



Hebridean Housing Partnership - Our plans for your homes

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HHP's plans explained

Welcome to this special issue of Homeward, in which we'll be looking in detail at what HHP is offering tenants following transfer. With the Comhairle approving HHP's plans in June, paving the way for investment of almost £100million in your homes, we are now in a position to explain to tenants exactly what HHP is offering, ahead of the formal consultation and independent ballot which will take place in the next few months. In this newsletter you'll find out more about HHP's proposals for a significant new house building programme, improvements to services and plans to improve all tenants' homes within the next ten years.

Welcome: Transfer offers housing 'opportunity of a lifetime'

It is my privilege to be the first Chair of HHP, and to have the opportunity to lead this new and exciting organisation through such a crucial period.

As a former Comhairle tenant myself I have been involved in the tenant movement in the Western isles for almost 20 years. Most tenants will agree with me that much has improved during that time. However in recent years there has been a growing and shared concern, by Councillors, officers and tenants' groups about the impact of the current level of housing debt – the money the Comhairle has had to borrow over the years to build and improve houses. There is recognition that without this issue being addressed the Comhairle will struggle to maintain the current level of service and to make the necessary improvements to enable all of the

homes to be brought up to modern day standards without pushing up rents to unaffordable levels.

The transfer proposal to take the houses out of Comhairle ownership has taken time to finalise in order to make sure we get it right. However this should not take away from the most important message - that this move is to safeguard the rights of all tenants and provide a better way forward than the Comhairle can offer. HHP is as much under



HHP will be putting tenants at the heart of their housing plans

local democratic control as the Comhairle, if not more so, since tenants will always be at the table when decisions are being taken.

I believe that with the housing debt written off and with the investment package offered by the Scottish Executive, we have been presented with the opportunity of a lifetime to make a real impact on our communities. HHP will provide new homes, improve standards and create jobs in the construction industry. The Housing staff who will transfer from the Comhairle have a track record of putting tenants first. With tenant support at ballot we can meet the challenges for housing in the twenty-first century. My vision for the future is that HHP will deliver an excellent housing service for both present and future tenants throughout our islands.

George Lonie, HHP Chairman

HHP's vision statement:

"We aim to provide good quality and affordable homes and to secure consistently excellent housing services throughout the Western Isles. Our people will work closely with our tenants and others to provide quality services which strengthen the communities we serve now and in the future".

hhp - Looking after tenants

You'll know by now that HHP is a new housing association, set up to take over the running of Comhairle housing, should tenants vote in favour in a secret postal ballot later this year. But what does HHP hope to achieve? The organisations goals, as set out in its Business Plan are:

- To put tenants at the centre of everything we do
- To make sustainable investment in tenants' homes
- To continually improve our services
- To provide efficient and effective housing management services at affordable rent levels
- To be a good employer of a high quality workforce
- To deliver a value-for-money service for tenants
- To deliver a first class homelessness service
- To contribute to the economic development and social inclusion of the Western Isles

HHP is committed to these goals. They will be used to deliver on ambitious targets for social housing, which is in great demand across the Western Isles. The Western Isles currently has one of the smallest social rented sectors in Scotland, making up only 16% of the total number of houses on the Islands. Recent trends suggest that there will be around 49 Right to Buy sales each

year for the next five years meaning that the sector will decline further unless investment in new social housing increases.

There are currently over 1000 households on the housing waiting list, with around 300 new applications made each year. Of these approximately 20% are households looking to move back from the mainland. Without sufficient affordable housing they will not be

able to do so and the population will continue to decline. It is vital that new and significant social housing investment, (currently only available through transfer), is made in order to help deliver the Comhairle's objective of creating a rejuvenated economy and enhancing the attractiveness of the Western Isles as a place to live, work, study and play.

Transfer to trigger building boom

To meet the high level of demand for social housing, HHP will be undertaking a significant new house building programme across the Western Isles that promises to help regenerate communities and has the potential to halt population decline. It is only through transfer that the necessary funding will be made available to deliver this programme.

In its Business Plan HHP sets out proposals to deliver an investment package of almost £100million part of which will deliver 275 new

homes in the 10 years following transfer. This represents a 15% increase in social rented housing across the Isles, and in some parts, such as Harris and Barra, the investment will result in an increase of almost a third over current Comhairle housing levels.

Councillor Norman MacLeod, Chair of the Comhairle's Housing Committee and a member of the HHP Board, said, "Without transfer and the cash injection from the Scottish Executive it will bring the Comhairle will not be able to deliver the new housing that we desperately need. Because of

borrowing restrictions we've not been able to build any new housing for over a decade. Following transfer this will change.

"HHP plans to build 40 new houses every year in the five years following transfer, not only delivering new homes but many new construction jobs as well. By building houses we will be able to start to reverse the flow of people away from the Islands and begin to help rebuild communities and the local economy."



Raising the Standard



Following transfer, should you vote for it, HHP will be introducing an excellence standard that you'll be seeing a lot more of in the future. The Hebridean Housing Quality Standard logo (above) represents the organisation's commitment to deliver on its promises not just on providing additional high quality housing but also on housing services, as well as repairs and improvements.

Developed in consultation with tenants and the Comhairle, the Standard sets out what tenants can expect for their homes within the first 10 years of transfer. It will ensure that housing in the Western Isles exceeds Scottish Executive guidelines that require all social rented housing to meet minimum requirements by 2015.

By 2015 every HHP home will be brought up to the Hebridean Housing Quality Standard and will have full double-glazing, central heating, a modern kitchen and a modern bathroom. Furthermore tenants will have a greater choice than ever before when it comes to the design of new kitchens and bathrooms and will be able to choose from an approved range of layouts, flooring, style, colour and decoration.

In the Business Plan HHP has set aside budgets to achieve the Hebridean Housing Quality Standard. This means that the following improvements will be delivered with no additional cost to any tenant:

- Full double glazing and central heating
- A modern kitchen, comprising quality units and worktops, vinyl flooring or equivalent, ceramic (or equivalent) wall tiles, sockets to suit layout, decoration and mechanical ventilation (if condensation identified).
- A modern bathroom, comprising a bath, hand basin, WC, vinyl flooring, ceramic wall tiles and mechanical ventilation (if condensation identified).
- A modern wiring system
- Mains powered smoke detector
- Insulated double glazed external doors fitted with security locking
- External security lighting
- No rising or penetrating dampness
- Annual maintenance checks on gas heating appliances
- Annual maintenance checks on smoke detectors
- Cavity wall insulation where it can be installed
- Solid fuel heating replaced in all sheltered housing units
- Drying facilities
- Energy efficiency measures to meet required standard (if technically feasible).

Delivering for tenants

One of the most important changes to the housing service following transfer will be that decisions will be made by tenants for tenants. All decisions that HHP make will be agreed by the HHP Board, a third of whom are tenants representing all areas of the Western Isles. We have been speaking to some of the Board members over the last few weeks to find out what they think HHP will deliver for tenants and others.

Barra and Vatersay



Jane Mackinnon (pictured) is a member of the Barra and Vatersay Housing Association and on the HHP Board represents the views of a small island community.

"The transfer of properties from the Comhairle to HHP is, in my view, the best opportunity for positive regeneration of our communities. Across Barra and Vatersay HHP are proposing to significantly increase the level of social rented in the first ten years following transfer. Investment on that sort of scale has never been possible before but can happen through transfer.

"But in all of this it is the views of tenants that are the most important factor. Through the transfer ballot and then, should transfer go ahead, through the main Board and four area committees, tenants will have a greater say than ever before in the management of their homes. Tenants in Barra as well as throughout the Western Isles will, for the first time, have a say in setting their own housing priorities."

Harris



Iain Reid (pictured) is vice chairman of HHP and a Comhairle tenant who lives in South Harris. He is also the Village Voice representative for Leverburgh.

"Like all Comhairle tenants I'm concerned that my house should be kept in good condition but that at the same time my rent should remain affordable.

"Sitting on the HHP Board means that I have a say in rent increases but because we will be free of the historic housing debt we will be able to keep rents affordable. We can make sure that improvements are delivered, and that much needed new housing is built that will cater for all groups including single people, the elderly and disabled, at costs that are affordable to tenants. In Harris this means we aim to increase the number of social rented homes by a third within ten years of transfer, not only benefiting tenants but also the local construction industry and the local economy."

Lewis



Alasdair Mackenzie (pictured) lives in Tong and is a member of the Tong Residents Group as well as being a Comhairle tenant:

"Transfer to HHP will mean that money will be made available to bring housing across the islands up to a much higher standard, as well as giving tenants a far greater say than ever before in how their houses are managed.

"In Lewis alone HHP is planning to build an additional 185 new homes in the ten years following transfer, much needed new homes that will start to make inroads into the housing waiting list.

"Along with this new build programme we will also be renovating all other properties in the area, not only enhancing our communities but also providing housing in a style that will meet local demands. This is a package that the Comhairle simply can't match."

Charlie Nicolson is a team leader with the Community Education Service in Lewis and Harris and a co-opted member of the Board,

"I volunteered for the HHP Board because I believe that HHP will deliver very real benefits for both existing and new tenants across the Isles. Social housing in the Western Isles needs a great deal of investment which can't be delivered under the present system. With transfer and the write-off of the housing debt that will follow, we will have the sort of opportunity that doesn't come along very often.

"In our Business Plan we have set out proposals to start work transforming social housing across the Islands straight away, delivering high quality, modern homes, fit for the 21st century. This sort of programme is long overdue and essential if we want to keep young people here on the Islands."





Jackie Swan (pictured) is a Comhairle tenant who lives in Benbecula and is a founder member of the Balivanich Residents Association.

“As a tenant representative on the main HHP Board I have been involved in developing HHP’s proposals for delivery of housing services should tenants vote yes to stock transfer. I am confident that HHP can deliver an excellent housing service; a service that involves tenants at a local level setting priorities for housing investment and service improvements. HHP is committed to providing tenants with affordable rents, an improved repairs and maintenance service and good quality homes.

“With the removal of the current housing debt, rent money paid by tenants can be used in full by HHP to deliver housing of a high standard. I am in no doubt that a yes vote for stock transfer is the way forward to provide a secure housing service for the tenants of the Western Isles.”

HHP’s priorities for investment

In its plans HHP has set out details of how we it spend £98.8million on housing improvements over the next 30 years in order to bring all homes up to the Hebridean Housing Quality Standard. The most urgent priorities over the next 10 years will see the renewal of 260 roofs, new roughcasting for 200 houses as well as:

In years 1-5 the installation of:

- 130 new central heating systems
- 610 new kitchens
- 200 new bathrooms
- New windows in 160 houses
- New external doors in 120 houses

In years 6-10:

- 460 new central heating systems
- 530 new kitchens
- 360 new bathrooms
- New windows in 800 houses
- New external doors in 200 houses



New technology to help speed up repairs

Continuing the excellent repairs service currently operated by the Comhairle is a priority for HHP following transfer. To ensure this happens many repairs and maintenance services will be provided by



the Comhairle's existing workforce meaning that you will continue to deal with repairs staff that you know and trust.

To assist them in doing their jobs and to speed up the repairs process, HHP will be introducing a number of new initiatives including hand held computers for staff carrying out repairs, allowing them to access property records, background information and service history on the doorstep.

"The introduction of new technology will mean that HHP will be able to operate a modern, responsive repairs service fit for the 21st century," said HHP vice-chair Iain

Reid. "We know how important a good repairs service is to tenants and we have looked long and hard at ways of making sure that we improve on what is currently on offer. We are confident that we can deliver a faster and more efficient service for all tenants."

HHP will also offer a number of other new initiatives to improve the repairs service. These will include an appointments system to allow tenants to schedule repairs at a time convenient to them, and also a user-friendly out of hours service.

Quality assurance procedures will ensure that contractor performance is monitored and meets the standards laid down by HHP. The targets that HHP will set itself are as follows:

Emergency repairs:	we will make safe WITHIN 1 HOUR any reported repair that may be a risk to health and safety or which could lead to serious damage to property
Urgent repairs:	repairs affecting the comfort and convenience of tenants will be completed by the END OF THE FOLLOWING WORKING DAY
Day-to-day repairs:	repairs will be completed within an agreed timescale, at a time convenient to tenants

Keeping promises and protecting your rights

How can you be sure HHP will keep its promises? Well HHP has been set up as an Industrial and Provident Society with charitable status. This means that it is an organisation run for the benefit of the community with any surpluses made being ploughed back into the organisation to provide better services and facilities for tenants.

To ensure this happens HHP will be regulated by the Scottish Executive and the Financial Services Authority and monitored by the Comhairle. Together these organisations will make sure that HHP delivers on its promises, whilst maintaining tenants' rights and keeping rents affordable. In particular the Business Plan sets out the following guarantees:

ON RENTS

HHP's Business Plan promises that there will be a rent guarantee for five years, meaning that your annual rent will not increase by more than inflation plus 1%. This is a guarantee that the Comhairle cannot make. After this initial five year period every effort will be made to continue the low level rent increase with tenants having a say in future levels. Please remember that it is the HHP Board that will have the final say on any future rent increases and a third of the Board are tenants themselves.

ON HOUSING BENEFITS

The current housing benefit system will not change following stock transfer. Housing Benefit will continue to be paid by the Comhairle.

ON RIGHTS

You will continue to have all the same rights that you currently enjoy with the Comhairle, including the right to buy your current home with discount. The only change to your tenancy agreement will be the name of the landlord.

You will be issued with a Tenants Information Handbook at the start of your tenancy. This will provide up to date information on the housing services offered by HHP and set out rights and responsibilities of all tenants.

ON REPRESENTATION

Tenant representation will be greater than ever before, with tenants sitting both on the main HHP Board and on four new area committees.

Looking after all of the Islands' communities

HHP promises decision-making powers for tenants across the Isles

As well as having the opportunity to put themselves forward for election to the main HHP Board, tenants will also be able to influence decision-making powers at a local level by sitting on one of four area committees to be set up following transfer.

This new shape for the management of housing recognises the diversity of communities across the Western Isles, helping HHP to serve the local needs of tenants.

Area committee members will have a say in local decision making on important issues including how HHP prioritises investment in tenants' homes. They will also be responsible for monitoring the performance of HHP activities locally and identifying any local housing problems or specific needs.

The area committees will be set up in Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra and members

will be unpaid volunteers from the local community.

In addition each of the four proposed area committees will have a representative on the main HHP Board.

HHP will shortly be looking for community volunteers to consider joining the new committees. There'll be more information about how to get involved at a later date.



Serving local communities

Having consulted in detail with Comhairle tenants whilst developing its plans, HHP knows the importance of making services and staff available to tenants throughout the Islands. For this reason, as well as maintaining a head office in Stornoway and a local office in Balivanich, HHP will also have representation in the one-stop-shops being developed by the Comhairle and partners in Tarbert and Castlebay. Until the one-stop-shops are completed arrangements will be put in place to ensure tenants can access services at the Comhairle's existing Tarbert and Castlebay offices.

Tenants will be able to arrange to meet with the appropriate member of staff at these



offices. They will also be able to access a full range of services at the Area Offices, including cash desk, allocations, repairs, benefits, homelessness and housing advice.

HHP will also offer regular surgeries at convenient locations decided by tenant and tenant representatives. Surgeries will be arranged on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis, depending on the level of demand.

HHP will also seek to provide greater access to services for tenants through PCs and the Internet.

Office opening hours for the Stornoway & Balivanich offices will be 8.30am – 5.00pm with the option of extending opening hours if there is a demand. The Comhairle's Tarbert and Castlebay offices are open from 9.00am – 5.00pm.



What's next?

We shall shortly be entering the period of statutory consultation required by the Scottish Executive before transfer to HHP can be considered. During this time the Comhairle will be sending all tenants important information that will help you to make up your mind on how to vote in the ballot. The timetable will proceed as follows:

August/September - STAGE 1 formal consultation (lasting 28 days)

All Comhairle households will receive a copy of the Stage 1 notice, a booklet detailing what tenants can expect from HHP following transfer. As well as the booklet there will also be a short video, providing a background to transfer and information on HHP's plans.

During this period there will also be door-to-door visits giving you the opportunity to speak to Comhairle and HHP staff about the proposals. Additionally you will be given the opportunity to see examples of the types of kitchens and bathrooms available to tenants following transfer.

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 once all views and responses have been considered. Only in the event of the majority of tenants who return their ballot papers voting in favour will transfer then take place. The ballot will be a secret postal ballot conducted by Electoral Reform Ballot Services.

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

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.com

Special communications needs

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

