



RINGING IN THE CHANGES: NEW YEAR, NEW OFFICES



Albyn celebrated the New Year in style with the opening of new offices in Inverness and Invergordon. £670,000 was spent building and customising our offices in Inverness which form a key part of the housing development at MacLennan Crescent as well as contributing to the renewal of the Merkinch and South Kessock areas of the city. At our Invergordon offices, a growing complement of staff together with a need for improved meeting and interview spaces necessitated allocating £1.5million, including £75,000 grant funding from HIE, to expand and improve the Invergordon offices. The changes have given us much better working space and flexibility to allow for future expansion as Albyn's business continues to grow.

Touchwood, a social enterprise company based in Skye, was commissioned to design and fit new reception desks for both offices. Made from recycled whisky barrels, the beautiful desks have transformed our reception areas for visitors and staff alike.

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New posts in corporate services

Corporate Services is expanding. With more demands placed on staff to assist the Committee of Management in their work and increasing personnel workload, it has been agreed to reorganise and expand our Corporate Services staff. Chief Executive, Mr Calum Macaulay, has been joined by Human Resources Manager, Mrs Lynn Young. A further two administration posts are being recruited as the Newsletter goes to press.

A day in the life of an allocations officer

I get to the office around 9am and check my e-mail. Resisting the temptation to send my bank account details to a nice man in Ghana, I delete all the junk mail and move on to my 'to do' list. Such is the nature of the job, it never seems to get any shorter! It doesn't take long for the first phone calls to come through, often from people interested in a vacant house. Sometimes they are just checking their position on the waiting list.

I aim to do my 'sign ups' at the beginning of the day, so it's off to Aviemore or maybe Lochinver. You can't say we don't get variety in this job. I show the applicant the house and if everything is okay, the lease is signed and the keys handed over. This is the high point in my day. It's rewarding to see someone set up in a secure home.

I try to interview an applicant in Inverness on the way back to Invergordon. That's time management for you! The interview experience varies every time. This isn't surprising, given the problems some people have faced in finding a home. By the time I return to what we fondly know as Mural House, I am gasping for a cuppa and after downing a mug of our finest fair trade Rosie Lee I am ready for more.

In the afternoon I run a waiting list for a house in Dornoch – which sounds like a race but it's just housing jargon for printing a report from the computer system. Letters are sent out by our admin team to those at the top of

the list to check interest and the lucky ones have seven days to respond. Next, I look at letters from last week for a house in Aultbea. I interview those at the top of the list by phone, primarily to check that the points awarded for priority are correct. A further home interview follows for the applicant with the highest points to check they understand what will be involved in starting tenancy and help and support they need is in place.

Most days are a mixture of the above, some days I am totally office bound and others involve over 200 miles of driving. There can be few more pleasant jobs than driving over to Poolewe in brilliant sunshine and perhaps none as dismal as struggling to Bettyhill on a dreich December day!

At about 5pm I pack up and go home, ready for a bit of relaxation provided him indoors hasn't burnt the dinner again!

Shirley Mack, Albyn Housing Society Ltd allocations officer based in Invergordon



RENT DEPOSIT GUARANTEE SCHEME

A new Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme now operates in Highland, based in our Inverness office. The scheme works with private landlords and people in housing need and aged 25 or over to overcome problems that can make it difficult to rent privately. The aim is to create successful long-term tenancies. People on a low income or experiencing financial difficulties are particularly at risk of homelessness. They often have no savings or the support of friends and family. Unable to get council or housing association tenancies in the area of their choice, they must look to private landlords for other renting options. But without the money for a deposit or advance rent payments, this option is out of reach for many prospective tenants. The Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme can help by offering a written guarantee for a period of six months in place of a cash deposit. The applicant is supported in finding a home, signing agreements, claiming housing benefits and negotiating with landlords.

The scheme is managed by Albyn on behalf of The Highland Housing Community Care Trust and is funded by The Highland Council. Referrals must come through the Council's homeless service.

To find out more, contact scheme co-ordinator Jayne Williams on 01463 712516 for further help and information.

NEW START HIGHLAND

Albyn has been successful in securing wider role funding for a new initiative from New Start Highland. The scheme aims to help vulnerable tenants into a new tenancy and to learn new skills when doing up their new home. Full time employees, trainees and volunteers of New Start will work alongside new tenants to help them be able to clean and re-decorate their homes, manage their tenancies and improve their confidence and employability skills. Chief Executive Calum Macaulay says of the project:

'We are delighted to be associated with New Start. We recognise fully the value of this type of project. It helps people who were previously homeless and also benefits the wider communities that they come to live in. New Start has proved truly innovative in this field and we look forward to further partnership working with them in the future.'



Streamlining Housing Applications: The Highland Housing Register

The six main providers of rented accommodation in the Highlands have joined forces to make it easier for applicants on housing waiting lists to access housing. The five housing associations operating in the Highlands – Albyn, Cairn, Lochaber, Lochalsh & Skye and Pentland – together with The Highland Council have produced a single housing register. 15,000 applicants on waiting lists have already been sent a new housing application form to complete. The new form means people who want to be housed by the Council, or any of the other housing associations mentioned, only need fill in a single form. This also applies to tenants wishing to transfer to a different property owned by the same landlord. Helen Barton, Housing and Community Services Director explains the benefits of the new system:

'The Highland Housing Register is an exciting initiative designed to make it easier for people to apply for housing. It is very important that people complete the forms when they receive them – even if they have already provided information in a different application recently. We will only be able to include people on the new Highland Housing Register if they complete a form. From 1st April 2008, all the main housing partners will use one common allocations policy. This means applicants will have the same number of points for their application with each landlord. This common approach reflects the strong culture of working together in the Highlands to find better ways of providing services. We are very proud to have played our part in this new system.'

If you have a query regarding the new form or the new policy rules, please contact our allocations team in Invergordon for further information.

If you have applied to us for housing or a transfer, you must make sure you complete the new form to be included on the new register. If you have not done this by the end of March you may not be considered for properties we let.

Advice on using loft spaces for storage

From time to time we get reports about problems arising from items being stored in roof spaces. Please be aware that in most properties, the ceiling structure is not designed to take additional weight. For this reason, we recommend that loft area areas are not used for storage purposes.

If you want to store light items in your loft space, this is entirely at your own risk. Albyn Housing Society will not be responsible for personal injury or for items becoming damaged by mildew, for example. If damage is caused to the ceiling during storage, the cost of repairing any damage will be charged to you, and your own insurance may not cover it.



New housing developments

A major milestone was achieved in January 2008 with the handover of seven specialised homes as part of the New Craigs Hospital Reprovisioning Programme. The closure of the hospital meant challenging deadlines for the provision of 26 new homes on different sites, with Albyn as the preferred partner of NHS Primary Care Trust and the Council's Social

Work Department. The project was led for Albyn by Helen Cameron who commented: 'Woodside is the first of four projects which will eventually provide custom-built housing with support. The project offers a range of difficult challenges which we have overcome by working in partnership.'



The Woodside project also represents the first homes to be completed on a site provided by the Highland Housing Alliance. The Alliance was set up in 2005 by Highland Council and a network of local housing associations and housing trusts. It is the private sector vehicle of the founding partners and aims to increase the supply of good quality affordable and private houses in the Highlands and to secure sites for all housing association partners.

In addition, the Development Department continues to provide a regular stream of new housing completions. Recent projects handed over to Housing for allocation or to Albyn Enterprises Ltd for sale under the Homestake Shared Equity Scheme include projects at Woodside, South Kessock and Kinmylies in Inverness and Muir of Ord, Invergordon and Aviemore. Work is well underway on new projects at Strathpeffer, Conon Bridge, Invergordon, Brora and Auldearn to provide much needed affordable housing for rent and low cost sale.

LGBT Housing Project

Recent research into LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transsexual) issues is starting to uncover a clear picture of housing needs related to sexuality, discrimination and homophobia, and to exclusion from mainstream service provision. The problem in researching needs is the 'invisibleness' of LGBT communities. People are often reluctant to disclose their sexuality meaning that they do not report harassment or explain the reasons why they are homeless. Mairi Nye was commissioned by the LGBT Housing Project Team to organise focus groups around Scotland and to discover the views and experiences of LGBT People:

'I was struck by the often painful and distressing experiences some of the participants shared in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity and to past or present housing difficulties. Many of them experienced verbal abuse and intimidation from neighbours or local residents. To minimise feeling unsafe in and around their homes, participants acknowledged that they would keep their sexual orientation hidden.'

With funding from Communities Scotland, Stonewall Scotland, the LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing in Edinburgh and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA), a set of standards has been developed to address the social housing needs and concerns of LGBT people.

Albyn Housing Society was invited to take part in a pilot scheme to understand LGBT issues in housing and to look at implementing standards in service provision. LGBT training was offered to all our staff and committee members. Housing and Community Services Director, Helen Barton, explains:

'We found the standards are generally ones that would help ensure that all our customers and staff get fair and equal access to, and provision of, services. We will be able to use them as a framework for reviewing our equalities work. By addressing these issues we also hope to develop the trust and confidence of LGBT people, thereby providing a better housing service to everyone in our communities.'



Lift-off For Shared Equity Scheme: Looking To Buy On The Open Market But Concerned About Costs?

In a major new venture launched in January 2008, Albyn's subsidiary company, Albyn Enterprises Ltd, was selected to operate the Scottish Government's new Low-cost Initiative for First-time Buyers (LIFT) scheme. According to Donald Lockhart, Albyn's Development Director:

'The scheme allows eligible people to buy a property off the open market with some of the equity funded by grant from The Scottish

Government. We expect it to be a popular scheme once the threshold house prices reflect the true cost of housing in the Highlands.'

Would you like to purchase a property on the open market but think you can't afford to? If so, LIFT may be able to help you. It enables you to buy between 51% and 80% of the value of a property on the open market. There are price limits set on what you can pay for a property depending on its size and location.

Areas Covered (as defined by LIFT)	Number of Bedrooms	Open Market Price Limit
Central area covers towns like Aviemore, Inverness and Golspie	1	£81,701
	2	£100,727
	3	£115,271
East area covers towns like Helmsdale, Wick and Thurso	1	£48,125
	2	£61,555
	3	£72,599
West area covers towns like Fort William, Portree and Ullapool	1	£89,535
	2	£90,207
	3	£104,085

Budding Talent: Prizes For Gardens!

Are you proud of your garden, or impressed by a neighbour's efforts? As we travel around the Highlands, we see so many beautiful gardens that we've been inspired to hold a competition this year, to be judged during July and August 2008. No matter what size your garden is, from containers upwards, there will be gardening vouchers awarded to winners in several categories.

If you love gardening and would like to enter - or think one of your neighbours deserves to be nominated - please fill in the coupon on this page and return it to our Invergordon office. We'll get in contact with you in the near future with more information.

Name of Gardener:

Address:

Contact Details:

Name and details of nominee if different:

Prize draw for survey respondents

Albyn Housing Society's Resident Satisfaction Survey was issued to one third of all our residents (including owners who pay service charges to us) in February 2008. This annual survey is very important to us as it provides information on how you feel about your homes and the services we provide. As an extra incentive, all survey respondents will be entered in the draw for the cash prize of £100

To make sure that responses to the survey are confidential, we have asked an independent research company, C A Market Research, to conduct the survey on our behalf.

Many thanks to all those who have already completed and returned your forms, or taken part in a telephone interview. The results will be of long-term benefit in helping us to develop our services.

A further third of our residents will be surveyed over each of the next two years to help us plan changes to our services and to monitor the results of these changes. If you did not receive a survey form this year, you will get one either in 2009 or 2010. A summary of the main findings of the current survey will be published later this year.

Santa really did come to town!



Young neighbours of our Maclennan Crescent staff meet Santa

We may all be looking out for Easter bunnies with chocolate eggs just now, but in the week before Christmas some very different visitors were spotted around the Albyn offices. In Invergordon, Frosty the Snowman visited our offices the day before the holidays and with the help of Development staff, collected over £225 for this year's Christmas charity, The Highland Hospice. Well done Frosty!

Santa turned up in person at our new Inverness office in Merkinch bearing sweets and presents for young children living nearby. As well as getting the chance to meet some of our neighbours around the office, staff were delighted to help Santa entertain around 20 young guests.



AGM UPDATE

Our AGM was held on 14 August 2007 in the Drumossie Hotel, Inverness, an accessible and high quality venue with the capacity to host a well attended meeting - and our AGM was well attended. We had 67 members, guests and staff present.

Reports on Albyn's work during 2006/07 were given by Mr Jim Oag, Chairperson of the Committee of Management, and Mr Calum Macaulay, Chief Executive. Mr Robin Nairn, Finance & IT Services Director, presented the year's accounts and financial report.

As we had just enough nominees for the large number of Committee of Management places open for election there was no need for a ballot. Nevertheless, five general members and three tenant members were elected on to the Committee of Management for a three-year period. The general members are Miss Christina Cameron; Mrs May Duncan; Mr George Kelman; Mrs Isabell McLaughlan and Mrs Maxine Smith. The tenant member places went to Mr Billy Milne; Mrs Fiona Samson and Mr Bryan Summerfield.

Ella Macrae was elected as our new chairperson after the meeting. Isabell McLaughlan continues as our vice-chair and George Kelman as our secretary.

Our guest speaker at the AGM was Ms Leona McDermid, Chief Executive of Social Firms Scotland. Leona gave a fascinating talk on the work of SFS and the wider aspects of social enterprise in Scotland.



Highland 2007 - Cultural Projects

In recognition of Highland 2007 Year of Culture, Communities Scotland set aside grant subsidy for wider role developments in Highland that fitted within the broad reach of culture. A total of £160,000 was set aside for this project and we were successful in helping groups to make bids that added up to £68,100 of this money. Our successful projects included:

Pulteneytown People's Project - £30,000

The Pulteneytown Environmental Art Project is a community arts project designed to improve the street environment of Bremners Walk in Pulteneytown, Wick by involving the community in designing artwork, both on the footpaths and as stand-alone pieces. This funding will be for eight pieces of artwork, all taken from design ideas of members of the community in Pulteneytown.

Calman Trust - £8,000

The Monsterness project brought together a large group of vulnerable, or potentially vulnerable, young people from across the Highlands to build and launch a huge balloon model of the Loch Ness Monster onto Loch Ness. It was unveiled at a public launch from Urquhart Castle grounds on the afternoon of Saturday 13th October. The project raised awareness of the issues and circumstances surrounding youth homelessness. The Trust wanted to demonstrate that the experience of homelessness for young people is the real monster under the surface of the Highlands.



Golspie Film Society - £2,100

Sutherland Archive Project aims to buy equipment allowing the Society to digitise film and slides from all over the Sutherland area. These will then be available throughout Sutherland and further afield for educational, cultural and social purposes.

Milton Community Woodland Trust - £6,000

The Milton Community Woodland Trust Logbuilding and Logbarn Upgrades project is in preparation for the delivery of the Trust's Stepping Stones Project to continue their delivery of a wide range of arts and crafts activities and community events.

Dunain Community Woodland Association - £5,000

Highland 2007 Children's Forest exists to educate and involve children in our natural environment and to restore some native tree species to an area once dominated by the Caledonian Forest. With the involvement of three local schools, up to 1,200 trees will be planted during 2008.

Inverness City Centre Management - £15,000

Festiveinverness Winter Festival supported the provision of a temporary ice rink in Falcon Square, Inverness and formed the centrepiece for a winter festival. The theme of the festival reflected Eden Court's annual Pantomime, Peter Pan and Friends. The festival ran between mid-November 2007 and January 2008.

18th Inverness Scout Group - £2,000

This project provided four Canadian canoes with paddles and safety equipment for expeditions along the Caledonian Canal. The aim of the project is to allow Scouts and Guides to become more self-reliant, more motivated and able to work as a team.

Invergordon bathroom replacement contract

The first meeting of the team set up to organise bathroom replacements in 265 of our Invergordon properties has taken place. The core group who will be organising the contract is made up of Albyn staff and three representatives from the Society's tenants, residents' groups and Committee of Management. The next step is for us to select a consultant from Albyn's approved list who will manage the contract on our behalf. Once the consultant is on board, the contractor will be selected based upon the same criteria of a demonstrable commitment to high quality customer care.

We hope to have the installation within each property completed and a working bathroom connected within a day, with tiling and floor vinyl works completed by a maximum of two days afterwards. A range of consultation meetings with tenants will be organised once the consultant and contractor have been appointed and a timescale agreed.

AFFORDABLE CREDIT IN HIGHLAND

Albyn has been successful in bidding for £35,000 grant funding from the Department of Work and Pensions to carry out a study into the availability of affordable credit in Highland. In partnership with The Highland Council, Citizens Advice Scotland and Highland Opportunity we have employed research company Knowledge Partnership to look at what types of financial services are available to people in Highland, what services people need and what could be delivered.

Surveys and questionnaires were circulated in the first months of 2008 and the results are expected by summer 2008. Albyn is concerned at the lack of financial services available to people on benefits or low income and also to people in rural and remote areas. The results of the study will be used as a basis for developing access to financial services throughout Highland area.



HOMESTAKE

ARE YOU HAVING DIFFICULTY GETTING
ONTO THE PROPERTY LADDER?

If this sounds like you, Homestake could help...

Would you like to live in a central location, close to local shops and services, yet within a private courtyard? If so, the below could be an excellent opportunity for you.

These spacious properties are built to a high standard and provide off street parking for residents within the development. The properties are being sold under the Homestake scheme which enables lower income households, including first time buyers, Housing Association tenants and Council tenants, to purchase between 51% and 80% of the property.

Royal Court, Kingussie

2 Bedroom, 3 Person Flat

51% for £49,980

80% for £78,400

If you are on a salary of £12,495 - £26,133 you may be eligible for assistance.

(Please note that there are only TWO properties remaining – one ground floor and one first floor property)

To enquire about your eligibility for the scheme and further details, please contact Homestake on:

01349 855 991



Homestake



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www.albynhousing.org.uk

Albyn Housing is a Scottish charity No. SC 027123.



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