

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held remotely on Thursday 10 December 2020 at 10.30am.

### Present:

Mr B Allan	Mr A Henderson (substitute)
Mrs J Barclay	Mr A Jarvie
Mr B Boyd (substitute)	Mrs B McAllister
Mr R Bremner	Mr D Mackay
Miss J Campbell	Mrs A MacLean
Mr L Fraser	Mr H Morrison (substitute)
Mr A Graham	Mr P Saggars
Mr R Gale (substitute)	Mr B Thompson

### Non-Members also present:

Dr I Cockburn	Mrs M Paterson
Mr J Finlayson	Mrs T Robertson
Mr J McGillivray	

### Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property  
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing and Building Maintenance  
Mr F MacDonald, Head of Property & Facilities Management  
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager  
Mr J McHardy, Housing Development Manager  
Mr M Mitchell, Service Finance Manager  
Ms M Macleman, Principal Tenant & Customer Engagement Officer  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator  
Miss M Zavarella, Clerical Assistant

**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 G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr M Finlayson, Mr C Fraser, Mrs L Munro, Mrs F Robertson and Ms E Roddick.

### 2. **Declarations of Interest** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

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

Items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9: Mr R Bremner (non-financial)  
Item 6: Mr L Fraser (Financial)  
Item 7: Mr A Jarvie and Mr B Thompson (non-Financial)

**Declaration of Interest: Mr R Bremner declared a non-financial interest in items 3,4,5,6,7,8 and 9 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.**

**3. Good News  
Naidheachdan Matha**

There had been circulated a note of the good news stories which included information on the tenant participation work that had been undertaken during the pandemic.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- The importance of tenant participation was emphasised and Members were encouraged to get involved in the tenant engagement process which was a good opportunity to break down barriers and hear directly from tenants;
- Reference was made to the importance of social engagement, particularly throughout the pandemic, and the positive benefit of organised events such as the online Christmas party;
- Appreciation was expressed for the commitment of staff throughout the response to the pandemic and the vital support provided by community groups; and
- Digital inclusion was more important than ever and further information was sought and provided on how this could be further improved and maintained, particularly as everyone transitioned back to more normal times post Covid.

The Committee **NOTED** the good news as circulated.

**4. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 30 September 2020  
Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 30 An t-Sultainn 2020**

There had been circulated Report No HP/14/20 dated 27 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it would be useful to know the impact of vacancy management on the deliverability of services as this was rarely reported on. In response to a question, it was agreed that it was important to be able to report the difference between active and natural vacancies that occur in a service and the Chair gave a commitment to investigate how this could be reported;
- it was confirmed that when Area Committees were considering localised performance the impact of vacancies was included in the narrative of the report;
- clarification was sought, and provided, that the downsizing policy was not actively promoted though it continued to be utilised on a targeted basis;

- service delivery was praised by Members and it was highlighted that recently appointed recruits were providing a high-quality service which spoke to the excellent training they had received from staff;
- further information was sought and provided in regard to the feasibility of selling garages/garage sites; and
- given the high demand for allotments, and the potential income revenue stream from this, a request was made for consideration to be given to identifying any potential allotment sites for local residents.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account;
- AGREED** to investigate how best to report the difference between active and natural vacancy management; and
- AGREED** that further consideration be given to the use of surplus HRA land for allotments.

**5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report to 30 September 2020**  
**Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 30 An t-Sultainn 2020**

There had been circulated Report No HP/15/20 dated 27 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- it was confirmed that no funding for the works had been made available by the Scottish Government;
- the Fire Service had installed alarms as part of safety checks/visits in the past and it was confirmed that contact would be made with the Fire Service as part of any new arrangements;
- in relation to the Strategic Housing Investment Programme for 2021-26, it had been stated that it would be possible to approve at least 500 units each year and further detail on this was needed, including proposals for how this would be resourced. It was confirmed that the target for the Council House Building element of the programme was currently 150 units per year;
- this issue, along with many others, would be discussed at the forthcoming Seminar on 27 January 2021 and all Members were encouraged to attend;
- most alarms were currently battery operated as opposed to being hard wired and there was a need for further information as to whether this was to be changed in future;
- confirmation was sought on what was being considered as potentially achievable in terms of capital spend in the current year and also in the following year;
- in terms of the progress with the Council House Building Programme for 2020-21, whereby it was anticipated that this programme would deliver 106 new completions within the current financial year, more information was needed on the cost per unit in this respect;

- in relation to the new build housing plan, there had to be a focus on provision within rural areas in particular, not least in light of current de-population issues;
- it was noted and welcomed that specific details of capital spend to the end of November, which would include a breakdown of costs per unit, would be provided as requested;
- it was queried as to what impact the slippage reported in the current year would have on the following year's programme and this would be reported to a future committee;
- further information was needed in terms of the definition of 'one-off houses' and it was noted that this would be provided at the Seminar;
- where there was no available in-house electricians, local contractors would be considered if possible, for the fitting of fire safety alarms along with consideration of a programme for future local apprenticeships (especially in rural areas);
- there was a need for continued communication in relation to risk assessments within flats, in conjunction with the Fire Service where necessary, not least to build in additional resilience where required;
- upgrading of fire prevention measures/equipment should be offered to all tenants;
- it was anticipated that, in view of the fact that the new fire safety regulations had now been delayed in terms of their implementation until 2022, this would allow all of the necessary work to be undertaken in advance of that date; and
- there was considerable frustration at not being able to identify sites for future housing development in an area such as the Highlands and it was hoped that this could be taken forward during future discussions with the Scottish Land Commission if possible.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme Monitoring Report; and
- APPROVED** the transfer of £1m from Revenue to Capital budgets for fire safety works for both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 budgets;
- NOTED** that further information would be circulated to Members on the spend to end of December 2020, the monthly spend projections to the end of the financial year, and a breakdown of unit cost for new builds;
- AGREED** to review the Fire Safety Programme of Works to determine the feasibility of targeting property types and prioritising areas and the opportunities for wireless devices; and
- AGREED** that the operation of the Apprenticeship Scheme and the level of trades officers in Caithness be investigated and the outcome reported to Councillor D Mackay.

**6. Property & Facilities Management Services: Revenue Monitoring Report to 30 September 2020**  
**Seirbheisean Stiùiridh Thogalaichean & Ghoireasan: Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach gu 30 Sultain 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 this work was so remote and minor it would not impinge on his work on the Committee.**

There had been circulated Report No HP/16/20 dated 16 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- in relation to the budget for Catering, Cleaning and Facilities Management, there was a need for further clarification on the budget which would be in place to support this area, including future recruitment, and as part of that it was hoped that a response would be received from the Scottish Government in this regard at an early date;
- further information was needed on when school lets, and specifically outdoor facilities, could be reinstated;
- there was a concern about the potential budget gap should sufficient additional funding not be confirmed;
- in thanking the staff concerned for the excellent work which continued to be undertaken, it was noted that they had been under significant pressure over recent months and consideration was currently being given as to whether there might be a need for agency staff to be employed in the near future;
- responsibility for the different elements of this budget should be discussed and reviewed if considered necessary;
- it was imperative that the provision of good and nutritional hot meals for schoolchildren was maintained and improved upon if/where necessary; and
- it had to be made clear that any additional budget support received was not expected to significantly change the level of service currently being provided and as such current and future pressures in this respect had to be highlighted in the coming months and kept under constant review.

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 2 totalled £35.240m;
- iii. based on the best available information to date, a service budget gap of £8.417m to the end of 2020/21 was presently forecast, largely due to continued 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. Ongoing spend addressing Covid related issues was the key reason for the service's forecast budget gap; and
- 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.

**7. Update on the Corporate Landlord and Strategic Asset Management Approach to Buildings and Assets**  
**Fios às Ùr mu Dhòigh-obrach Uachdarain Chorporra agus Stiùireadh So-mhain Ro-innleachdail a thaobh Thogalaichean is So-mhain**

**Declarations of Interest: Mr B Thompson 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/17/20 dated 18 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the high-level vision was inspiring but the size and scale of the project was emphasised and it was queried whether the Council was adequately investing in the appropriate management tools and training that would be required to achieve the objectives;
- feedback was provided on the Property Performance Framework (PPF) and the suggested metrics during which a number of queries were raised in regard to feasibility of the PPF being completed at least partially prior to the suggested timeline of two years to enable priorities to be quickly identified; whether the impact of home working would be incorporated into the process; the need for evaluation of insulation and energy efficiencies; and whether a pragmatic approach was being adopted to identify the key priorities, for which it was felt that schools should be a key focus; and whether the Council should be actively considering prudent borrowing;
- with regard to property rationalisation, it was queried how the capital receipt should be allocated and a number of views were expressed at whether this should be retained centrally or retained in the local area that it was generated and it was highlighted it might be easier to rationalise estate if local areas received some proportion of the capital receipt. It was further highlighted that disposal of assets also generated a revenue saving which was retained centrally. It was acknowledged that the Council had a significant number of properties (1,200 in total). However, it was highlighted the rationalisation of these would not be straightforward given the land mass of the Highlands. It was indicated that disposal of common good properties would not be possible in many instances and assurance was provided that there would be cognisance of the social value of buildings, particularly in remote and rural areas;
- assurance was provided that the proposed approach would involve collaboration with communities and services at a local level and a plea was made for early intervention with building users with reference being made to the Fort William 2040 initiative and ascertaining community views. The importance of co-locating with the third sector organisations, as well as public sector organisations, and keeping buildings in rural areas vibrant and protecting employability was also emphasised. Further information was sought and provided on how the Corporate Landlord model would impact on Community Asset Transfers;
- it was indicated that transferring staff and relevant budgets from previous responsible services would be a difficult task;

- with regard to homeworking, it was queried whether staff contracts of employment would need to be amended to reflect this change and that workplace risk assessments would need to be undertaken. It was also queried how the Council's carbon reduction target would be addressed if energy use was being transferred from Council buildings to staff homes;
- the importance of ensuring that the data was up to date was emphasised; and
- further information was sought and provided on the types of criteria applied to assess and grade buildings.

The Committee **NOTED** the report.

## **8. Housing Performance Report Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais**

There had been circulated Report No HP/18/20 dated 27 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- concern was expressed at the increasing rent arrears trend and Members expressed their appreciation to staff for their diligent efforts supporting tenants. In addition, staff were further commended for their sympathetic approach in dealing with homelessness presentations. Members praised the team for the commitment and dedication and it was suggested that these achievements should be captured and acknowledged;
- with regard to rent arrears, it was highlighted that additional support and advice was available from the Council's Welfare Team and the Citizen's Advice Bureau;
- reference was made to the Average re-let time performance indicator and a request was made to follow up on earlier discussions held with the Chair regarding initiatives in Caithness. It was further highlighted the profile of voids in this area had reduced and it was suggested that this be reassessed; and
- with regard to the suggestion that the number of complaints had increased during the pandemic, it was clarified that the numbers detailed in the report were cumulative, i.e. the figures for June – September also included the figures for April to June hence why it appeared like an increase.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 to 30 September 2020.

## **9. Annual Assurance Statement to the Scottish Housing Regulator Aithris Bharantais Bhliadhnail do Riaghladair Taigheadais na h-Alba**

There had been circulated Report No HP/19/20 dated 27 November 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, reference was made to the positive response that the Council had received from the Scottish Housing Regulator as set out in their letter which had been appended to the report and the reasonable suggestions for improvement that had been made.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the report from the Scottish Housing Regulator on the Annual Assurance Statement for 2019; and
- ii. **APPROVED** the Annual Assurance Statement for 2020 detailed at Appendix 1 to the report.

The meeting was closed at 1.55pm.