

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Housing and Property Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on **Wednesday 6 November 2024** at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms S Atkin
Mr B Boyd (Remote)
Mr R Bremner (Remote)
Mr I Brown
Mr L Fraser
Mr A Graham
Mr M Gregson
Mrs I Mackenzie (Remote)

Mr R Mackintosh
Ms A MacLean
Mr D Macpherson
Ms J McEwan (Remote)
Mr C Munro (Remote)
Mr P Oldham (substitute)
Mr R Stewart (Remote)

Non-Members also present:

Mr J Finlayson (Remote)
Ms M Hutchison (Remote)
Mrs B Jarvie (Remote)
Mr B Lobban

Mrs M Paterson (Remote)
Mrs T Robertson (Remote)
Ms M Ross

Tenant Representatives in Attendance:

Ms L Richardson, Tenant Representative
Mr A Dick, Tenant Representative
Mr D Paterson, Tenant Representative
Ms M Anderson, 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 H Cameron, Housing Development Manager
Ms H Chisholm, Housing Policy Officer
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.**

Ms S Atkin 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 Mrs G Campbell-Sinclair, Mr R Jones, Mr D McDonald and Ms L Niven.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

Item 12: Mr M Gregson – Transparency Statement.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

The Committee **NOTED** the good news as circulated and that an update on the Action Plan and next steps arising from the Highland Housing Summit would be provided to the Members briefing on 21 November 2024.

4. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Non-HRA Budget Monitoring Statement to 30 September 2024 Aithris Sgrùdaidh Buidseat Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais agus Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Neo-thaigheadais gu 30 Sultain 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/21/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an assurance was sought and provided that the Service's budgets had been fully loaded into the new financial system and there was the ability to monitor spend against budget;
- in response to questions, confirmation that Members would be provided with a breakdown of spend on Supervision and Management, Other Costs and homelessness and consideration given to the level of detail provided in future reports;
- concern at the pressure on staff due to staff vacancies and noting that Members would be issued with a list of current vacancies by post title once the service establishment check had been completed and confirmation of the activity to fill these posts;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the potential to include spend on central administration and loan charges during the course of the year would be considered;
- noting that the Service had a good track record on the average time taken to complete adaptations from the date of referral, and the level of budget ring-fenced for this purpose;
- it would be helpful for Members to be provided with updates by ward, where appropriate, on the ongoing Resettlement support being provided in Highland; and
- reference to the response rate to the previous annual rent consultation and that local Members encourage tenants to participate in the next consultation.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- i. **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account and Non-Housing Revenue Account 2024/25 for the period to 30 September 2024; and

- ii. **NOTED** that Members would be provided with a (a) breakdown of spend on Supervision and Management, Other Costs and homelessness; (b) list of current vacancies by post title and confirmation of the activity to fill these posts; and (c) updates by ward, where appropriate, on the Resettlement support being provided.

5. Property & Facilities Management Services Revenue Monitoring Statement to 30 September 2024

Aithris Sgrùdaidh Teachd-a-steach Sheirbheisean Rianachd Cuid-seilbh & Ghoireasan gu 30 Sultain 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/22/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- further clarity was sought and provided on the impact of fee-earning staff vacancies on annual income targets and the work being done to review targets and the income multiplier to improve on the predicted year end position;
- in response to a query, confirmation that the Council's estate was valued on a rolling five year programme and this took account of investment in buildings such as energy improvements;
- concern at there being insufficient contractor capacity to deliver new housing development and the volume of projects in the Highland Investment Plan going forward particularly given other major developments in the area such as the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport;
- in regard to the above, the need for a collective approach with partners, agencies, and private sector was emphasised. Officers had also commenced dialogue with external suppliers in terms of procurement going forward;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the underspend shown on the CCFM budget, the impact of recruitment challenges and sickness absence and the ongoing work with the Education Service to improve the service going forward;
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the new CCFM model of delivery and plans to provide more support to Head Teachers, as responsible premises officers;
- in response to a query, it was explained the potential for a trusted keyholder option was being considered where challenges existed in gaining access to Council facilities and more detail would be provided in a future report;
- an update was sought and provided on the establishment of the Highland Property Partnership which included external partners. A meeting was to be held on 18 November 2024 and details of the outcome would be provided to a future Committee;
- an assurance that consultation would be undertaken with Members and communities affected by asset rationalisation and the change of use of any buildings;
- in response to a query, further clarification was provided on the negative figure shown for other costs under the technical design and projects budget and that further detail could be provided to Mr A Graham if required and

- concerns were expressed at the cost of hiring Council facilities and sports pitches and the impact on community groups and organisations. The Chair proposed that more detailed information on school lets by Associated School Group be provided to a future Committee and afterwards a Member briefing be arranged on this issue.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the position for the second quarter of the 2024/25 financial year, and the predicted year-end position;
- ii. 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
- iii. the progress update provided in relation to corporate budget savings delivery.

The Committee also **AGREED** that more detailed information on school lets by Associated School Group be provided to a future Committee and thereafter a Member briefing be arranged on this issue.

6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Monitoring Report Monitoring Report to 30 September 2024

Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais gu 30 Sultain 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/23/24 by the by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an explanation was sought and provided on the level of grant funding provided by the Scottish Government and strategic approach taken in respect of individual open market purchases;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the planned delivery of 189 Council houses by 31 March 2025 remained on target;
- concern was expressed at the impact of construction industry conditions including labour and material shortages on tender returns and how this was being addressed. In response, a detailed summary was provided on the mitigating actions being undertaken in response to the challenges;
- the importance of building the right type and mix of new affordable housing so it was adaptable from early to later life and the need to consider housing solutions for all ages going forward. In response, an explanation was provided on the approach taken with partners to deliver an appropriate mix of housing to meet the need in locations. This issue was also addressed in the Highland Housing Challenge; and
- the importance of arrangements being put in place for the maintenance of open spaces in new housing developments, specific concern being raised in respect of Achmore Court, Inverness. It was confirmed that officers would liaise with the local Members on this issue.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the budget position on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2024/25 to 30 September 2024.

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

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

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an assurance was sought and provided that work was ongoing to identify the internal and external resources required to deliver the Capital Programme going forward;
- officers be thanked for the improvement works undertaken to St Clement's School, Dingwall;
- the need to celebrate the Council's achievements and good work in delivering projects such as new housing developments and schools;
- every measure be taken to ensure business as usual could be maintained at the Charleston Community Complex as the works at Kinmylies Primary Nursery were progressed;
- in response to a query, reference was made to the full condition survey being carried out to the Inverness Leisure Centre and Aquadome to identify the refurbishment works required going forward;
- concern that at the further delay on the Broadford Primary School project and that the timescales for the project had been unrealistic and querying who would take responsibility if the Scottish Government did not grant a funding extension for the project;
- it was important to recognise the excellent work of the stakeholder group in taking the Broadford Primary School project forward and that Members undertake scrutiny of the project based on the facts as presented to the Committee;
- an update was sought and provided on the works being undertaken at Nairn Academy to ensure it continued to be operational and safe;
- confirmation was sought that the opportunities to support staff to work across the wider Highland area would be considered in more detail; and
- the ongoing works to improve the Gypsy/Traveller site at Longman Park, Inverness be welcomed and potential for local Members to visit the site once the project was completed be considered.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the capital monitoring position at the end of the second quarter of the 2024/25 financial year, the estimated year-end position and the main financial 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. that the outcome of the options appraisal exercise for the provision of staff housing on Rum would be reported to the next meeting of this Committee; and
- iv. the current position on the remedial works underway at Charleston Academy and Nairn Academy.

8. Service Performance Monitoring Report – Q2 2024/25
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Coileanadh Seirbheis – R2 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No HP/25/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- in response to a query, confirmation that more clarity would be provided on the performance information for Renewable Energy generated per annum under Property and Facilities Management;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the next report to the Committee would include information on the strategies being progressed in relation to staff absences;
- in response to a query, a summary was provided on the ongoing work to make more information publicly available and confirmation the next report to the Committee would include further information on the nature of the Freedom of Information requests being received.

The Committee **NOTED** the Service's performance information and that the next report to the Committee would include further information on the:

- i. strategies being progressed in relation to staff absences; and
- ii. nature of the Freedom of Information requests being received.

9. Housing Performance Report 1 April 2024 - 30 September 2024
Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais 1 Giblean 2024 – 30 Sultain 2024

There had been circulated Report No HP/26/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- re-let times continued to be a matter of concern and a major issue nationally and reference to the need to balance using in house staff and external contractors in terms of the impact on performance and the repairs budget;
- noting the impact on re-let times due to delays caused by utility companies was a national issue and had been raised at COSLA and Scottish Government level and with OFGEM;
- concern in relation to the level of rent arrears and an assurance that the focus continued to be on early intervention and raising awareness of the support available to tenants from the Council and other agencies;
- the impact on rent arrears due to the migration of tenants on legacy benefits and tax credits to Universal Credit at 31 March 2024;
- confirmation that a breakdown of the percentage of emergency and non-emergency repairs that were rechargeable to the tenants would be provided directly to Mr R Stewart;
- highlighting that performance on both emergency and non-emergency repairs was significantly better than the national benchmarking average;
- it would be helpful for local Members to be kept up to date on the longer term voids within their wards. It was confirmed this information would be provided directly to Mr I Brown;

- highlighting that further performance information by Council Ward could be found on the Council's Intranet ward reporting pages; and
- concern at the impact of rising costs, particularly energy costs, on working tenants and the level of rent arrears and for this to be taken into account when installing new heating systems.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information provided on Housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024.

10. Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2025–2030 Plana Ro-innleachdail Tasgadh Taigheadais 2025–2030

There had been circulated Report No HP/27/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:

- further clarity was sought and provided on the new key worker policy statement developed by officers and partners which focused on supporting communities;
- the importance of families within communities also being recognised, as the informal care provided to relatives enabled them to remain at home, saving Council and NHS Highland resources;
- a proactive approach be taken to delivering housing where private development was not economically viable, reference being made to a Fife Council initiative to build mid-market properties for sale or rent;
- it was important to ensure existing housing occupied by tenants who were elderly, immobile or with health conditions met their needs;
- the next update on the Strategic Housing Investment (SHIP) should reference the overall plans in respect of the Highland Housing Challenge;
- how the Council was going to meet the challenge associated with the current high build costs per Council house unit in delivering the new affordable housing programme;
- it was clear the Council could not meet the challenges on its own and there had to be consideration of every type of tenure, collaborative partnerships and other sources of funding to increase the housing supply;
- the collaborative and inter agency working and achievements to date in delivering affordable housing and in the mid-market sector be recognised;
- the potential for former retail land and property to be brought into public use for housing be explored and reference to successes in Inverness City Centre in this regard;
- further clarification was sought and provided that all properties were built to varying needs standards to cater for the vast majority of people for the duration of their lives; and
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided on the framework and process in place for using compulsory purchase orders to acquire sites for affordable housing.

The Chair advised that many of the above issues had been raised at the Highland Housing Summit and there would be the opportunity for further discussion at the Members briefing on 21 November 2024. She also advised that it was hoped major developments in the area such as the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport would retain young people in the area and help balance the population.

Ms L Robertson, Tenants Representative advised that the universal message arising from national housing events and summits was that every home needed to be accessible and adaptable. Social housing was important in tackling poverty and exclusion and she referred to the potential to lobby the Scottish Government to allow local authorities to raise income through a reformed Council tax to build the homes required in communities.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- i. **APPROVED** the Strategic Housing Investment Plan attached as Appendix 1 to the report, for submission to the Scottish Government in draft form pending consideration by Area Committees; and
- ii. **AGREED** the indicative planned investment programme to 2030 contained in Appendix 2 to the report, subject to further discussion by Area Committees.

11. Delivery Plan Budget Monitoring & Progress Update: Reconfiguring Our Assets – Affordable Housing and Net Zero: Energy Efficient Homes Sgrùdadh Buidseat Plana Lìbhrigidh & Cunntas air Adhartas: Ag Ath-rèiteach na So-mhaoin Againn – Taigheadas Neo-chosgail agus Neoni Lom: Dachannan Lùth-èifeachdach

There had been circulated Report No HP/28/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- in response to a query, it was confirmed Mr D Macpherson would be provided with details of progress with the roll out of LED street lighting;
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided on how the Social Value Charter for renewables would be advanced to ensure maximum benefit to the affordable housing programme;
- confirmation was sought and provided that a review would be undertaken of the level of support provided to tenants following the installation of new heating systems;
- noting that a range of factors that impacted on the affordability of a heating system including the significant increase in electricity tariffs. Individual tenants experiencing difficulties with their bills be encouraged to contact the Housing Team in the first instance;
- the potential for the Council to test the performance of air source heating systems in terms of value for money. It was explained that case studies had been done on performance levels linked in with whole house retrofit and further details were provided in this regard;
- the opportunity to make ongoing design improvements to new housing development and confirmation a specific issue with fire alarms at Joe Yates Court, Dingwall would be investigated;
- in terms of key risks, confirmation that Mrs A Maclean would be provided with further detail on work being undertaken to assess the space standards and specifications of newbuilds; and
- the consideration being given to a small modular contract to test this particular product in terms of cost and quality be welcomed.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the progress provided in the Programme and Project updates in the report; and
- ii. that the Deliver Affordable Housing Project would be updated to reflect the outcomes and actions as a result of the Highland Housing Summit.

12. Annual Assurance Statement 2024 Aithris Bharantais Bhliadhnail 2024

Transparency Statement: Mr M Gregson made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item on the grounds his brother in law was a member of the Scottish Regulatory Framework Committee and was an adviser to the Scottish Government for the energy efficiency standards for Scottish housing. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No HP/29/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:

- an explanation was sought and provided on the engagement undertaken in relation to the Customer Satisfaction Survey, the challenges in getting new and younger tenants to participate and the need to adapt to tenant feedback on their preferred method of engagement;
- in regard to the above, further consideration would be given to how to more proactively engage with new tenants; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the reasons for the grading and progress being made in respect of compliance with the Scottish Housing Quality Standard.

Thereafter, the Committee heard from the Ms L Richardson, Tenant Representative on Tenants Together Scotland's lobbying activity in relation to tenant participation and design of the tenant satisfaction survey to better capture the views of tenants. She also raised a number of fire safety and accessibility concerns on behalf of disabled and older tenants.

It was confirmed that ongoing discussions on the issues raised would continue to be taken forward with tenant representatives and Members.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the Annual Assurance Statement for 2024 detailed in Appendix 1 of the report.

13. Property Revenue Maintenance Programme Update 2024-25 Cunntas às Ùr mu Phrògram Gleidhidh Teachd-a-steach Seilbhe 2024–25

There had been circulated Report No HP/30/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- reference to the benefits and greater clarity the new Single Property Service would deliver for Members and the Committee;

- further clarity was sought and provided on the budget allocated to the Single Property Service, the process for this being prioritised across the Council's estate and reference to the additionality and enhanced facilities that would be delivered by Highland Investment Plan; and
- the importance of ensuring the Responsible Premises Officers issued the appropriate fire safety and drill information in Council premises where partners were co-located.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the:

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

14. Asset Rationalisation Update 2024-25 Cunntas às Ùr mu Chuibhreannachadh So-mhaoin 2024–25

There had been circulated Report No HP/32/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- confirmation was sought and provided that an update would be provided to local Members on the deliverables and benefits the Caithness Demonstrator project was achieving. This would include options for the future use of the Wick Library and community views on this issue;
- in response to a query, confirmation that further details would be provided to a ward business meeting on the status of the former Finance Office, Nairn and proposals for the Nairn Depot;

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the progress on the asset rationalisation workstreams.

15. Tenant Participation and Engagement Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Chom-pàirteachadh Mhàladairean

There had been circulated Report No HP/33/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members heard from Mr D Paterson, Tenants Representative in relation to this item. Thereafter, the following main points were raised:

- the tenant representatives be commended on the level of volunteering and commitment they provided to their communities;
- the potential to refresh the 'rate your estate' initiative involving local housing officers, Members, tenants and residents;
- the 'rate your estate' initiative continued to be active in Caithness and further details were provided on the benefits of this approach;
- the potential to have an environmental improvement budget line in next year's budget for housing estates to enable improvements to be undertaken at a ward level;
- noting that a percentage of the Area HRA Capital budget could be allocated towards environmental improvements to reflect tenant priorities; and

- the process of feeding in tenant views to budget planning in terms of priorities would be a positive step.

Thereafter, Members heard from Ms L Richardson, Tenant Representative on improving accessibility to the tenant consultation process and being mindful of those with disabilities and visual impairments and where English was not their first language.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Tenant Participation & Engagement Strategy 2024-2029 as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report, subject to agreed amendment at sign-off meetings of the Tenant Working Group in November and December 2024; and
- ii. **NOTED** the ongoing activities and commitment to tenant engagement demonstrated by tenant volunteers and officers.

16. Update on Resettlement and Humanitarian Programme Fios às Ùr mun Phrògram Ath-shuidheachaidh agus Daonnachdail

There had been circulated Report No HP/34/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members commended the Resettlement Team, officers, schools, partners, third sector and other organisations and communities for the level of support provided. The refugees and displaced persons who had settled in the Highlands had brought huge benefits to their communities and schools and it was anticipated more people would require to be resettled in future and it was hoped they would be welcomed.

Thereafter, the following main points were raised:

- confirmation was sought and provided that the Council was fully funded for the resettlement and humanitarian schemes;
- the importance of positive messages being communicated to communities in relation to the resettlement of refugees and displaced persons and the fact local Members had a key role in this regard;
- an assurance was sought and provided in relation to resettlement of Afghan families in transitional accommodation at Cameron Barracks, Inverness; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that ward updates would be provided as appropriate on the resettlement and humanitarian support being provided.

The Committee **NOTED** the efforts made by Council Services, partner agencies and communities in delivering services to households requiring resettlement and humanitarian support and that ward updates would be provided as appropriate.

The meeting was closed at 2.25pm.