

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Thursday 10 August 2023** at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin
Mr B Boyd
Mr R Bremer (Remote)
Mr I Brown
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair
Mr L Fraser
Mr A Graham
Mr S Kennedy (substitute)

Mrs I Mackenzie
Mr R Mackintosh
Ms A MacLean
Mrs B McAllister
Mr C Munro (Remote)
Mr A Rhind
Mr R Stewart (Remote)

Non-Members also present:

Mr J Finlayson (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)

Mr T MacLennan (Remote)

Also in Attendance:

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

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning and Estate Strategy
Mr R MacLeod, Service Lead - Housing Investment/Building Maintenance
Mr J Henderson, Policy Assistant - Empty Homes & PRS Liaison, Housing and Property
Ms H Cameron, Housing Development Officer, Infrastructure and Environment
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager, Performance and Governance
Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer, Performance and Governance
Mrs O Marsh, Committee Officer, 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

Preliminaries

Prior to the commencement of the meeting, the Committee expressed their appreciation to Mr D Goldie for all his excellent work over the years and wished him well in his retirement.

**1. Calling of the Roll and Apologies for Absence
Gairm a' Chlàir agus Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of J McEwan, Mrs M Paterson and Mr A Sinclair.

**2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement
Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd**

There were no Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statements.

**3. Recess Powers
Cumhachdan Fosaidh**

The Committee **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 29 June 2023 had not been exercised in relation to the business of the Housing and Property Committee.

**4. Good News
Naidheachdan Matha**

An additional good news event was highlighted that a new £16m primary school at Ness-Side, Inverness had been completed during the summer holidays. In this regard, it was requested that an opening event be organised to celebrate this important achievement for the Highland Council and local community.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the good news as circulated.

**5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget: Final Outturn
2022/23 and Monitoring Statement to 30 June 2023
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Buidseat Neo-Theachd-a-
steach Taigheadais: Fìor Shuidheachadh Deireannach 2022/23 agus Aithris
Sgrùdaidh gu 30 Ògmhios 2023**

There had been circulated Report No HP/12/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

- concern at the condition of some general amenity areas in housing estates as a consequence of the suspension of non-essential repairs and separately the Council's policy not to use glyphosate weedkiller with no decision on a substitute. The ECO Housing & Property confirmed that he and the appropriate officers would undertake site visits with local Members to any areas of specific concern;
- noting that responsibility for ensuring common areas were maintained to the required standards rested with the ECO Housing & Property. The ECO explained that discussions were being progressed at a senior level with the ECO Communities and Place and other officers on a strategic approach to common grounds maintenance including new housing developments;
- it would have been helpful for Members to be provided with more clarity in the report on the position of the reserves at the end of the financial year 2022/23;

- further clarity was sought and provided on the reasons for the significant increase in the variance on repairs and maintenance between the end of Quarter 3 and the outturn position;
- further details were sought and provided on the reasons for the underspend shown on the 'Supporting People' budget;
- the rent levels set for the current year had sought to protect tenants from the cost of living crisis. It had been acknowledged there would be consequences for reserves and non-essential repairs, and that difficult decisions may have to be made on rent levels for next year;
- the balance the Service sought to achieve in terms of using inhouse services and external contractors taking account of capacity issues, staffing costs and the specific trades, skillsets and specialist support required, This matter was regularly reviewed by officers and considered in the workforce planning reports brought to Committee;
- in regard to the above, discussions would be held with Members as to the scope of the proposed revised trades framework and the allocation of works to external contractors;
- noting that officers would investigate the specific constituency matters raised by Mrs B McAllister and confirming the Council's policy on gas appliances;
- the potential for Members and tenant representatives to have an input into the tenant satisfaction survey prior to circulation. Mrs L Richardson, Tenant's Representative, advised there was a high level of collaboration between the tenant representative bodies and the Housing Team through a number of forums, including on rents and co-designing the tenant survey. A main challenge was getting more tenants to become actively involved in this process; and
- the challenges the Council faced in terms of the ambiguities around the ownership of land and progress being made through the Corporate landlord model on this issue.

The Committee:

- NOTED** the final outturn figures for the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2022/2023;
- APPROVED** the drawdown of £3.965m from the Housing Revenue Account reserves to ensure a balanced budget for 2022/2023; and
- NOTED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2023/2024 for the period to 30 June 2023.

6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring: Outturn Report for 2022/23 and Quarter 1 Monitoring Report to 30 June 2023 PP.14-20
Sgrùdadh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Aithisg Fìor Shuidheachaidh airson 2022/23 agus Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Cairteal 1 gu 30 Ògmhios 2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/13/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- confirmation was sought and provided that Members would be provided with details of the average cost per unit of new Council house builds in Highland;
- appreciation was expressed at the significant investment in new Council houses across the Highlands;
- further information was sought and provided on the significant overspend on the budget in 2022/23 associated with the one-off individual purchase scheme. A financial model was used to ensure these purchases were self-financing and had a positive impact on the overarching five year Programme. There was recognition within the Scottish Government's grant system of the need to undertake works to some properties prior to let and this was also reflected in the price the Council was willing to pay for these properties; and
- Members be provided with a briefing on the HRA Capital Programme including the repairs and management side. The Chair advised that she had been having discussions in relation to the establishment of a working group to consider these issues.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the final outturn figures for the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2022/23; and
- APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2023/2024 for the period to 30 June 2023.

7. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Budget: Final Outturn for 2022/23 and Monitoring Statement to 30 June 2023
Buidseat Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Seilbh & Ghoireasan: Fìor Shuidheachadh Deireannach airson 2022/23 agus Aithris Sgrùdaidh gu 30 Ògmhios 2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/14/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- final position for the 2022/23 financial year;
- position for the first quarter of the 2023/24 financial year, and the estimated year-end position; and
- progress update provided in relation to budget savings delivery.

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

There had been circulated Report No HP/15/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In relation to paragraph 5.6 of the report, Members were provided with further information on the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete issues at Charleston Academy and Nairn Academy. Further updates for parents and carers on the works were being drafted and both Schools would open on schedule for the new term with works continuing thereafter.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- more detailed information be made available to Ward 12 and 13 Members and a briefing offered to the parent council and staff in relation to the issues at Charleston Academy. The issues with the concrete added to the urgency and case for investment in what was a substantial school estate that incorporated Kinmylies Primary School;
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the building condition surveys being undertaken. It was confirmed that summary versions could be provided for local Members in the Black Isle and Cromarty Firth wards;
- concern that Duthac House, Tain was falling into a state of disrepair in its entirety. It was confirmed that officers would attend a Ward Business Meeting to discuss with local Members the plans for the building going forward;
- in relation to St Clement's School, Dingwall, an update date was provided on progress with the land purchase and design work. The Interim Chief Executive had confirmed there were to be no further stakeholder meetings for these types of major projects until the position was clearer with the LEIP funding and pending the review of the Council's Capital Programme;
- confirmation was sought and provided that an update would be provided to Mrs A Maclean on boiler replacements in her ward;
- the Service be congratulated on securing funding for the Gypsy/Traveller site at Longman Park, Inverness and reference to the significant improvements this would deliver; and
- an update was sought and provided on the potential relocation of staff from the Merkinch Family Centre, and that officers would report back to local Members in the near future on the plans for the building.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. final position for the 2022/23 financial year;
- ii. position at the end of the first quarter of the 2023/24 financial year, and the estimated year-end position;
- iii. progress made with the projects referred to in this report, and the actions taken and revised programme dates for the new Nairn Academy building; and
- iv. actions taken following the structural surveys and assessments carried out during the summer holiday period at Charleston Academy and Nairn Academy, and that a verbal update will be provided at the next meeting of this Committee.

9. Housing Performance Report Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais

There had been circulated Report No HP/16/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- tenants continued to face a cost of living crisis and the position with rent arrears would have been worse if a higher rent increase for the current year had been agreed;
- delivering a greater service involved increased cost and the current trends in national inflation and the position with the reserves would influence the decision on rent levels for 2024/25. The level of discussion that would be

required with Members and tenants could not be underestimated given the potential impacts of that decision;

- an explanation was sought and provided that the Service aimed to achieve a balance in the recovery of rent arrears taking into account the complexities of the benefits system. The potential to review the system for generating letters for technical rent arrears would be referred to the Service's Policy Team;
- debt recovery activities aimed to be reasonable and proportionate to the amount outstanding, acknowledging the costs involved and reflecting the personal circumstances of tenants. The Service worked closely with the NHS and tenants who were in hospital/long term care on a case by case basis and numbers could be provided to Members if required;
- the Service's performance on the time to undertake repairs compared well to other local authorities and staff be commended on this achievement;
- the potential for a report to be brought forward to Members on the impact of the cost of living crisis on the number of homeless presentations. It was confirmed this matter would be raised with the Service Lead;
- in relation to the number of homeless presentations from outwith Highland, it was confirmed this information was not currently available. The position was being monitored and it was hoped details could be provided to Members in future; and
- significant additional demand was being experienced for housing of all tenures and particularly in regard to homeless presentations. The Chair and ECO Housing & Property were to meet with the Scottish Minister for Housing to discuss this from a national strategic perspective and to get a steer on addressing the complexities around these challenges.

Mrs L Richardson, Tenant Representative, reported on tenant liaison nationally with the Scottish Housing Regulator on the impact of the cost of living crisis on tenants. Fuel and food costs had been identified in tenant surveys as the two main significant reasons for rent arrears. The point was made to the Regulator that the focus should be on lowering these and other household bills rather than rent levels which was the least of tenants monthly costings .

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance during the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023.

10. Service Performance Monitoring Report - Financial Year 2022/2023 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanaidh na Seirbheis – Bliadhna Ionmhais 2022/2023

There had been circulated Report No HP/17/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- it was queried what type of freedom of information topics were requested from the Housing Service;
- the percentage of housing dwellings that were energy efficient was up to 77.3%. It was queried how many tenants actually engaged their heating despite the property being classed as energy efficient. It was felt that some

tenants might not be able to afford to run their heating and, in this regard, it was queried if this question formed part of the tenant questionnaire;

- Members would welcome discussions at Area Committee level in terms of the particular housing stock in their area, the type of strategic approach which would best fit their area and feedback into the overall strategic approach, including rent increases and Housing investment. In this regard it was suggested that Areas with comparable housing stock levels meet together with Council Officers as a more efficient use of time and resource;
- further information was requested to review the Housing & Property Service sickness statistics, in terms of a rolling history overview, and compare this against previous quarters to provide better context of the measurement process;
- Members felt that Housing & Property's complaints resolution performance reflected well on the Council's overall performance, especially as the number of complaints accounts concerning Housing and Property accounted for around half of all complaints received by the Council; and
- it was confirmed that the missing data in section 6 Service Plan Progress of the report would be populated in future reports.

The Committee **NOTED** the Service's performance information.

11. Housing and Property Service Plan 2023-2024 Plana Seirbheis Taigheadais is Seilbhe 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No HP/18/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Members felt that the delivery of Service Plans should be discussed at Area Committees to take into consideration complexities and considerations within each local area;
- the Dingwall office rationalisation project had been ongoing for some time and Members requested that the momentum and urgency should continue. In this regard it was confirmed that several properties were still not ready for sale or rent. An update was requested from Officers when the properties would be ready for market, for lease or for community asset transfer;
- disappointment was expressed that local businesses and shops in Dingwall Highstreet had to undertake cleaning and weeding of the street as Council services no longer undertook these works. In this regard further disappointment was expressed that some Council owned buildings in the High Street appeared unkempt with unclean windows and were not viewed as a good neighbour to the surrounding businesses
- regarding independent living adaptations, whilst the Council's performance was 38.6 days which was below the target of 50 days, concern was raised that there did not appear to be continuous improvement to stretch performance by the Council. In this regard, it was also felt that the provision of Homeless accommodation, whilst below the Scottish average should be improved upon even from a cost control perspective;
- concern was raised regarding the new Broadford primary school timescale as the planning application had been pushed back until 2024, especially as a

condition of the Leap 2 funding was that the building be completed by December 2024 and there didn't appear to be room for further slippage. In this regard, clarification was sought on how confident the Council was in meeting the deadline; and

- it was questioned if biomass heating systems carried the risk of not being true net zero, and the Councils target could therefore be at risk.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Service Plan for 2023/24.

The meeting ended at 2.20pm