

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held remotely on Thursday 10 June 2021 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr B Allan	Mr A Jarvie
Miss J Barclay	Mrs B McAllister
Mr R Bremner	Mr D Mackay
Miss J Campbell	Mrs A MacLean
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mrs L Munro
Mr M Finlayson	Mrs F Robertson
Mr C Fraser	Ms E Roddick
Mr L Fraser	Mr P Saggars
Mr A Graham	Mr B Thompson

Non-Members also present:

Mr K Gowans	Mr C Munro
Mr A Henderson	Mr I Ramon
Mr D Macpherson	Mr D Rixson
Mr J McGillivray	Mrs T Robertson

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing and Building Maintenance, Housing and Property
Mr F MacDonald, Head of Property and Facilities Management, Housing and Property
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy and Investment Manager, Housing and Property
Mr R Campbell, Estates Strategy Manager, Housing and Property
Mr A Byrne, Housing Policy Officer, Housing and Property
Mr L Hannah, Housing & Homeless Service Manager, Housing and Property
Mr M Mitchell, Service Finance Manager, Resources and Finance
Miss J MacLennan, Democratic Services Manager, Performance and Governance
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Performance and Governance
Ms O Bayon, Committee Administrator, Performance and Governance

**An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council.
All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to Committee.**

Mr B Thompson in the Chair

BUSINESS

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Committee **NOTED** the following declarations of interest:-

Item 5: Mr A Jarvie, Ms L Munro (non-financial)
Item 8: Mr A Jarvie, Ms L Munro and Mr B Thomson (non-financial)

Declarations of Interest: Mr R Bremner declared a non-financial interest in items 3,4,5,6,7 and 8 below as a Board Member of Albyn Housing Society Ltd but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

Mr L Fraser declared a financial interest in items 3,4,5,6,7 and 8 below on the grounds he undertook work for the Housing Service in Nairn but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion on the basis this work was so remote and minor it would not impinge on his work on the Committee.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Committee **NOTED** the following good news updates:-

- **Junior Warden Schemes:** the Tenant Participation team had restarted their work with young people through the Junior Warden Scheme. These schemes were designed to raise awareness in the young people of issues affecting communities and the role of the Housing Service and other statutory bodies in addressing these issues. The schemes were delivered in partnership with Youth Development Officers and the school. Junior Warden Schemes were due to commence with S1 children from Invergordon Academy and Dingwall Academy, P7 children from Cromarty Primary School and with other schemes planned for later in the year for Inverness and Lochaber;
- **Rate your Place:** the Tenant Participation Team had developed an online survey tool called Rate your Place. It was based on the Place Standard, which was a tool that was used to assess the quality of a place. It gave a holistic picture of how people felt about living in a specific area and helped officers and residents to identify priorities for improvement. A pilot survey had just been completed in Windsor Place, Conon Bridge and the results were being analysed to identify next steps. A copy of the survey report is available from the Tenant Participation Team and would be provided to Ward Members and placed on the Members Bulletin;
- **North of Scotland Regional Network:** A Highland Council tenant, Liz Richardson, had just been elected to represent tenants in Highland on the North of Scotland Regional Network (Region 1); and
- **Item 8 - Capital Programme – Update on Education and Property Projects** - the Corporate Communications Team had developed an interactive map which would effectively be an online map of the Appendix to the report. This would be publicly available and a press release was to be issued in this regard.

4. Housing and Property Directorate Service Plan Plana Seirbheis Buidheann-stiùiridh an Taigheadais is na Seilbhe

There had been circulated Report No HP/08/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- regular update reports on progress with the Corporate asset rationalisation project be submitted to the Committee, reference being made to the importance of Members being at the forefront of this process;
- stressing the need for more rapid progress to be made towards asset rationalisation and for material outcomes to be delivered in the current financial year;
- the importance also of Members supporting the ongoing work of the Redesign Board in leading on the asset rationalisation programme in conjunction with new ways of working and workforce planning;
- the disposal of Council leased buildings in the first instance would achieve early savings for the Council; and
- the Chair advised that he discuss the issues raised with the Executive Chief Officer and the Chair of the Redesign Board outwith the meeting.

The Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property provided an overview of the current status of the project and the work currently being undertaken to fill the significant data gaps which existed so that the business case for each building could be properly assessed. He confirmed that regular progress reports would be submitted to the Committee.

During further discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the potential for toilet facilities at Bught Park, Inverness to be opened to accommodate the significant numbers using the Park. It was confirmed this matter would be investigated further and a response provided directly to Mrs B McAllister;
- clarification was sought and provided that there was a presumption against undertaking small land sales unless there was a good business case in terms of the HRA;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the strategic review of the housing stock, including garages, and future investment needs would be brought forward for discussion to the Committee and at Area Committee level;
- the quality assurance processes in place to ensure the quality standards were achieved in Council properties and new build constructions;
- in terms of property and facility management, the opportunity to be more flexible in sharing properties with third sector partners;
- the work ongoing with suppliers to reduce the level of plastics used in food and drinks provision in schools and other key facilities be welcomed;
- confirmation was sought and provided that plans for all the Council's buildings was shared with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service;
- an update was sought and provided on the status of the upgrading of Beaully Primary School;
- the need to reappraise the issues around the ability to contact Service staff in the field, and to increase the supply of mobile phones;
- an explanation was provided on the challenges around imposing sanctions for breach of tenancy due to anti-social behaviour, including the reluctance of the courts to deprive people of the right to remain in a tenancy; and
- with regard to neighbour complaints about anti-social behaviour and also enquiries about small land sales, the Head of Housing confirmed he would contact Ward Members out with the meeting in relation to their specific queries.

The Committee **AGREED:-**

- i. the Directorate Service Plan for Housing & Property, noting the indicative budget at this time and that it was subject to review with any changes required to be reported back to Committee; and
- ii. that regular update reports be provided to the Committee on progress with asset rationalisation.

5. Housing Performance Report Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais

Declarations of Interest: Mr A Jarvie and Ms L Munro as Directors of High Life Highland declared a non-financial interest in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interest did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No HP/09/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- further information was sought and provided on the extent and nature of the fire safety issues on gypsy traveller sites and timeline for resolving these issues;
- an update was sought and provided on progress with addressing the backlog in non-emergency repairs accrued as a result of the pandemic and the additional sub-contractor resource being used in this regard;
- the average re-letting time reflected the impact of the pandemic over the past year;
- the potential pressure that would be placed on the Service in relation to the level of rent arrears and the lifting of the moratorium on evictions;
- the Service's staff be commended on their hard work in dealing with the challenges throughout the pandemic;
- there should be a focus on improving communication with regard to freedom of information requests;
- clarification was sought and provided on the potential to provide more gypsy / traveller sites in the Highlands on the basis this community had been displaced from some of their traditional stopping places due to new house building; and
- the continuing challenges with re-letting times in Caithness due to the changing nature of the housing profile and market in the area, and the potential for initiatives to be brought forward to address this issue. The Head of Housing confirmed he would arrange to meet with the Caithness Members to discuss this issue in more detail.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on the housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021.

6. Annual Monitoring Report 2020/2021: Highland Housing Register (HHR) Allocations Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Bhliadhnail 2020/2021: Sònrachaidhean Clàr Taigheadais na Gàidhealtachd

There had been circulated Report No HP/10/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- a report be submitted to the Committee on the issues in relation to the supply and demand for later life adaptive living properties given the age demographic for the Highlands and the need for the Council to be proactive in considering options on how to address this issue;
- in relation to future reporting, Members be provided with details of the fully wheelchair accessible ground-floor Council stock and type of wheelchair adapted property required by age and area;
- the need to engage with applicants and tenants who required wheelchair accessible properties on the standard design of new build properties to provide for more flexibility within the housing stock to meet demand;
- the potential pressures that would be placed on the Council and other social housing providers due to the impact of the pandemic in relation to the affordability of private sector rents;
- an assurance was sought and provided that the HHR Allocation Policy review would be subject to a full equalities impact assessment including on the 16 to 25 age range;
- an assurance was sought and provided that every effort was made to accommodate tenants/applicants with severe disabilities who may require alternative housing to move nearer family or professional support. Applicants also received care and support points in this situation;
- the potential for a more creative approach to be progressed across the Council and in partnership with communities in relation to investment in new housing to attract people into areas of Highland. It was noted that new social housing development was currently the remit of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the specific changes proposed to the Mutual Exchanges Policy were as detailed in the report;
- the potential to build more two bedroom as opposed to one bedroom properties in recognition that tenants circumstances change;
- some of the Council's new builds had the flexibility to be adjusted between one and two bedroom need; and
- in relation to future reporting on accessible housing, feedback be provided from the public/service users who required access to this type of social housing.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the information contained in the Annual Monitoring Report on housing allocations which demonstrated that the policy was achieving its objectives;
- NOTED** the main issues being considered as part of the HHR Allocation Policy review which was still underway;
- APPROVED** changes to the Mutual Exchanges Policy as outlined in section 7.4 of the report; and
- AGREED** that a report be submitted to the Committee on the issues in relation to supply and demand for later life adaptive living properties.

7. **Homelessness and Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan** **Dìth Dachaigh agus Plana Eadar-ghluasaid Ath-thuineachaidh Luath**

There had been circulated Report No HP/11/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- there was concern that some people would be at risk of homelessness because of the COVID pandemic consequences, such as being unable to pay their rent or mortgage and with the eviction process recommencing. The lack of available housing in Highland was a further concern and it was suggested that properties and closed business in the towns or city could perhaps be considered for investment to create additional housing stock;
- an Empty Homes Officer had now been recruited (a co-funded post with SHELTER) and it was suggested that this Officer could perhaps liaise with Members to discuss/identify potential empty properties to be used for housing in Wards;
- Members expressed thanks to the Income Maximisation and Housing teams for the excellent work undertaken throughout the pandemic;
- information was sought and received in relation to the ongoing work involving different agencies in order to keep young people safe;
- information was sought and provided in regard to the length of time that people were spending in temporary accommodation as it was recognised that this impacted mental health, especially during the pandemic; and
- it would be important to focus on continued communication with Housing and Tenant Association groups in order to ensure that they were continually updated on new schemes or initiatives.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** progress on the Council's Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan and actions undertaken to mitigate homelessness in Highland; and
- APPROVED** the Annual Update of the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan attached as Appendix 1 to the report for submission to Scottish Government.

8. Capital Programme – Update on Education and Property Projects Prògram Calpa – Fios às Ùr mu Phròiseactan Foghlaim is Seilbhe

Declarations of Interest: Mr A Jarvie, Ms L Munro and Mr B Thomson as Directors of High Life Highland declared a non-financial interest in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interest did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No HP/12/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was noted that the financial papers were not part of this report due to the timing of the meeting, however, they would be presented at the next meeting;
- Officers were thanked for their hard work regarding the large number of Education and Property capital projects progressed during the current financial year;
- there was concern regarding the accuracy of some detail on the status of Schools in Appendix 1 as specific Schools had known delays but these had not been clearly identified;
- further financial details were requested regarding projects which were either 5% overspent or underspent and whether any underspend had been allocated to other projects;
- attention was drawn to the list of significant listed buildings within the portfolio and it was queried as to how these would be brought up to the listed buildings standard;

- information was sought on the start date of the Nairn Academy synthetic pitch resurfacing works and in this respect it was confirmed that an update would be provided for Ward Members once the start date had been confirmed by the contractors;
- there was concern that the Culloden Academy project had insufficient budget allocation for completion and further clarification was therefore needed in this regard. In response, it was confirmed that this issue would be taken to the full Council for further discussion in the first instance;
- it was felt that improved communication between Members and Officers was needed in regard to oversight of capital projects (including the meeting of targets, budget management and updates on on-site progress) and in this regard the Chair confirmed that he would welcome suggestions from Members on how this could be taken forward;
- it was queried as to whether the refurbishment of the Invergordon Academy toilets would be completed before pupils returned;
- clarification was sought as to whether Invergordon Town Hall, as a local iconic building, could receive funding from the Scottish Government to avoid further deterioration and also preserve its heritage;
- it had to be recognised that local businesses could also benefit from Capital Programme investments;
- it was suggested that an interim report should be submitted to a future meeting to review project management, identify methodologies and practises for clarity/transparency and provide improved oversight for each project;
- an update was requested regarding the sale of land at Milton of Leys to build a new nursery;
- it was stressed that the extensive period of time which had been taken in terms of progress in relation to St Clements School was unacceptable; and
- clarification was sought and provided regarding the means of capital project management within the Council.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the progress made with the Education and Property projects in the Council's Capital Programme as detailed.

The meeting was closed at 3.00pm.