

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 29 January 2025** at 9.55am.

Present:

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

Non-Members also present:

Mr M Baird (Remote)	Ms L Johnston (Remote)
Mr A Baxter (Remote)	Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Dr C Birt	Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr A Christie	Mr D Millar
Mr J Finlayson (Remote)	Mr P Oldham (Remote)
Mr R Gale (Remote)	Mrs M Paterson (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)	Mrs T Robertson (Remote)
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)	Ms M Ross (Remote)

Tenant Representatives in Attendance:

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

Officials in Attendance:

Ms A Clark, Chief Officer – Housing and Communities
Mr F MacDonald, Chief Officer – Property and Assets
Mr B Cameron, Strategic Lead - Housing & Building Maintenance
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning & Estate Strategy
Ms C Pieraccini, Strategic Lead Finance (Place)
Ms H Cameron, Housing Development Manager
Mr K Forbes, Property Manager (Estates Management)
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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr R Jones and Ms L Niven.

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

The Committee **NOTED** that there were no Declarations of Interest or Transparency Statements.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

It was confirmed that a response would be provided to Mrs A MacLean outwith the meeting regarding the policy of de-centralisation and the locating of staff across local communities.

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

4. Housing Revenue Account Estimates 2025/26 Tuairmsean Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais 2025/26

There had been circulated Report No HP/01/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, some Members spoke in favour of an 8% rise in rent, with reference to the need for investment in order to maintain and improve the housing stock, particularly with regard to energy efficiency measures such as improved insulation, and new doors and windows, all of which would reduce tenants' energy bills. It was recalled that two years earlier, when inflation had been significantly higher, the Council had maintained the rent increase at 4%, but now it was vital to raise investment and lower costs in the longer term, protecting tenants and their homes.

Other Members supported a lower increase, with reference to the high costs facing many people, including those in receipt of benefits such as Universal Credit and Housing Benefit, and those working in lower paid jobs, whose salaries were unlikely to rise by 8% and the impact. It was suggested that an 8% rise would be an irresponsible and unreasonable burden on people along with reference being made to the impact of this on their wellbeing. Many people remained affected by the cost of living crisis and fuel poverty and, although inflation had reduced in the previous two years, it remained a significant impact, with many people relying on foodbanks and unable to properly heat their homes. It was proposed that a lower rent rise of 5.96% was crucial to tenants facing challenging times, and the cost of this could be met by removing £1.3m of energy efficiency works, affecting around 130 properties, this being less than 1% of the housing stock. Approximately 61% of Council tenants were in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit and would not receive an 8% rise in these benefits. It was also pointed out that while 48% of the responses to the Tenant Participation survey had favoured the 8% rise, this was likely because it was the lowest option, with no lower alternative, and around 30% of respondents had picked the 'none of the above' option.

Other issues raised included ongoing concern at the high level of historic housing debt and the resultant loan charges that the Council faced, this being around 43% of the total housing budget. An explanation was sought and provided for some of the figures in the report, and clarification that the 3% consultation response in paragraph 9.6 of the report should say 30%. It would be helpful if the void turnaround rate could be improved.

The Tenant Representative made reference to the government financial assistance that tenants had been receiving two years earlier which was not the case any longer. While supporting the need for investment in the housing stock, particularly with regard to energy efficient measures which would reduce fuel bills, she pointed out the challenges being faced by many Council tenants, and that tenants should not be financially responsible for energy efficiency and improvement measures to the housing stock and that this was, in fact, a Human Rights Issue. In support of her position, she quoted several organisations including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and also pointed out that housing debt was a serious problem for all Scottish Local Authorities.

Mrs G Cambell-Sinclair, seconded by Ms S Atkin, **moved** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

Mr A Graham, seconded by Mr M Gregson, moved as an **amendment** to delete the expenditure line for Capital Investment Funded from Current Revenue £1.346 million relating to “additional funding for capital investment in energy efficiency and external fabric from rent increase”, and make corresponding reduction in House Rents Income to £69.717 million. Reducing the rent increase for 25/26 to approximately 6%.

On a vote being taken there were 9 votes for the motion, 6 votes for the amendment and 2 abstentions, and the **MOTION** was carried, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Mrs S Atkin, Mr B Boyd, Mr R Bremner, Mr I Brown, Mrs Campbell-Sinclair, Mr L Fraser, Mr R Mackintosh, Mr C Munro, Mrs M Reid

For the Amendment:

Mr A Graham, Dr M Gregson, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mrs A MacLean, Ms J McEwan, Mr R Stewart

Abstentions:

Mr D Macpherson, Mr D McDonald

Decision

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the requirements to achieve a balanced budget and associated budget pressures for the Housing Revenue Account for 2025/26;
- ii. **NOTED** the feedback received from tenants through the annual rent consultation;
- iii. **AGREED** an 8% rent increase for 2025/26 and how this increase be allocated, which was detailed in Appendix 1 to the report;
- iv. **NOTED** how this would impact upon rents across the Council house estate and how this compared with rents across Scotland as detailed in section 5 of the report;
- v. **NOTED** the above rent increase would be applied to all residential HRA rents and service charges, to Gypsy/Traveller site pitches and to non-HRA rents for leased properties (subject to lease agreements); and

- vi. **NOTED** that in line with the Council's Housing Challenge, work was ongoing to develop a detailed action plan and that this would include the development of a long term rent strategy to enable the expansion of the social rented housing stock alongside maintenance and improvement of the existing HRA estate.

5. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 31 December 2024

Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Neo-thaigheadais gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/02/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and Non-Housing Revenue Account 2024/25 for the period to 31 December 2024.

6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report Monitoring Report to 31 December 2024

Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/03/25 by the by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, an explanation was sought and provided on the main reasons for previous and projected underspends on heating/energy efficiency and external fabric, concern being expressed that tenants' rents were being increased to meet expenditure that the Council had not been able to fulfil. It was further explained that these works should be considered and seen as part of the whole five year capital programme agreed and that projects would be accelerated where there was the contractual ability to do so.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2024/25 to 31 December 2024.

7. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Statement to 31 December 2024

Aithris Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 31 An Dubhlachd 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/04/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- information was sought and provided on how the projected overspend of £2m would be managed, which would be from the general fund account;
- the proposed changes to the Wick campus reception were welcomed and information was sought on measures being undertaken to tackle the shortage of cleaning staff, with reference to there being robot hoovers deployed but the cleaning of areas other than the floor was queried;

- concern was expressed at the level of vacancies in cleaning, catering and facilities staff, with particular reference to lack of cleanliness in some offices and schools;
- it was vital the Responsible Premises Officers were in place and that all essential safety checks and drills were being undertaken;
- the context for the reduction in the number of non-domestic rates properties being eligible for rates relief was sought;
- it was suggested that asset rationalisation projects would at times benefit from improved communication between services, as well as specified outcomes and timeframes;
- an overspend on materials was queried and this would be further discussed outwith the meeting, as would reports on issues with some school bookings for which some electrical appliances were centrally controlled, and efforts to tackle the climate crisis through providing appropriate equipment such as Electric Vehicle charging points in Council homes;
- with regard to the 54 fee-earning job vacancies, information was sought and provided on efforts being made to fill these posts, which included graduate training schemes; and
- information was sought and provided on efforts to tackle rising costs and procurement issues for building projects, while also continuing to use local Highland contractors as much as possible.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- APPROVED** the budget position for the third quarter of the 2024/25 financial year, and the predicted year-end position;
- NOTED** 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, and identifying new income and procurement opportunities; and
- NOTED** the progress update provided in relation to corporate budget savings delivery.

8. Property Revenue Maintenance Programme 2024-25 Report Aithisg Prògram Gleidhidh Teachd-a-steach Seilbhe 2024-25

There had been circulated Report No HP/05/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, confirmation was sought and provided that Members would be provided with a breakdown by Service on the costs of vandal damage as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report. In response to a query, it was explained the costs of repairs to public toilets was balanced between the Property Service and the Amenities Service.

The Committee **APPROVED** the:-

- budget categories for the Property Revenue Maintenance budget;
- budget position for the third quarter of the 2024/25 financial year; and
- year end balanced budget, being forecast.

It was also **NOTED** that Members would be provided with a breakdown by Service on the costs of vandal damage detailed in Appendix 1.

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

There had been circulated Report No HP/06/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- with reference to the extensive remedial works that had been undertaken at Charleston Academy, partly as a result of RAAC concrete issues, it was hoped that the complete replacement of the school building, as detailed in the Highland Investment Plan, would be progressed by the Council at its meeting on 6 March 2025;
- disappointment was expressed at the slow pace of progress of the planning permission for the new Broadford Primary School, which had been submitted in June 2024 and had not yet been approved. It was queried whether it was acceptable that the project had been considered ‘shovel-ready’ given this had slipped to October 2026 and it was suggested this was disappointing to pupils and staff. However, in contrast, other Members indicated that the community was pleased with the progress being made, as evidenced at a recent stakeholder meeting about the school, and a recent HMIE report on the school had been excellent; and
- information was sought and provided on phasing for the new housing being built at the Travelling People Sites on the Longman area of Inverness.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. capital monitoring position at the end of the third quarter of the 2024/25 financial year, the estimated year-end position, and the main financial variances outlined in the report;
- ii. current position regarding the delivery of the works programmes, the individual projects referred to in the report, and the work underway to identify the priorities for 2025/26 and the subsequent years; and
- iii. progress on the Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete remedial works at Charleston Academy and Nairn Academy.

10. Community Asset Transfers (CAT) Glusad So-mhaoin Coimhearsnachd

a. Black Isle Education Centre Ionad-Foghlaim an Eilein Duibh

There had been circulated Report No HP/07/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

Members indicated that the proposal had been subject to thorough assessment, was aligned with the aims of the Community Empowerment Act and approval would enable Raddery House Ltd to seek funding to purchase the site. The Group’s work, tenacity, ambition and commitment to the project was highlighted and the project would deliver benefits for the local area and wider Highlands as a centre of excellence.

The Committee **AGREED** to the sale of the land and property comprising the Raddery Wood and the Former Black Isle Education Centre, Raddery, The Black Isle, to Raddery House Ltd. for £325,500, based upon the terms of transfer as set out at paragraph 6.1 of the report.

**b. Elphin Community Hall
Talla Ailbhinn**

There had been circulated Report No HP/08/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, support was expressed for the application and the benefits that it would bring to the community. Reference was made to the economic development burden that some organisations had experienced with CAT, and further information was sought and provided on the steps that could be taken by the Council to have conditions reconsidered to help support communities as much as possible whilst protecting the Council's and public's interests.

The Committee **AGREED** the sale of Elphin Community Hall (former Assynt Primary School) and surrounding land (0.4ha) to Elphin, Ledmore, and Knockan Community Association Ltd (ELKCAL) for £1 based upon the terms of transfer as set out at paragraph 7.1 of the report.

**11. Exclusion of the Public
Às-dùnadh a' Phobail**

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, that the public be excluded from the meeting for Items 12, 13, and 14 on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 6 & 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

**12. Foul Sewer Servitude Request
Iarrtas Seirbheiseachd Saidhbheir Shalaich**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No HP/09/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

**13. Housing Development Initiatives
Iomairtean Leasachaidh Taigheadais**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No HP/10/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

**14. Property Transactions Monitoring
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ghnothachasan Seilbhe**

There had been circulated to Members only Report No HP/11/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **NOTED** the recommendations as detailed in the report.

15. Service Performance Monitoring Report Quarter 3 2024/25
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Seirbheis Cairteil 3 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No HP/12/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- the rise in applications for housing from serving and ex-armed forces personnel was queried and was thought to be largely the result of changes in the terms of the application form. The support provided to armed services personnel was summarised;
- information was sought and provided on the reduction from 2021 to 2024 in tenant satisfaction levels in relation to opportunities and decision making. This had been observed across Scotland and might relate to economic challenges or post-pandemic issues. Members pointed out that significantly higher levels of customer satisfaction were being reported by Albyn Housing in Caithness and the Council Leader offered to raise the matter with the Chief Executive of Albyn Housing at a forthcoming meeting to determine if there were any learning opportunities that could be gleaned. It was pointed out that some Housing Associations had very active tenant members with a higher 'on the ground' presence than the Council and this helped to increase tenant satisfaction levels; and
- it was understood that the management of many areas of housing and property work was a balancing act, using limited resources to tackle many challenges, with decisions in one area often impacting on other areas. The excellent work undertaken by the housing staff was welcomed and gratitude for their efforts expressed.

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

16. Housing Performance Report 1 April 2024 – 31 December 2024
Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais 1 Giblean 2024 – 31 An Dubhlachd 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/13/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Housing service staff were thanked for their work to reduce debt and to tackle homelessness, voids, and anti-social behaviour; and
- an explanation for the re-let / void times lengthening was sought and provided, with many details included in the report. It was suggested by officers that a future Committee might wish to reconsider the budget for tackling voids. It was proposed that this decision could be devolved to Area Committees as the causes and solutions to void properties varied according to locality and a request was made for officers to consider this.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the information provided on Housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 to 31 December 2024; and
- ii. that consideration would be given to the balance of investment in re-letting works at an area level, and recommendations brought to a future Committee on the approach to re-let times.

17. Delivery Plan Update **Fios às Ùr mun Phlana Libhrigidh**

There had been circulated Report No HP/14/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- with reference to the Housing Void-Plus Policy, the Council Leader requested that a report be submitted to the Caithness Committee giving an update on the area pilot project;
- information was sought and provided on how energy efficiency performance targets could be improved;
- it was welcomed that 18 houses in Caithness were being leased to Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks for refitting and were likely to meet net zero aims;
- the current situation with regard to Solar PV generation was summarised, it was queried whether Torvean Quarry, Inverness could be utilised as a possible site for Solar PV, alongside the planned battery energy storage and solar generation. Confirmation was provided that a more detailed response would be provided to Mr A Graham on the feasibility of this but assurance was provided that a number of different options were evaluated with a view to maximising energy opportunities; and
- information was sought and would be provided outwith the meeting to all Members on how much feed-in tariff each Solar PV site had generated in the years since their installation.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the implementation of the new Void-Plus Policy which was designed to assist the re-letting of void Council houses in Caithness;
- ii. the progress provided in the Energy Estate Programme and Project updates in the report; and
- iii. that Members would be provided with information on the feed in tariff revenue generated by each of the Solar PV sites in each of the years since their installation.

The meeting was closed at 12.35pm.