

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 1 May 2024** at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Mr D Macpherson
Mr B Boyd	Mrs B McAllister
Mr R Bremner (Remote)	Ms J McEwan
Mr I Brown	Mr C Munro
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr M Paterson
Mr L Fraser	Ms M Ross (substitute)
Mr A Graham	Ms M Smith
Mr R Mackintosh	Mr R Stewart (Remote)
Ms A MacLean	

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird (Remote)
Mr R Gale (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mrs L Sagers (Remote)

Tenant Representatives 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 B Cameron, Interim Head of Housing & Building Maintenance
Mr F MacDonald, Head of Property and Facilities Management
Ms H Cameron, Housing Development Manager
Ms H Jones, HR Business Partner
Mr R Macdonald, Energy Manager
Mrs L Dunn, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer

**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

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

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mrs I Mackenzie.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

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

Thereafter, the Chair advised that Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property, was leaving the Council to take up a new post with East Renfrewshire Council. Members thanked Mr Rodgers for his significant contribution and the support, guidance and expertise provided during his time with the Council and wished him well in his future career.

4. Housing Performance Report to 31 March 2024 Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais gu 31 Am Màrt 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/09/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members comments included the following:

- the impact of lifting the moratorium on evictions on the statistics going forward in relation to homelessness;
- the approach taken to offer temporary accommodation to vulnerable young persons who were sleeping rough or presented as homeless;
- the multi-agency protocols and support in place to help prevent homelessness involving children and young people in respect of relationship breakdowns;
- further details be provided on the 'other reasons' for homelessness as referred to in Appendix 2 of the report;
- the impact across the Service associated with repairs and maintenance being undertaken in house;
- repairs and maintenance should be undertaken in house where possible while recognising the ongoing recruitment challenges associated with increasing in house provision;
- issues around staff not being able to gain access to properties to carry out repairs or safety checks and that officers have further discussions with Members and tenant representatives on this issue;
- the impacts of Universal Credit and other welfare benefit changes on the level of rent arrears;
- further context was sought and provided on the current level of rent arrears and it was explained this included technical arrears, the figure was approximately half of the Scottish average and the Council was in the top six of best performing local authorities in Scotland;
- in response to a query, it was explained the Service worked closely with the Welfare Team, partner agencies and third sector with a focus on early intervention and wrap around support for tenants. It was confirmed that Members would be circulated with the Rent Account Management Policy;
- concern at the safety of pathways in the Kinmylies Estate, Inverness, no alternative to glyphosate having been identified for weed control;
- an update on the Amenities Project including a more holistic approach to weed control had been provided to the Redesign Board and Members input on this issue was encouraged;

- responsibility for maintenance of common areas and stair wells in mixed tenure blocks of properties and the opportunity for the Council to engage with the Scottish Law Commission's consultation on the law of the tenement. The Chair requested that a Member workshop on this issue be scheduled going forward;
- Members be provided with contact points for housing associations to assist in dealing with enquiries from constituents;
- a greater focus be placed on windows and doors in Council estates and the opportunity for continued engagement on the Capital Programme through local committees and ward business meetings;
- specific issues raised by Mrs J McEwan in relation to a non-essential repair and by Ms M Smith in respect of a heating installation by an external contractor and confirmation these cases would be investigated;
- the increased repairs budget in 2024/25 should make a notable difference to delivering lower priority repairs going forward;
- the fact many agencies and private companies no longer built houses across the Highland had placed significant additional pressure on local authorities;
- confirmation was sought and provided that as at 31 March 2024 there were 8,618 applicants, on the Highland Housing Register. A report on housing allocations was to be brought to the Committee in August 2024;
- young people were not applying for housing due to the large number on the waiting list and this was compounded by difficulties experienced in securing affordable housing in the private sector in Highland; and
- in response to a query, information was provided on the main reasons for private landlords ending tenancies.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the Housing Performance Report as circulated; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a Member workshop on the maintenance of communal areas be scheduled going forward.

5. Service Performance Monitoring Report - Quarter 3 2023/24 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Seirbheis - Cairteal 3 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No HP/10/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the increase in staff sickness absence in Quarter 3, how this was being monitored and the support being provided to staff and confirmation officers would report back to Members on the actions being taken;
- in response to a query, information was provided on the risk to school meals provision from cost and staffing highlighted in the report;
- in response to a query, an explanation was provided on the criteria used to measure the suitability and condition of the Council's assets;
- the challenges for the budget going forward associated with climate change and increased investment required in energy efficiency. A report on the Capital Programme to a future Committee would provide more detail, particularly in relation to net zero standards;

- the impact of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child on Council budgets going forward;
- how the Council's asset rationalisation fitted with the place based planning being undertaken in many communities in Highland and reference to the significant opportunities presented by the Highland Investment Plan to be considered at full Council;
- the progress being made and challenges in delivering the Corporate Landlord model, noting that it was understood reports on a single property service would be brought to the full Council;
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided on the number of serving and ex-armed forces personnel allocated housing;
- it would be helpful for Members and the public if abbreviations were not used in future reports;
- the mitigating actions being progressed in relation to the risk highlighted in relation to property staff vacancies and effect on income generation.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Service's performance information.

6. Service Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report Aithisg Adhartais Bhliadhna air Plana Obrach an t-Seirbheis

There had been circulated Report No HP/11/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- information be provided on the Service's annual agency spend as a percentage of salary costs, noting this was low in comparison to the rest of the Council;
- the need to ensure multi social media platforms including TikTok were used to attract school leavers and graduates into the Council and confirmation this would be raised with Corporate Communications;
- the importance of working with universities, colleges and schools in relation to careers and key vacancies in the Council and also to promote loyalty and career paths to young people as a measure to retain staff;
- cross geographical recruitment through a hybrid and creative approach particularly in rural areas be promoted while continuing to ensure young people were mentored;
- the potential to improve the uptake of exit interviews given the valuable information generated and confirmation that a new exit process operated by HR had been introduced and it was recognised more engagement was required;
- some employees left the Council as the actual job was not the post they thought they had applied for and the potential for this to be raised as part of the Employee Review and Development process;
- the importance of improving working conditions for staff across the Council as a measure to boost recruitment;
- it would be helpful for Members to be provided with a gender breakdown of roles within the Service;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed that as part of workforce planning there was close working with ICT colleagues to promote smarter working and attract younger generations into the organisation.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the four-year action plan and the progress report.

7. Housing Strategy Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Ro-innleachd Taigheadais

There had been circulated Report No HP/12/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the review process for the Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028 and noting that an annual update would be brought to the Committee;
- in response to a query, it was explained a whole system approach involving partners and the private sector was required to meet the significant demand for housing associated with the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport;
- the collaborative working undertaken with the Police and other partners in relation to anti-social behaviour across Council estates and the complex challenges involved. Members were encouraged to contact the local housing team, amenities and environmental health in relation to issues within their wards and also local tenant participation groups;
- the significant benefits being delivered to tenants through the Wick District Heating project and the ongoing partnership work with contractors to create more apprenticeships in the area;
- the potential for companies locating in Caithness to take over and invest in the significant number of void properties in the area;
- the potential to build modular style units to accommodate Ukrainian displaced families that wished to remain in Highland and that efforts were ongoing to support these households in moving to areas and tenures of their choice and housing need;
- in response to a query, an update was provided on progress with the redevelopment of Meiklefield, Dingwall which had been highlighted to the Scottish Government as a priority;
- concern at the lack of progress in relation to empty homes on High Street, Muir of Ord which was considered a priority;
- in relation to place based planning, consideration be given to raising awareness of the potential for people to downsize to free up larger properties in communities; and
- further clarity was required from the Scottish Government on its policy on the installation of wood burning stoves in new builds. It was understood there would be a dispensation for rural areas and biomass continued to be an option.

Thereafter, the Committee heard from Mrs L Richardson, Tenant Representative on the importance of tenant engagement and participation and the wide range of work being undertaken by tenant organisations at a regional and national level, including with the Scottish Housing Regular, Scottish Government and key stakeholder groups. She stressed the need for there to be more partnership working in Highland, and in terms of recruitment, the focus should be on promoting housing to young people as a vocation as it was part of a much wider picture.

The Chair thanked Mrs Richardson for her contribution and advised she would feedback her comments to the Council's Senior Leadership Group.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. progress made in 2023/24 in achieving agreed priorities in the Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028;
- ii. significant achievements in 2023/24 to increase housing supply, to deliver essential housing services and to support Highland's tenants and service users;
- iii. aspects of positive performance and the successful engagement with the Scottish Housing Regulator in 2023/24; and
- iv. proposed changes to national housing policy and that further updates would be provided to Members and Committee ahead of their implementation.

8. Heating Policy for Non-Domestic Estate Poileasaidh Teasachaidh airson Oighreachd Neo-Dhachaigheil

There had been circulated Report No HP/13/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In response to a query, an explanation was provided on the process for requesting a variation in temperature through the submission of a Change Control Form. A reasonable response time was not yet defined but would be confirmed in due course.

The Committee **APPROVED** the adoption and application of the proposed Heating Policy for the non-domestic property estate.

In conclusion, Members were advised this was Mrs B McAllister's last meeting of the Committee and they expressed their appreciation for her long service to the Council and dedication and support for the residents and Council tenants in the Inverness Central ward over the period. Members extended their best wishes to Mrs McAllister for the future.

The meeting was closed at 1.35pm.