

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held remotely on Thursday 3 February 2021 at 10.30am.

Present:

Miss J Barclay
Mr R Bremner
Miss J Campbell
Mr M Finlayson
Mr L Fraser
Mr A Graham
Mr A Jarvie

Mrs B McAllister
Mr D Mackay
Mrs A MacLean
Mr C MacLeod
Mrs F Robertson
Ms J Tilt

Non-Members also present:

Mr A Christie
Mrs M Cockburn
Mrs M Davidson

Ms S Fanet
Mr J Finlayson
Mr K Gowans

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
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 L Fraser in the Chair

BUSINESS

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr B Allan, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr C Fraser, Ms E Roddick and Mr P Saggars.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

The Committee **NOTED** the following Transparency Statement:-

Item 6: Mr L Fraser (Transparency Statement)

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

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

- reference was made to the positive uptake of the Council's new scheme to buy homes directly from owners to increase its housing stock. It was stressed that the offer to purchase was not automatically accepted, the Council would only consider purchasing properties which met certain criteria and for which there was a local demand; and
- appreciation was expressed for the new housing developments in Nairn (31 houses) and Maryburgh (16 houses). In particular, reference was made to the high build standard and that the developments also comprised of accessible housing for wheelchair liveable use. The Council and the developer was commended for their work and the positive impact of the new housing on the local community was emphasised.

4. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 31 December 2021
Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 31 an Dubhlachd

There had been circulated Report No HP/02/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the plans to support tenant participation by returning to face to face meetings and associated timeline while ensuring this was done safely. In response, it was confirmed that Members would be provided with a briefing paper on the review across a range of Housing Services as Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed;
- an update was provided on taking cases to court and the advice and funding received from the Scottish Government to support tenants in arrears as a result of the pandemic. Officers would continue to engage with tenants in terms of court action being a last resort;
- confirmation was sought and provided that a briefing paper would be provided to Members on the breakdown of the homelessness budgets by Area;
- the approach being taken to garages across the Areas with a view to sharing good practice and improving the corporate approach. It was confirmed that a briefing paper would be provided to Members on this matter;
- an assurance was provided that progress was being made in clearing the backlog in day to day repairs and there were no significant issues with staffing and contractor availability. There were supply side issues which was affecting the timescales for some repairs and this was being kept under review;
- problems had been experienced by the public and Members in accessing the Council's Service Centre and having repairs and other concerns logged and where the corporate responsibility for this rested. It was confirmed this issue would be raised with Communities and Place and an update provided to the next meeting. In the meantime, Members should make officers aware of any specific challenges or ongoing concerns;
- the process for residents to identify their priorities for their estates, for example through rate your estate walkabouts, and for those to be fed into and prioritised within the Area environmental spend budgets;
- the need for more detailed information to be provided on the projected overspends shown on the HRA and Non-HRA homelessness budgets to

allow Members to better understand the complexities around the issues and to explain to tenants the relationship with improvements undertaken through the capital programme;

- concern at the projected overspend on the maintenance of homeless accommodation and underspend on supervision and management. Members were receiving an increasing number of complaints in relation to temporary accommodation from neighbouring residents. It was confirmed that a briefing paper would be provided to Members on the supervision and management of temporary accommodation; and
- clarification was provided that there was a relatively small minority of tenants across the housing stock who would wilfully damage their property both in temporary and secure tenancy accommodation. This was a challenge for housing management and it was accepted that a more effective approach other than recharging tenants could be taken and further consideration would be given to this matter.

The Committee:-

- i **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2021/22 for the period to 31 December 2021; and
- ii **AGREED** that briefing papers be provided to Members on:- (a) the review across a range of Housing Services as Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed; (b) a breakdown of the homelessness budgets by Area; (c) the supervision and management of temporary accommodation; and (d) the approach being taken to garages across the Areas.

5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report to 31 December 2021
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 31 an Dubhlachd

There had been circulated Report No HP/03/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- a more detailed narrative be provided on the slippage on the heating/energy efficiency budget, reference being made to the level of representations Members received in relation to heating efficiency within tenanted properties. It was confirmed that Members would be provided with a briefing paper containing more detailed information on energy efficiency projects;
- significant concerns at the impact on tenant fuel bills due to cost of some of the new heating systems and rising energy costs including the increase in the energy price cap. It was anticipated there would be a significant increase in fuel poverty in the Highlands going forward and an assurance was given that while a national response would be required, the Council was committed to providing support to households to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty on tenants as a priority;
- confirmation that the analysis by Changeworks comparing both the performance levels of heating systems and the impact on tenant fuel bills would be available in the near future and would be shared with the Committee and the Climate Change Working Party;

- an assurance that there was 90% compliance with the new fire safety legislation in Council houses across Highland. The majority of the non-compliant houses was due to the fact the Service had not been able to access those properties and work was ongoing as a priority in this regard. It was confirmed this information would be shared in the public domain and it was intended to give a further update at the next meeting in June 2022; and
- in addition to the Council's Service Centre, there had been problems with accessing the Council's out of hours emergency numbers, hosted by another local authority, during the recent storms. The Executive Chief Officer undertook to raise the issues regarding both the Service Centre and emergency numbers with the Executive Leadership Team.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2021/22 for the period to 31 December 2021;
- AGREED** that a briefing paper be provided to Members providing more detailed information on energy efficiency projects; and
- NOTED** that delays experienced in accessing the Council's Service Centre and emergency numbers would be raised with the Executive Leadership Team.

6. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Report to 31 December 2021
Aithisg Sgrùdaid Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 31 an Dubhlachd

Transparency Statement: Councillor L Fraser made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item on the agenda in that he had a connection to this item by reason of he provided minor maintenance work in the Nairn area. However, having applied the objective test he did not consider that he had an interest to declare. This is because the work only related to the Nairn area and is a minor allocation of the overall Nairn Area budget. He had requested that this Statement be recorded in the Minutes.

There had been circulated Report No HP/04/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:

- Concerns were expressed regarding the roof at Dalneigh Primary School following a recent incident of vandalism and ongoing damage from Seagulls/Oyster Catchers. In view of this, further information was sought and provided on the timeline for the permanent roof repairs to enable pupil lessons to return to the classrooms;
- The response to address the damage to the Wick Campus was commended and appreciation was expressed to all involved in the remedy of this. The outcome of the investigations of how this had occurred in a new build were welcome to ensure that catastrophic failures in future projects were avoided; and
- Further information was sought and provided on how the integrity of buildings were being assessed particularly in regard to heating systems (both old and new) and the increasing costs.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. net spend at the end of Quarter 3 totalled £50.237m;
- ii. based on the best available information to date, a service income gap of £1.129m to the end of 2021/22 was presently forecast;
- iii. almost every area of service relied on income to pay for services, and this continued to be disrupted this year because of ongoing Covid impacts;
- 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 might be made in future quarterly reporting to reflect the updated apportionment of costs and savings across the new Service structure.

7. Property Capital Monitoring Statement and Progress Update Aithris Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cuid-seilbhe agus Cunntas às Ùr air Adhartas

There had been circulated Report No HP/05/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:

- appreciation was expressed for the presentation and the Leader of the Opposition (SNP) confirmed that the invitation to meet up with officers would be taken forward in due course;
- an update was sought and provided on Asset Rationalisation. It was indicated that Area Committees provided a forum for open and transparent discussion/decision-making of the disposal of buildings and would enable this workstream to be more readily progressed;
- concern was expressed at the increasing and highly inequitable fuel costs. There was a need to raise awareness of this inequality. Highland was one of the biggest contributors of renewable energy and there was a need to consider how this could be utilised to address fuel poverty and help local communities;
- officers were commended for the Learning Places Scotland national awards received and appreciation expressed for the modern work practices that had been adopted in regard to Merkinch Primary School. Reference was also made to the positive impact the new school building was having on education outcomes and assurance was sought, and provided, that the external lighting at the entrance to the Family Centre would be redirected;
- further information was sought and provided on progress of the Corporate Landlord Model and the timeline for the introduction of building passports. Assurance was provided that work was being undertaken to use spaces efficiently and all options were being considered to work collaboratively with other partners from the public, private and third sector. Confirmation was provided that an update on Dingwall Primary School Nursery Annex would be provided to Councillor A MacLean.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. financial position for the 2021/22 financial year as of 31 December 2021, and the estimated year-end forecast; and
- ii. progress made with the Education and Strategic Asset Management projects in the Council's Capital Programme.

Prior to closing the meeting, the Chair expressed his appreciation to Members and officers for their work particularly during the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

The meeting was closed at 12.35pm.