

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held remotely on Thursday 11 March 2021 at 10.30am.

### Present:

Mr B Allan	Mr D Mackay
Miss J Barclay	Mr C Munro (substitute)
Mr R Bremner	Mrs A MacLean
Miss J Campbell	Mrs L Munro
Mr L Fraser	Mrs F Robertson
Mr A Graham	Ms E Roddick
Mr A Jarvie	Mr P Saggars
Mrs B McAllister	Mr B Thompson

### Non-Members also present:

Mr A Baxter	Mr J McGillivray
Mr J Finlayson	Mrs M Paterson
Mr A Henderson	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 J McHardy, Housing Development Manager, Housing and Property  
Mr M Mitchell, Service Finance Manager, Resources and Finance  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, 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**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr M Finlayson and Mr C Fraser.

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

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

Item 4: Mr A Jarvie (non-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**

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

- Tenants from Ballifeary worked with the Ballifeary Community Council to establish the Let's Grow Ballifeary-Bught garden project which consisted of accessible wooden planters filled with a range of winter vegetables which the community would be encouraged to harvest;
- Throughout the COVID pandemic, the Tenant Participation Team had been providing support to enable tenants to get connected to attend meetings and events online. Working collaboratively with the Libertie Project, android tablets had been provided to 32 households who did not have a suitable device. As part of a second phase of this scheme, the Libertie Project was working with the SCVO to deliver the Scottish Government's Connecting Scotland programme in the Highlands which, subject to eligibility criteria, provided either a Chromebook or an iPad, and a mobile WIFI device with 24 months of unlimited data allowance. The Tenant Participation team had been referring tenants or residents who met the criteria for these devices to help them keep connected to their families and friends, order shopping online, and get them involved in Tenant Participation online events and activities;
- The Hilton Bike Project which had been set up to encourage people out of their cars and children and young people to take up cycling. Expert advice was provided from WheelNess and works would commence in the Spring to install bike shelters, tool stations and air pumps with funding secured from the Environmental Improvement budget;
- The Upper Achintore Regeneration Group had been working to combat climate change and enhance the local environment. Two potential tree planting sites had been identified and sponsorship had been received from Ben Nevis Distillery to install recycled whisky barrels throughout the area;
- Congratulations were extended to Paula Lloyd, tenant from Hilton, who had been awarded the BEM in the New Year's Honours List for services to the homeless and Catherine Stoddart, tenant from Ballachulish, who had been elected on to the Tenant Participation Advisory Service Scotland Board as a tenant representative; and
- The work of the Tenant Participation Officers to maintain contact with tenants and the assistance they provided to support them online throughout the pandemic was commended.

#### 4. **Update on Corporate Landlord and Asset Management Strategy** **Fios às Ùr mu Ro-innleachd Uachdarain Chorporra agus Rianachd So-** **mhaoin**

**Declarations of Interest: Mr A Jarvie declared a non-financial interest in this item as a Director 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 his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report No HP/02/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Executive Chief Officer provided an update to the report following the full Council meeting on 4 March 2021 at which the Council's budget was approved. In particular, he outlined the significant investment in Health and Safety spend and approval of the Change Fund bid which would help drive forward asset rationalisation and support future ways of working for staff.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- this was a substantial project and it would be helpful for a Members briefing to be arranged on this item;
- the significant investment in health and safety was welcomed and it was confirmed that an update would be provided to each Committee in relation to the detail of the Programme and spend;
- a summary of the work being undertaken in respect of the Health and Safety programme also be provided to Members;
- in relation to schools, it was confirmed the Education & Learning Service was currently assessing the educational requirements of their buildings, and a future phase of asset management would consider their physical condition and investment requirements;
- confirmation was sought and provided that Area Committee and local Member and community engagement would be a key factor in shaping the investment programme and in considering the social value and community use of buildings;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the recruitment process for the posts detailed at section 4.6 of the report would commence as quickly as possible;
- confirmation was sought and provided that staff would be involved in the project in a range of ways going forward, details of which were provided;
- a more detailed explanation was sought and provided on the requirement to deliver a new and better evidence base and the timescales involved;
- the significant linkages between the work being undertaken by the Redesign Board in relation to workforce planning and future ways of working and the delivery of the asset management strategy and the importance of Member oversight being well managed through the Board and the Committee in this regard;
- it was suggested a standalone forum be established comprising Members and officers to consider both asset management and future ways of working for staff;

- the asset management approach should take forward options for disposing of the current Council Headquarters site to a developer and building a new headquarters in an alternative location, and consider the impact on the Capital Programme;
- the need to dispose of any properties the Council leased in early course on the basis of the savings this would deliver;
- a crucial part of the performance metric should be a building's environmental performance in terms of the Council's commitment to becoming carbon neutral;
- the potential to relocate services from the Diriebught Depot to a Council owned site near the Longman Roundabout and use the land for housing development;
- it was hoped that the significant additional investment in asset management would allow projects such as the above to be investigated; and
- it was critical the asset management strategy and future ways of working supported small rural communities and enabled home working.

The Committee **NOTED** the contents of the report and **AGREED** that a:-

- i. Member briefing be arranged on this item; and
- ii. summary of the work being undertaken in respect of the Health and Safety programme be provided to Members.

**5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 31 December 2020**  
**Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2020**

There had been circulated Report No HP/03/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- confirmation was sought and provided that fire safety works to Council properties were wholly funded through the HRA, and no external funding had been received in this regard. It was confirmed that Members would be circulated with details of the Scottish Government's funding made available to homeowners for fire safety measures;
- the proposed carry forward of the HRA surplus was welcomed, however concern was expressed at the backlog of repairs and maintenance and potential capacity issues in the ability to spend the additional monies available in the next financial year. It was confirmed that while it was anticipated the additional spend would be manageable, the uncertainties around trade capacity and sub-contractor, material and other costs was recognised and this would be kept under review;
- the opportunity ahead of the next financial year to undertake external non-essential repairs and maintenance and environmental works in housing estates where safe social distancing could be maintained. It was confirmed the approach would be to commence and maximise external low risk works as soon as the Government guidelines permitted; and

- in relation to the backlog of repairs and maintenance, an assurance was provided that as with the first lockdown a prioritised programme by repair type, waiting times and some geographical clustering would be drawn up with a view to expediting the backlog as soon as possible.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account;
- ii. **AGREED** that any year end HRA surplus be added to the 2021/22 HRA Revenue budget for repairs and maintenance, in order to fund the backlog of work arising from Covid-19 restrictions during 2020/21; and
- iii. **AGREED** that Members be circulated with details of the Scottish Government funding available to homeowners for fire safety measures.

**6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report to 31 December 2020**  
**Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 31 An Dùbhlachd 2020**

There had been circulated Report No HP/04/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- noting that a Members seminar on new builds would be held on 26 March 2021;
- the commitment to report back to each Committee on any delays and mitigating actions on the Capital Programme be welcomed;
- clarification was sought and provided on the status of the Strategic Housing Investment Programme in terms of the number of new build approvals and completions and progress against targets, and noting that a more detailed update would be provided to the next Committee;
- clarification was sought and provided that medical adaptations would be prioritised and works undertaken once the guidelines permitted; In the meantime, adaptations essential for the immediate wellbeing of a tenant would continue to be undertaken;
- in relation to modular and modern methods of construction, this would be covered in the Members seminar on 26 March 2021;
- the need to actively consider the potential impacts of increasing contractor costs on the Council's future new build programme;
- the benchmark figure for the cost of new build units to allow comparisons to be made with conversions costs, specific reference being made to community interest in re-purposing properties on the High Street, Nairn for domestic use. It was confirmed Members would be provided with the Council's benchmarks costs for different sizes and types of new house builds;
- the need to make clearer the link between the level of spend and the number of houses delivered and it was confirmed further clarity would be provided on the borrowing requirements for individual new Council house builds;

- the impact of Brexit on supply chains of materials and therefore costs, noting this was not currently impacting on the Programme;
- an update was sought and provided on progress with compulsory purchase orders in relation to derelict properties;
- the Council's housing development team and partners be congratulated for delivering significant investment in affordable housing in Lochaber; and
- a query in relation to the start date for the affordable housing development at Upper Achintore, Fort William. The Housing Development Manager confirmed he would respond directly to Mr B Allan on this matter.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme Monitoring Report;
- NOTED** that any slippage in the current year's programme would be carried forward to the 2021/22 programme; and
- AGREED** that further clarification be provided to Members on the:-
  - borrowing requirements for individual new Council house builds; and
  - Council's benchmarks costs for different sizes and types of new house builds.

**7. 2020/21 Capital Programme – Update on Education and Property Projects  
Prògram Calpa 2020/21 – Fios às Ùr mu Phròiseactan Foghlaim agus Cuid-seilbhe**

**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/05/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the significant impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of school capital projects was noted. However, recognition and praise was given regarding the completion of many new Highland schools to date including Merkinch Primary School, Invergarry Primary School, Alness Academy and the refurbishment of Inverness High School. Members expressed their appreciation for the completion of these projects and emphasised the improvements that this had made to the learning experience for pupils. Congratulations were also expressed regarding the successful funding bid to the Learning Estate Investment Programme which included provision for Nairn Academy, Tain Campus and Broadford Primary School was welcomed;
- assurance was sought and provided regarding the future school's capital programme, specifically that the correct resources were in place, particularly in terms of staff, to drive forward the building and maintenance

of schools to ensure all the complex aspects in respect of build, stakeholder engagement, procurement, and communication plans were in place;

- it was confirmed that works would commence on the Nairn synthetic pitch in July 2021;
- it was queried if Portable Appliance Testing would be undertaken in addition to the routine property maintenance regime;
- it was questioned if schools could be ranked in the same way that was used for condition of buildings (e.g. A,B,C,D), taking into account the climate change emergency and their energy efficiency;
- confirmation was provided that all heating options would be examined when replacing school boilers;
- in terms of Merkinch Primary School, information was sought and provided on how it had been feasible to build such a large school with surplus capacity. Further information was also requested on the external works at Merkinch Primary School (Phase 2), progress of the Family Centre, and when works at Dalneigh Primary School would commence. The need for the alteration works at St Joseph's nursery to be undertaken as soon as possible was also emphasised;
- concerns were raised regarding the buildings which became vacant and thus surplus to requirements following the construction of a new replacement build. A number of Members acknowledged that although the new builds were very much welcomed, many buildings which had been vacant for a number of years remained in their wards and the financial burdens as well as other issues such as security and anti-social behaviour were highlighted. Specifically, it was highlighted that it had still not been possible to dispose of the old Wick High School as work remained outstanding and further information was sought and provided on when the Wick Campus work would be completed. It was proposed that a seminar be held with a view to ensuring that the capital planning process included provision for identifying solutions for the disposal/demolition of redundant sites. The Chair welcomed this proposal and also highlighted that it was intended that there would be reports to local Area Committees in terms of the Property Service and that this, in conjunction with the Corporate Landlord Model and the Asset Rationalisation Programme, would enable local property issues to be addressed;
- it was requested that an additional fourth column be included in Appendices 1 and 2 within the list of Education and Property projects indicating the target completion date; and
- a request was made for the building materials from the demolition of Alness academy to be reused for the provision of the new sports barn at Dornoch.

Thereafter, the Committee;-

- i. **NOTED** the progress made during the current financial year with the Education and Property projects in the Council's capital programme; and
- ii. **AGREED** that an update be provided to Members on Phase 2 of Merkinch Primary School and when works at Dalneigh Primary School would commence.

**8. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Report to 31 December 2020**  
**Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2020**

There had been circulated Report No HP/06/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, it was confirmed that Scottish Government funding, to cover Covid-19 expenditure, would remain in a centralised budget rather than be disseminated to service budgets, and no ongoing implications for next year's budgets were anticipated.

In addition, clarification was sought and provided regarding the non-domestic rates budget and assurance was also provided that the Council worked with third sector organisations and community groups to ensure that any opportunities for rates relief were maximised.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. net spend at the end of quarter 3 totalled £50.008m;
- ii. based on the best available information to date, a service budget gap of £7.359m to the end of 2020/21 was presently forecast, largely due to continued Covid responses. (This was an improving outturn position from Q2 as the year end budget gap was now forecast to reduce from £8.417m to £7.359m);
- iii. 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;
- iv. 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; and
- v. further adjustments would be made in future quarterly reporting to reflect the updated apportionment of costs and savings across the new Service structure.

**9. Housing Performance Report**  
**Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais**

There had been circulated Report No HP/07/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the increase in tenant engagement via the online forums was welcomed;
- it was queried if the third quarter reduction in temporary housing accommodation statistics included housing tenants that had to vacate the property due to issues such as mould;



- further information was requested on the legislation for Private Landlords in respect of evictions due to rent debt and also on the length of time spent in temporary accommodation;
- reassurance was sought and provided regarding the commencement of Garden Aid as soon as possible despite the impact of Covid-19, and having the property list up to date;
- concern was expressed at the level of new Universal Credit claimants, which it was felt was likely to continue to increase, and the impact of this on rent arrears and the HRA budget;
- a request was made for Housing staff to inspect the housing stock at least once per year which would also help to identify vulnerable tenants. Members thanked Housing Officers for supporting vulnerable tenants so far during the pandemic; and
- Housing Officers were having to deal with extremely challenging circumstances and very complex issues and assurance was provided that there were a range of support mechanisms in place to ensure the wellbeing of staff was maintained.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the update on the delivery of housing services during the Covid-19 emergency;
- ii. **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 – 31 December 2020; and
- iii. **AGREED** that further information be provided to Members on:-
  - a. the legislation for Private Landlords in respect of evictions due to rent debt; and
  - b. the length of time spent in temporary accommodation.

The meeting was closed at 1.41pm.