

Housing Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 24 January 2023 5.30pm

Foreword for an alternative budget commentary

Green and Independent Group

Cllr Matthew Howard, Green and Independent Housing Spokes

Cllr Naomi Bennett Green and Independent Finance Spokes

1 INTRODUCTION

The Green and independent Group has chosen not to submit an alternative budget report but instead to provide a simplified commentary on the Housing Revenue Account.

The purpose of our commentary is to provide a simple clear report which sets out the Group's view.

Because of the nature of the comments and proposals in this report, we do not consider that a formal alternative budget report is required or would add any value.

Councillors and officers will be aware that the Council has already started modernising its budget processes. This group will continue to explore how to improve its financial communications and make them accessible to all.

The "virements" process by which budgets can be switched within and between cost centres has also been streamlined and allows the council to respond more appropriately to a fast changing world.

The increasing pace of change means that financial scrutiny has to change too. We expect less emphasis on setting budgets at the start of the year and greater emphasis on monitoring changes throughout the year.

Our commentary consists of this foreword and Cllr Howard's speech at the committee. The foreword is intended to be

included with the Agenda Reports Pack and set the scene for Cllr Howard's speech. Copies of Cllr Howard's speech will be released at the committee meeting.

We also wish to take this opportunity to thank the officers, councillors, community groups and residents whose views, experiences and knowledge have helped shape this report and particularly to thank Ms Julia Hovells and Ms Lynn Bradley for their input.

2 OUR AIMS

The Green and Independent Group describes ourselves itself as an independent group not an opposition group. We regard ourselves as equally free to praise or criticise the proposals of all groups to the extent that they support our aims for the Housing Revenue Account.

These are as follows:

Clarity

There were 7,155 council homes in this city at 1 April 2022. That's 7,155 households who rely upon us for shelter and services. It's not comfortable relying on an organisation for essential support when its workings are complex and opaque.

Every year the council has to decide how much to raise rents and service charges (within the limits set by central government). How can tenants judge whether those decisions are fair without clear information about finances?

We will continue to work for clearer, simpler information for those who rely upon us.

Climate

We are all aware that the council's resources to tackle climate change are limited. This makes it essential to ensure that any funds that the council can secure to tackle the climate

emergency are used in a way that gets maximum reduction of emissions from the funds available. Housing related emissions continue to form a substantial part of the city's emissions.

We have consistently argued that to get maximum reduction of emissions from a limited budget it is better to adopt low cost low technology partial retrofit techniques.

This also promotes social justice. It is fairer to have many households have some reduction in heating bills than for a few households to have a big reduction and the rest to have none at all.

Cllr Howard will cover the options and constraints in his speech.

We are very much aware that the council's past choices have been distorted by government grant conditions and that details of some expected grants have yet to be released.

Cost of living crisis

The impact of the cost of living crisis on the council's housing work is already very clear, particularly in those wards where much of the council's housing stock is based, such as Abbey.

Rent arrears

We note that 42% of the council tenants in our city are currently in arrears. Although we note that the level of arrears is comparatively small in a proportion of these, this is still cause for concern.

We are aware that income support advice is available to tenants on request. However, we would like to see a more proactive approach and in particular for an offer of advice to be made in cases where there are clear indicators of distress. For example, if a tenant requests condensation and mould help, financial distress is often present as well.

Condensation, damp and mould

Cllr Howard will discuss this area of work further in his speech. In particular, he expects to cover why he considers that cases are still under reported as well as other concerns.

Thermal window treatments and other low cost interventions

Cllr Howard will discuss this area of work further in his speech. In particular, he expects to explain why such a programme may reduce arrears

Other matters

Labour shortages and delays

We are concerned about reports that vulnerable tenants have been left without hot water and heating for up to 7 days due to labour shortages and other issues. We request that a small stock of heaters be made available to be issued by customer service staff to tenants awaiting contractor responses.

Doors

Cllr Howard wishes to request a review of our door replacement policy to address tenant concerns.

Funding options

Cllr Howard will comment on the extent to which funding is currently available under the current budget and what funding sources might be available.