

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Thursday 17 November 2022** at 10.30 am.

### Present:

Ms S Atkin	Mr A Jarvie (remotely)
Mr M Baird (substitute)	Mrs I Mackenzie
Mr B Boyd (remotely)	Mr R MacKintosh
Mr R Bremer (remotely)	Mrs A MacLean
Mr I Brown	Mrs B McAllister
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr C Munro
Mr L Fraser (remotely)	Mrs M Paterson
Mr R Gale (substitute)	Mr K Rosie (remotely)

### Non-Members also present:

Mr C Birt	Ms T Collier
Mr A Christie	Mr P Oldham

### Also in Attendance:

Mr A Dick, Tenant Representative  
Ms L Richardson, Tenant Representative

### 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, Service Lead - Policy and Performance, Housing and Property  
Mr R Campbell, Estates Strategy Manager, Housing and Property  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal 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.**

**Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair in the Chair**

## BUSINESS

### 1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Graham, Mrs J McEwan and Mr A Rhind.

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

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

Item 6: Mr L Fraser  
General: Mrs S Atkin

### 3. **Good News** **Naidheachdan Matha**

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

- **Catering Service. Employee of the Year Award:** on the 27 September 2022 Croy Primary School Cook, Anja Fuglestad, won the Employee of the Year Award at this year's Scottish School Food Awards;
- **Design Team. First class honours in BEng Programme Engineering (Design & Manufacture):** Dylan Nairn from the Property team recently graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University. He started on a Modern Apprenticeship with the Highland Council in 2018 and had progressed into an Engineer position in the Design Section within Property Services; and
- **Ness Hydro Project:** at the British Construction Industry Awards on 12 October 2022, the Hydro Ness Project won the Small Project of the year. In addition, The Council was one of 12 organisations across Scotland to be praised for its planet protecting efforts and had been recognised at the 2022 VIBES – Scottish Environment Business Awards. The Hydro Ness team was presented with the Engaging Scotland Award at the recent ceremony.

The Chair commended all staff who had promoted the Highlands with these significant achievements.

### 4. **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 30 September 2022** **Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu 30 Sultain 2022**

There had been circulated Report No HP/14/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an assurance was sought and provided that the position with non-essential repairs would be kept under constant review and reported in the Q3 monitoring report to the Committee in January 2023. The HRA Revenue Estimates for 2023/24 would also be considered by the Committee in January at which Members would be invited to make decisions around the future management of the HRA;
- whether a review of garage sites and vacant garages was to be carried out with a view to disposal if not required as part of the Council's portfolio. It was confirmed that garages was a delegated function to Area Committees and that the position in Sutherland and communication with local Members would be reviewed;
- the Housing & Property Team be commended on their response to the challenges presented by the rising cost of materials and issues with recruitment;
- how expenditure on the HRA would be managed given that it was funded entirely by rental income from tenants and that a balanced budget had to be maintained. It was noted that consultation with tenants would commence in the

near future on the options for rents in the next financial year. A balance was required in terms of the affordability issues for tenants set against the investment requirements of the housing stock;

- the difficult issues around recruitment faced by the Service, noting this was reliant on the labour market within the construction industry and the rates the Council was able to offer compared to the private sector, and therefore the importance of the Council growing its own workforce. The successful apprentice programme within the Building Maintenance Team was highlighted in this regard, details of which would be shared with Members; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that a more detailed report would be brought to the Committee in due course on the Council's strategic approach to improving energy efficiency in its housing stock and in moving towards net zero targets.

The Committee:

- i **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2022/23 for the period to 30 September 2022; and
- ii **AGREED** to spend non-essential housing repairs in order to address the projected overspend within the current year.

**5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report to 30 September 2022**  
**Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 30 Sultain 2022**

There had been circulated Report No HP/15/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an update was sought and provided on the slippage shown on the heating/energy efficiency and external fabric budgets. This was due to problems within the construction industry with works taking longer than previously, and either no or higher than anticipated returns being received that did not constitute best value. It was planned to progress all projects next year, and the position would continue to be monitored with regular reports back to Committee;
- the Council's new build programme and the process for making decisions on the mix of housing provided. It was explained the new build programme was subject to the Strategic Housing Investment Programme, to be presented to the Committee early in 2023. The Housing Development Hub which comprised the Council and a range of partners worked together to consider the best mix of houses on individual sites;
- the organisation 'Age Friendly Communities' sought to promote inter-generational communities where people of all ages were able to live healthy and active later lives and it was hoped the first of such communities in Scotland could be in the Highlands. It was confirmed that further information would be sought on this matter, including the views of tenants;
- it was important there was also a focus on young people who experienced difficulties in accessing housing in the area;
- reference was made to the option to source external contractors from further afield who were willing to travel to and undertake works in Highland at a lower cost than could be done locally;

- there were significant opportunities for heating homes and energy efficiency in the Highlands which should be explored such as hydrogen, and the need to ensure alternatives were financially affordable and sustainable;
- in terms of recruitment, there were real opportunities for the Council through a commitment to work with other agencies to explore and create opportunities to grow talent in the Highlands and make progress with addressing the skills gap.

The Committee **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme Monitoring Report.

**6. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Report to 30 September 2022**

**Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 30 Sultain 2022**

**Transparency Statement: Mr 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.**

There had been circulated Report No HP/16/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the measures that could be considered to reduce the cost of utility consumption across the Council and High Life Highland if behavioural change could not be achieved. It was explained that consideration was ongoing as to how to drive behavioural change to reduce costs and there was need for a thematic discussion on this issue, with Members input, outwith the meeting;
- clarification was sought and provided on the number and roles of the fee earning staff vacancies and the reasons this continued to have a negative impact on the Service achieving its annual income targets;
- the condition of the Council's depots and the impact of current financial climate and demands on the Capital Programme on the ability to improve the working conditions for employees and ensure the best use of workspace. It was noted the Council in shaping the Capital Programme going forward had to consider the balance between investing in its existing assets and building new assets in relation to its depots and other non-housing stock; and
- the Redesign Board was considering workstreams in relation to asset rationalisation of buildings and depots and this included public sector co-location.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. that based on the best available information to date, a service budget gap of £1.546m to the end of 2022/23 was presently forecast. This was an increasing budget gap since the Q1 monitoring report where a budget gap of £1.261m was being projected;

- ii. that the budget gap might change positively or negatively depending on the application of expenditure and recruitment controls, filling fee earning posts in an extremely challenging job market, adjusting services to meet previously agreed budget savings; in-year income recovery, identifying new income and procurement opportunities;
- iii. the progress update provided in relation to budget savings delivery; and
- iv. that further adjustments would be made in future quarterly reporting to reflect the updated apportionment of costs across the new Service structure.

## **7. Property Capital Monitoring Statement and Progress Update Aithris Sgrùdaidh Calpa Seilbhe agus Cunntas às Ùr air Adhartas**

There had been circulated Report No HP/17/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

An update on Thurso High School was provided during which Members were advised that a decision on whether to refurbish or demolish Block A at the School would be taken once the costs had been established. Blocks B and C had been surveyed with no structural defects having been found. Survey work would be carried out on other concrete frame buildings of a similar construction across the Council's estate to give reassurance.

Members were advised that due to ongoing challenges with sub-contractor availability, the new Ness Castle Primary School building would now be handed over to the Council in December 2022. To provide for a smooth transition and taking account of the festive period, it had been decided to open the School to pupils on 27 February 2023. Parents would be advised of the revised opening date and weekly updates would be provided to the stakeholder group on progress.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the other schools of a similar construction and age to Thurso High School and confirmation they were subject to a regular inspection regime. These buildings had a 60 year design life and it had been highlighted by the Service that Thurso High School could be taken forward as part of the future LEIP funding bids. However, there were serious challenges in regard to the capital available to replace these buildings as was the case with the Council's depots;
- officers be thanked for their swift and professional response to the situation at Thurso High School and Members looked forward to further engagement once the surveys had been included and a conclusion reached on the way forward;
- Thurso High School was older than its design lifespan of 60 years and therefore it could be expected that this type of problems might unfold. There was a need for the Council to work in partnership with external stakeholders including the Northern Hub and the private sector and to be innovative in exploring possible solutions. The Chair advised that the points raised would be picked as part of the review of the Capital Plan; and
- an announcement on the outcome of the bidding process was expected before the end of December 2022 for LEIP Phase 3 funding and this might have an impact on the Capital Programme going forward. It was cautioned this was revenue funding for ongoing running costs and the Council would still require to borrow the capital costs of constructing the buildings.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the position for the second quarter of the 2022/23 financial year, and the estimated year-end position;
- ii. **NOTED** the progress made with the projects referred to in the report;
- iii. **AGREED to HOMOLOGATE** the decision taken to retain and convert the modular classroom unit at Bun-Sgoil Shlèite; and
- iv. **NOTED** the current situation at Thurso High and that a further verbal update would be provided at the Committee meeting.

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

There had been circulated Report No HP/18/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, the Service's staff were commended on their hard work in achieving the performance levels set out in the report.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2021 – 30 September 2022.

## **9. Review of Rent Arrears Management Policy Ath-sgrùdadh air Poileasaidh Fiachan Màil**

There had been circulated Report No HP/19/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- due to the cost of living crisis many tenants were already in arrears with the potential for those arrears to escalate and the action that would be taken if tenants were unable to maintain payments to prevent them becoming homeless;
- in regard to the above, reference was made to the importance of early engagement between tenants and officers so that support could be provided. There was also support for tenants available through the Council's Welfare Team in relation to income maximisation, and the Move on Project. Reasonable repayment packages would be accepted from tenants and the Council was one of the best performing local authorities for sustaining tenancies and the aim was to maintain this standard going forward;
- the Council's record in relation to the low number of evictions demonstrated the level of engagement and support provided to tenants in arrears and the staff be commended on their work in this regard;
- an offer be made to all new tenants to have an income maximisation meeting with the Council's Welfare Team, CABx or other money advice agencies to discuss budgeting and financial management. It was confirmed that discussions would be held with the Head of Revenues & Customer Services on the improvements that could be made to the Council's current new tenancy sign up arrangements; and

- clarification was sought and provided that the Tenant Participation and Engagement report below highlighted the need to improve relationships with other partner agencies in terms of referrals. The experience with locally based money advice workshops would be evaluated and consideration given to other outreach work that could be undertaken.

The Committee **NOTED** the ongoing support provided by the Housing Service to tenants struggling to pay their rent during the “cost of living” crisis.

## **10. Tenant Participation and Engagement Update** **Ath-sgrùdadh air Com-pàirteachas is Gníomhan Ceangail Luchd-màil**

There had been circulated Report No HP/20/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- appreciation was expressed to the Tenant Participation Team for their diligent work and Members commended the organic growth of tenant groups;
- the Tenant Participation Team was commended for reaching out and engaging with tenants who had found it difficult to contact the Council. It was highlighted that often tenant groups were very happy with the outcome of Rate Your Estate works as they felt listened to and involved in the process. Each project could positively affect people’s lives and empowered them to make further improvements through collaborative working;
- it was queried if tenant participation meetings would fully return to face-to-face meetings as this was seen as more beneficial for interaction rather than online sessions;
- it was suggested that Members seek out their local tenant participation meetings and make efforts to join them to engage with tenants and become more knowledgeable. It was further suggested that there be more engagement with young people at tenant participation meetings;
- although digital communications were welcome, there was a need to include alternative methods as well;
- it was requested tenant participation outcomes be presented at ward business meetings;
- clarification was sought and provided on how the Council engaged with tenants or residents at properties which appeared to be empty or clearly unmaintained;
- appreciation was expressed for the Council’s early intervention work with tenants as this was seen as vital work;
- the three tenants that were representatives in Tenant Participation groups at a national level were commended; and
- further information was sought on which wards had a tenant participation group and how groups were established. A request was also made for local Members to be notified with any action points.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the ongoing progress in improving tenant participation in Highland.

**11. Homelessness and Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan  
Cunntas às Ùr mu Chion-dachaigh: Plana Eadar-ghluasaid Luath gu Taigh Eile**

There had been circulated Report No HP/**21**/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Council was not building enough new developments containing 3 and 4 bedroom properties to house larger families living in temporary accommodation and further information was sought and provided on how this could be addressed as demand for these types of properties was rising. However, it was highlighted that Appendix 1 to the report indicated that 90% of all homeless applicants required a 1 or 2 bedroom house;
- it was confirmed that the 120 empty properties under review referred to at paragraph 9.2 of the report was a Highland wide figure. Further information was sought on when these properties would be brought back into use;
- it was queried if any lobbying was being undertaken of the Scottish Government's newly established Prevention Review Group regarding the duties being placed on local authorities in respect of homeless prevention and whether these responsibilities could be shared with housing associations;
- it was queried what impact the changes to Local Connection in Homelessness Legislation would have on the Council;
- further information was sought and provided on whether the non-violent disputes, referred to at 4.6 of Appendix 1 to the report, was mostly due to family relationship breakdowns;
- the success of the Move on Project, particularly in regard to reducing arrears, was commended and it was hoped that this approach would be expanded; and
- Housing officers and their teams were praised for their hard work in dealing with homeless cases and the support they provided. Further information and detail regarding the reasons for homelessness was requested in order to help prevent homelessness in the first instance.

Thereafter, the Committee:

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

The meeting was closed at 12.51pm.