

MORAY COUNCIL

Minute of Meeting of the Housing and Community Safety Committee

Tuesday, 06 September 2022

Council Chambers, Council Office, High Street, Elgin, IV30 1BX

PRESENT

Councillor Theresa Coull, Councillor John Divers, Councillor Amber Dunbar, Councillor Jérémie Fernandes, Councillor Donald Gatt, Councillor Sandy Keith, Councillor Scott Lawrence, Councillor Marc Macrae, Councillor Shona Morrison, Councillor Bridget Mustard, Councillor Kathleen Robertson, Councillor Derek Ross, Councillor Draeyk Van Der Horn

APOLOGIES

Ms Anna Bamforth, Ms Jane Bartecki, Mr Ronald Tolmie

IN ATTENDANCE

Also in attendance at the above meeting were the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance), Head of Housing and Property Services, Acting Housing Strategy and Development Manager, Building Services Manager, Housing Services Manager, Housing Needs Manager, Property Asset Manager, Georgina Anderson, Senior Solicitor, and Lindsey Robinson, Committee Services Officer, as Clerk to the Committee.

1. Chair

Councillor Amber Dunbar, as Chair of the Housing and Community Safety Committee, chaired the meeting.

2. Declaration of Group Decisions and Members Interests *

In terms of Standing Order 20 and the Councillors' Code of Conduct, there were no declarations from Group Leaders or Spokespersons in regard to any prior decisions taken on how Members will vote on any item on the agenda or any declarations of Member's interests in respect of any item on the agenda.

3. Resolution

The Committee resolved that under Section 50A (4) and (5) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended, the public and media representatives be excluded from the meeting for Items 12 and 13 of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information of the class described in the relevant Paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

Paragraph Number of Minute	Paragraph Number of Schedule 7a and Reason
12	9 - Information on terms proposed or to be proposed by or to the Authority.

13	1 - Information relating to staffing matters. 2 - Information relating to any particular occupier or former occupier of, or applicant for, accommodation provided by or at the expense of the Authority.
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4. Minute of Meeting of the Housing and Community Safety Committee on 21 June 2022

The minute of the meeting of the Housing and Community Safety Committee dated 21 June 2022 was submitted and approved subject to a review of the notes of the meeting being undertaken in regard to why the discussion on moss on properties specifically in New Elgin between Councillor Divers and Officers did not appear on the minute and the outcome advised accordingly

Under reference to paragraph 6 of the Minute Councillor Dunbar stated that at the previous Committee on 21 June 2022, Councillor Keith had raised a question on the policy in regards to spending the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) surplus and the plans on how this would be spent and what were the plans of the administration.

She stated that in terms of the methodology for setting the HRA balance, while a number of factors have historically informed the level of balance budgeted for, there has not been a defined policy. Officers are now working on a policy which is aligned with the General Services approach, taking into account of particular risks and other risk factors when determining the budget.

She further stated that there was a significant backlog in maintenance due to the pandemic as well as the need to improve the housing stock, the Administration would be keen to see any available funding in the budget used to ensure this overdue work is carried out.

She continued that the Administration was keen on collaboration and that strategic direction ultimately would be decided by all members of the Committee and by others if necessary. She asked that, if any Councillors had any specific ideas on this point or anything else relevant to the Committee, they should raise them with her directly and they can be explored further.

5. Written Questions **

The Committee noted the following written question submitted by Councillor Keith and the Council's response thereto:

What consideration has been given to introducing a Furniture Rental style scheme for tenants of socially rented accommodation in Moray similar to those scheme operating in Aberdeen and Newcastle?

RESPONSE

We do not currently have a furniture leasing scheme. The Council did have a scheme in 2005 which was established as a means of matching surplus furniture which had been purchased (and no longer required) following local flooding incidents in the area and those who may benefit from receiving it. This scheme was resource limited and therefore ended when the furniture ran out.

Currently at time of allocation, our Housing Support Team will guide clients through the process of applying for Community Care Grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund. This has become an established and successful way of ensuring that homeless applicants are moving into properties with furniture, where they do not have the means to independently fund it. Our current tenancy sustainment rates for homeless applicants are in the top quartile nationally, which indicates that tenants are generally being housed in appropriate accommodation with the resources and skills they require to maintain the tenancy.

This is however an area we are not complacent about and we will engage with applicants and monitor trends of households struggling to acquire furniture at the moving in stage, to inform whether operation of a Furniture Leasing Scheme may be of assistance.

There were no supplementary questions asked by Councillor Keith.

The Committee noted the following written question submitted by Councillor Mustard and the Council's response thereto:

Recently I had a neurodivergent constituent contact me about the Transport Scotland Survey on the A96 which they found difficult to complete because of the wording within some of the questions. They felt some of the questions were vague, i.e. without definitions or making assumptions about the interpretation of the questions, and therefore found it difficult to respond. The work I have been involved in shows that when issues arise which prevents the person from understanding the question, they do not continue to complete the survey and therefore their potential input is lost. Taking lessons from this constituent's concerns and looking at some of the phraseology within the questions within the housing needs assessment, some questions may create difficulties for some people.

For instance, neurodivergent people may struggle with questions which ask 'could you' and then ask for details such as the income questions. The phrase 'could you' implies a yes/no answer, as in 'yes, I could provide you with details'. Instead, something more direct as such "Please provide" may be better.

This type of vague language also does not assist people whose first language is not English, such as British Sign Language (BSL) users. From the training provided to members by the British Deaf Association, written surveys pose difficulties for BSL users, and they would recommend an alternative format such as access to signed questions.

Additionally, the Scottish Government are consulting on a draft plan to improve and strengthen Scotland's equality evidence base. The consultation runs until 21 September 2022. As part of the strategy, new guidance on sex, gender identity and trans status was published by the Chief Statistician in September 2021. Therefore, the housing needs assessment should follow that guidance

These are just a few examples of what may be problematic to some people within our community whose voices are important, and their input is valuable to gain an accurate picture of the housing need in Moray.

What consideration was given to equalities in the phrasing of the questions and what mitigating action is in place to assist people to complete the survey?

RESPONSE

Firstly in terms of methodology, the Housing Need and Demand Assessment survey is being undertaken using a hybrid research methodology, incorporating both telephone and online survey methods.

For the telephone methodology, it is one which allows the consultant Research Resource to readily support residents to 'talk through' the interview meaning that any who have difficulty in reading or understanding can be supported through the process. It also allows them to identify any other particular needs when they are speaking to respondents and do what they can to provide for these. If any respondents have hearing difficulties they can utilise TypeTalk technology if required. Moreover, those individuals selected for the survey have been notified by letter and on that letter there is a telephone number and email address for Research Resource where they can get in touch to make arrangements for interview. These arrangements may include appointments at particular dates, times or in a particular way. They can, and are happy to, liaise with support workers, interpreters and family members to facilitate inclusion in the research process.

The consultant has augmented this with an online methodology in order to broaden access and participation in the survey. The online methodology allows respondents to use text readers, increase font size, use online translation facilities or change background colours in order to make the screen more accessible when completing. The survey is also developed as a multi-mode online survey and is screen adaptive meaning that respondents can take part on PC, tablet or mobile phone and the survey will adapt, which has been found to help response and inclusion.

In terms of questionnaire design, the consultant has been very mindful of inclusion, but happy to respond to feedback. A large number of the survey questions used are tried and tested and have been successfully used in other similar surveys. They are Market Research Society Company Partners and follow their guidelines with respect to questionnaire design. This means asking questions in a clear and unbiased way, to ask questions that are within the frame of reference of the respondent and can be easily responded to and delivering these in an accessible structure.

As a supplementary question, Councillor Mustard sought clarification on how people access help if they need it.

In response, the Head of Housing and Property Services advised that guidance would be added to the web pages.

6. Housing and Property Budget Monitoring to 30 June 2022

A report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) presented the Committee with the budget position for the Housing Revenue Account and General Services Other Housing Budget for the period to 30 June 2022.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed to note the budget monitoring report for the period to 30 June 2022.

7. Housing Investment 2022-23

A report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) informed the Committee of the progress of the Housing Investment Programme 2022/23 to 30 June 2022.

Following consideration, where Officers answered questions relating to moss removal, electrical testing and the forced entry to properties, the Committee agreed to:

- i. note the progress of the Housing investment Programme to 30 June 2022, as detailed in Section 3 and appendices I to VI of the report; and
- ii. approve the service developments outlined in paragraph 3.10 of the report.

8. Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan

A report by the Depute Chief Executive informed the Committee of progress on development on Moray's revised Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan and sought approval for a service development in line with the priorities.

Councillor Coull in referring to Appendix 1 of the report and in particular to those households where a lack of life skills featured highly, sought clarification on whether Education could help with improving the life skills of young people.

In response, the Housing Needs Manager advised that housing staff used to attend the secondary schools twice a year, but this was suspended due to the pandemic, but that he could look at the possibility of restarting this .

Councillor Robertson stated that she wished to commend the staff for their hard work in the significant reduction in temporary accommodation.

Following further discussion Councillor Morrison sought clarification on what support was available to council tenants during the current cost of living crisis.

In response, the Head of Housing and Property Services agreed to arrange a briefing for Members on the approach being taken to support tenants through the current financial crisis; .

Thereafter, the Committee agreed:

- i. to note the most recent iteration of the Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan in appendix 1 of the report, which was submitted to the Scottish Government on 3 August 2022;
- ii. the service development of £46K per annum detailed in paragraph 4.1 of the report;
- iii. that the Housing Needs Manager investigate with Education reinstating housing staff visits to secondary schools which were suspended due to the pandemic;
- iv. that the Head of Housing and Property Services arranges for a briefing for Members on the approach being taken to support tenants through the current financial crisis; and
- v. to commend staff for the work undertaken in regard to the significant reduction in temporary accommodation and the approach taken in regard to dealing with people in crisis.

9. Moray Affordable Housing Investment Programme

A report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) informed the Committee of progress on the Affordable Housing Investment Programme in Moray.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed to:

- i. note the progress on the Moray Affordable Housing Investment Programme;
- ii. note progress on the delivery of the Council's new build and acquisition programme;
- iii. the potential for accelerated delivery within the Council's own new build programme; and
- iv. note progress on delivery of housing at Bilbohall, Elgin.

10. Housing Management Review and Service Developments

A report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) provided the Committee with the progress on the review of Housing Management. It also included recommendations for service developments which arise from it and provided an overview of service developments within the 2022/23 budget.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed:

- i. to note the progress of reviewing the Housing Management structure and resources;
- ii. that the budget set aside for a Housing Inspector post is amended to recruit 1 FTE mainstream Housing Officer instead;
- iii. to the addition of a further 1 FTE Area Housing manager and 2.1 FTE Housing Officers to the Housing Management structure; and
- iv. to note the overview of the service developments within the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2022.23 as detailed in paragraph 5.2 of the report.

Councillor Van der Horn left during the discussion of this item due to connection issues.

11. Question Time ***

Councillor Gatt sought clarification as to when estate walk-about by Housing Officers would be reinstated.

In response, the Housing Services Manager confirmed that some visits have restarted but not in all areas. He confirmed he would get back to Members with a full response.

Councillor Fernandes raised a concern that house prices in Moray have increased by 17.3% in the last year, making it one of the highest in Scotland. He stated that the house prices in Moray were still below the national average, but that Moray had a low wage economy.

He was of the opinion that some people moving into the area for work were having to stay in Air BnB for up to six months before finding suitable long term accommodation due to investors buying up properties for rentals or short term lets.

He was further of the opinion that the shortage of housing was having a negative impact on local people wanting to stay in the area and on young professionals wanting to move to Moray and sought clarification on the view of officers on this issue and what more the Council could do to meet the housing needs of the local population.

In response, the Head of Housing and Property advised that there was a Housing Need and Demand Assessment currently underway that includes a particular focus on key workers and incoming workers, and will evidence the extent of the unmet need in the current housing market.

He further advised that this comprehensive approach would be used to inform the subsequent affordable housing development programme, any changes required to the allocations policy, and the local plan for future developments.

He clarified that although the full report would not be available until Spring 2023, if there was evidence of any emerging trends they would be responded to.

12. Building Services Trading Operation Budget 2022-23 Annual Budget and Budget Monitoring [Para 9]

A confidential report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) presented the Committee with the Building Services Trading Operation Budget for 2022/23 and budget monitoring information for the period to 30 June 2022.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed to:

- i. note the proposed Building Services Trading Operation Budget for 2022/23 as detailed in section 5 and Appendix I of the report;
- ii. note the service development proposals at a cost of £208k as detailed in section 6 of the report;
- iii. note the 2022/23 Building Services business priorities highlighted in section 7 of the report;
- iv. note the financial information for the period to 30 June 2022, as detailed in section 8 and Appendix II of the report; and
- v. note Building Services operating performance for the period to 30 June 2022, as set out in section 9 of the report.

13. Provision of Temporary Homeless Accommodation [Para 1 and 2]

A confidential report by the Depute Chief Executive (Economy, Environment and Finance) informed the Committee of the intent to cease commissioning a supported accommodation service in Elgin for the purpose of providing temporary accommodation to people who are homeless, as defined in Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, Part II, (Homeless Persons), as amended.

Following consideration, the Committee agreed:

- i. to the proposed closure of the temporary accommodation property detailed in paragraph 4.1 of the report;
- ii. to note that the Council will monitor and reconfigure our stock of temporary accommodation, where required, in order to mitigate the impact of the aforementioned closure; and
- iii. to note that officers will work with Sacro to manage the transition to the new model, including exploration of future employment opportunities for affected employees.