

Drawing up a Housing Strategy for the Highlands

A' Dèanamh Ro-innleachd Taigheadais airson na Gàidhealtachd

Community Newsletter & Survey

Cuairt-litir & Suirbhidh Coimhearsnachd

The Highland Council is developing Highland's third Housing Strategy. This newsletter and survey is to help you to get involved.

What Highland's Housing Strategy Will Do

Dè Choileanas Roi-Innleachd Taigheadais Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Highland's Housing Strategy will show how we and our partners will meet people's needs and deal with housing issues over the next 5 years. It will set out the main housing issues and our strategic direction - what we aim to do; our priorities and how we will use Highland's resources including those used to provide new houses

It will also set out how we hope to achieve the outcomes that we think are most important for Highland - these are to:

- Create more housing opportunities by building more affordable housing and improving access to a wider range of housing choices;
- Improve the quality and condition of housing across Highland including improving the management of rented housing;
- Have fewer households living in fuel poverty;
- Have better housing opportunities for those with particular needs; and
- Have less homelessness through preventing it happen in the first place.

We are working towards the vision that we've set ourselves. This is that:

"Everyone in Highland has a good quality, warm, affordable, secure home which meets their needs in a pleasant and thriving community. Housing helps communities across Highland to have sustainable economic growth."

This vision fits with Highland's Single Outcome Agreement - the document which describes the commitments made by Highland's various public agencies to deliver better outcomes for Highland's residents.

How We Are Deciding What To Do

Ciamar a cho-dhùineas sinn dè tha ri dhèanamh

We are consulting with people across Highland to help us decide what action to take. This will help us understand what their priorities are - and what changes are needed - so that we can take these on board. We are also consulting with our partners who help us deliver our Housing Strategy. They include housing associations; the Scottish Government, NHS Highland and Highlands' many voluntary organisations.

This newsletter is part of that consultation. It describes Highland's main housing issues. It sets out some of the options that we are proposing to take to deal with these. It then asks for your views on these. It also asks for your views on other housing issues.

Your replies to these questions will help us understand what we need to do to deal with the things that are most important to you. Please help us by completing the survey form at the end of this newsletter and returning it to us. You can also give us your views on-line on the Council's web-site.

We hope to have a Consultative Housing Strategy available by the end of 2009 to consult widely on. We aim to have Highland's Housing Strategy in place by early 2010.

The Main Housing Issues in Highland Na Prìomh Cheistean mu Thaigheadas air a' Ghàidhealtachd

Because people are living longer and more are living alone, households are increasing. The population is growing in many areas - this is good for Highland's economy but brings challenges. More houses to buy and houses to rent need to be built in the majority of Highland's communities. The chronic and persistent lack of affordable housing is one of Highland's biggest challenges.

We carried out a study to tell us how much new housing needs to be built across Highland. It also told us how much of this needs to be 'affordable' housing to help people on low / modest incomes who can't find housing they can afford to buy or rent¹.

It told us that there will be a continuing increase in the number of households in Highland and around 8,000 new houses need to be built over the next 5 years to house all those who want to make a new home for themselves. If these houses aren't built then this will lead to problems such as: increased housing costs; people being unable to live in the area (which will weaken our economy and jeopardise jobs) and more pressure on rented housing.

The study also told us that of these, around 4,500 of these new houses need to be 'affordable' to help people on low / modest incomes who can't afford private housing. The vast majority require to be housing association or council rented housing (around 9 out of 10 of these). It also showed that we need to be building much more affordable housing suitable for single people or couples - rather than families.

Many people have difficulty paying for housing

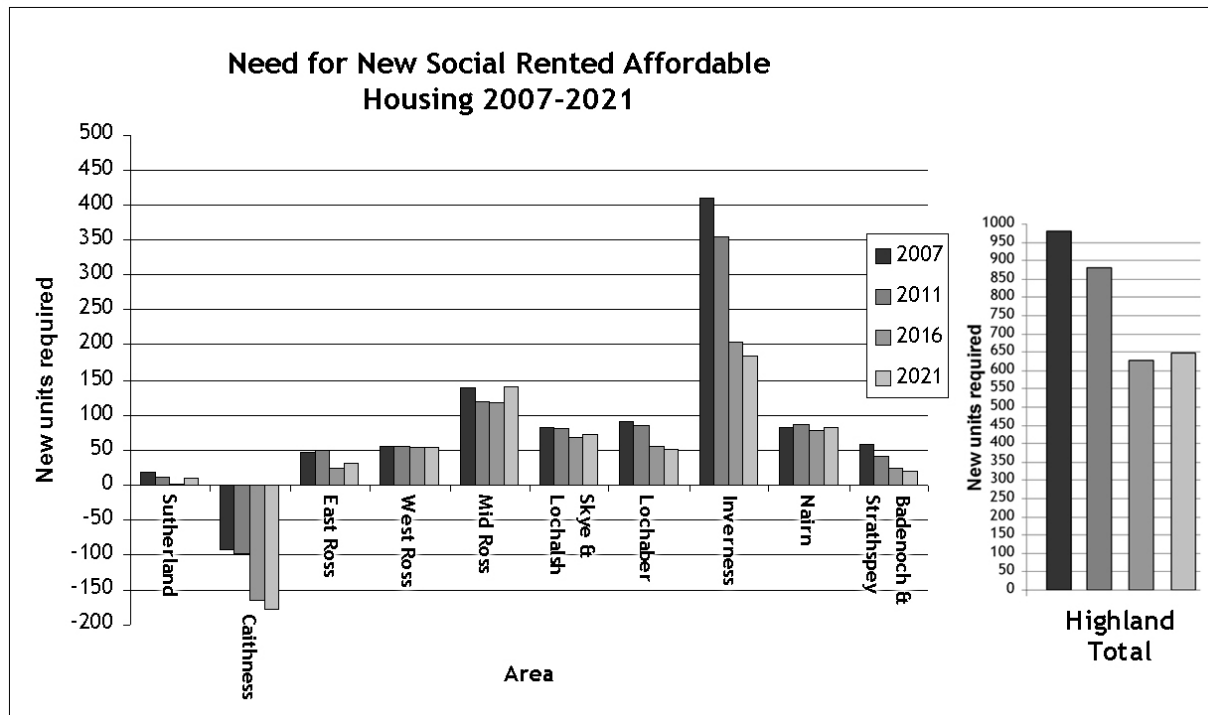
People's income in the Highlands tends to be lower than elsewhere in Scotland. Many can't afford to get a mortgage. House prices have been rising and are very high in many communities, often above the reach of locals.

The study told us that less than a third of households, under 35 years old, had enough income to buy housing in 2007. Housing is most affordable in Caithness. It is least affordable in Wester Ross and Skye & Lochalsh where less than one in four households under 35 could afford to buy.

There isn't enough affordable housing in many rural communities and towns - in some places, and for some people, the shortage is critical.

¹ A short summary of this study, and the full study report, is available from The Highland Council or via this link: www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/localplans/HighlandHousingNeedandDemandAssessment.htm

The need for affordable housing varies a great deal across the different areas of Highland. Nairn, Skye & Lochalsh, West Ross and Mid Ross are under the greatest pressure for affordable housing. Lochaber, Inverness and Badenoch & Strathspey are the next most pressured. Caithness has different housing issues - it has adequate affordable housing to meet people's needs and, in contrast to other areas, there is likely to be a continuing decrease in the need for affordable housing there.



Lots of people want social rented housing and so there is very great pressure on the housing that does become available.

There are over 10,000 households on Highland's Housing Register. The majority of them have been awarded points because they have housing needs. We allocate our houses to people who are in the most housing need. Although there are around 19,500 social rented houses across Highland, only a small number of them (7%) were available to rent last year.

There is great pressure on social rented housing - for example, around the Inner Moray Firth, for every Council / housing association house which becomes available there are over 10 applicants on the Register. This is much higher in many smaller communities. This means that people experiencing housing need often have to wait a long time.

If someone is homeless they have an acute need for housing. Many more of Highland's households are becoming homeless. This is mostly because of Highland's housing shortage. Last year over 2,300 households applied to us as homeless. This is almost double those who applied at the start of our last Strategy. Because over 1,700 of them were found to have no-where that they could reasonably stay, we had a legal duty to house them. The vast majority of them were households already living in Highland. Many had children.

Last year over 1,400 households were provided with social rented housing through Highland's Housing Register. The vast majority had a connection to the area where they were housed because for example they lived or worked there already.

Lots more new affordable houses have been built but these levels of new supply aren't likely to last.

Housing organisations, such as the housing associations, across Highland have been very successful at providing new affordable housing. 2,000 new affordable homes (1,368 rented

houses and 682 new low cost homes have been built in communities right across Highland over the last 6 years with the help of Government subsidy. Much of this success is due to Highland's organisations working well together. Private housing developers have also helped by providing a proportion of affordable housing on their larger developments.

Right to Buy sales are falling - meaning these houses can be rented out again in the future.

However we expect that there will be much less money from the Government and from the Banks to build new affordable housing over the next few years. The challenge for us and our housing partners will be make sure we spend the limited money we have wisely and in the communities where it is most needed.

It is difficult to build more because there are many development challenges.

The infrastructure to support the building of new homes is often poor and there is very little money to remedy the problems. It can be very difficult to get land to build on.

People often object to new housing being built in their communities.

Housing associations are expected to build more houses using less Government subsidy.

Some communities need to be regenerated and revitalised.

In some communities, people are moving away and local services are suffering. Poverty and disadvantage is concentrated in some communities. Both these types of communities need help so that they become attractive places to live and work.

The quality and condition of a lot of privately owned housing is also a concern.

Because some houses are old and because others haven't been maintained or improved, many houses need work carried out on them.

People living in private rented housing are more likely to be living in housing which has the poorest conditions and with the poorest energy efficiency.

Changing demographic patterns are increasing the need for housing and services.

Older and, in particular, frail older people will make up a much larger part of the population over the next few years. This is increasing the demand for housing to be fitted with adaptations and equipment, to help them carrying on living independently, and specialist services.

What We Think We Need To Do

Dè a dh'fheumas sinn a dhèanamh

Highland's Housing Strategy will build on the strengths of our current approaches. It will also include all the commitments we made recently in our plan to prevent and tackle homelessness. For more information on this, go to our website at:

www.highland.gov.uk/livinghere/housing/homelessness or ask at any Council office.

There are some new issues which we need to decide how to tackle. We also need to set priorities because we will not have enough money to do everything. Here are our main challenges and how we propose to tackle them. We would like your views on these.

1. Where should new affordable houses be getting built and what should they be?

The shortage of affordable housing is more acute in some communities than others. Most households in need require affordable rented housing. We are expecting less money to build new affordable housing.

Our preferred options are:

- Building new affordable housing in the areas and communities where the largest shortages and the most acute pressures are.
- Building less low cost home-ownership houses and more social rented houses than we did before. However because more subsidy is required to build a social rented house, this means that we will be building fewer affordable houses.
- Continuing to suspend the Right to Buy for some tenants in areas which are experiencing housing pressures and large shortages.
- Continuing to find innovative ways to fund the building of new affordable housing.

2. Who should we be building houses for?

In some rural communities, land-owners sell their land for housing because they want to help meet the housing needs of their community. Some people have a perception that social rented housing is often let to people who don't have a connection with the community. Our figures show that this isn't the case - 95% of Highland Housing Register lets last year went to people with a connection to the 'letting zone' where they were housed. Nonetheless we recognise that these perceptions cause communities concern.

Our preferred option is:

- In pressured small rural communities taking into account in the allocation of new build affordable housing, the reason for investment in that community. This may be by allocating a 'quota' of these lets to applicants who have been awarded additional points because they meet a need identified by that community.

3. How can we best meet the needs of people with community care needs?

Pressure on community care services is increasing. Some communities have less demand for services than others. In some communities it is very challenging for organisations to provide services often due to the lack of local workforces and pressures on funding.

Our preferred option is to:

- Make best use of adaptations and new assistive technology in non-specialised housing to help households with community care needs to live independently in their own home.
- Making sure that all the services which someone with community care needs might require are accessible by focusing service developments in communities where there is long term demand and an ability to provide services effectively.

4. How can we make sure all our Council houses meet the standard set by the Government?

The quality of our Council housing varies- in some areas there are more houses needing substantial investment to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) by 2015.

Our preferred option is to:

- Spend the limited money we have from Council house rents and borrowing on making sure that all our Council housing meets the Standard. This will mean changes to the way we have invested in the past.

5. How can we help private owners repair and improving their housing?

New legislation introduced clear differences between the way Council's should help disabled owners with adapting their homes and assisting owners with repairs. Disabled households can now get more grant help to fit the adaptations they need. Owners are expected to take greater responsibility for the condition of their homes. This is because the circumstances leading to need for an adaptation are very different from those relating house repairs that the owner may have neglected or, to increase house value through improvements. More of the Council's budget needs to be spent on disabled adaptations.

Our preferred options are:

- To provide more advice and information to help owners maintain their homes and private rented properties.
- To help owners make best use of their own investment in their properties in a way that they can afford. Grants for improvement and repair will no longer be available. In some cases, we may provide limited financial support for low income owners for a few high priority health and safety related works.

Copies of Highland's current Housing Strategy are available on The Highland Council's website at www.highland.gov.uk . A copy of Highland's Housing Need & Demand Assessment will also be available from here soon.

Some of the other issues Highland's Housing Strategy will be covering:

- Setting targets for the number of private and affordable houses we want built in each area of Highland.
- Improving the role of that private renting plays in meeting housing needs.
- Managing neighbour nuisance and dealing with anti-social behaviour.
- Improving the quality and management of private rented properties.
- Improving the quality and management of social rented housing.
- Making sure we know what communities housing needs and priorities are.
- Preventing and managing homelessness.
- Helping households who can't afford to heat their homes - taking them out of 'fuel poverty'.
- Making sure housing is more sustainable and energy efficient.
- Regenerating areas with low housing demand.
- Helping fragile rural communities to become stronger.
- Making sure that our services help meet the needs of different equalities groups such as disabled people; ethnic minorities; older people etc.
- Providing housing support to people who have community care needs such as older people; those with learning disabilities; or to prevent homelessness.

Drawing up a Housing Strategy for the Highlands - Your Views

A' dealbh Roi-Innleachd Taigheadais airson - Ur Beachdan

Please give us your views and comments on these issues and our proposed approaches. We are happy to accept responses from individuals, community councils etc. Please return this form to the address below by the end of December 2009.

You can also access a copy of this survey, and fill it in, on-line at:
www.highland.gov.uk/highlandhousingstrategy

1. Where should new affordable houses be getting built and what should they be?

What are your views on this issue and the preferred options we set out on page 5? Should we be doing something else? If so, what?

2. Who should we be building houses for?

What are your views on this issue and the preferred options we set out on page 5? Should we be doing something else? If so, what?

3. How can we best meet the increase in people with community care needs?

What are your views on this issue and the preferred options we set out on page 5? Should we be doing something else? If so, what?

4. How can we make sure all our Council houses meet the standard set by the Government? What are your views on this issue and the preferred options we set out on page 5? Should we be doing something else? If so, what?

5. How can we help private owners repair and improving their housing?

What are your views on this issue and the preferred options we set out on page 5? Should we be doing something else? If so, what?

6. Our Housing Strategy has been in place since 2003. Is there anything which we, or other housing related organisations, should be doing differently? Please tell us. Please also tell us what you think we should be doing instead.

7. What other housing related issues do you think we (and / or our housing partners) should be dealing with? There is a list of other housing issues on page 6 - you may find it helpful to look at this.

Please give us your views including what you think we should be doing.

Housing / Housing Related Issue	What we should be doing

8. About you (this will help us understand where the different housing issues are)

a) Name (optional) or Organisation you represent

.....

b) Community / Area you live in or represent

.....

Returning Your Completed Survey

Please tear off this form and return it to **The Highland Council, Housing & Property Services, FREEPOST SCO2032, Inverness, IV3 5BR.**

You can also hand it into any Council Service Point or Housing Office and they will send it on. Alternatively you can email your views to: housingandproperty@highland.gov.uk