

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 21 May 2025** at 9.30am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin	Mr R MacKintosh
Mr B Boyd	Ms A MacLean
Mr I Brown	Mr D Macpherson (Remote)
Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair	Mr D McDonald
Mr L Fraser	Ms J McEwan (Remote)
Mr A Graham	Mr P Oldham (substitute) (Remote)
Dr M Gregson	Ms M Ross (Remote)
Mr R Jones	Mr R Stewart (Remote)
Mrs I MacKenzie	

Non-Members also present:

Mrs M Cockburn	Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Mr S Coghill (Remote)	Ms K Maclean (Remote)
Ms S Fanet	Mr T MacLennan (Remote)
Mr D Fraser (Remote)	Mr J McGillivray (Remote)
Mr R Gale (Remote)	Mrs M Paterson (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (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 A Maguire, Head of Development & Regeneration
Mr B Cameron, Strategic Lead – Housing & Building Maintenance
Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning & Estate Strategy
Ms D Delonnette, Service Lead - Housing and Homelessness
Mr K Forbes, Property Manager (Estates Management)
Ms H Jones, HR Business Partner
Ms H Chisholm, Housing Policy Officer – Resettlement Team
Ms T Taylor, Project Manager – Placement Programme Home to Highland
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 Bremner 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**

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

**4. Housing Performance Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025
Aithisg Coileanadh Taigheadais 1 Giblean 2024 gu 31Màrt 2025**

There had been circulated Report No HP/15/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members commended officers on the level performance achieved as set out in the report and raised the following main points:-

- the reduction in rent arrears was encouraging and an explanation was provided on the main reasons for the decrease, credit being due to tenants, officers and focus on early intervention in conjunction with other agencies;
- clarification was sought and provided that the Council's performance on rent arrears and repairs compared well to other local authorities with similar geographical challenges;
- in response to a query, it was explained that £3.1m of rent arrears was in the context of £68m of revenue generated from rental income over the year. In addition, a proportion of those arrears would be due to tenants waiting for benefits to be paid, however it was not possible to quantify this;
- the improvement in performance on emergency and non-emergency repairs was welcomed and an explanation was provided on the contributory factors;
- how performance on emergency and non-emergency repairs would be sustained going forward and the balance to be achieved within the available budget between performance on repairs and average re-let times;
- it would be helpful for local Members to be informed when average re-let times were exceeded for properties within their wards;
- the potential for additional monies to be invested in low priority repairs;
- some of the factors impacting on average re-let times were outwith the Council's control including delays with utility companies;
- an update was provided on the lobbying being undertaken by the Council at a national level on the above issue and ongoing discussions with utility companies on improving performance;
- concern at the impact of the Radio Teleswitch Service switch off, was noted and it was confirmed that this was the responsibility of the utility companies. It was recognised the Council had a potential duty of care for vulnerable households and advice had been issued to tenants and energy advice agencies to raise awareness and encourage them to engage with

utility companies. Further promotion would be required and Members should continue to highlight the issue to constituents;

- it was suggested there was a need to reinforce the demand for more affordable one-bedroom properties in Highland and for other partners and sectors to be involved to increase supply. It was explained that a new housing need and demand assessment would help inform the next Strategic Housing Investment Programme to be presented to the Committee on 5 November 2025;
- the action being progressed by the Council to meet its obligations under the Scottish Social Housing Charter in relation to tenant participation. This included an ongoing focus on promoting tenant participation, involving more younger people, and tenant and Member involvement in estate walkabouts. The annual tenant participation report would be presented to the Committee on 5 November 2025;
- clarification was sought and provided that additional Council tax income from second homes was allocated to the Landbank Fund for developmental work to support the new build programme; and
- whether the Service was considering the purchase of a four-bedroom house in Daviot that had been empty for a considerable period of time. It was confirmed officers would report back to Mr D Macpherson on this matter.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025.

5. Homelessness Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Chion Dachaigh

There had been circulated Report No HP/16/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the lifelong impact of homelessness on children and their development and an assurance was provided that performance on the average time spent in temporary accommodation by households with children continued to improve and the importance of resolving cases involving children as quickly as possible was recognised;
- confirmation was sought and provided that if households with children wished to remain in their temporary accommodation, it was possible to convert to a secure tenancy and in practice this happened regularly;
- in terms of the number of people receiving housing support, it was explained the figures involved varying levels of support and represented a small percentage of the overall number of tenants;
- how a balance was achieved between housing local people and those with employment in the area compared to those who by choice wished to move to Highland from other areas. It was noted the number of cases with no local connection as defined in the Code of Guidance for Homelessness was relatively low and the majority related to Inverness;
- the potential to increase the 'need to reside' points for local people and those with employment in the area and noting this would form part of the wider Highland Housing Register (HHR) Allocation Policy review;

- it would be helpful to have a breakdown on the location, types and sizes of properties required in terms of homelessness and it was confirmed officers would respond directly to Mrs I Mackenzie on this matter;
- the potential to repurpose more empty houses in localities in Highland and noting a report on the ongoing work in this sector would be submitted to the Committee in August 2025;
- further clarity was sought on reference in the HHR Allocation Policy to unsatisfactory housing conditions and unmet housing need. It was confirmed officers would respond directly to Dr M Gregson on this matter;
- an assurance was sought and provided that the Council worked with partner agencies when appropriate to provide support to the homeless or those threatened with homelessness;
- in response to a query, it was explained no timescales had been set in relation to the Scottish Housing (Scotland) Bill and final details on the new level of prevention duties had not been received;
- it was important to note that under the Scheme of Delegation, the HHR Allocation Policy was clearly the responsibility of the Housing and Property Committee; and
- in response to a query, it was confirmed that the timescales for the HHR Allocations Policy review had not yet been set, timescale to be set, its scope having to take account of any legislative changes that came forward.

In conclusion of the item, it was stated that a main issue for the Council was that it did not have enough houses to meet demand and this was being raised at the highest level with the UK and Scottish Governments. A follow up Housing Summit was to be held on 6 June 2025 and officers had been working with the Scottish National Investment Bank and other providers to secure additional investment in housing. Other local authorities in Scotland had similar problems, however it was exacerbated in Highland due to its geography.

The Committee **AGREED** the progress in mitigating homelessness and delivering secure housing outcomes in Highland.

6. Council of Sanctuary Comhairle Comaraich

There had been circulated Report No HP/17/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:

- all those involved in supporting refugees arriving in the Highlands were congratulated on their efforts;
- this was an excellent report that set out all the resettlement programmes the Council had been involved in, funded by and in line with the UK and Scottish Governments humanitarian schemes;
- the dedication and drive to support and welcome refugee families to the Highlands was recognised. However, given this excellent work was already being carried out, it was queried whether anything would change by the Council joining the City of Sanctuary;

- it was queried whether it would have a positive reaction as it did not appear so on social media. However, it was highlighted that social media did not reflect the views of everyone and a decision should not be made based on this;
- specific concerns were expressed in relation to veterans and other citizens who were experiencing hardship and required support and who might perceive they were less of a priority at a time when there was already a lack of housing to accommodate demand;
- the challenges around the availability of housing were recognised, however the report was about the Council's responsibilities in terms of supporting and protecting people from other countries who were fleeing from violence and war;
- the proposal to apply for a City of Sanctuary Award was a public recognition of all those involved in working in refugee programmes and for the excellent work undertaken of which the Council, partners, third sector and communities in Highland should be proud of;
- the people involved in the schemes had made a positive contribution to their communities and to the Highlands and it was important to recognise that while by choice they would prefer to live in their home countries, through the work of officers and partner agencies they felt at home in Highland;
- although it was called City of Sanctuary Award, confirmation was provided that it was for the work of the whole of the Highlands;
- Highland hospitality was globally renowned and the Council could continue to be a welcoming local authority without the need for accreditation. Therefore, the Council should continue to support refugees in the manner it had been for many years;
- a number of questions were raised and responded to including the longer term post programme support measures that had been put in place and measures to monitor these; how the Council ensured there was sustained engagement and integration of those that did not qualify for the resettlement schemes; and ensuring that services were not working in silos;
- it was important not to set one group of the population against another, with both veterans and refugees requiring support;
- refugees did not wish to be singled out for preferential treatment, actual or perceived. The Highlands was renowned for welcoming and being respectful of people from all countries, however it was not necessary as a symbolic gesture to sign up to the scheme for this to be the case; and
- the cost of gaining a City of Sanctuary Award was only £2,100 over three years, however, concern was expressed at the timing of signing up to the scheme. It was felt that it would be prudent to pause signing up to this scheme to enable further review to understand how it would work with local communities with the full details being reported to a future meeting. This would not diminish or change the sterling work being undertaken from carrying on.

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

Mr D McDonald, seconded by Mrs I Mackenzie, moved as an **AMENDMENT** to delete recommendation ii. in the report.

On a vote being taken there were 7 votes for the motion, 9 votes for the amendment and 2 abstentions, and the **AMENDMENT** was carried, the votes having been cast as follows:

For the Motion:

Mrs S Atkin, Mr B Boyd, Mr I Brown, Mrs Campbell-Sinclair, Mr R Mackintosh, Mrs A MacLean, Mr P Oldham.

For the Amendment:

Mr L Fraser, Dr M Gregson, Mr R Jones, Mrs I Mackenzie, Mr D McDonald, Ms J McEwan, Mr D Macpherson, Ms M Ross, Mr R Stewart.

Decision

The Committee **NOTED** the efforts made by Highland and partner agencies in supporting resettlement and humanitarian programmes to date.

**7. Service Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report
Aithisg Bhliadhnail Adhartais Plana Feachd-obrach Seirbheis**

There had been circulated Report No HP/18/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- concern at the increase in staff turnover rates, and noting the key reasons given in exit interviews related to salary levels compared to the private sector and career development and an update was provided on the work being progressed in those areas;
- concern at the challenges associated with the age profile of staff, reference being made to the succession planning tool designed to identify areas that required focus as a priority, this being an issue across the Council;
- an assurance was sought and provided that the skills of long serving staff due to retire would not be lost, reference being made to the importance of mentoring and sharing knowledge with other staff;
- highlighting positive and negative feedback received from tenants on interactions with the Service's maintenance officers and the importance of customer service skills training, quality interactions and supportive engagement with all tenants;
- clarification was sought and provided that the Housing and Building Maintenance Service was considered to be in a better place compared to the previous year due to the progress made and creative approach taken to filling vacancies more quickly and increased level of staff training;
- the officer time required in respect of the Investors in People accreditation and associated cost to the Council. It was confirmed this information would be provided directly to Ms J McEwan;
- concern at the level of agency staff costs, and an assurance this remained low compared to the rest of the organisation;
- skills shortages was a national issue and the importance of the Council growing its own younger workforce with a commitment that they stayed with the Council for a certain period of time. It was highlighted that the Service was taking the lead in terms of apprenticeships and traineeships;

- staff absence continued to be a work in progress and the Service's flexible approach to working arrangements for staff recuperating from illness be commended;
- concern staff absences may be exacerbated by the wider picture and specifically the burden being placed on the Service due to the pressures and poor standard of accommodation in some areas of the private rented sector;
- an update was sought and provided on the action being taken by the Service to offer recruitment incentives and packages and benchmarking undertaken with the private sector. The Highland Investment Plan would also act as an incentive for professional staff to work with the Council, help reverse the drift to the private sector and provide more opportunities to grow and mentor younger people;
- representations be made to COSLA with a view to getting a remote and rural area allowance to assist with the recruitment and retention of staff. It was explained the Council currently had a relocation scheme to assist with costs;
- whether the vacancies in the Service advertised in a recent radio campaign were based in Inverness. It was confirmed that specific details of locations would be provided directly to Mr R Jones; and
- the scope to have relief contracts for seasonal staff that rolled over from year to year to speed up the process. It was explained this issue would form part of the ongoing Amenities review to be shared with Members in due course.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. Housing and Property workforce planning progress report and updated action plan; and
- ii. positive outcomes from the report, including:
 - a. creative recruitment techniques reduced the overall number of vacancies within the service;
 - b. the Housing and Building Maintenance workforce planning pilot exercise involved enhanced HR support and resources over a 12-month period which enabled the managers to work together to identify and resolve challenges while developing their own managerial skills;
 - c. the Housing Team was approved as a partner with the Chartered Institute of Housing's Professionalism Commitment;
 - d. specific specialist training commitments were given to areas such as fire and asbestos safety and how to deal with traumatic events and vulnerable customers; and
 - e. team restructures improved efficiency, service delivery and supported staff development opportunities within the service.

8. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring and Progress Update Sgrùdadh Buidseit agus Cunntas Adhartais a' Phlana Libhrigidh

There had been circulated Report No HP/19/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an explanation was sought and provided on the Void Plus Policy being piloted in Caithness;

- an update was sought and provided on the progress being made in relation to the migration of property assets and property resources project;
- in response to a query, further details were provided on the network of community facilities savings to be delivered and how this related to the Community Points of Delivery Project in the Highland Investment Plan;
- concern the above approach may leave some properties in town centres and villages empty and derelict;
- further clarity was sought provided on the request that Devolved School Management (DSM) repair budgets be increased, noting this budget would be revisited next year. The potential to transfer this budget to the Service was also being considered to ensure it was spent in key areas;
- it would be helpful for a Members briefing to be arranged on the Single Property Service;
- the contingency planning in place in response to challenges with contractor capacity to mitigate against delays on projects. It was explained that innovative ways of overcoming the challenges were being considered and Members would be provided with an update on the new trades framework once finalised;
- the need to provide more accommodation for key workers and the potential to include the social care sector staff to help with recruitment and retention of staff. It was confirmed the broader definition of key workers agreed by the Committee as part of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan would be circulated to Members for their information;
- noting that, as agreed by the Council, an approach was to be developed in relation to mid-market housing and key worker housing across Highland and progress would be reported back to the Committee; and
- further clarity was sought and provided on the challenges around the use of compulsory purchase orders in relation to vacant land and buildings and the significant funding challenges for the Council following purchase due to extremely high development costs.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the progress of the Delivery Plan Programmes and Projects as per the updates provided in the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a Members briefing be arranged on the Single Property Service.

9. Service Performance Monitoring Report – Q4 2024-25 Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais – R4 2024-25

There had been circulated Report No HP/20/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

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

10. Exclusion of the Public
Às-dùnadh a' Phobail

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public should be excluded from the meeting for the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 6 & 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

11. Housing Development Initiatives
Iomairtean Leasachaidh Taigheadais

There had been circulated to Members only Report No HP/21/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

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

12. Property Transactions Monitoring
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ghnothachasan Seilbhe

There had been circulated to Members only Report No HP/22/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

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

The meeting was closed at 12.45pm.