

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 14 August 2024** at 10.30 am.

Present:

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

Non-Members also present:

Mr D Fraser (Remote)
Mr R Gale (Remote)
Mr P Logue
Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr P Oldham (Remote)

Tenant Representatives in Attendance:

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

Officials in Attendance:

Mr M Macleod, Assistant Chief Executive - Place
Mr B Cameron, Interim Head of Housing & Building Maintenance
Mr F MacDonald, Head of Property and Facilities Management
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning & Estate Strategy
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 Ms M Smith.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

3. Recess Powers Cumhachdan Fosaidh

The Committee to **NOTED** that the recess powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 27 June 2024 had not been exercised in relation to the business of the Housing & Property Committee.

4. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Chair presented Josh McCook, from the Caol Residents Group with a special recognition certificate for all his valuable input into the local community and congratulated him on his award.

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

5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget: Final Outturn 2023/24 Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Neo-thaigheadais gu

There had been circulated Report No HP/14/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- the Council investigate applying any future underspend on loan charges to the reduction of capital debt rather than taking the underspend to reserves and a report be brought back to the Committee;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the advice of the Council's Section 95 Officer on the need to boost the level of HRA reserves;
- the rationale for the transfer of the year end surplus to reserves included the need for resilience and flexibility in terms of future costs pressures and new statutory requirements;
- the approach to the level of historic debt had to be part of a wider strategy and the proposal to apply any future underspend on loan charges to the reduction of capital debt was not a sustainable way forward;
- the approach to the year-end surplus should depend on whether the level of interest generated by this sum being transferred to reserves was higher or lower than the interest paid on servicing the debt;
- outlining the lobbying being undertaken by the Council and Leader with the Scottish and UK Governments to have historical debt written off and the potential to take a similar approach as Shetland Islands Council by tying the debt in with infrastructure works and economic development;
- the previous Leader had lobbied the UK Government without success and any reduction to the loan capital would surely result in a reduction in loan charges;
- in relation to the overspend on the repairs and maintenance budget in 2023/24, differing views in relation to the reasons for and impact of decisions taken in relation to recent rent increases, This included the views and priorities of tenants on rent levels and the national perspective as outlined by the Tenants Representative;

- the recommendation that future HRA Revenue Estimates focus on a longer-term rental strategy covering a number of years be welcomed on the basis it would allow the Service and tenants to plan better for the future;
- it was important the significant analysis underway to ensure that an appropriate rent increase was applied for the next financial year included Member consultation;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the progress being made due to the increase in the repairs and maintenance budget agreed by the Committee for 2024/25;
- in response to a query, information was provided on the current backlog of lower priority repairs, the progress being made in terms of performance and acknowledging the need for a renewed focus on cyclical works;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the role of housing support services and the savings achieved and on how the supervision and management budget would be handled in the current year given the underspend in 2023/24;
- confirmation was sought and provided that information on the current number of vacancies within the Service and the posts involved would be circulated to Members; and
- the Housing Challenge report presented to the Council in June 2024 chartered a strategic path going forward and referenced many of the issues raised by Members.

Thereafter, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair seconded by Ms S Atkin **moved** the recommendations in the report.

As an **amendment**: Mr A Graham seconded by Mrs A Maclean **moved** the recommendations in the report and an additional recommendation that the Council investigate applying any future underspend on loan charges to the reduction of capital debt rather than taking the underspend to reserves and a report be brought back to the Committee.

On a vote being taken, the **MOTION** received **7** votes, the **AMENDMENT** received **6** votes, and there were no abstentions, and the motion was therefore carried, the votes having being cast as follows:

For the motion (7): Ms S Atkin, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr R Jones, Mr R MacKintosh, Mrs M Paterson, Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair.

For the amendment (6): Mr A Graham, Ms A Maclean, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mr D Macpherson, Ms J McEwan, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Committee:

- NOTED** the final outturn figures for the Housing Revenue Account and non-Housing Revenue Account 2023/24; and
- APPROVED** the transfer of the year end surplus of £0.772m to the Housing Revenue Account reserves.

**6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring:
Final Outturn 2023/24
Sgrùdadh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Toradh
Deireannach 2023/24 (G)**

There had been circulated Report No HP/15/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an update was sought and provided on progress in bringing the Council's stock up to energy efficiency standards, the significant changes proposed by the Scottish Government in moving to net zero standards, and the implications for the Council's HRA capital programme and tenants;
- in response to a query, Members were advised that it was understood the Scottish Government was maintaining the level of funding for open market house purchases and the Service was cautious about the type of and location of properties purchased;
- concern at the poor standard of maintenance in common areas in housing estates, including new housing developments and that tenants and residents deserved better surroundings and safer footpaths, while acknowledging the reduction in the budget in the current year. It was important to consider this issue more proactively going forward including the available resource, method of weedkilling and no strimming policy. The Chair advised this matter had been discussed at senior level and the Council Leader, Convener and senior Members and was being taken forward with officers;
- in regard to the above, it was recognised staff were working hard within available resources and reference to opportunities for a more collaborative approach to be taken with volunteers in communities;
- further clarity be provided on the protocol in place for the handover of new housing developments to the Council in terms of grounds maintenance;
- it would be helpful for a more detailed breakdown to be provided on the homes delivered as part of the new house build programme 2023/24; and
- in relation to heating and energy efficiency works, the timeline for new external funding opportunities given issues in some older stock in Caithness. It was confirmed officers would provide local Members with an update on plans for the capital programme including opportunities to tie in with external funding opportunities.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the final outturn figures for the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2023/24.

**7. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Budget
Final Outturn 2023/24
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh &
Ghoireasan gu**

There had been circulated Report No HP/16/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- in response to a query, an explanation was sought and provided on the new Facilities Management (FM) model and how this would be implemented in schools going forward. It was confirmed an update on the new FM model would be provided to a future Committee;
- an update was sought and provided on the implications for the cleaning service as a result of the savings agreed for the current year, and on the use of robotics and consideration of other ways to modernise and enhance the service;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the impact of letting charges for Council facilities, the challenges in achieving income targets, maintaining facilities to the appropriate standards and supporting communities wishing to use facilities. The additional revenue funding allocated towards the maintenance of facilities was appreciated and further information would be provided in a future report on how this funding was being invested;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the underspend on the cleaning budget was mainly due to staff vacancies, however the Service would continue to advertise and recruit to these posts;
- concern at the overspend on utility costs in respect of Council depots, other offices and HLH properties and the opportunities to encourage behavioural change amongst staff to reduce consumption;
- opportunities to reduce energy costs at Wick Campus be investigated further; and
- further information was sought and provided on the overspend on technical design and projects.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. final position for the 2023/24 financial year; and
- ii. 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/17/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- a stakeholder's meeting be held at the earliest opportunity to discuss progress with the new Tain Campus, reference being made to the ongoing representations being received from parent councils by local Members on the project;
- the Service's staff be thanked for their hard work across the vast programme of projects being carried out across Highland;
- an update was sought and provided in relation to progress with the provision of housing for school staff on Rum and noting that other opportunities in rural areas would be considered going forward;
- commending the works undertaken to St Clement's School and Charleston Academy over the holiday period;

- in response to a query, an explanation was provided on the differences in the treatment of the underspend in relation to Dunvegan Primary School and Broadford Primary School; and
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the Gypsy/Traveller site at Longman Park, Inverness and it was confirmed a further update would be provided to Members on the project and funding arrangements in due course.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the capital monitoring position at the end of the 2023/24 financial year and the variances outlined in the report;
- ii. the current position regarding the delivery of the works programmes and the individual projects referred to in the report;
- iii. the various challenges faced in recent years and that would continue into 2024/25 and beyond;
- iv. that the outcome of the options appraisal exercise for the provision of staff housing on Rum would be reported to the next meeting of the Committee on 13 November; and
- v. that the 2024/25 and 2025/26 programmes of work for the School Estate Investment Programme and Property Estate Asset Management budget headings would be reported to the next meeting of this Committee on 13 November 2024 along with a full update on all projects that were underway.

9. Housing Performance Report to 30 June 2024 Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais

There had been circulated Report No HP/18/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- in response to a query, an explanation was provided on the reasons for the increase in re-letting times, mainly due to major refurbishment works required to some longer term voids. Nationally, average re-letting times were increasing and there was increased lobbying being undertaken with the utility companies to reduce delays;
- the reduction in rent arrears was welcomed and reference to the challenges in sustaining performance and the continued process of offering tenants the required level of support;
- investigate the potential for technical arrears to be reported separately from the overall rent arrears figures within the constraints of the information available from the DWP and tenants;
- concerns around homelessness and forced evictions by private landlords and the impact on the Service's staff dealing with such cases and the enhanced training and support provided in this regard;
- a further breakdown on the main reason given for homeless presentations in respect of the age range 26-59yrs be provided to consider pressure points and further support that could be offered to families and children. It was confirmed this matter would be raised with the Scottish Government's statistical team;
- the need for a regular maintenance regime for gutter cleaning and removal of moss from roofs given the impact on the structure of and dampness within properties; and

- information was sought and provided on the rents payable for temporary accommodation compared to social housing rents and timescales for moving people from temporary accommodation to permanent secure tenancies. It was confirmed there had been an overall reduction in the time spent in temporary accommodation and further information would be provided to a future Committee on this matter.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 – 30 June 2024.

10. Highland Housing Register Allocations Annual Monitoring Report 2023/24

Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Bhliadhnail Riarachaidhean Clàr Taigheadais na Gàidhealtachd 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No HP/19/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Chair advised that work was ongoing to arrange a Housing Summit in October 2024. It was hoped to attract MPs and MSPs, particularly those with housing portfolios, tenant participation officers and others. It was hoped Members would assume an active role and details of the final arrangements would be confirmed in due course.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an explanation was sought and provided on the phased approach to the implementation of the HHR Allocations Policy. An updated timeline would be provided to Members on the final implementation date;
- there was an ageing population in Highland and the importance of having an age friendly strategy and joined up approach across the Council to deliver more age friendly communities and the mix of housing required;
- the work being undertaken with housing partners to raise awareness of housing options for older people and to encourage individuals to consider their individual housing needs in the longer term;
- the importance of the Policy being rolled out as soon as possible, and opportunities through the private sector and the planning process to facilitate more housing development in response to the level of demand;
- the need for more affordable social housing development in remote and rural areas of Highland experiencing depopulation to support and sustain these communities;
- the problem was not the Allocations Policy but the shortage of housing. It was important to highlight the main factor for the high number of applicants on the HHR Register was due to the high demand for housing in the City of Inverness as a first choice;
- concern at the numbers in the 16-25 age group living with parents/relatives or in temporary accommodation and the impact this may have on their employment opportunities;
- the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport would significantly increase demand for housing and concern at the resultant pressure on the HHR Register going forward. It was confirmed the revised housing needs and assessment would consider the likely impacts on private and social housing;

- in response to a query, it was confirmed a briefing note would be circulated to Members on the decision making process in terms of offering applicants mid-market rent housing;
- further clarity was sought and provided that an annual review of the Register was undertaken to reflect changes in circumstances or where applicants had found their own solution. In addition, applicants were encouraged to inform the Service of any such changes;
- an explanation was sought and provided that one of the challenges to be addressed in the housing needs and demand assessment was to quantify better the level of hidden demand, particularly in rural areas of Highland;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the range of advice and assistance provided to residents at risk of homelessness, including referrals to other agencies; and
- noting that officers would be content to continue discussions with local Members on any opportunities to use housing land to generate income, for example in relation to parking or use of garages.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information contained in the Annual Monitoring Report on housing allocations which demonstrated that the policy was achieving its objectives and that the Highland Housing Register Partnership continued to provide affordable and secure social housing in Highland communities.

11. Service Performance Monitoring Report 2023/24 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanaidh na Seirbheis 2023/24

There had been circulated Report No HP/20/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

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

The meeting was closed at 2.25pm.