

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGETS 2021-22

Executive Summary

Following the end of the rent reduction period in April 2020 social housing rents are now increased by CPI + 1%. The budgeted rents have been prepared on this basis and rents have been increased by 1.5% (September CPI of 0.5% plus 1%).

On 13 February 2020 Council approved the full Sheerwater Regeneration Scheme under which the HRA will lose the rental income from the dwellings within the regeneration red line. As discussed later in the report, many dwellings within the Regeneration Red Line are now being held as vacant if they become void. This is necessary to minimise moving tenants and will allow the regeneration to be carried out efficiently. However the HRA is foregoing the rental income from these dwellings and the financial implications arising from the Regeneration continue to create an HRA deficit which will be funded by a transfer from reserves in 2021/22.

The Covid crisis has had a significant impact on HRA rent collection in 2020/21 with arrears estimated to increase by around 7% to 8.5%. However further lock downs may increase this percentage and reduce the scope to collect the arrears.

The working balance per property is forecast to be £100 at 31 March 2021. £100-£150 balance per property is considered to be necessary for prudent financial management.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL That

- (i) the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2021/22 as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be approved; and**
- (ii) with effect from 5 April 2021, rents be increased by 1.5%.**

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To recommend that the Council approves the resources necessary to implement its objectives and to enable the Council to determine charges to tenants for 2021/22.

The item(s) above will need to be dealt with by way of a recommendation to Council.

Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

Background Papers: None.

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Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper sets out the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets (Appendix 1) for 2021/22.
- 1.2 Detailed explanations of the changes and pressures within the different elements of the budget are set out in the sections below. The HRA is forecast to make an estimated deficit of £819,000 with a £827,000 contribution from reserves being required to maintain a working balance per property of £100. A range of £100 to £150 per property is considered prudent.

2.0 Forecast Outturn

- 2.1 At the end of the second quarter of 2020/21, the collection rate is approximately 6% down on the comparative period last year. This position is due to many tenants struggling with the financial impact of Covid-19. Work continues to ensure that those tenants who have stopped paying receive advice and support in accessing Universal Credit. Nevertheless, the overall arrears position is predicted to increase by around £200,000 - £250,000 per quarter. It is worth noting that following the embargo on taking recovery action to 23 August 2020, the courts have a considerable backlog and are prioritising the most serious cases (i.e. significant ASB, substantial rent arrears of more than 1 year, etc.).
- 2.2 It is unclear at this stage what the ongoing financial impact will be on the Housing Revenue Account. However, assuming there is no improvement in the collection rates, we would anticipate the projected increase in arrears, due to Covid-19, to be in the region of between 7% and 8.5% for 2020/21, which equates to a full-year rent arrears increase of between £0.8m and £1.1m.
- 2.3 When HRA properties within the Sheerwater Red Line become void they are being held as vacant to facilitate the commencement of the Sheerwater Project. The estimated full year effect of these properties remaining vacant to the financial year end is £670,000.
- 2.4 HRA interest costs are forecast to be £5,077,224 in 2021/22, against a budget of £5,237,927 providing an estimated saving of £160,703. This is due to PWLB rates being lower than forecast for half the year and expenditure on new build developments being slower than forecast.

3.0 Approach to Budget Setting 2021/22

Assumptions

- 3.1 The draft budgets in this paper should be considered alongside the draft Investment Programme report elsewhere on the agenda which will influence the overall budget position.

Management and Administration

- 3.2 Salary and other central costs have been allocated to the HRA in accordance with normal accounting rules to show the full cost of the service. The budgets are set and monitored in a pre-allocated format to make it possible to see the overall impact rather than just a proportion of the overall cost/variance which may be allocated to an individual service.
- 3.3 There has been a £100,000 reduction in the salary control total set by the Council, but this is offset by increases in other overhead costs and a slightly higher proportion of costs allocated to the HRA resulting in an overall increase of £77,000 for 2021/22.

4.0 Rents and Other Charges

- 4.1 On the 4th October 2017, the Department For Communities And Local Government (DCLG) and the Prime Minister's Office, announced that social housing rents will be increased by Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1% for 5 years from 2020 ending the four year rent reduction period. A rent increase of 1.5% (September CPI of 0.5% plus 1%) has been incorporated into the estimates.

Recovery of Charges

- 4.2 Service charges, including energy charges, are based on the cost of the service being provided. The Chief Finance Officer has delegated authority to vary service charges in line with external factors.
- 4.3 Energy charges are levied on a per block basis based on cost. This allows energy costs to be recharged to tenants on a more detailed basis. An energy charge review was carried out in 2020/21 and the Draft Budget incorporates the amended charges.
- 4.4 Housing Related Support charges were reviewed and the new charges introduced from April 2020. Up to 31st March 2018 Surrey County Council fully subsidised the Housing Related Support charges for council tenants in receipt of a means tested benefit. This £130,000 funding ceased in 2017/18. However under the new arrangements tenants in receipt of means tested benefit continue to receive the service free of charge.

Implementation Date

- 4.5 The new rents will be applied from the first Monday in April (i.e. 5 April 2021) and the service charge uplift with effect from 2 August 2021.

5.0 Prudential Borrowing

- 5.1 The HRA requires certainty and accuracy of costs wherever possible especially following government policy changes, rent reductions, and the impact of the Sheerwater regeneration project. HRA interest charges for pre 2016/17 borrowing are fixed at the Council's average borrowing rate at 31 March 2016. HRA borrowing from April 2017 onwards are charged at the annual average 50 year borrowing rate. This ensures that General Fund investment decisions made by the Council do not impact the HRA.
- 5.2 These HRA interest costs are forecast to be £5,077,224 in 2020/21 and £5,216,852 in 2021/22. These costs include the borrowing taken on to fund the new build development schemes included in the Housing Investment Programme elsewhere on the agenda. £16,483,000 additional borrowing is forecast over 2020/21 and 2021/22.
- 5.3 The 2021/22 Budget makes no allowance for repayment of the debt taken on for Self-Financing or for the repayment of the borrowing relating to the new build developments. The borrowing relates to long life assets which are fully maintained.

6.0 Robustness of the Budget and Risks

- 6.1 It is important to consider the robustness of the budget and the adequacy of reserves for the purpose of maintaining the financial health of the Housing Revenue Account. The key risks are set out in the following paragraphs.

Covid Crisis

- 6.2 The Covid Crisis is having a significant impact on HRA rent collection as tenants are faced with financial hardship and lockdown restrictions reduce the ability to collect monies owed. It

Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

is estimated arrears will increase by around 8% in 2020/21 and it is not yet known how much of this will be collectable. At this point it is not possible to estimate with any certainty the impact the virus will have in 2021/22. However an additional bad debt provision of £200,000 has been built into the 2021/22 Budget.

HRA New Build Developments

- 6.3 As detailed in the Affordable Housing Expenditure Update report, which was considered by the Executive in October 2018, Officers have reviewed the land assets held by the authority, and other potential development sites around the Borough, to identify suitable new build affordable housing sites in order to utilise retained one for one receipts and increase the local affordable housing supply.
- 6.4 The Draft Housing Investment Programme elsewhere on the agenda includes these new build development schemes. The Draft Budget assumes that the development at the corner of Rydens\Sundridge Road and Hale End Court (Old Woking Independent Living Scheme) will complete in 2021/22.
- 6.5 Historically HRA dwellings have been let at Social rent levels. Social rents are calculated using a prescribed complex formula which takes 70% of the national average rent and adjusts it based on how the property value and local earnings (using the relative county earnings) compare to the national average. Both the property value and relative county earnings are at 1999 levels and the outcome can only be adjusted by 5 or 10%. This formula is applied nationally and makes no further allowance for local circumstances. Therefore there is little flexibility within this formula to set a rent which is suitable for the relevant part of the borough, suitable for the type of accommodation, and ensures the financial sustainability of the HRA and affordability to tenants.
- 6.6 The additional rental income generated by the new build units is unlikely to cover the management, maintenance, and interest costs attributable to the new build dwellings. The net cost of these developments will therefore be subsidised by HRA surpluses. New build rents will be reviewed upon completion to ensure they are set at a level which guarantees the schemes are affordable. Under the Kingsmoor Park Development, a level of social rent which is suitable for Woking was determined. Where possible the new units will be let at or just below Kingsmoor Park rent levels (which are shown below) and capped at a LHA levels. To enable this new build units will be grouped into an Affordable (up to 80% of market rents inclusive of service charge) Rent Category within the HRA. Although developments which receive Homes England funding (such as Hale End Court) may be required under the funding agreement to be let at social rent. This will provide flexibility to set suitable rents.
- 6.7 The 2021/22 Kingsmoor Park rent levels are;

2021/22 Kingsmoor Park Rents	
Unit Type	£
Rents £ pw	
1 bed flat	£127
2 bed flat	£145
2 bed house	£155
3 bed house	£179
4 bed house	£188

Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

Retained One for One Replacement Receipts

- 6.8 Local Authorities can retain an element of Right to Buy receipts locally to be used on one for one replacement housing. These receipts can currently be used to fund up to 30% of the cost of the replacement housing and must be used within 3 years or passed to the Government with interest charged at 4% above the base rate. A consultation proposing to alter these arrangements was issued on 14th August 2018. However no further announcements have been made. The proposed arrangements may provide flexibilities around holding the receipts for a longer period and passing them to a group company.
- 6.9 The HRA developments detailed in the Housing Investment Programme below will utilise all of the existing retained one for one receipts balance and there is a risk the HRA will not be able to build up enough receipts to fully finance 30% of the scheduled developments at the time of construction. If there is a short fall in retained receipts the HRA will have to borrow to fund 100% of the development until sufficient receipts have been received.
- 6.10 The Council has recently secured Homes England Investment Partner Status along with almost £2 million of capital grant funding towards Hale End Court. Officers will continue to work with Homes England to access grant for other affordable housing schemes to deliver this programme.

Repairs, Maintenance, and Management & Contractual Inflation

- 6.11 Minor changes to repairs, maintenance, and energy budgets have been made to align them with the actual level of expenditure being incurred. The NVH budget has been realigned to the level of the expenditure incurred in the current year. Due to the position of the current indices, contractual inflation is expected to be minimal. Insurance costs for the HRA has increased by £12,000 and grounds maintenance cost by £30,000.
- 6.12 Elsewhere on the agenda is a report regarding bringing the Housing Management and Asset Management services back in house. The estimates have been prepared on the basis that this will take effect from the 1st April 2022 at the earliest and no impact of the insourcing has been assumed in the 2021/22 budget.

Major Repairs Contribution

As per the 1 April 2017 Item 8 Determination, depreciation is to be charged to the HRA in accordance with proper accounting practices. The depreciation replaces the Major Repairs Contribution and is transferred to the Major Repairs Reserve to be used on capital works to the stock or repaying debt. HRA depreciation is calculated by dividing the total asset value of Council Dwellings by their average useful economic life. Based on the 31st March 2020 asset value the depreciation amount is estimated to be £3,700,000 in 2021/22.

Sheerwater Regeneration

- 6.13 On the 5th April 2018 Council authorised a loan facility of £26m, on terms previously approved by Council, to enable Thamesway Developments Limited (TDL) to implement the approved Leisure and Recreational facilities as a first stage of the full regeneration of Sheerwater. On the 4 April 2019 the Council approved a further short-term loan facility of £42m to TDL, on terms previously approved, to enable the first residential phase (Purple).
- 6.14 In February 2020 the full Sheerwater scheme and financing facilities were approved by Council. The Council approved use of Compulsory Purchase Order powers for the regeneration in July 2020. Following an update of the Sheerwater position presented by Thamesway, the Council has approved proceeding with the Red, Yellow and Copper phases of the regeneration.

Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

- 6.15 Under the Sheerwater Regeneration approximately 397 HRA dwellings will be demolished. The vacant land will be transferred to Thameswey Developments Ltd and the replacement affordable housing dwellings transferred to Thameswey Housing Ltd. The HRA will therefore lose the rental income from these 397 dwellings. This places pressure on the HRA and an annual transfer from reserves is forecast to be required in order to sustain the HRA in the earlier years of the regeneration. The financial impact of the regeneration is already significant as dwellings which become void within the red line are being held as vacant. The HRA therefore loses the rental income from these dwellings but there is no offsetting saving on management costs or Depreciation etc. or a contribution from the project for the units being transferred.
- 6.16 Currently there are 193 void HRA dwellings within the red line. Where the phasing of the project allows, some of these units will be re-let as temporary accommodation. However it is likely any re-letting of properties will be offset by new voids in areas which are in the earlier phases on the scheme. The 2021-22 budget assumes that any dwellings currently void will not be re-let in future. It also assumes that there will be no income from dwellings due to be demolished within the first 36 months of the regeneration project and with no offsetting savings until 2022/23. This removes an estimated £1.5m income from the HRA Operating Account in 2021/22. This will increase if more properties within the red line become void and are not offset by additional re-lets.
- 6.17 The financing of the Sheerwater Regeneration Project allows for a capital receipt and other recharges to be made from the Project to the HRA to compensate it for the historic HRA debt relating to the demolished dwellings and other costs. However the timing will depend on the financial position of both the project and the HRA which will need to be reviewed over the course of the project.

Reserves and Balances

- 6.18 With the removal of the Revenue Contribution to Capital Outlay (RCCO) the total contribution to the Asset Management Programme reduces from £3,892,898 in 2020/21 to £3,700,000 in 2021/22.
- 6.19 The balance on the HIP Reserve is £4,834,000 as at 31 March 2020. It is likely that the remaining balance will need to be ring-fenced to be used to maintain an HRA Surplus during the construction phase of the Sheerwater Regeneration and to offset the rental income lost due to the Covid Crisis.

7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 The 4 year rent reduction period had a significant impact on the financial position of the HRA. While the return to rent increases of CPI + 1% is welcomed the rental income over the HRA 30 Year Business Plan will be considerably less than that calculated under Self-financing.
- 7.2 The regeneration of Sheerwater has started meaning the HRA will forego the rental income on void and demolished dwellings within the red line. As detailed in the report it is estimated that the HRA will use reserves of £827,000 to maintain the working balance per property of £100 in 2021/22

8.0 Implications

Financial

- 8.1 The financial implications are explicit in the report.

Housing Revenue Account Budgets 2021-22

Human Resource/Training and Development

- 8.2 There are no additional human resources or training and development implications arising as a direct result of this report.

Community Safety

- 8.3 No community safety implications noted

Risk Management

- 8.4 Risks to budgets have been identified throughout the year and will be reported in the Performance and Financial Monitoring Information booklet (the “Green Book”). Specific risks have been set out in the report.

Sustainability

- 8.5 No sustainability implications noted.

Equalities

- 8.6 No equalities implications noted.

Safeguarding

- 8.7 No safeguarding implications noted.

9.0 Consultations

- 9.1 No public consultations have been undertaken in preparing this report.

REPORT ENDS