

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Care, Learning and Housing Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 24 January 2019 at 10.05 am.

5. Housing Revenue Account Estimates 2019/20 Tuairmsean Cunntais Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais

Declaration of Interest: Ms L Munro declared a financial interest in this item as a Council house tenant but, in terms of the dispensation granted by the Standards Commission, remained to participate in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No CLH/02/19 dated 15 January 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- as confirmed during discussion of the previous item, the additional revenue raised from the proposed 3% rent increase would be spent on environmental improvements and allocated to Areas on a pro rata basis according to their Housing stock levels. In this regard, further detail on expenditure and budgets available on environmental improvements was sought for Area Committees;
- this localised approach would be welcomed by tenants who had indicated a preference for direct benefits to be achieved from increased rent;
- in some Wards tenants were being actively encouraged to suggest what environmental improvements were need. It was suggested that this approach provided an opportunity to widen the scope of participatory budgeting;
- local concerns about potential contractor capacity would be discussed at Ward level;
- again it was confirmed that, through workforce planning, the intention was to increase in-house capacity to undertake repairs and improvements. In this regard, the redesign work to bring property maintenance closer to the Housing service was welcomed;
- support was voiced for the 3% rent increase, pointing out that recent rent increases had been significantly lower than many other Local Authorities;
- information was sought on the rationale behind the setting of rents. For example, it was questioned if it was appropriate for rents in rural areas to be similar to those in Inverness and whether rent setting should be delegated to Area Committees. In response, it was explained that policy issues such as these were dealt with through the Policy Development Group, the meetings of which all Members were able to attend;
- it was important to continue working with the Treasury and the Scottish Government in relation to Housing loans and early settlement charges and the Leader would speak about this at a CoSLA meeting the following day;
- concern was expressed about the impact of Universal Credit on rent arrears and increased levels of debt. It was important the Council's approach towards tenants with debt or arrears was empowering and supportive and that people were treated with respect and dignity. Early intervention in relation to debt was helpful. Accordingly, as suggested in the report, a future report on

communication with tenants on arrears needed to be added to the recommendations;

- a request, by a local MP, had been made in Parliament for additional funds to cover rent arrears that had resulted from issues around the implementation of Universal Credit;
- alternative means, including digital online communication, of engaging with tenants should be explored, noting that traditional letters were expensive to produce and, at times, a barrier to communication. Drop-in sessions and liaison with other services such as social services and High Life Highland could be helpful to empower and encourage active vibrant tenant associations;
- consideration should be given to investing in garage voids to facilitate their rental, thus increasing income and possibly reducing on-street congestion. Community resilience and empowerment in this regard should be explored, including possible discussion with tenants' associations;
- the response rate to the tenant survey was only around 3-4% and efforts should be made to increase engagement with a wider range of tenants, including tenant support and advocacy. It was also suggested that engagement should be undertaken with people on the Housing waiting list;
- communication with communities in relation to empty houses was useful for early alerts about properties that had been vacated;
- in relation to the Council houses that were left in a poor state of repair by tenants, attention should be drawn to the difference in rent levels between Council properties and the private sector;
- specific issues were raised regarding environmental improvements in the Bught area and a housing issue in Tomatin and officers undertook to discuss these in greater detail with the Local Members involved;
- information having been sought on the reduction in the sheltered housing budget, it was explained that this related to reductions in the cost of warden accommodation;
- the policy in relation to housing estates that were now mixed tenure was explained, namely that where land was held on the Housing Revenue Account the cost of maintenance was met from the Housing Revenue Account. In response, it was explained that this was consistent with most other Councils' policies and any decision to change this would be a political one;
- the planned review of loan charges and capital planning was welcomed, and it was suggested that a unified Housing Revenue report would be beneficial and that the tenants' finance and participation group should be involved in the review from the outset rather than at the end of the process; and
- the outcomes from a pilot in Ross and Cromarty considering inspections of vulnerable or at risk properties could be shared with the Area Committee.

* The Committee **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** to the Council:-

- i. a 3% increase for council house rents for 2019/2020;
- ii. that the above percentage increase (3%) be applied to all residential HRA rents and service charges and to Gypsy/Traveller site pitches;
- iii. that non-HRA rents for leased property should increase as stipulated in existing contracts;
- iv. that the estimated HRA surplus of £2.5m in 2019/2020 be applied as capital from current revenue to fund HRA capital investment; and
- v. that a full review of HRA loan charges and capital planning be carried out during 2019/20 to inform future HRA rents policy and the 2021-2026 HRA Capital Plan;

and

AGREED:-

- vi. that a detailed report be brought back to a future Committee on how the Service contacted and communicated with tenants on arrears;
- vii. that detail on expenditure and budgets available on environmental improvements be provided to Area Committees; and
- viii. **NOTED** that, following consideration by Area Committees/Ward Members, rents for garages and garage sites would be increased by 3%.