

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Thursday 27 April 2023** at 10.30 am.

### **Present:**

Ms S Atkin	Mr R Mackintosh
Mr M Baird (substitute)	Ms A MacLean
Mr R Bremer	Mr C Munro
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mrs M Paterson (Remote)
Mr L Fraser	Mr A Rhind
Mr A Graham	Mr K Rosie (Remote)
Mrs I Mackenzie	Mr R Stewart

### **Non-Members also present:**

Mr R Gale (Remote)	Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)	Mrs T Robertson (Remote)
Mr D Macpherson (Remote)	Ms T Collier (Remote)

### **Also in Attendance:**

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 A Maguire, Head of Development & Regeneration, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy  
Mr B Cameron, Service Lead - Policy and Performance, Housing and Property  
Mr R Campbell, Estates Strategy Manager, Housing and Property  
Mrs L Dunn, 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**

## **BUSINESS**

### **1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mrs B McAllister, Ms J McEwan, and Mr A Sinclair.

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

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

Item 5: Mr R Stewart

Item 7: Mr C Munro

Ms S Atkin made a general Transparency Statement as her husband was a private landlord.

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

Members expressed disappointment that staff had been relocated from the Town House building. It was felt that moving approximately 100 staff members away from the city centre should not be classed as a good news item. In this regard, it was clarified that the expressed disappointment was the decision itself, not the hard work carried out by staff to implement the move.

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

**4. Communities Housing Trust**  
**Urras Taigheadais Coimhearsnachd**

The Communities Housing Trust was a registered charity set up to help rural communities secure long term solutions to their local housing needs. They represented a wide range of interests including communities, local government, landowners, crofters and housing associations, and were funded by the Scottish Government and various charitable trusts and foundations.

The Committee **AGREED** that Mr C Munro replace Mrs M Paterson as the Highland Council representative on the Communities Housing Trust.

**5. Workforce Planning**  
**Planadh Feachd-obrach**

**Transparency Statement: Mr R Stewart made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as a close relative was employed by the Council. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare on the basis his relative was not employed by the Housing and Property Service.**

There had been circulated Report No HP/06/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- confirmation was sought and provided that Members would be provided with a breakdown of the functions of all staff within the Service;
- the Service's proposals to meet the challenges around an ageing staff and loss of expertise. It was explained there was an opportunity to review the approach to vacancy management and functions to be delivered in future, bearing in mind the Service had to deliver significant staff savings;

- further clarity was sought and provided on the approved recruitment process for unfilled critical vacancies designed to reduce delays in such posts being filled;
- the importance of continuing to deliver services to the relevant service standards irrespective of the different working practices of staff. Specific Member concerns would be investigated by officers;
- information was sought and provided on the Council's approach to identifying and nurturing talent within the organisation. This was also a key objective of workforce planning;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the relatively high turnover of staff in the Service and the work ongoing in relation to this issue, bearing in mind there was an element of natural turnover;
- the modern and graduate apprenticeships be welcomed as good news and information was provided on the engagement with schools and UHI to help with succession planning, growing the workforce in Highland and developing the right skills to fill vacancies;
- clarity be provided in future workforce planning reports as to where the skills gap existed within the Service;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the support provided to the Service's staff who were due to retire and the Council's guidance in relation to staff experiencing the menopause, copies of which would be circulated to Members. An update was also provided on the support being provided to help people from Ukraine living in the Highlands into employment with the Council;
- the timetable for reporting the results of the most recent staff survey to the relevant Committee would be confirmed to Members;
- the opportunities to engage positively with younger people to promote the benefits of a career in the Service and within their local area. It was confirmed this would be considered as part of the wider recruitment process;
- the potential for the Redesign Board to review its workforce planning project and consider areas of further support;
- it was suggested there was a contradiction around vacancy management, turnover and staff savings targets against the challenges around an ageing staff, skills gaps and recruitment difficulties;
- it was suggested there was a lack of clarity about around some of the wording in the report and querying the statement that the new peripatetic facilities management operational model would have no carbon implications; and
- noting that progress in the current financial year on expenditure on essential repairs would be reported separately to the Committee.

The Committee **NOTED** the Housing and Property Service Workforce Plan for 2022 – 2025.

## **6. Review of the Highland Housing Register Allocations Policy Ath-sgrùdadh Poileasaidh Clàr Taigheadais na Gàidhealtachd**

There had been circulated Report No HP/07/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- whether a different approach was required in the Policy for local people in remote and rural areas in Highland to help sustain the population and communities. It was explained there was a need to balance the housing needs of locals and other groups of applicants such as key workers. There would be an opportunity to consider this matter in more detail in the annual review of the Policy at the Committee in August 2023;
- the work of housing staff in dealing with the tenants and prospective tenants be acknowledged;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the agencies, partners and stakeholders engaged in the survey of service users. This included engagement with current tenants, tenant groups, and those who currently had an HHR application in the system;
- consideration be given to introducing homelessness into the tenant participation process, noting that the potential to have a homeless service users group was being progressed;
- confirmation that Ms A Maclean would be provided with the Equalities Impact Assessment documentation that had informed the policy review;
- an explanation was sought and provided in relation to the significant issues around key workers including how they were defined. National guidance could impact on the Local Housing Strategy going forward. Information was also provided on the local lettings initiatives undertaken in partnership around key workers;
- anti-social behaviour and the partnership work undertaken when moving the perpetrators to another property to mitigate this behaviour and the need to reinforce the message that the Council required support from other agencies in dealing with this issue;
- concern for those families who due to issues of supply and demand had been on the waiting list for a larger house for a long time. It was hoped the revised allocations policy would prioritise those applicants better in relation to applications and there were incentives to encourage HHR tenants to downsize;
- support for the proposed change to the Caithness Choice-based Letting scheme which sought to reduce the rate of refused offers and the associated staff workload;
- the revised allocations policy achieved the right balance in seeking to address the challenges and it was hoped would deliver positive outcomes for applicants and tenants and officers be commended on the work involved;
- support for the aim of the policy to ensure those in the least secure and suitable accommodation had priority;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the allocations policy in respect of those living with family and friends, extreme overcrowding where there was proven links with damp and mould, substandard accommodation and on the suitability of HMO accommodation; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that a briefing would be provided to the Ward Members in Nairn on the issues raised on the allocation of properties in respect of homeless persons.

The Committee **APPROVED** the updates to the HHR Allocations Policy as contained in the revised policy at Appendix 1 to the report subject to consideration of the proposed change to the Caithness Choice-based Letting scheme by the Caithness Area Committee.

**7. Local Housing Strategy 2023 - 2028**  
**Ro-innleachd Taigheadais Ionadail 2023 – 2028**

**Transparency Statement: Mr C Munro made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item as his family operated a Short Term Let business and he was also was an office-bearer in a local community trust which was co-operating with the local housing association with the intention of building affordable housing.**

There had been circulated Report No HP/08/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- the need for the Council, partners and private sector to work together to increase the supply of affordable housing in the Highlands given the excess of demand and to meet housing need rather than market demand, particularly for younger people;
- the challenges around influencing the private sector to deliver more flexible models of housing to better meet housing need. It was explained the Strategy fed into the local development plans in relation to future development. The Strategy also sought to ensure a healthy private rented sector that met housing needs;
- the continuing challenges with construction costs. It was reported that currently there was no speculative private sector development on the west coast partly for this reason;
- in regard to the above, reference was made to a pilot project in Broadford being undertaken with a private developer, supported by the Scottish Government, to build houses for the local market, and it was planned to extend this model to Fort William;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the impact of Opportunity Cromarty Firth had been factored into the Strategy and the assessment of housing supply targets;
- the significant additional investment that would be required in relation to energy efficiency and bringing the stock up to the required standards. A report on this matter would be brought to the Committee later in the year;
- an update was sought and provided on the effectiveness of the empty homes initiative which compared favourably with national figures and that there would be a continuing focus on this going forward;
- an assurance was sought and provided that Members would have the opportunity to review the Strategy through the annual monitoring report to be brought to the Committee;
- the potential for the Age Friendly Communities model to be progressed in Highland given the ageing population and the importance of people leading healthy and active later lives. It was confirmed that meeting the housing needs of an aging population formed a central part of the Strategy and the strategy action plan contained a number of outcomes in relation to improving health and wellbeing. The Strategy was also aligned closely with the Health and Social Care Partnership's Strategic Plan;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the membership of the Local Housing Strategy Delivery Group would be circulated to Members; and

- it was critical that 'LHS Outcome 1' set out the report was considered as a high priority, given that the lack of housing was a real barrier to growth in rural areas of Highland and a factor in depopulation.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028 as attached at Appendix 1 to the report.

## 8. **Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2023 - 2028** **Plana Tasgaidh Taigheadais Ro-innleachdail 2023–2027**

There had been circulated Report No HP/09/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- concern at the range of issues constraining the affordable housing development programme as outlined in the report such as schools capacity in Inverness and the need to have further dialogue with the Scottish Government;
- In relation to the above, it was confirmed that the Council's target for the provision of affordable homes had not been reduced. The focus was on building homes in Inverness in areas where there was school capacity;
- as per the Corporate Plan, the target for the number of houses built or purchased per year during the period 2022 to 2027 was dependent on the review of the Capital Programme in July 2023;
- the need for the Council to have more influence over the planning process in terms of the wider services and infrastructure required as a result of housing developments;
- further clarity was sought and provided on complexities of dealing with long term empty homes in communities. Compulsory Purchase Orders would be used where necessary and discussions were being held with the Scottish Government on the potential to streamline the process;
- in regard to the above, the Council's initiative to purchase properties had been successful, and it was intended to run another promotional campaign in the near future;
- information was sought and provided on the funding secured in respect of vacant contaminated land to make it viable for housing, and that bids would continue to be made to the appropriate funding rounds for this purpose;
- noting that the Council was proactive about land acquisition and explored all opportunities and information from local Members on potential sites would be welcomed;
- the conversion costs in terms of purchasing churches was prohibitive, however where church land was available this would be explored;
- the opportunities to deliver modular housing given construction costs and to benefit from the economies of scale this could bring. There was a commitment to this in the Council Programme and it was confirmed that discussions were ongoing on a pilot project using one of the off-site manufacturers and a potential site had been identified;
- the need to explore the opportunities for strategic investment in housing in town centres in Wick and Thurso and other areas, reference being made to the importance of such regeneration projects being progressed to the stage they were funding ready;

- a proposal that the first recommendation in the report be amended so that Members were being asked to approve the Strategic Housing Investment Plan attached as Appendix 1, for submission to the Scottish Government;
  - confirmation was sought and provided that a report on the Landbank Fund and the Evergreen Infrastructure Fund would be brought to a future Committee; and
  - frustration that land for housing could not be identified particularly in the remoter areas given that geography of the Highlands and its relatively sparse population.
- i. **APPROVED** the Strategic Housing Investment Plan attached as Appendix 1 to the report, for submission to the Scottish Government; and
  - ii. **AGREED** the indicative planned investment programme to 2028 contained in Appendix 2 to the report, subject to further discussion by Area Committees.

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

There had been circulated Report No HP/**10**/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- it was queried if officers felt confident that there were sufficient resources to maintain or even improve on current levels of good performance, or if it was felt that levels of resources were deemed insufficient; and
- regarding paragraph 7.5 of the report on rent arrears, Members requested further information on how many tenants made up the remaining amount of arrears aside from the 353 with arrears over £2,250.

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

## 10. **Performance Monitoring Q4 to 31 March 2023** **Sgrùdadh Coileanaidh C4 gu 31 Màrt 2023**

There had been circulated Report No HP/**11**/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- it was felt that UFSM (universal free school meals) uptake of 67% was quite low. In this regard further information was sought, and an update would be provided;
- regarding early intervention of rent arrears, it was confirmed that officers were working hard to tackle this as early as possible; and
- it was queried if there was any correlation between rent arrears and properties with a low energy efficiency rating. In this regard it was confirmed that an analysis would be undertaken.

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

The meeting was closed at 1:35pm.