
HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT – MTFP 2017/18 TO 2021/22

**Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Veronica Copeland,
Adult Social Care and Housing Portfolio**

**Responsible Director - Paul Wildsmith,
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider proposals in respect of the revenue budget, rent levels and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2017/18 in the context of the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan to 2021/22 and the 30 year Business Plan.

Summary

2. The key decision regarding the HRA is the balance between rent and service charge levels and investment in the housing stock. For four years, commencing in 2016/17 the Government are introducing a compulsory 1% reduction in Social and Affordable rents through the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015. We therefore have no discretion to increase rents, although we could reduce rents even further than the level imposed upon us. This would however have a significant impact on the level of services we are able to provide to our tenants. It is proposed therefore that in line with government rent policy all Council tenants will have an average 68p reduction in weekly rent (Average Rent 2016/17 £72.17 – Average Rent 2017/18 £71.49). It is worth noting that 70% of tenants will have their rents and service charges covered by benefit payments. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken to enable Members to understand the full impact of the proposed rent and service charges and this is attached at **Appendix 1**. The proposals included in this report have been considered and supported by the Customer Panel and Housing Executive.

Recommendations

3. It is proposed that the following are recommended to Council:-
- (a) The Equalities Impact Assessment at Appendix 1 is given full consideration before making any decisions.
 - (b) An average weekly social rent reduction of 1% for 2017/18 be implemented giving an average rent of £71.49.
 - (c) Garage rents and service charges are increased as shown in Table 3.
 - (d) The budget at **Appendix 2** is approved.
 - (e) The Housing Business Plan **Appendix 3** is agreed.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are supported :-
- (a) To enable the Council to deliver an appropriate level of service to tenants to meet housing need and to support the economic growth of the Borough through housing development.
 - (b) To allow the results of consultation to be considered before final decisions are made.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources

Background Papers

CLG Rent Restructuring Guidance

Pauline Mitchell: Ext 5381

S17 Crime and Disorder	The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.
Health and Well Being	There are no issues relating to health and well-being which this report needs to address
Carbon Impact	There are no carbon impact implications in this report
Diversity	There are no diversity issues
Wards Affected	This will have an effect on the majority of the Wards in the Borough.

Groups Affected	All Council Tenants and Lifeline Service Users
Budget and Policy Framework	The issues contained within this report require Council approval and the report will be presented to Council in February 2017.
Key Decision	This is a key decision because agreement to the recommendations will result in the Local Authority incurring expenditure which is significant. There will also be a significant effect on the communities living or working in an area comprising two or more wards within the area of the local authority.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision for Cabinet, as the approval of Council on February 2017 will be required.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The report has no particular implications for the Sustainable Community Strategy.
Efficiency	As the HRA is a ring fenced budget every effort is made to maximise income and identify savings in order to maintain a high quality service.

MAIN REPORT

Setting the MTFP for the HRA

5. Councils no longer have the previous levels of flexibility to decide the balance between the levels of service provided to tenants and the levels of rent charged. For a four year period commencing in 2016/17 all social and affordable rents must be reduced by 1% and there is discretion to lower the rent levels even further but this would significantly impact on the levels of service provided to our tenants. The MTFP as described in the following sections reflects government policy whilst striving to ensure the standard of service offered remains high. This will be a challenge in the context of the HRA already having relatively low rents and service charges. The investment identified in the 30 Year Business Plan has been reduced to reflect any loss in income.

6. Analysis of Expenditure within the HRA

(a) Management £5.574m

This includes all staffing costs associated with the provision of a housing management service, central support service and ground maintenance recharges and other associated support costs such as ICT and insurance. These costs have been benchmarked and show our 2015/16 (latest available CIPFA stats) cost of £557 per property compare very favourably with our Comparator Group average of £1,192 per property.

(b) Maintenance - Revenue Repairs - £3.642m

This covers the on-going general repairs to the Councils 5,271 properties at a rate of approximately £718 per property per year. This level represents an average spend and reflects the overall good condition of the stock due to sustained capital investment. Benchmarks indicate we provide good value for money when compared to the overall average of £1,074 per property. The continued investment in a good repairs service is essential to maintaining our

stock at a good level for current and future tenants.

(c) **Capital Financing Costs**

This is the cost of paying for previous borrowing undertaken to fund capital expenditure.

(d) **Bad Debts Provision**

A provision to cover rents that are deemed unrecoverable.

(e) **Revenue Contributions to Capital Programme - £12.08m**

The Council cannot borrow to finance major refurbishments due to the current restriction on HRA borrowing, although we have successfully bid for some grant funding from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) for the building of new houses during 2015/18. Most capital expenditure needs to be funded from revenue. The budget acknowledges this and allows for revenue contributions each year. In addition over recent years contributions have been set aside to fund significant investment such as regeneration and new house building.

7. Members will appreciate that expenditure items (a) to (d) are relatively fixed and the main variable is the type and location of capital investment. The proposed Business Plan is discussed in the following section and this explains where future capital investment is planned.

Housing Business Plan

8. The purpose of the Housing Business Plan 2015 is to ensure that the Housing Service has a financial plan which is sustainable and focuses investment towards strategic priorities. During the development of the Business Plan it has become clear that there were a number of strategic investment priorities that are particularly pressing and have significant financial implications for both the Housing Revenue Account and the Council's General Fund.
9. The following proposals will outline these strategic priorities, the resources available to deliver on these priorities (subject to final decisions on rent levels) and how resources will be aligned against the priorities.

New Build – Current Programme

10. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment completed for Darlington in 2015 identified that there is a need for 160 affordable dwellings for rent across the Borough of Darlington each year. Not only is there a need to build affordable dwellings to meet local need, it is also a business need for the Housing Service. The Business Plan is underpinned by the rents received from Council properties and the loss of rents as a result of regeneration works and right to buy sales would significantly reduce income for the Housing Service if these properties were not replaced. Similarly the impact for New Homes Bonus of overall reductions in property numbers needs to be taken into account.
11. The implementation of the Government's Self-Financing Initiative introduced from April 2012 enabled the creation of an Investment Fund which is currently being prioritised on the development of new Council housing for affordable rent. A total of £23.3m has previously been approved to deliver 60 two and three bedroom houses

and 106 two bedroom flats across seven sites. Expenditure in 2017/18 will mainly be in relation to Allington Way, Lingfield where 30 two bedroomed flats and 32 two and three bedroomed houses are due for completion in October 2017.

12. The Investment Fund includes £17.7m for further consideration for investment in Council Housing such as additional new build schemes. The government has recently announced grant funding through the Homes and Communities Agency which can be used, for example, for Affordable Housing for Rent, Supported Housing and bringing empty homes back into use. Appropriate schemes are therefore currently being worked up into more detail for future Cabinet approval.

Housing for Vulnerable People

13. Each year Housing Services complete a range of minor and major adaptations to individual Council properties where a need has been identified by an Occupational Therapist. In 2015/16 over 250 properties received adaptations works through this route and works ranged from the provision of lever taps and grab rails to semi-permanent ramps, stair lifts, hoists and ground floor extensions. The spend profile of the adaptations budget has changed in recent years with an increasing number of major projects being commissioned including:
 - (a) the installation of through floor lifts
 - (b) completion of major structural alterations to provide wheelchair friendly accommodation
 - (c) the construction of extensions providing ground floor bathing and bedrooms
14. The increasing number of larger projects funded through the adaptations budget reflects the fundamental role adaptations play in supporting households to continue to live independently, reduce the need for expensive care packages and prevent a premature move into a more supported form of accommodation. Due to the key role adaptations play in reducing demands on Adult Social Care budgets the Business Plan is committed to investing £300k per year on lifts and adaptations.
15. Properties being provided as part of our current new build programme of 160 homes have been built in accordance with Lifetime Homes principles. Inexpensive features include flush door entrances at front and rear for wheelchair access, and raised sockets, as well as, low level window sills and openings. Increased space standards have however increased costs, including hallways wide enough for 360% wheelchair turning circle, wider doors, ground floor toilets in all properties including houses are wheelchair accessible, all ground floor flats have flat floor showers, a knock out panel is provided between the bedroom and bathroom in the ground floor flats to make it easy to provide a ceiling track hoist in the future and additional space/electric sockets provided in the hall of houses to facilitate a platform lift. A bespoke six bedroomed property has also been provided at Red Hall for a large family which includes a child with disabilities. The property can be readily converted into two 3 bedroomed properties.
16. Unfortunately due to significant future constraints on the HRA budget the current specifications will need to be reviewed but we have significantly increased the amount of stock available for people with disabilities both now and in the future.

Existing Stock Investment and Responsive Repairs

17. The housing stock has been assessed as being in good condition with significant annual investment as part of a structured programme for both on-going capital improvements and maintenance resulting in:
 - (a) All stock meeting the Decent Homes Standard by 2006.
 - (b) A proactive approach to capital improvement work ensuring all stock is maintained to a standard above the Decent Homes Standard, locally known as the Darlington Standard.
 - (c) An average SAP rating of over 70 across the Council housing stock indicating an above average level of thermal comfort. This can be largely attributed to a central heating programme which has installed over 2,700 A-rated combi-boilers and a planned maintenance programme which ensures all properties suitable benefit from cavity wall insulation and 300mm of loft insulation. A significant number of properties with previously very poor SAP ratings have also been targeted in recent years for a more comprehensive package of energy efficiency measures including double glazed UPVC windows, composite doors and in some cases external cladding.
18. The Business Plan identifies a capital works budget of £41m over the next five years and £233m budget for capital works over the next 30 years. The impact of these changes is outlined in more detail in paragraphs 22-24 of this report. This budget will ensure all works identified within the stock condition survey can be completed alongside additional works to maintain properties to the Darlington Standard.
19. The Business Plan anticipates responsive repairs will remain at historical levels and so allocates a budget of £20.3m for responsive and cyclical repairs within the five year investment plan and £124m within the 30 year investment plan.

Energy Efficiency

20. The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) is an industry standard used to evaluate the energy efficiency of a property. The average SAP rating of the Council's housing stock is over 70 and well in line with the national average. Housing stock with poor levels of thermal comfort has now benefitted from additional measures as indicated above and given the on-going constraints on the HRA budget which had not previously been foreseen it is now an appropriate time to review our energy efficiency programme. The programme for 2016/17 included £600k for energy efficiency and £250K for a door replacement programme. Whilst new doors continue to be fitted based on poor condition, no particular area could be identified as a priority for other energy efficiency measures such as replacing sound doors or single glazed upvc windows with double glazed units. This £600K has therefore been set aside as a saving and it is proposed that this particular heading is removed from the Business Plan going forward.
21. The five year investment plan directs £8m towards investment in A rated combination boilers and £50m over 30 Year Business Plan period.

22. Attached at Appendix 3 is the 30 Year Investment Plan and at **Appendix 4** the detailed 5 Year investment plan.

Rent Level Options

23. The main objective of the Government's policy on rent restructuring is that rents should be fair and affordable for tenants in the social rented sector. The policy sets out a common basis on which all rents in the social sector should be set. This means that the rent for a house or flat (known as the formula rent) is linked to its capital value, size, location, condition and local earnings so that tenants can make a proper choice between how much they pay and the size and quality of the property they live in.
24. On 8 July 2015 the Government introduced a requirement for all social landlords to reduce their rents by 1% every year for the next four years (2016/17 – 2019/20) rather than increasing them by CPI + 1% as previously indicated. The reduction is described by Government as social landlords' contribution to reducing the Housing Benefit Bill. The impact on the Council's HRA is that by year 4 we will be losing rental income of approximately £2.5m every year. Example rents for 2017/18 based on this new information are attached at **Appendix 5**.

Garage Rents and Service Charges

25. The budget at Appendix 2 includes the financial effect of the proposed increases. The proposed service charges shown at Table 3 provide for achieving full recovery of costs from those tenants who directly benefit from the services provided. In most instances this means a small inflationary increase is necessary but in some instances no increase is needed to maintain current levels of service. Any additional costs will be covered by Housing Benefits for the 71% of tenants who are eligible. The HRA funds a Money Advice Service and Income Management Team to address the financial challenges facing a number of Council tenants and referrals are also made to CAB for independent financial advice as well as to food banks and the Credit Union. Those tenants, particularly first time tenants who require more sustained intensive support will be referred to the Housing Plus Team.

Table 3: Garage Rents and Service Charges

Description	Current Weekly Charge (16/17)	Proposed Weekly Charge (17/18)
	£	£
Garage Rents	7.39	7.47
Building Cleaning – Flats	1.76	1.76
Building Cleaning – Sheltered Schemes	3.60	3.61
Building Cleaning – Extra Care	11.32	11.33
Grounds Maintenance – General Housing	1.67	1.70
Grounds Maintenance – Blocks of Flats	1.67	1.70
Heating – Comprehensive schemes	11.46	11.46
Heating - Blocks of flats	1.28	1.34
Administration – Leaseholders	84.00	84.50
Furnishings and Fittings – Comprehensive Schemes	1.85	1.87
Furnishings and Fittings – Good Neighbour Schemes	0.84	0.85
Lifeline Response	5.24	5.28
Lifeline - Sheltered and Extra Care Housing	16.80	17.03
Pavement Crossings and Hard standings	3.96	4.00
Mid-day Meal – Extra Care (Residents only)	32.27	32.27
Mid-day Meal – Extra Care (Non-Residents only)	38.78	38.78
Furnished Tenancies – 1 bed flat	28.51	28.51
Furnished Tenancies – 2 bed flat	29.65	29.65
Furnished Tenancies – 2 Bed House	45.97	45.97
Furnished Tenancies – 3 Bed House	48.10	48.10
Furnished Tenancies – White Goods	6.10	6.10
Guest Rooms in Sheltered Schemes	79.80	80.50
Door Entry Systems	0.65	0.66
TV Aerials	0.19	0.19
Housing Plus Service	17.71	17.89

HRA Implications of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and Autumn Statement

26. The Housing and Planning Act included a number of significant changes to housing and planning in general. Those changes that directly impacted on Council housing services included the following:

- (a) Pay to Stay - An additional rent charge where households have a taxable income above £30,000 per year, with the additional income being used by the Government.
- (b) The end of secure tenancies. Apart from in a limited number of circumstances all new tenancies to be let as fixed term “flexible” tenancies to ensure better use of Council stock. There will also be an impact on the right of succession, introducing flexible tenancies on succession for some and also making succession for anyone other than a partner or spouse discretionary.

- (c) The introduction of a charge on vacant “higher value” Council properties which would force the sale of properties to pay the charges. The income was intended to be used to compensate Housing Associations for the introduction of the voluntary right to buy.

27. The significant impacts of these on the HRA, as well as, the increased administrative burdens have been taken into account in the Autumn Statement. The Right to Buy for housing associations has been extended but will be funded by Government so there will be no requirement for Higher Value Asset payments from local authorities at least for 2017/18. The Government is not proceeding with ‘Pay to Stay’ either. However, fixed term tenancies will be proceeding and are currently set to be introduced in Autumn 2017 following a period of consultation. This means that if a family’s circumstances change and they no longer need social housing that home can be reallocated to another family who needs it more.

Consultation

28. The Annual Review of the HRA Business Plan is developed in consultation with Council tenants through their Customer Panel and the Housing Executive and supplemented with surveys, and marketing tools such as mystery shopping. The proposals have been considered by the Customer Panel and Housing Executive and they supported the proposed changes.

Equality Impact Assessment

29. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken to enable Members to understand the full impact of the recommendations included in this report. The EIA is attached in full at Appendix 1. This identified that the proposals had no specific impacts in terms of sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief, race, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity. However a small number of the approximately 500 tenants of working age affected by the Bedroom Tax who have a disability could benefit slightly. This is where they are deemed to have one or more spare bedrooms and are therefore at risk of losing some of their Housing Benefit.

30. As a result of the rent decrease and small overall increase in service charges all tenancies will benefit from the rent reduction. The exceptions are tenants of sheltered housing schemes who will see a 2-3% increase overall due to increased service charges. For some such groups as older people and disabled people, the increase in energy efficiency work, together with the continuing aids and adaptations programme will have a positive impact. The increase in housing supply will also have specific positive impacts for older and disabled people because of the specialist design of some properties.

Financial Implications

31. The estimates included in this report represent a fair view of ongoing plans and commitments although Members will appreciate some budgets are subject to volatility and will continue to be monitored closely.

32. The level of revenue balances projected in this report represent an adequate level given the level of risk.