

**Chair of Housing Committee, Councillor Claire Wells'
speech on the occasion of the rate setting meeting
for the 2020-21 financial year**

Thank you, Mr Mayor

I beg to move that the minutes of proceedings of the Housing Committee, as contained in Clauses C1 and C2 of the report of the meeting held on Wednesday, 16th October, 2019 in relation to fees and charges for 2019/2020, the draft capital programme for 2020/2021, and the minutes of proceedings of the Housing Committee as contained in Clause C1 of the report of the meeting held on Wednesday the 18th December, 2019 in relation to the draft revenue estimates for 2020/2021, be received, approved and adopted by the Council.

As I stand here today, this may well be my last speech as the housing chair and I have taken some time to reflect not only on the past year but the past four years: where we have come from, what we have achieved and the vision we have neatly parcelled up for the incoming council members.

In this day and age where the press are only interested in sensationalised - if not always accurate - news pieces which sell papers or get them hits on Facebook, the day- to-day heroes are often forgotten. So today I am going to concentrate on those stories that don't make the papers, the stories that don't sell on the high street and definitely don't get Facebook hits.

Over the past four years we have:

- 1) Provided homes for 524 families or people in need.

That's 503 more people housed than the 21 homes that were re-possessed due to rent arrears in the same period.

- 2) Housing officers have undertaken 2247 housing inspections and, in doing so, have helped numerous people with both housing and personal issues. I would like to share this story with you. One tenant had got themselves in a right mess, with their property looking more like a rubbish dump than a

home. I won't go into details but suffice to say it was grim. With the help of one of our outstanding officers this tenant has tidied up their home, their living conditions are better, their lifestyle is much healthier and their wellbeing much improved. This is only one of many stories shared with me, all of which demonstrate the dedication, empathy and understanding of our tenants shown by the team.

3) By the end of December 2019 we had refurbished 260 homes in Willaston with 94 properties remaining to be externally refurbished before the end of the first 5-year £14.5m framework agreement. This project was a particularly controversial one which, when I came on board,

was causing much angst amongst the residents. Feedback I have received from those in the houses that have been completed is overwhelmingly favourable. We have received several positive comments complementing the housing service on how wonderful their homes are after the external refurbishment has been completed and they have moved back in. We have also had hand-written letters thanking us for their new kitchens. There has been some continued scaremongering within the area and I would strongly urge anyone who is unhappy to contact the council directly. Stop listening to second or third-hand rumours where stories from when the project started have now

been embellished beyond even my beliefs and the facts totally distorted. It is so easy to shout out when things go wrong, but more often than not we are getting it right and that is lost in the noise of the few things that don't go according to plan.

- 4) To date we have signed 960 people onto the new five-year fixed term tenancy agreements. Looking at the reviews undertaken to date, only 10 out of the 86 tenants reviewed were offered a new tenancy on different terms from what they were on before and this was due to the tenant's circumstances changing. This is what the new agreement is for. Again, rumours and outright lies have led tenants to fear this change. I stand today to tell any tenant

who is willing to listen: this change is not something you should fear. On the contrary, I would urge you to embrace this change as the agreement is much better for you. It enables us to manage our stock more effectively. For example, if someone is in a four-bedroom house that they no longer need, we can plan alongside the tenant to downsize, affording us the opportunity to house another family in need. This can only be a good thing for our community. We would never, at the end of your tenancy, just boot you out of your home.

5) Community is at the heart of what we do when providing social housing - and no one shows this more than our housing team. We have facilitated

36 mutual exchanges enabling those who wish to move to more suitable accommodation to do so within the constraints of our limited housing stock.

6) When I took over as the chair in October 2016 the voids list held 72 properties – I will just pause to let that sink in. January 2020 we reported 10, this number has been consistently low since November 2018. This is only possible because of the work put in by our voids officer Liam Birchall and the hard working maintenance team managed by Ray Kelly and the voids contractor. We currently budget £3500 per standard void. However, due to the poor condition some properties have been returned in, we have been required to spend much more and

this year had to spend approximately £11 000 on one property alone. The budgeted £3500 in reality does not cover everything we would aspire to provide. We would like to invest so much more to bring them up to our decant standard giving our tenants the best possible start in their new home.

7) A tender has been accepted for the first phase of Spring Valley's refurbishment scheme, subject to government funding and the approval of £1.6m. This is another first for Douglas Borough Council, one which I hope sets an example to others as we work closely with all service providers to co-ordinate a scheme that, once complete, will mean

no further work will be necessary in the area for many years after completion.

8) Lower Douglas flats have been the headache of our stock for some time now. I am so proud of the hard work put in by officers in collaboration with the developer into getting the £12.6m Peel Road project off the ground. Even though we are still awaiting the go ahead from the Department of Infrastructure and Treasury this is a unique project, which will kick-start the desperately needed redevelopment of lower Douglas and herald a new era of good quality homes within our town centre. I also feel it necessary to mention at this point the challenge we face in finding the right line between

communicating too soon with residents only for them to be disappointed later on down the line when all the best laid plans go awry. This is the reason behind our decision not to go out to tenants in relation to who will be moving into this development. David Cretney MLC was a bit 'chopsy' on social media recently criticising Douglas Borough Council by saying tenants are due proper consideration and consultation. While I do not disagree, the timing and the implication that we do not do this needs to be clarified. Once we are in a position where we have sign off from the Department of Infrastructure and Treasury for this project and we are one hundred percent sure when

we are going to be in a position to relocate residents we will of course consult with them. Time and time again we have had to rescind our promises and plans only to disappoint those who have been contacted, due to factors outside of our control.

- 9) We continue to embrace technology to improve our service. To this end, over the coming year we will deliver our new software platform, enhancing our service to the tenant through improved management of our information and more efficient back-office processes. This will have a direct and positive impact on our customer service offering. The investment in technology will help us to better

understand and respond to tenants' individual needs and requirements which will be key to strengthening engagement with them and delivering targeted communications. Along with advancing our digital strategy by moving towards more online services, we have successfully run a number of online campaigns. By way of example we ran a very successful campaign to remind tenants wishing to participate in the TT Homestay scheme of their obligations under the terms of their tenancy agreement, which require them to obtain prior permission from the Council before registering for the scheme.

10) Four years later and we are still pushing for the Willaston apartments development. Earlier this year we finally wrapped up the battle we were having with the Department of Home Affairs in relation to the Police Station and it is hoped that with continued perseverance we will eventually get an extra 34 flats within Willaston. It is my hope that the new housing committee come April will continue on the course of sticking to the Council's principles and upholding their visions.

11) That said, I am pleased to say that the tides of change have fallen upon us and our relationship with the Department of Infrastructure has seen

some improvements recently. Their work with us on various projects has had a positive impact on our schemes and, although things still take longer than necessary, I feel they are improving. As we continue to work in collaboration with all stakeholders, I hope that processes can be streamlined and duplication of work cut down. I have said it many times in the past – Douglas Housing is a unique beast and treating our projects or requirements the same as any other local authorities just doesn't work. We have expertise within our department which others don't have and making use of these resources and trusting in their abilities will lead to savings in the long run for the

Department of Infrastructure and a speedier outcome on requests for us. The only thing I feel may be missing now is the human factor. Looking at big schemes in money terms is necessary but what must never be far from our minds is the impact it will have on people who are currently in our housing stock and on our community where more social housing is desperately needed.

12) Rental increases are always a touchy subject but it is our goal to bring fairness alongside practicality and affordability when looking at the budget. This is not easy, not always appreciated by the public and despite the time we spend advising the

Department of Infrastructure of our needs, ultimately outside of our control. In October 2019 we once again reinforced our desire for a five-year plan with steady increases to rents and our maintenance budget with an equitable split between reinvestment, which includes maintenance, management and loan repayments. As of yet our requests appear to have gone unheard but it is a drum I am confident the team will continue to beat as maintenance is not a monster that will ever stop growing.

13) Window refurbishment is another project which we are getting under way. A £30 000 pilot scheme

of 40 dwellings is due to start this quarter with the view to repair defective double glazing units. Once these are complete we will be looking to extend the scope to all council properties. It will remain within the remit of tenants to maintain their windows once this project is complete

14) Bathroom and Positive Input Ventilation (PIV) unit installations are also ready to go. A number of these units have already been installed and have been found to significantly reduce the condensation within our properties. The feedback we have already received has been encouragingly positive.

In closing, I would like to thank members for continuing to support me as the Chair for Housing. It has been a great privilege and has nurtured a passion in me which I didn't know existed.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the committee who have supported me, my deputy chair Cllr Crawley, Cllr Quirk, Cllr Skinner, Cllr D Pitts and the former Cllr Cain. We have not always seen eye to eye but your experience has helped guide decisions for the greater good of both the council and its tenants. To the former Housing Director Sue Harrison, Deputy Gary Atkin and the new Housing Manager Vusimbe Zivave, thank you for your tolerance as I sometimes rather

clumsily found my path. To the new Director Dan Looney, I hope to still be here after April but if not then I wish you luck. Your job is a hard but incredibly rewarding one and I hope that as time goes on your spreadsheet of wins gets longer so that when times are tough and you are ready to throw in the towel you are able to go back and remember what all the hard work is for.

Mr Mayor, this Council continues to recognise it has a duty to address the needs of its tenants and continue to progress the Housing Development Strategy which provides a solid long-term solution - where capital projects are addressing long standing problems and with schemes that will outlive their loans. Encouraging

our tenants to embrace their responsibility as residents, working in partnership with government and creating an environment where community spirit is at its core.

We look forward to 2020 unfolding, working alongside the Department of Infrastructure, hoping for greater financial autonomy and providing an improved service to our tenants.

I recently had a conversation with one of our friends up the road and he said to me 'Claire, if you can look yourself in the eye and can say hand on heart you have done everything to the best of your ability then that is

all that matters'. I will be honest and say I was surprised he knew my name but I was also grateful for the wise words – I can hand on heart say that for the past four years with the support of my great team, with our focus on the tenants, I have done everything to the best of my ability.

Mr Mayor I beg to move the housing budget for the 2020/2021 financial year.