

Chief executive of Inverness Chamber of Commerce ■

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Good housing attracts good employers – and discourages migration in search of better living

The leader of one of our West Coast member businesses would always have the same greeting for me, whether we met out west, in Inverness or in Gatwick's departure lounge as we both headed north. His cheery comment was always: "Keep up the great work Stewart! But remember, just focus on getting housing and broadband sorted and leave the rest of the stuff for us to fix!"

Speak to any Highland business leader, regardless of their location or sector, and their most pressing issues will be staffing, housing and digital connectivity. The issue of lack of housing is one of the highest priorities for our region's Highland Economic Recovery Partnership,

which I co-chair with Stuart Black, chief executive of HIE.

Collectively, we have presented innovative solutions around the issue to the Scottish Government which are gaining traction and have the potential to deliver workable options particularly for the hospitality and leisure sectors which underpin so much of our region's economy. However, I recognise that our initiatives led by my colleagues Mark Tate and Frazer Coupland, from Cairngorms and Lochaber Chambers of Commerce, have not moved fast enough and that some of our region's hospitality providers have had to address the pressing challenge head on by providing staff accommodation built in their own hotel grounds.

In addition, one of our long-standing partners, Parklands Care Homes, have also directly and innovatively tackled the issue of housing for their key workers. Parklands' proposals for their new care home in Milton of Leys, Inverness has incorporated staff accommodation in response to the shortage of affordable homes for key workers in Inverness. Aligning with their strong organisational values, Parklands have confirmed that although priority will be given to Parklands' employees, if there is spare capacity, some homes could be offered to other care workers in the

area, including NHS employees.

Parklands Care Homes made matters clear in stating there was a "distinct lack of quality rental accommodation offered and available at affordable rents" for care workers in Inverness. In seeking to provide the best of support for their employees, they added: "Purpose-built new-build properties made available at affordable rents for staff is the key aim of these properties. The cottage flats will offer the opportunity for some staff members to share accommodation which again will allow them to lessen the financial burden associated with high rents and poorly insulated private rented accommodation."

While we've seen necessary innovation from sectors such as hospitality, tourism, leisure and the social care sector, businesses that are leading the house-building sector in delivering much-needed homes are equally strident in their call for recognition for all that they do to meet demand across the city of Inverness and the wider Highlands and Islands. Importantly though, the contribution from house building addresses far more than meeting the pressing need for energy efficient accommodation at affordable prices.

I strongly agree the significant contribution housebuilders make to the local and national economy is often overlooked. Companies in

this sector, like many locally, such as Springfield Properties and Tulloch Homes, create jobs and help to combat climate change by increasing the energy efficiency of our built environment.

In my mind, I have no doubts that these businesses have a positive impact on the wellbeing, health and even educational attainment of individuals in our communities.

Our Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) groups in Inverness and across the Highlands have built on the strong legacy of the construction and housebuilding sectors' engagement with organisations such as CITB. We recognise there is still work to be done and will continue our efforts to promote apprenticeships and careers in construction and house building. In doing so, we firmly believe we are encouraging, and preparing, our region's young people for well-paid, meaningful and lasting careers in this important sector.

Sustaining housebuilding is crucial for the wider Scottish economy and for all of our local economies that housing developments support across the country. Furthermore, I am convinced that good housing also attracts good employers to Inverness and the Highlands and, of vital importance to this city and region, discourages people from migrating in search of a better living.

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