

MINUTE EXTRACT: HOUSING & PROPERTY COMMITTEE: 29 JANUARY 2020

4. **Housing Revenue Account Revenue Estimates 2020/21
Tuairmsean Teachd-a-steach HRA 2020/21**

Declaration of Interest – Mr A Christie declared a non-financial interest in this item as General Manager of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey Citizens Advice Bureau but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No HP/02/20 dated 16 January 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer – Customer and Communities.

In discussion, Members highlighted there was no planned use of HRA balances in 2020/21 and that loan charges were higher than the Scotland average. It was clear from the consultation exercise that tenants were expecting the Council to reinvest the income generated by the proposed rent increase on planned maintenance and repairs and other estate improvements as a priority. There was a need therefore for a general review to ensure the most efficient use of resources including the potential use of HRA balances and review of loan charges.

It was confirmed that officers would be working in this calendar year to develop the HRA Capital Plan (2022/2027) and this would include the resourcing of the plan. As part of this consultation would be undertaken with Members to inform the Plan for future years. A report on the HRA Capital Plan would be presented to the Committee in April 2020. It was also reported that the draft budget proposed an increase in repairs and maintenance expenditure.

During further discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- confirmation was provided that provision had been made for impact on rent arrears arising from Universal Credit and the Committee would receive regular performance reports on rent arrears;
- the consultation exercise undertaken with tenants had been excellent and the and the Housing team be commended in this regard;
- the opportunities to drive efficiencies to improve the turnaround time for void properties to reduce the level of void rent loss;
- further information be provided on a pilot project in Hilton, Inverness which was understood to be having a positive impact on voids;
- consideration be given to an early intervention inspection regime of properties and their surrounds as spend to save measure, as had been piloted in the Ross and Cromarty area. This would also help identify vulnerable tenants and other issues. In this regard, it highlighted that local Members had the opportunity to prioritise their HRA supervision and management budget to address the different issues in areas;
- the role of the Tenant Participation Officers was key to ensuring good relationships and communication between tenants and the Council;

- the potential for timescales for repair works and administration to be presented separately in the future reporting of void figures;
- the Council's loan charges were relatively low compared to the private sector and in turn generated increased revenue for the Council;
- Members be circulated with details of expenditure on the relevant budget headings along with comparators for the past 4/5 years to allow trends to be considered;
- the potential for a time limit to be placed on the proposed use of HRA properties for temporary accommodation. The Head of Housing and Building Maintenance advised he would discuss this matter directly with Mr L Fraser;
- the potential for tenants in temporary Council accommodation to be offered a secure tenancy in appropriate cases;
- the potential for Council house rents to better reflect the range of market rates in areas across Highland;
- the need to build more Council houses, particularly in the Inner Moray Firth area where private sector rents were significantly higher than council rents;
- concern that in Ward: Culloden and Ardersier some properties did not meet the Scottish Quality Housing Standard. The Head of Housing and Building Maintenance confirmed he would investigate the specific cases involved;
- confirmation was sought and provided that officers would review the potential to bring more former janitor's houses back into general housing use to help reduce waiting lists and generate revenue;
- the importance of their being appropriate Member scrutiny of repairs and maintenance work which was carried out in house by the Council;
- the fact no additional external funding had been made available for compliance with the new standards for domestic fire detection;
- feedback on tenant satisfaction ratings following the completion of upgrading works be included in performance reports to the Committee;
- the importance of environmental works being undertaken in housing estates and the success of community garden schemes in some areas;
- the Chair expressed his support for the development of a local housing strategy for Caithness through a multi-agency approach and that he would have further discussions with Mr R Bremner on this matter, including the potential to replicate in Caithness the good work being undertaken in partnership through the Fort William 2040 vision; and
- officers had met with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and some RSLs and had discussed the the issues specific to Caithness and feedback would be provided.

* The Committee **AGREED** to **RECOMMEND** -

- i. the draft HRA Revenue Budget for 2020/21 (attached as Appendix 1 to the report);
- ii. a 3% increase for council house rents for 2020/21;
- iii. that this percentage increase (3%) be applied to all residential HRA rents and service charges and to Gypsy/Traveller site pitches;

- iv. that non-HRA rents for leased property be increased as stipulated in existing contracts; and
- v. that a report on the HRA Capital Plan (2022/2027) would be presented to the Committee in April 2020.

The Committee **AGREED:-**

- i. that Members be circulated with details of expenditure on the relevant budget headings along with comparators for the past 4/5 years;
- ii. to investigate the potential for the timescales for repair works and administration to be presented separately in the future reporting of void figures; and
- iii. further consideration be given to how a local housing strategy for Caithness could be taken forward through a multi-agency approach.