

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held remotely on Wednesday 9 September 2020 at 10.30am.

Present:

Miss J Campbell	Mr D Mackay
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mrs A MacLean
Mr M Finlayson	Mrs L Munro
Mr C Fraser	Mrs F Robertson
Mr L Fraser	Ms E Roddick
Mr A Graham	Mr P Saggars
Mr A Henderson (substitute)	Ms M Smith
Mr A Jarvie	Mr B Thompson
Mrs B McAllister	

Non-Members also present:

Mr R Bremner	Mr B Lobban
Mr H Carmichael	Mr J McGillivray
Mr J Finlayson	Mrs I Mackenzie
Mr R Gale	Mr D Macpherson

Also in attendance:

Mrs M MacKay, Tenant Participation Representative

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer, Property and Housing
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing and Building Maintenance, Housing and Property
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager, Housing and Property
Mr J McHardy, Housing Development Manager, Development and Infrastructure
Mr M Mitchell, Service Finance Manager, Corporate Resources
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, Performance and Governance
Miss M Zavarella, Clerical Assistant, 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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs J Barclay and Mrs L MacDonald.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

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

Item 3: Mr L Fraser (Financial) and Mrs A MacLean (Non-Financial)
Item 6: Mr B Thompson, Mrs L Munro and Mr A Jarvie (Non-Financial)

3. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 30 June 2020
Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 30 Ògmhios 2020

Mr L Fraser declared a financial interest in this item 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 his work was so remote and minor it would not impinge on his work on the Committee.

Mrs A MacLean declared a non-financial interest in this item as Chair of Ross-shire Woman's Aid and a director of Ross and Cromarty Citizens Advice Bureau but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that her interest did not preclude her from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No HP/10/20 dated 21 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- clarification was sought on the current uses of temporary accommodation and it was confirmed that Members would be circulated with an area breakdown in this regard;
- how the Service could better ensure tenants kept their properties up to standard, given the detrimental impact houses and gardens falling into a state of disrepair had on the amenity and safety of neighbours and the wider neighbourhood environment, and also the cost implications to the Council;
- the potential to reinstate the pilot scheme introduced in Ross and Cromarty to develop as a spend to save initiative a regular inspection and reporting regime for properties and gardens. The Head of Housing and Building Maintenance confirmed he would have further discussions with local Members on this matter;
- the importance of early intervention in managing tenants who might be experiencing difficulties and the fact an annual inspection regime might help identify other underlying issues that might not otherwise have been picked up; and
- the potential for community groups to provide support to tenants in their communities where this was required.

In response, it was confirmed the issues raised by Members were challenging and, in some cases, extended beyond the sphere of housing management, for example where tenants were experiencing mental health issues and required a more holistic approach. Early intervention was key and therefore the intelligence gathered from housing and other Council staff, Members and the community was essential, in terms of persuading tenants to change behaviours, providing

support, and making referrals to statutory agencies. In addition, a summary was provided on the complexities presented by housing tenancy law in respect of the enforcement action.

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

- clarification was sought and provided that any expansion of the Garden Aid scheme would need to be costed and built into the HRA revenue estimates for future years;
- confirmation was sought and provided that significant capital and revenue funds had been set aside for environmental improvements to enable local projects to be progressed and the proposal to recommence the Rate Your Estate initiative involving Members and tenants was welcomed;
- while the issues raised by Members were pan Highland, the Area Committees were best placed to develop local solutions;
- the need for a firmer stance to be taken in relation to those tenants who did not keep their properties/gardens up to standard despite being fit to do so;
- an assurance was sought and provided that new tenant inspections were being carried out;
- new approaches and innovative ways of working were required to better manage the challenges around issues of anti-social behaviour, void properties, and the Council's homelessness obligations, including more Member engagement and support and Council's housing staff improving the avenues of communication with tenants, tenant participation groups and communities;
- the need to consider the how a regular inspection regime could be targeted to deliver the best value for the Council;
- the potential to use the environmental budget more strategically in the future to improve heating systems and target fuel poverty;
- the need for a multi-layer approach through the Area Committees and local community partnerships to support the Housing Service;
- the potential to share examples of good practice of community initiatives, supported by the Council, that were making a real difference to housing estates and tenants; and
- the Chair advised that he would reflect on the points in relation to the structure of the Committee agenda going forward, including a focus on sharing good practice.

In response to some of the points raised, reference was made to the changing environment for Council housing and the need for the traditional approaches to housing management arrangements to be revised to take account of the wider issues. Discussions were ongoing on the Service structure and how services were delivered in future, including the need for a more multi-agency and functional approach.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account; and
- ii. **NOTED** that an area breakdown of the current uses of temporary accommodation would be provided.

4. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report to 30 June 2020
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 30 Ògmhios 2020

There had been circulated Report No HP/11/20 dated 21 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- whether the costs of projects had increased due to the impact of the pandemic. It was confirmed that future reports would include information on the impact on project costs as a result of COVID-19;
- confirmation be circulated to the Committee that tenants, including those in new builds, could change their gas supplier after 30 days of occupancy;
- the scope to reduce the figure for capital projects which could be charged to revenue below the current threshold to fund more borrowing for new builds. It was confirmed this would require the Council's financial regulations to be reviewed which was within Members gift;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the approach taken in relation to the location of and mix of houses in new build developments, with specific reference to meeting demand from tenants who wished to upsize and those with accessibility issues; and
- the work being undertaken as a Council in consultation with other agencies in terms of profiling the Council's capital plan going forward taking cognisance of socio-economic factors. It was confirmed that the Housing Need and Demand Assessment, which was currently being reviewed in consultation with colleagues in Planning, informed local development plans and local housing strategy.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme Monitoring Report;
- ii. **NOTED** that future reports would include further information on the impact on project costs as a result of COVID-19; and
- iii. **NOTED** that confirmation would be circulated to the Committee that tenants, including those in new builds, could change their gas supplier after 30 days of occupancy.

5. Annual Monitoring Report 2019/2020: Highland Housing Register Allocations
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Bhliadhnail 2019/2002: Riarachaidhean Clàr Taigheadais na Gàidhealtachd

There had been circulated Report No HP/12/20 dated 21 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it would be more cost effective for the Council to purchase properties on the open market rather than undertaking adaptations to existing properties as a measure to close the gap between demand and lets for wheelchair accessible and level access housing;

- linked to the above, the potential for planning policy to be used to increase the supply of private housing to meet demand for specialist designed houses for those on the waiting list. The Head of Housing and Building Maintenance confirmed he would have discussions with planning colleagues on this matter and report back to Mr A Jarvie;
- concern at the percentage target which had been set for wheelchair accessible houses in new build developments compared to the level of demand from applicants. It was confirmed this target would be reviewed in consultation with the planners and as part of the review of the local housing strategy;
- confirmation was sought and provided that a detailed analysis was being undertaken of offers being refused and the outcome of this would be reported to the Committee;
- it was important the allocations policy did not inadvertently bias against particular groups and in this regard it would be helpful to have a breakdown of lets by age;
- the opportunities for more new Council house builds to be designed and constructed as life-long and dementia friendly properties for tenants to reduce the requirement for adaptations in the future;
- an assurance was sought and provided that officers were continuing to explore all opportunities for the provision of affordable housing in Nairn and its surrounds;
- officers be commended on the investment in new build specially designed houses in Ward 8: Dingwall and Seaforth to meet the particular needs of applicants on the waiting list;
- concern that in relation to the Unsuitable Accommodation Order, the burden of supporting some tenants to sustain their tenancies would fall on the Housing Service, and the need for a more holistic approach to be progressed;
- the review of the points allocated for different housing needs be welcomed and confirmation was sought and provided the other HHR landlords were following the same points system;
- a point in regard to whether the other HHR landlords accepted all tenants in line with the Council's statutory duties. The Housing Policy & Investment Manager confirmed that HHR landlords followed the same allocation policy and that he would raise any particular issues Members had with housing partners; and
- options for buying properties on the open market be investigated and the outcome reported to Committee, including the issues around the re-purchase of former Council houses from an asset management perspective.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. information contained in the Annual Monitoring Report on housing allocations which demonstrated that the policy was achieving its objectives;
- ii. process for consulting on proposed changes to the Mutual Exchanges Policy and the Allocation Policy;
- iii. that a detailed analysis was being undertaken of the offers being refused and the outcome of this would be reported Committee;
- iv. that a breakdown of lets by age would be circulated to the Committee; and

- v. options for buying properties on the open market would be investigated and the outcome reported to Committee.

**6. Property, FM Services Revenue Monitoring Report to 30 June 2020
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Seilbh, Seirbheis Rianachd
Ghoireasan gu 30 Ògmhios 2020**

Declarations of Interest: Mr B Thompson, Mrs L Munro and Mr A Jarvie declared a non-financial interest in this item as Directors of High Life Highland 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/13/20 dated 25 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property.

The Chair welcomed the report and explained that it presented the opportunity for the same level of scrutiny of the Property and Facilities Management (FM) Services as that provided to the Housing Service and he welcomed feedback on the report. In addition, he paid particular tribute to the Catering, Cleaning, and FM staff for their excellent work in preparing the school estate for reopening and he expressed his appreciation to all involved.

During discussion, it was suggested that there was a need for a broader planned approach to be undertaken which would provide further information on the ongoing property maintenance requirements to get buildings up to the required standards and associated costs which would then inform the long-term property strategy and future capital planning. In response, the Executive Chief Officer Housing & Property explained that this concept, the Corporate Landlord, was being adopted as agreed at the last meeting of the Committee and that there would be regular reporting on this and also Asset Management going forward. Continuing, he provided further information on this model including the commissioning of a stock conditioning survey and the timeline for completion.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the more detailed reporting of gross income and gross expenditure to improve scrutiny of net budgets as set out in the Appendices attached to the report;
- ii. net spend at the end of quarter 1 totalled £10.774m;
- iii. based on the best available information to date, a service budget gap of £3.128m to the end of 2020/21 was presently forecast, largely due to essential Covid responses;
- iv. almost every area of service relied on income to pay for services and this was significantly disrupted this year because of Covid impacts. Spend addressing Covid related issues was the key reason for the service's forecast budget gap;
- v. the budget gap might change positively or negatively depending on the application of expenditure and recruitment controls, adjusting services to meet previously agreed budget savings; in-year income recovery, identifying new income and procurement opportunities, drawing down any further Government grant support and any new Covid related recovery costs;

- vi. that further adjustments would be made in future quarterly reporting to reflect the updated apportionment of costs and savings across the new ECO structure, improved monthly profiling of income and expenditure and any other resourcing issues emerging including any potential Brexit impacts; and
- vii. the significant effort and support applied by the Property, Catering, Cleaning and FM teams in preparing the physical school estate for fully reopening on the 18 August 2020. The Property & FM teams were also providing phased support to bring the HLH estate back into operational use.

The meeting was closed at 12.55pm.