



Issue 5 October 2005

Homeward

Transfer news for Comhairle Tenants from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Hebridean Housing Partnership

Use your vote

Welcome from Councillor Norman MacLeod and HHP Chairman George Lonie

It's been a long road but we are almost there! Very shortly you'll be receiving your ballot paper on plans to transfer all of the Comhairle's homes to Hebridean Housing Partnership.

We've done our best to make sure you have all the information you need to make an informed decision. Over the last six weeks we've manned transfer showrooms in Stornoway and Balivanich, carried out a door-knocking information exercise supported by HHP's transfer trailer as well as making sure every tenant received their copy of the Bringing Home the Future Stage One Notice and video.

With this busy period of activity nearly at an end it is now down to you to decide on the future of your homes. The Comhairle has made it quite clear from the start that it sees transfer to HHP as the best available option for social housing in the Western Isles, injecting much needed new investment that will deliver improved housing and improved housing services as well as a significant



HHP Chairman George Lonie, Board member Chris Morrison and Comhairle housing chair Norman MacLeod outside Harbour View

programme of new house building. But ultimately, it's for you to decide. Make sure you use your vote when the ballot paper drops through your door.

Rent increases inevitable without transfer, says Comhairle

Transfer funding needed to meet new housing standards

The Comhairle would be forced to raise rents significantly in order to meet new Government housing standards. That's the message from Councillor Norman MacLeod the Comhairle's housing spokesman.

The Comhairle has worked out that, to maintain services and investment, tenants would need to pay significantly higher rents compared to HHP. These substantial rent increases would be necessary to meet the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, which requires all social

housing to meet a certain quality by 2015.

Councillor MacLeod said, "Substantial rent increases are inevitable without a significant change in the way that we fund our social housing. Whether transfer goes ahead or not, we are required to meet new Scottish Executive regulations on social housing standards. Currently, much of our housing doesn't match up, so if transfer to HHP does not go ahead we will need a significant cash injection or we will have to look at more drastic measures such as possible service or staff reductions."

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Rent increases inevitable without transfer, says Comhairle

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The Comhairle has also worked out that to match HHP's proposed rent increases, which will be limited to a maximum of the rate of inflation plus 1%, it would have £10million less than HHP to invest in services and tenants' homes over the next 10 years.

"Contrary to some claims that have been made there are no proposals other than housing transfer that can deliver the necessary investment," continued Cllr MacLeod. "Only in the event of transfer will the Scottish Executive write-off the housing debt of £38million, which is absolutely critical to delivering the type of

service that tenants have come to expect."

As well as the debt write-off, which currently costs 75p in every pound of housing income raised, the Scottish Executive has promised an additional £15million in the event of transfer to support delivery of HHP's new build programme, and an overall investment programme of over £100 million. The total investment package will deliver improved housing, more responsive and efficient housing services and much needed new homes for the Western Isles, should tenants vote for it in next month's ballot.

"The only certainty tenants will have if they

stay with the Comhairle is a significant increase in rent levels," concluded Cllr MacLeod. "HHP, on the other hand, can guarantee rent levels for the first five years following transfer, and after that they pledge to maintain rents at affordable levels, a pledge that will be safeguarded by the tenants who sit on the HHP Board. This is another key point. All of HHP's decisions are made by a Board of voluntary members. A third of the Board are tenants, including the vice-chairman, and they will ensure that rents are kept at affordable levels."



hhp showrooms display everything but the kitchen sink!

Have you made it down to one of HHP's housing transfer showrooms yet? Situated in Stornoway and Balivanich the two showrooms have staff on hand to explain HHP's promises to tenants as well as demonstrating examples of the kitchens, bathrooms, and heating systems tenants can expect following transfer.

The organisation's two premises, one at Harbour View in Stornoway and the other at Winfield Way in Balivanich, also provide information literature on HHP's plans, including its home improvement programme and proposed new services.

HHP is planning an extensive improvements programme, which will only be possible through new funding released in the event of tenants voting in favour of transfer in an independent ballot expected next month. Developed following detailed consultation with tenants and tenant groups, HHP's plans will include the fitting of over 600 brand new kitchens in the five years following transfer.

As well as the two showrooms the HHP transfer trailer has been on the road for the last six weeks showing tenants what they can expect from HHP.

"Harbour View is open outside normal office hours so that those who work can also come along," said George Lonie, HHP Chairman. "However, we realise that not everyone can get to Stornoway or Balivanich so we've also provided the HHP transfer trailer, to give tenants in more remote communities the opportunity to see what's on offer."



HHP Chairman George Lonie inspecting kitchen units at Harbour View

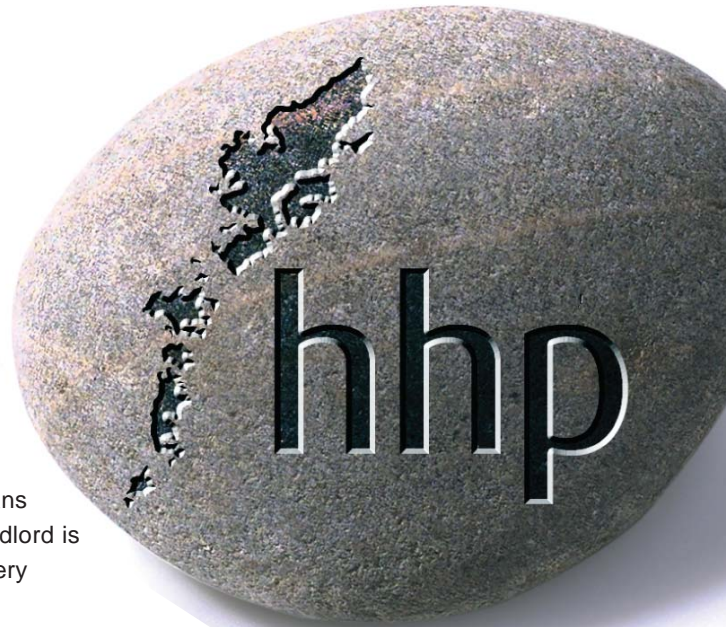
HHP's plans will bring all Comhairle homes up to the Hebridean Housing Quality Standard, introduce improved housing services and deliver a new build programme for the first time in over a decade.

"Through transfer, funds will be made available that simply wouldn't be otherwise," George continued. "It's only through this funding that HHP will be able to deliver an investment programme that will see the installation of 100s of new kitchens, bathrooms, windows, doors and wiring systems in the near future."



The HHP transfer trailer

Are you undecided?



You'll have received lots of information on the transfer since HHP's plans were unveiled, however transfer of the Comhairle's housing to a new landlord is a big deal and we would expect all tenants to consider the information very carefully before making a decision on how to vote.

There is sure to be plenty of healthy debate around the big issues, such as investment in new homes, rent levels and tenants rights. If you are still to make up your mind then we would ask you to consider the following 10 transfer FACTS:

Fact 1

ONLY in the event of transfer will the Comhairle's housing debt of £38million be written off and money be made available for new homes and upgrades to existing ones. Repayment of the debt currently costs the Comhairle's housing department 75p in every pound of income raised.

Fact 2

Without transfer, rents will have to be raised significantly to pay for the improvements needed and there will be no extra money to invest in the building of new affordable housing.

Fact 3

ONLY in the event of transfer will new money be made available to build new social housing across the Western Isles, new housing that will provide economic benefits and help reverse the flow of people away from the Islands. Over the first 10 years 275 additional homes will be built, including 40 every year for the first five years.

Fact 4

All Comhairle homes must reach the Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015. **WITHOUT** transfer and the extra investment it will release, this will have to be achieved either through a reduction in services and staff or significant rent increases.

Fact 5

WITHOUT transfer housing services and housing staff face an uncertain future.

Fact 6

ONLY in the event of transfer can rents be guaranteed. HHP will make a binding guarantee to tenants that rents will not rise by more than inflation plus 1% for each of the first five years after transfer. This guarantee is legally binding. The Comhairle cannot make such a guarantee.

Fact 7

ALL tenants' existing rights, including **right to buy**, will be protected following transfer.

Fact 8

Your housing benefits will not be affected by transfer. Any benefits that you are currently entitled to will not change because of transfer.

Fact 9

Transfer is about community ownership not profit making. HHP Board members are unpaid volunteers and any surpluses made by HHP must be invested back into homes and services.

Fact 10

Transfer will allow tenants more control over decision making than ever before. Tenants will sit on the board of HHP and help set future rent levels. All tenants will be eligible to become members of HHP and elect Board members.

HHP pleased with response to plans

Housing transfer seems to be a popular option amongst Comhairle tenants, with more than seven times as many saying that they are for as are against HHP taking over the Comhairle's housing.

A substantial sample of tenants from all over the Islands were interviewed in an independent survey in August and September. Almost two thirds (61.5%) said that they would definitely or probably vote yes if a ballot were to be held tomorrow, and just 8.5% said that they would definitely or probably vote no. 93% said that they would definitely or probably vote in the October ballot to decide if transfer will go ahead.

It's widely recognised that the availability of housing is a problem on the Western Isles, with 74% saying they were aware that there are over 1,000 people on the housing waiting list. A massive 92% thought it was important that HHP plans to build 40 new homes a year in the first five years after transfer.

When reminded that 75p in every pound of housing income raised by the Comhairle goes towards paying off its £38 million housing debt, 53.5% said that they were all in favour of transfer as the best way of paying off debts and raising more money for improvements. Only 6.5% said that they

were totally against it.

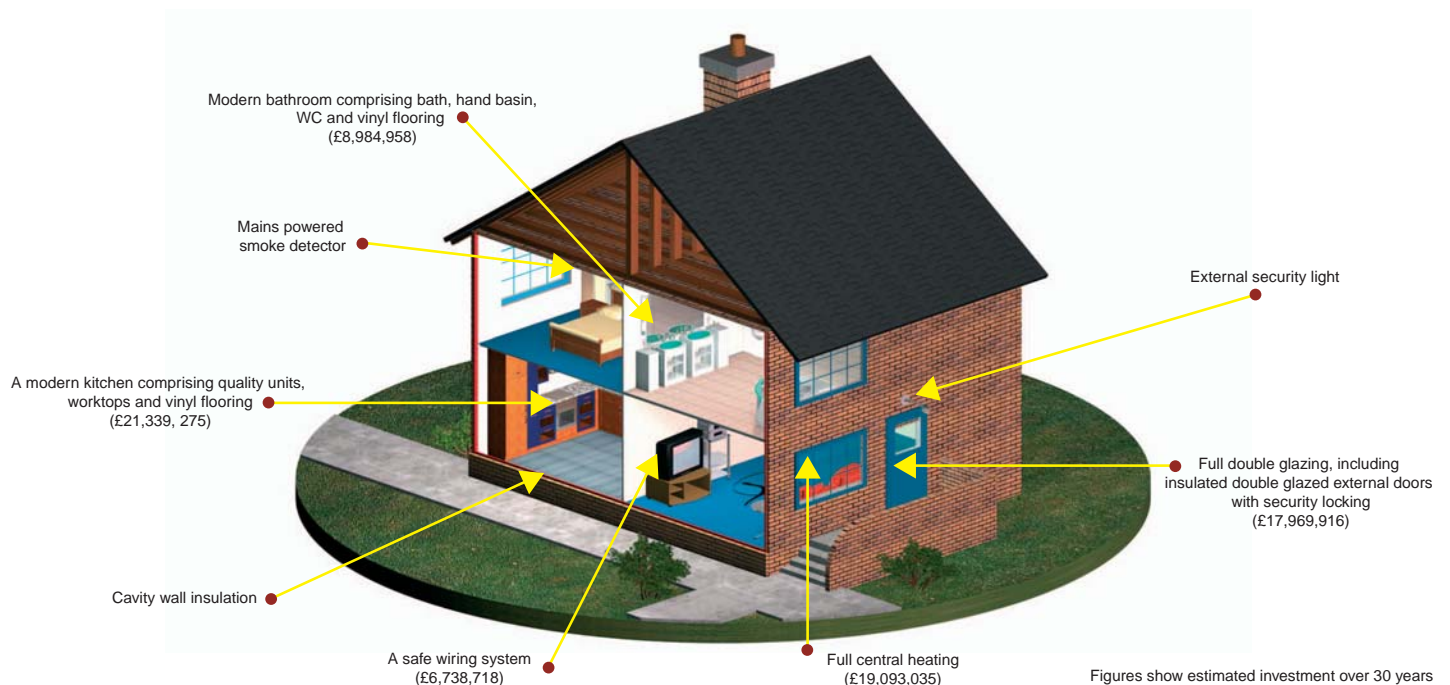
When asked what concerns they had about transfer, 'rent increases' was the most common, mentioned by 10% of those surveyed. George Lonie, HHP Chairman, points out that rent levels would remain affordable. "HHP would give a five-year guarantee to tenants that rents won't go up by more than inflation plus 1% a year - the Comhairle can't give that kind of guarantee. After that HHP would strive to continue the low level rent increases, with tenants having a say in future levels."

£1000s to be spent on every home

One of the main driving forces behind transfer to HHP is the need for investment to bring all of the Comhairle's homes up to the new Scottish Housing Quality Standard by 2015.

HHP has gone even further and consulted with the Comhairle and tenants to develop the Hebridean Housing Quality Standard (HHQS) to address the specific needs of homes in the Western Isles. HHP plans to invest a total of £106million over 30 years to bring every home up to the Standard. That's an average of £56,144 per home.

This graphic shows the features that every home would have:



Forum in favour of transfer

Housing transfer is all about community ownership, which means that tenants will get a real say in the decisions that HHP make if transfer goes ahead. HHP would be able to invest in many areas that the Comhairle can't, meaning lots of benefits for tenants.

As secretary of the Western Isles Residents Forum, which represents the views of tenants across the Islands, and a tenant of Cearns, the largest housing estate on the Islands, Etta Mackenzie believes that transfer is a great opportunity for tenants.

"For me, the key point about transfer is that tenants will have a real say. Tenants will be able to become members of HHP, and then put themselves forward for election to the HHP Board. There are the same number of tenants, Comhairle members and independent members on the board, which means that tenants will have an equal voice when it comes to making decisions on issues like future rent increases.

"Even when it comes to home improvements, I am pleased to see that tenants would have a say in the layout of their new kitchens and bathrooms, and given a choice of things like the type of kitchen units, handles, worktops, tiling and floor coverings."

HHP's main focus is to bring every home in the Western Isles up to the Scottish Quality Housing Standard by 2015, but Etta is also pleased to see that part of HHP's plan is to build more new homes on the Islands.

"Obviously tenants would benefit from improvements like new kitchens, bathrooms and heating systems, but I think that it's the new build programme that will really benefit communities in the future.

"The Comhairle has not been able to build any new houses for more than a decade, which means that there are currently over 1000 people on the housing waiting list. It's difficult for anyone to get a Comhairle home at the moment, and I fear that our communities will be hit hard as young people are forced to move away from the Islands to find somewhere to live.

"HHP are promising to build almost 300

new homes over the next 10 years, which will help to reduce the flow of people away from the Islands and hopefully attract new people and companies to come over from the mainland. I think it would be a real shame if we didn't take this chance to help stop resident numbers declining.

"Ultimately it's for all tenants to make up their own minds, but we have been listening to the transfer plans since they were first suggested and see transfer as the best way forward if our homes are to be improved and services maintained at the current level. The package on offer is the best available and gives all tenants certainty and a good deal for our homes. The Comhairle simply can't match this."



Your thoughts so far

Have you had your say on the housing transfer proposals? All tenants in the Western Isles have now received their copy of the Stage One notice, which contains details of the proposals to transfer all of the Comhairle's housing to HHP. Tenants had 28 days from the issue of the notice to make comments, and it seems as though you have had plenty to say.



There have been some very positive comments so far, with remarks such as:

"I'm happy to go ahead", "I'm looking forward to the changes" and "I agree with transfer as it will generate funds to provide rented accommodation for young couples."

It is understandable that many of you will still have questions. The Comhairle will shortly be sending out the Stage Two document, which will follow up on tenants' comments from Stage One and give details of any changes that have been made to the proposals, but here are answers to a few of the questions asked so far:

"How can tenants make sure the ballot will be run properly?"

The secret postal ballot will be completely independent and will be conducted by Electoral Reform Services, one of the most respected balloting organisations in the UK. The organisation is part of the Electoral Reform Society and oversaw its first ballot in 1898. It has acted as an independent body in Trade Union elections and is a consultant to the United Nations. You can rest assured that Electoral Reform Services will see that the ballot is fair and accurate and that neither the Comhairle nor HHP will know which way any individual tenant has voted.

"Where is the money going to come from for all the improvements?"

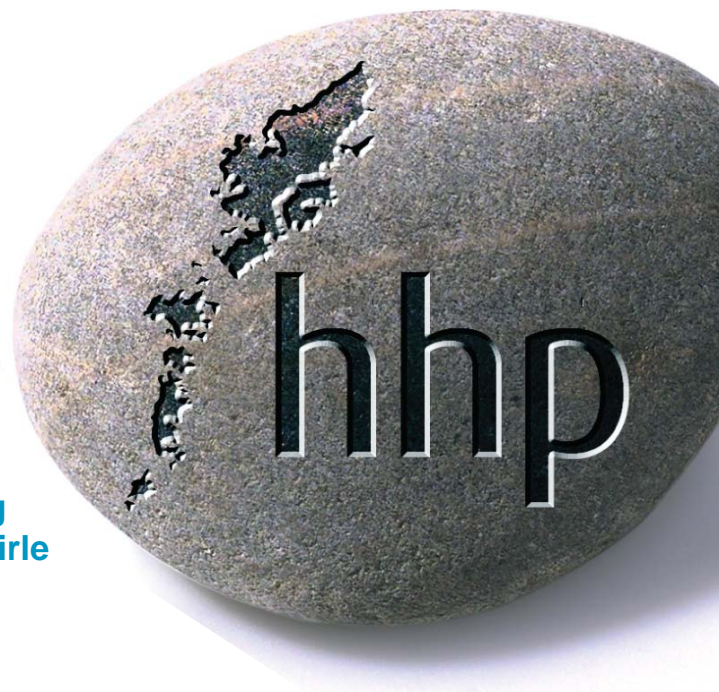
HHP will be able to invest a lot more of tenants' rent money back into housing improvements and services because it will not have to pay back the Comhairle's £38 million housing debt - that will be cleared by the Government after transfer. At the moment 75p in every pound received by the Comhairle goes towards loan payments. The Scottish Executive would also make an additional £12.5 million available for new houses. As a Registered Social Landlord, HHP would also be able to access grant funding.

"Will I still get Housing Benefit?"

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit would not be affected by transfer. They will continue to be paid by the Comhairle at levels set by the government.

The Stage Two document will answer more of your questions, but if you would like further information, or to see examples of improvements that would be made after transfer, you can drop in to HHP's premises at Harbour View in Stornoway and Winfield Way in Balivanich. The HHP transfer trailer will also be travelling across the Western Isles to give those who can't make it along to the premises a chance to speak to staff and see what you can expect from HHP after transfer.

Make your vote count!



Transfer will only go ahead if the majority of tenants who vote, vote yes in a secret ballot that gets under way in October. The future of housing in the Western Isles is in your hands and Comhairle members are urging you to use your vote.



Cllr Alex Macdonald (Carloway)
Convener of the Comhairle

We want to provide the best possible housing service to the people of the Western Isles, but the main thing stopping us from doing that is the Comhairle's £38million housing debt. If the transfer goes ahead, that debt will not transfer to HHP, which

will mean more money for improvements, repairs and maintenance, and new houses. We think that transfer is the best option for tenants in the Western Isles, but ultimately it is up to tenants to decide. I would urge every tenant to use their vote.



Cllr Norman MacLeod (Knock and Bayble)
Chair, Housing Committee

The prospect of transfer to HHP is a great opportunity for tenants. Not only will they have a real say in housing issues, they'll also see major improvement works in their homes and the communities around them. With rents guaranteed

not to rise by more than inflation plus 1% for the first five years after transfer, a guarantee the Comhairle can't make, this is a chance for tenants to get fully modernised homes without the prospect of large rent increases.



Cllr Norman A Macdonald (Uig)

One of the most important things about the proposed transfer is that tenants will have a real say. Transfer is all about community ownership and tenants will have more influence on housing issues than they've ever had before. Tenants will be

represented on the HHP board and will influence issues such as future rent levels and housing repair and improvement programmes. Transfer can't go ahead unless tenants vote for it, so that's why I'd call for everyone to make their vote count.

Kenny says 'Use your vote!'



It's been a few weeks since you received your copy of the 'Bringing home the future' transfer video, featuring local radio presenter Kenny MacIver. Filmed earlier this year, taking in communities up and down the Isles, the video featured real tenants

asking questions of real members of HHP. With the ballot just round the corner we'd ask you to remember Kenny's most important words of advice:

"But let's be very clear about one thing –

transfer can only happen if the majority of tenants voting in the ballot, later in the year, vote "yes". All tenants, including joint tenants, are eligible to vote, so make your vote count. Use it. Don't waste it. Think about it... what do you want?"

Get in touch

For further information or advice regarding the proposed housing transfer, you can call the following numbers:

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar on
01851 709338

Hebridean Housing Partnership on
01851 706368

Independent Tenant Adviser, TPAS on
freephone 0800 269645

Alternatively visit the website:
www.hebrideanhousing.co.uk

If you wish a member of staff to call at your home to answer any queries you may have about the transfer, please contact the Comhairle on the above number.

If you have any comments or queries on this information bulletin please contact

Ken Newton or Dan Hughes, TNC, tel
01698 420420, fax 01698 424000 or
email team@tnc.uk

Special communications needs

If you, a relative or neighbour needs assistance with understanding this bulletin because of visual impairment, learning difficulty or language reasons please tell the Comhairle and we will arrange for help.

What's next?

With the first stage of formal consultation now finished we are taking the opportunity to analyse your comments and views. Following this analysis you will shortly be receiving a brochure called the Stage 2 Notice, required by the Scottish Executive before we can proceed with a ballot.

The timetable will proceed as follows:

Late September - STAGE 2 formal consultation

During the second stage of formal consultation you will receive further information from the Comhairle responding to questions and issues raised during Stage 1.

October - BALLOT

The independent ballot of all Comhairle tenants on the proposed transfer will take place in October. Only in the event of the majority of tenants voting in favour will transfer then take place. The ballot will be a secret postal ballot conducted by the Electoral Reform Society.

In the event of a 'yes' vote, transfer itself would take place in 2006.

