumstances there was no justification whatever in continuing the policy the Council had adopted since the war. "Today we are in a position to allow private persons or builders to build within reasonable limitations and I urge that we give them a chance to see what they can do before we add to the already heavy burden on the ratepayers," he added.

Coun. K. L. Smith seconded.

While agreeing with most of what Coun. Morgan had said, Coun. Kermode asked the Council not to panic about it. There were still quite a number of needy cases for re housing but a review of the existing list was necessary.

Coun. Vaughan said he understood that if the Council failed to build the right proportion of Council houses the Government might step in.

Matters were getting too complicated for Coun. Furneaux's liking. "One week we say we must house the people at Holmsley; and the next week we say we shouldn't build any more houses," he commented, adding that he would be sorry if the Council turned down the proposed 100 houses.

The Mayor pointed out that the Council was already committed to the building of the 100 houses.

"If I knew that builders were going to build houses to let then I would heartily support the proposition," said Coun. Miss Padwick. She realised, however, that there were many people on the housing list who would never be able to afford their own house.

Cashed In On Their Own Houses.

Reference to Council house applicants having "cashed in" on their own properties was contained in the letter which Coun. Kermode wrote to the Town Clerk.

He said that for a long time members of the Council had been told that in spite of the large number of houses the Council had built the number of applicants remained about the same.

They had been informed that a check was made quite recently and that there were now 650 applicants on the general list. "With the consent of the Chairman I examined the first 60 applications on the file," declared Coun. Kermode, who then went on to give details of his findings.

He said that in no less than 32 of the 60 cases the applicant was either adequately housed or had sold his own house or wished to sell it. "I cannot understand why we ever accepted applications from people who, in a number of cases, have cashed in or wish to cash in on their own house, and then want to live in a Council house which will be heavily subsidised by the Christchurch ratepayers, not to mention a substantial, subsidy from the general taxpayer." the letter continued.

Coun. Kermode estimated that the number of genuine cases on the list was somewhere in the region of 200 to 250 and not 650.

SOLVED THEIR OWN PROBLEM

The letter went on to refer to the possibility of a large number of workers being brought to Hurn and continued: "I want to suggest that we treat these newcomers as we treated the staff of S.R.D.E. We told them to apply to their own housing department. The staff of S.R.D.E. are to be congratulated on solving their own housing problem through the Somerford Housing Society and without any local rate subsidies.

"We should tell the de Havilland Company and its workers to follow their excellent example and either take an interest in the Somerford Housing Society and extend its activities or else form their own housing society, which is quite a simple matter."

Coun. Kermode contended that the Council's activities should be limited to housing genuine Christchurch housing hardship cases residing in Christchurch or Holmsley.

The Mayor agreed that the list probably contained the names of people who would never get housed by the Council, but he pointed out that the Housing Officer had no minuted authority to refuse any applications.

Ald. T. Markham, who is a member of the Tenancies Committee, assured the Council that no applicant had been granted a Council house when it was known that he had sold his own house. It had never been stated that there were 600 people on the list who must be housed. "We turn more down than we house," he added,

Coun. Miss Padwick came to the conclusion that the figure given at the last meeting must be "very phoney". The Council had been assured that it was because of the large number of applicants that it was impossible to close Holmsley.

A tribute to the work of the Tenancies Committee was paid by the Deputy Mayor, Coun. Mrs. Wallis Power, who said that some landlords were not altogether free from blame. She knew of a case where tenants had been offered £200 to get out so as to give the landlord vacant possession.

"They are waiting for £400 because they want a car as well as a Council house," she said.

POSSIBLY MISLED

Enlarging upon the text of his letter, Coun. Kermode felt that the local M.P. had possibly been misled by the figures given to him. He had a letter from Mr. Nicolson in which it was stated that 926 families in Christchurch wanted accommodation. He said that out of the 60 applicants referred to in his letter, there were five people who had actually sold their houses recently, five others who wanted to sell their houses and ten who were a hundred per cent, adequately housed in separate houses or flats.

He knew of one case where a man received from his landlord a handsome present to vacate the house and that man was now living in a Council house and had paid £450 for a car.

RENTS SHOULD BE HIGHER

"If this sort of thing is going on elsewhere then I say the housing needs of this country are nothing like what we are told by the newspapers," he said.

Another point made by Coun. Kermode was that there were many people living in Council houses whose incomes were such that they ought not to be given the benefit of any subsidy and their rents should be increased. "If there's no benefit in living in a Council house, they will soon want to leave and build one of their own," he added.

In the opinion of Coun. Furneaux the latest policy of freeing the builders would see the matter righted in the next twelve months.

The Council decided that the whole matter should be referred to the Finance and General Purposes Committee with a view to formulating some policy for putting applicants on the housing list. Members of the Tenancies Committee will attend this meeting.