

IN SHORT

We will save at least the past four weeks entries on this page:

Week ending 15 June week 34 of the application

Last week we reported that we had just received a number of letters in response to ours for information on the sale and application processes. A clear picture of what may have happened is emerging: The process of disposing of the land at Manse Crescent has been dynamic and changing from the start.

Officers admit that circumstances have changed since the council took the decision to sell the site in 2005.

The council having entered into a dynamic situation which may not be within the control of the elected members.

We have concluded that there are grounds to think that a conflict of interest has been created.

Without prejudice to our objection on planning grounds, we cannot see how the council can be reasonably certain that the residual purchase price could not be less than the best consideration achievable.

The agreement has no anti-embarrassment provision.

Having tied themselves to going ahead with a deal which includes price sensitive suspensive conditions the council has no opportunity to market test the residual purchase price.

Responses are very often late, ambiguous, contradictory, unspecified and gratuitous.

Actions are very often defended as being common practice without offering any explanation that they may be "good practice".

Contrary to PAN82 the planning authority is involved in the sale process.

The sale/application process is confused and does not ensure public confidence in the system and in the council's actions.

Unfortunately the council are still very late in answering the key questions on why the planning authority are negotiating the application. To see HALL's current detailed response [[click here](#)]

On the 11 June we received a reply from the Leader to a letter we sent him on 14 April 2008. He has refused our invitation for him to come to Houston and explain his aims for the future. He prefers to rely on the mechanisms put in place by the council to consult with the public.

We welcome good consultation processes and think that the Local Area Committees may provide a good forum. However, maybe Councillor Mackay may like to consider that there are members of HALL who have been involved in consultation for over 30 years. If he sought their advice they would tell him that systemic consultation that prohibits initiative and intuition rarely succeed.

Being listened to is one key requirement of consultation, but as important is personal access those who are thought to make the policy. Sadly Councillor Mackay gives the impression that we should be satisfied that he has met once with BoW Community Council and once with the Chairman of Houston Community Council. Is he hiding or does he think we are not important enough for him to bother?

Maybe he should read what we told Nicola Sturgeon about her proposals "Firm Foundations" [[click here](#)] – she dismissed us out of hand. She and her fellow party member may reflect on the fact that what we foresaw what is happening to the housing market. HALL members have a lot of grey hairs – maybe the current government and their local councils could listen to experienced members of the public who are concerned enough to spend time to write. Or do they put it down to us having too much time on our hands?

The first Local Area Committee was held on the 10 June 2008 and our representative, Anthony Rush, was very enthusiastic about it. He had particularly high praise for Councillor Nicolson, the convenor. For Anthony's report [[click here](#)]

Week ending 8 June2008 - Week 33 of the Application

Some interesting developments this week.

The new Chief Executive of Scottish Water, Richard K Ackroyd, has written to express his understanding of the local community's concerns. He has also set a time table for completing their investigations and agreed to meet representative of the community to explain those findings. We expect this meeting to take place in late July/early August.

To see Mr. Ackroyd's letter [\[click here\]](#).

We also learn that the planning application will not be going before the planning board until possibly August.

Late in the week we have also received a number of letters in answer to our requests for information. We will be studying them early next week and a report will be posted on this site. We can report that there was a long stop date in the agreement which terminated on 21 March 2008. The council has agreed to extend to it 25 September 2008. They don't say why – but we will be asking why. The council still have a number of important questions to answer. Just why they have extended the long stop date is just one of them.

Week ending 1 June2008 - Week 32 of the Application

A very quiet week.

We received a letter from the Director of Corporate Services which outlined some observations he had on the application of the Freedom of Information Act. It made us realise that some officers and members are under the impression that they have to explicitly ask for information under the Act for its provisions to apply. This would of course not make sense so we have reviewed the process as we have found it. [\[click here\]](#)

We have also reviewed the Drainage Assessment and find it worse than we thought. It appears that the applicant intends to allow storm water to flood the roundabout. We have submitted Representation 12 to give our comments to the Head of Planning [\[go to Planning Representations\]](#)

With the news from the house builders that new private house sales are down 50% and mortgage lenders taking a very pessimistic view on lending which has caused a mortgage famine we have suggested to councillors that they may look at how they are going to create enough affordable homes. The new market conditions must make proceeding with a contentious development even more undesirable.

The world breaking attempt at pot hole filling has gone very quiet. Is Renfrewshire going to make the Guinness Book of Records? What nonsense – there are still highly dangerous pot holes left un-repaired and unsigned.

Week ending 25 May - Week 31of the Application.

Having sought information from the Planning Officer on progress with the application we are told that SEPA have replied objecting to this application and any other development until the problems with the sewer are solved.

The council has not received a response from Scottish Water. We have to tell you that the new Chief Executive will reply as soon as he has been able to investigate the matter. SEPA tell us that they too are pressing Scottish Water for a response.

The Planning Officer expressed “mild” surprise when he told us that the council's engineers have submitted a two line internal memo saying that they have no objection s to the drainage assessment.

A member of HALL has queried whether we should be taking action against SEPA in the way that campaigners in Campbeltown are. We had arranged to meet the Planning Officer to see both the SEPA submission and that of the council's engineers, but the Planning Officer rang back said that he wasn't allowed to let us see the memo from council officers.

We learn from the GHS meeting with councillors to discuss education cuts that the impression given was that there is no such thing as a whipped vote and that the cuts were not politically driven.

We are also told that the two parties who make up the administration did not support a motion to review the education cuts, whereas the two parties who make up the opposition did.

HALL says:

It is beyond believe that council officers should express no adverse comments about Mactaggart & Mickels Drainage Assessment.

It is not SEPA's job to critically assess the engineering aspects. So we do not support action against SEPA. In fact we thank them for the position they have taken on this matter. But we believe that the council's engineers should be critically assessing the various elements of the sewer system which cause the council's own Environmental Health Department to say that they will take action under Section 80 of the EPA.

These sewers cause Statutory Nuisance – in plain speak a health hazard. This is yet another example of the council not placing public safety as the highest priority.

We then find that the two line memo is to be treated as secret – council tax payers in Renfrewshire are evidently not permitted to see how the officers the pay act. This is as nauseating as the obnoxious discharge from the sewers.

We are very pleased to see that there is no such thing as a “whipped vote”. The application will surely fail. It has to be addressed on planning grounds and it would be a chance in a million if all the SNP and Lib Dem councillors on the planning board didn't find agreement with one of the multitude of reasons we have given why the application should fail on planning grounds.

Week ending 18 May2008 - Week 30 of the Application

HALL feel a week of some progress.

HALL have been invited to provide a representative for the Local Area Committee for Houston, Crosslee, Linwood, Riverside and Erskine. We have nominated Anthony Rush as our first representative. We had not expected this invitation so we were a little unprepared. We will be bringing forward rules to apply to the election of our representative in mid-summer when we have a clear idea of what it entails.

We have received reports back from a meeting which took place with Head of Roads and the Depute Leader wrote to us effectively giving a guarantee that in future our roads will be “safe and secure”. HALL are concerned that members of the council have no idea of the scale of the problem and what it actually is.

Head of Planning has now released the Drainage Assessment to us as part of his reply to our 10th Representation. We have responded and submitted a new paper which considers what sort of residential development would be appropriate if it wasn't contrary to the development plan [[click here](#)].

Annabel Goldie has received a lost copy of a letter dated 3 March 2008 from the Interim Chief Executive of Scottish Water. As nobody we have spoken to have had a reply to their letters to Scottish water we must assume that there is a conspiracy to lose their letters. HALL has written a strong letter to the Interim Chief Executive [[click here](#)].

HALL is not blameless on losing things – we appear to have lost last week's contribution to In Short. We cannot explain it either. We did submit a petition last week [[click here](#)]

HALL is realising just what drives the issues we are commenting on. Fundamentally the issues are caused by under funding or poor use of available funds, or a combination of both. The sale of the land at Manse Crescent was prompted by an initiative which gives council's more flexibility in funding their capital programme. It's referred to as the Prudential Code.

Under the code the council can sell assets and use the funds for capital spending. HALL has learnt that unlike some other councils (including some who are in the same group as Renfrewshire for comparing CT) Renfrewshire didn't have many assets to sell, hence the requirement to maximise on price. Renfrewshire Council set its priorities for capital spending as renovating old schools and refurbishing the Council HQ. Before anybody reacts to the latter we should ask whether the council has been able to rationalise its office accommodation and make savings as a result. It appears that they have and so it is well done the old administration if that's the case.

It isn't difficult in these circumstances to assume that the priority for selling Manse Crescent is “get as much as we can”. If it is, it's fundamentally wrong and contrary to the development plan which contains policies to enhance and create new open space. It is gratuitous to have these policies if they cannot be delivered and worse still the opposite is practiced to raise funds to pay for other needs.

Under the Prudential Code the council can borrow from non-public sources and charge the interest to revenue. As we have said before the interest on £3 million would add about £4/year to the CT. Council members have to realise that strategic planning isn't just to grab the obvious.

If Renfrewshire is to have any hope of creating a sustainable thriving economy it must create the environment where wealth can be created. Gryffe Valley must be regenerated to an area where affluence thrives. This is the 'ticket'; HALL will be pursuing at the Local Area Committee.

Week ending 4 May 2008 - Week 28 of the Application

28 April - A councillor emailed a HALL member: The state of the roads in Renfrewshire is simply unacceptable. Whilst there is not yet a published or budgeted solution I remain vigilant in seeking satisfactory repair. I do note that the previous Administration of Renfrewshire Council sought to prioritise main arterial routes whilst the current Administration is focusing on rural roads. I believe this, if realised, may assist all representations in this regard. Time, and rigorous scrutiny, will tell. Another councillor said: 'I can assure you that the roads in Ward 10 are at the top of my priority list and that I am constantly lobbying for action.'

28 April - SEPA emailed HALL: 'At the present time we have not received any update from SW in respect of the surcharging problem and in the circumstances we could only advise the Council that it would be inappropriate for a connection to the foul sewer be made until the surcharging of the sewerage system is remedied.' 30 April - Another councillor emailed a HALL member: 'I would be more than happy to link with you and other members of HALL to press for greater priority to be given to roads in the area.' 1 May - Another councillor emailed a HALL member: 'Regarding the roads, you will be aware that the council has just embarked on a huge pothole-filling activity, and covering all areas, particularly the more rural areas, which have often been left poorly or un-filled in the past. Potholes have been a serious problem for years - we are trying to address this in as urgent a manner as is absolutely possible, after a particularly bad winter and the extreme damage it caused.'

1 May - See 'Is Eileen McCartin shooting from the hip?' [click here] when she comments on the education cuts.

2 May - HALL receive a partial response to questions posed by them under the Freedom of Information Act on 26 March. See 'council admit only giving partial answers' [click here] This week has seen interesting developments on both the appalling state of the roads and the application by Mactaggart & Mickel. However, the reaction to the schools' cuts leaves us speechless. We are now receiving cross party support (except from Liberal Democrats) for getting something serious done about our roads.

Head of Roads, Iain Hamilton, has invited Gordon Masterton and Anthony Rush to meet him on 14 May to discuss the issues. Some councillors have expressed an interest in being there.

HALL says: Well done Iain Hamilton. Maybe with the help of the councillors we will get you a proper budget to work with.

It is obvious that Mactaggart & Mickel are making heavy weather over the application, in particular the drainage assessment. We are concerned that the council are prevented from simply refusing the application because of long stop dates that they agreed with Mactaggart & Mickel to revise

We have learnt from the letter we received on 2 May that there is no correspondence with Scottish Water on the capacity of the main sewer in regard to the development plan.

HALL are now receiving information from other community bodies in Scotland who have similar problems. Why don't the councils play hell about it?

We simply can't believe what we are reading about the school's cuts. Its no use comparing themselves with the past - this new administration was supposed to change things for the better.

Week ending 27 April 2008 - Week 27 of the Application

It has been a quiet week in some ways. Most of what we can report is the product of meetings and conversations with councillors.

HALL recently invited all four party leaders to meet a selection of community bodies from Gryffe Valley to explain their ideas about the future for Gryffe Valley. Two leaders accepted and HALL hasn't received a reply or an acknowledgement from the other two. The two who replied are Councillor Iain Langland and Councillor Iain McMillan ('the opposition parties').

HALL still has no acknowledgement of our application to become a member of the Local Area Committee. Councillors tell us that we won't be accepted – evidently some would like to portray us as cranks. One councillor even advises us to apply under a different guise.

If we are cranks we wouldn't be alone in making ourselves open to be thought to be crackpots.

On the 24 April, Councillor Marie McGurk launched a campaign to fill 6000 potholes in 20 days. A spokesman was reported to think it something to boast about – maybe a world record. And, they call us cranks.

Councillor McGurk gave a technical explanation which will have brought her into conflict with road building experts who tell us it isn't the weather that causes pot holes its poorly maintained roads.

On the same day the meeting about education cuts was held at Paisley Grammar. From reports that HALL has received it seems that nobody was convinced and nobody was listening to the parents. Another meeting will be held at Houston Primary School on Monday 28 April.

We are not surprised that the parents weren't listened to – one councillor has told us this week that voters aren't bothered. Another told us that it was embarrassing to be a member of the Scrutiny & Petitions Board. Nothing got done – they just referred petitions to the “main board”. The councillor added, “I don't like the Petitions Board as in a way it looks like the elected officials are not listening”.

Other councillors advise us that we should use the petitions board. We have looked at the rules. As we read them, “petition” means a formal written request by one or more people. In an important matter it would not be necessary to have a multitude of signatories – the importance of the issue is what matters. One signatory or an organisation is sufficient.

We suspect many petitions fail because they have relied on numbers of signatures not substance. There are rules which proscribe subjects from being valid petitions. At first sight these rules seem to prevent any meaningful issue being considered as most issues will relate to a decision taken by the Council etc and proscribed under rule (ix.). Rules (i) and (vi) are also limiting on matters of importance.

HALL thinks that to be affective petitions should address future conduct.

Maybe the administration will come to realise that HALL members are resilient people who have been driven to understand how council policy is adversely affecting our lives. Manse Crescent is an example of systemic breakdown. Just what do Councillor Mackay and Councillor McCartin think they are achieving by their silence and refusal to meet with us?

We trust that whoever is invited to be a member of a Local Area Committee they will be appointed on merit. We shall see.

Week ending 20 April 2008 - Week 26 of the Application

14 April – We received a letter from the council admitting that they were wrong when they have told us in the past that they had studied the need for elderly homes in Houston – they put it down to a breakdown in internal communication.

14 April – An opposition councillor tells HALL: “The SNP were elected on a promise to freeze council tax and make efficiency savings. If the electorate wanted an increase they could have voted for a different political party. So if people wish to pay more taxes it is I believe dependant on the democratic decision made.”

15 April – A member copies us with an email from the Council Leader who says that there would be no point in increasing council tax “just for the sake of it”.

16 April – HALL email SEPA about the planning application [[click here](#)]

16 April – HALL discover that all councillors have access to the internet. We said sorry for believing they didn't.

17 April – A councillor asks HALL whether we have heard the saying: “Making friends and influencing people”.

18 April – Council acknowledge that they have failed to provide information requested by us under the Freedom of Information Act.

HALL says: As time goes by we are seeing more examples of administration in the Council which we believe is poor and typical of an organisation in crisis. There are other signs. The defensive nature of the remarks about council tax is a sign of lack of confidence. And, the willingness of some members and officials to remark on shortcomings is very similar to disillusionment which exists in bodies that are not performing and where there are questions about leadership.

The council and its members are facing new challenges. Some councillors who in the past were appreciated because they are nice people, who would listen sympathetically whilst it was recognised they couldn't change anything, are now in power. But they still can't change anything. This causes angst on both sides.

Opposition members are in a dilemma, they do not want to bring the council's business to a grinding halt, so they voted for the budget, including cuts in education. But, the council still has a duty to deliver the services it is required to do by law. This is where they are challenged. There is no mandate for a freeze in council tax and poor services cannot be defended by declaring there would be no point in increasing council tax & just for the sake of it, especially when there is abundant evidence that there is a need to improve services.

We can all see that the council is making great efforts to meet EU requirements on waste recycling. These requirements are clearly prescribed and there are penalties if the council fails. There are no such clear prescriptions which apply to schools, roads etc. Whether the level of service is adequate is thought to be a matter of opinion. But is it?

There are league tables for schools. We should expect our schools to achieve better than average standards and where they are already doing so, to improve not regress. There are examples of roads in Renfrewshire where degradation and pot-holing is a certainty not a possibility. Next week we shall be publishing a paper on the roads in Ranfurly, which must rate as the worst maintained in Scotland. These roads will without doubt continue to collapse unless they are rebuilt. The council should have no option but to rebuild them & if there is an accident they should be held responsible under the laws which are there to protect the public from harm. Under the new Corporate Homicide Act councils can be held to account & there is a new mood that public bodies cannot avoid the responsibilities private enterprise shoulder.

Week ending 13 April 2008 - Week 25 of the Application

STOP PRESS - REVISED PROPOSAL SUBMITTED [\[click here\]](#)

Top housing boss says, "too many flats" [\[click here\]](#)

7 April & Derek MacKay emails a member of HALL regarding budget cuts in education. His explanation of the actual education cost appears to be a cut and paste of what we have reported before. However he does tell us that the Renfrewshire grant settlement increase was 3.4% compared with an average for all councils of 4.55%. This reflects the decline in population in Renfrewshire. He also explains that the council tax freeze had no negative impact on council services. We just don't accept this or that the reduced grant should have come as a surprise [\[click here\]](#) to see our detailed comments.

9 April & HALL visited the Council to see M&M's latest proposals. We were refused a copy of the drawing on the pretext that we may be a competitor of M&M who wanted to steal their copyright. To see our comments on the proposals [\[click here\]](#)

10 April & Letter received from Head of Roads answering our query made on 20 February. Mr. Hamilton confirms that lorries using Reilly Quarry and Landfill Site are not barred from using Houston Road through Houston. Mr. Hamilton did say he was & "sorry" that he couldn't be of & "more assistance".

HALL says:

In some ways an interesting week which has caused us some effort to react to the issues raised. Mr. Hamilton should be congratulated for saying & "sorry". It's a shame that Councillor McKay couldn't apologise for the cuts in education and all of the other failing services which we have to endure. When we get replies from the Council, sorry, regret and apologise are not words that feature. We have invited all party leaders to meet community representatives & maybe we will be able to report some contrition for the appalling state of council services. Have no mistake freezing council tax or introducing local income tax will take away the only choice the electorate are supposed to have & to decide on what they want to spend on services. Week ending 6 April 2008 - Week 24 of the Application

30 March & Chair of Gryffe High School Parents Council urges any parents who have concerns to raise the matter directly with their Councillor and MSP, & "since the Council's budget was set by the elected members of the Council, if the decision is to be changed, many individual letters and phone calls will be more effective than one petition."

31 March – Head Teacher assures parents that both before and after the announcement of the cuts Head Teachers had made their feelings known – “often very bluntly” and that their professional associations have also been involved. He said, “It has been made clear to us that as employees we now have to focus on managing the cuts and our service delivery, which I will do in the best interests of pupils.”

31 March – Two Councillors answer HALL’s call to give details on what they have done to improve quality of life of their constituents. One said, “it is not for me as a politician to promise an allusory (sic) objective”. Another said that they couldn’t because they are on the planning committee..

1 April – Clean up along Riverside completed by Scottish Water.

1 April – A Councillor says cuts in Council staff would hardly be a vote winner, "the Council is a big employer. "

2 April – Planning Officer says, “We have been in contact with the applicant who claimed that the revised layout plan was in the post and the Drainage Impact Assessment should be with the Council by the end of this week. With regard to the latter, the Council would not provide a copy unless it was requested under the Freedom of Information Act. The alternative would be to ask the applicant for a copy.

4 April – SEPA confirm that they have contacted Scottish Water and advised them that if action wasn’t forthcoming that SEPA were going to issue a notice to ensure that some action was taken to tidy up the scene. The Council were also I know considering a similar way forward and hopefully any future problems will be dealt with more expeditiously in the future.

5 April – Councillor Langland has confirmed that Scottish Water have offered to meet him when they have decided on what needs to be done. He has agreed to get a firm timetable from them.

HALL says: A week of small steps.

The two lower ranking officers who came out a week last Friday to see the sewers took immediate action. Contrast that with the 6 weeks it took their bosses to send them out. Its not difficult to draw conclusions where the problem lies.

We believe that Councillors have got to challenge what they are being told. If they are not challenging what is not been done about overflowing sewers and supporting parents who are incensed about cuts in what the schools can offer their children, how can we believe that they are even thinking about the reasons for and against permitting development of publicly owned open space by a house-builder who this week announced pre-tax profits which are 30% of turnover.

We have produced a paper which answers the challenges of the Government’s Firm Foundations initiative. We will be posting this as soon as we can. We are challenging the Scottish Government to channel some of the profits made by house-builders to hard pressed first time buyers. See FIND OUT or [click here]

There will be a Public Meeting regarding the schools’ cuts. The meeting starts at 7.30pm on Thursday 24 April and is at Paisley Grammar School. All parents in Renfrewshire are welcome. Head Teachers have given up and the teachers' unions will be satisfied because there will be no overall redundancies. Consequently parents have to fight this on their own - be certain there may well be more cuts again and again, at least until 2011.

Week ending 30 March 2008 - Week 23 of the Application

28 March – Junior Council Officials meet HALL and agree that the problems with the sewers amount to Statutory Nuisance and that there should be no more development until the problems are solved. They had to see the problem so that they can now issue Scottish Water with an abatement notice.

27 March - An Oppostion Leader Councillor tells HALL " I feel I must put on record that I don't believe I'm being fobbed off. If I felt that then be assured I would challenge it".

26 March – A Councillor tells HALL, “I am trying to get answers about the loss of teaching/ education posts which I believe to be around 120 - the PR story being that P2 classes are having investment to reduce class sizes. That has to be at the expense of the rest of pupils. It seems some posts will go through VER and others through non filling of vacancies. I have heard that extra probationers and student teachers will be brought in this year but last years probationers won’t get jobs.

25 March – Planning Officer tells HALL “we’ve heard absolutely nothing from Mactaggart & Mickel – ring again next Monday.” 25 March - A Councillor tells HALL, “ I expect the next 3 years to be as bad or worse than this year. The figures I have seen suggest education has borne the brunt of the cuts-app. £5.7million of savings of £8.7 million across the Council. 1.4% cuts in primary school budgets; 2.4% from special schools; 2.8% from secondary schools. The convener said ‘well it’s the biggest budget so it will have the biggest

savings.’”

23 March – High School Head Teacher tells concerned parents that the cut in teaching posts (5) is directly related to a 4% cut in the total budget for 2008/09. The roll remains buoyant. The most likely impact will be on class size and Advance Higher classes or options such as German H. No teachers will lose jobs as the council is offering early retiral this year and any other 'surplus' staff will be transferred to fill vacancies.

23 March – HALL challenge Councillors, “tell us what you have achieved to improve the quality of life of the community you represent.”

HALL says: We were delighted to meet the two junior officials from Environmental Services – but couldn’t help draw the parallel with the predicament of BA staff at T5. The reaction of the Head at the High School is also symptomatic of the malaise we all find ourselves in. We don’t think parents place teachers’ jobs before standards. We also see two contrasting styles from Councillors – on the one hand disillusioned that they are powerless and on the other defiant with the public. HALL knows which approach the public appreciate. Well done “disillusioned” and well done the two foot soldiers from Environmental Services.