

This report is to approve the recommendations in the draft HRA capital and revenue budgets for 2020-21. Before I come onto the detail of the recommendations, I wanted to take the opportunity to highlight some of the key achievements and challenges of the Homes and Communities service during the last year.

This has been a particularly turbulent time in the world of housing where we deliver services to some of our most vulnerable groups of customers and I wanted to share with you some of the great work that Raj and her team have been doing.

One of the most important parts of the portfolio is working to reduce rough sleeping and homelessness – no one should have to face a night on the street - and this is an area where we have made significant progress this year. Officers have worked intensively and in partnership with other agencies and the voluntary sector. It's been fantastic to see the great partnership working that has developed between Rugby and Hope4 with Rugby Borough Council officers working on site to support homeless clients.

I'm proud to report that as a direct result of this work the number of rough sleepers has reduced from 32 in October 2018 to 12 in 2019. 18 rough sleepers have moved into safe accommodation and 2 of those are now in employment. I would particularly like to mention Marie Filcek who has worked tirelessly to support rough sleepers and she and her colleagues continue to work with those who remain on our streets or insecure housing.

Other initiatives I would particularly like to mention are:

- The Rugby Housing Pathway Project which enables those with low to medium support needs to be placed into accommodation and receive support to maintain a tenancy and to move forwards with their lives. The Pathway project in Rugby was recently highlighted by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as a best practice example in their recent press release where the government announced additional funding for the Rough Sleeper Initiative. I'm also delighted to report that Rugby has secured an additional £120k of that funding to provide specialist support in the coming year.
- Our financial inclusion work continues to be a big focus – officers work closely with Warwickshire partners and the voluntary sector to ensure that customers receive targeted support with personal budgeting and debt management to enable them to sustain their tenancies - whilst also addressing the underlying issues causing rough sleeping and homelessness. The support is out there for those who need it.
- As well as seeing our tenancy sustainment work pay dividends by working closely with our most vulnerable tenants to prevent evictions, we've also recently reviewed our Rent Arrears Policy which sends a clear message that support is available for tenants wishing to engage but for those who "won't pay they can't stay".
- Rugby continues to lead and deliver the Trailblazer Preventing Homelessness, Improving Lives Project on behalf of the whole of Warwickshire. I'm delighted to report that the project has completed over 1000 (1068) preventions since it started.

In terms of other housing successes:

- Substantial progress has been made in the decanting of Rounds Gardens. The 121 approach taken with our customers is paying dividends as we know their needs and

support requirements, allowing us to engage with a whole range of support agencies to ensure a smooth transition to their new home. And the Deconstruction of Biart Place has begun. Officers have worked extremely hard to run this challenging project smoothly and efficiently.

- The new supply of affordable homes in the borough, which we've been able to do through the Housing Acquisition Fund, is invaluable in helping us to boost the numbers lost through Right to Buy and has helped us to reduce the numbers of those in temporary accommodation and particularly in inappropriate and inexpensive B & B accommodation. This has fallen from 31 in June 2018 to just 2 in December 2019. 44 S106 properties have completed at Cawston Meadows and Rugby Gateway plus 14 open market acquisitions with more to come in 2020/21.

Crucial to providing housing that is fit for the future, is to ensure that our properties are maintained and improved to the highest standards. We've completed a lot of maintenance and upgrading work this year including:

- 146 new bathroom installations;
- Over 400 new boilers fitted (with Grade A energy efficiency rating);
- 16 new kitchens fitted;
- 30 sites have had new high security main entrance doors, including cloud-based fob access which also enable easier identification of things such as abandoned properties;
- 1300 additional carbon monoxide alarms fitted;
- 540 smoke alarms as part of our ongoing smoke alarm replacement programme;
- We continue to make adaptations such as grab rails which can help improve the quality of life for our tenants.
- Our Life line Service continues to go from strength to strength - we are currently in the process of obtaining Telecare Services Authority (TSA) Accreditation which will not only provide our current customers with assurance of a high standard service but, will also add further credibility for the service to grow further commercially.

I also wanted to say a few words about the other aspects of the portfolio:

- I was really proud to launch the Rugby Lotto in May 2019 – this was a great moment for the voluntary and community sector in Rugby. We now have 34 good causes registered, with ticket sales raising in excess of £34,000 a year for the sector – in addition to grant funding;
- We've digitalised the grants application process which as well as freeing up significant amounts of officer time and leading to efficiency savings, has meant a paperless, consistent and much simplified process for all.
- Our customer services team continues to assist customers in accessing services and supporting wider council services. Telephone is still the Council's busiest channel of contact with circa 120,000 calls annually. The team continue to push channel shift by advising and encouraging customers towards digital channels that are available. Our Rugby App, the Rugby Chat bot and Portals offer self service for some services and we will continue to roll out further shift away from phones to digital.
- The Equality and Diversity service has been focussing on the delivery of the Council's E&D action plans, with an emphasis in 2019 on development and delivery of an

LGBT+ Action Plan based on the recommendations from a survey commissioned with Warwickshire Pride. The Council also launched a Disability Charter developed with support from Cllr Kieran Brown – thank you - and the Charter was approved by the E&D steering Group. I would also like to thank our Deputy Leader Cllr Derek Poole for his commitment and time towards such a critical area of work. Preparations are now starting for the Council to undertake a self-assessment to retain the Excellent Standard we are so proud of. Thank you too to Cllr Sally Bragg for all her hard work as Health Champion for Rugby.

- Lastly but by no means least is all the great work our ICT team continue to do to drive forward the Council's digitalisation and digital inclusion programme. Office 365 now allows access securely and remotely from most places for councillors and staff. We're contributing to our climate change commitment by moving towards paperless meetings and rolling out new systems including a new Housing Management System and Asset Management enabling more digital ways of working and storing of information.

In asking councillors to approve the HRA budgets tonight I hope this summary of what we've achieved has helped to give a picture of the support that is needed from different departments and the hard work that goes into providing some of the council's most critical services.

In making decisions around the budget we have to factor in all of the different challenges – the potential loss of stock via Right to Buy and a commitment to future acquisitions to deal with it. We also need to ensure that our medium term financial plan includes the development of the high rise sites and that's why following the abolition of the debt cap we're recommending increasing the debt indicator to £152m. In relation to rents – the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015 introduced a requirement for local authority providers to reduce rents by 1% a year for four years from 2016. This resulted in an estimated cumulative differential to the council of over £5million over 4 years. The Government recommendation for this year is to increase social housing rents by CPI (Consumer Price Index) plus 1%. This amounts to 2.7% for 2020/21 - an inflation-based rent increase. We're also proposing a small increase to service charges to cover wage and cost of service increases. This allows us to maintain affordability for residents whilst also enabling the Council to continue to provide a fit for purpose housing and support service to its customers, particularly those with increasingly complex needs.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Raj and all the officers in her team who have worked so hard in challenging circumstances over this last year. Just this week we've found out that Rugby has been shortlisted as Council of the Year at the National Housing Awards. I'm keeping everything crossed that the hard work will be rewarded at the awards in London in May – but either way it's a fantastic achievement to be shortlisted! I'm really positive about the future and what more we are going to achieve through our innovative approach to tackling homelessness and I also look forward to helping to shape Rugby's future housing particularly through the Biart and Rounds Gardens regeneration projects to provide secure and affordable housing for all of our residents.