Council, item 9

Committee: Full Council Agenda Item

Date: 16 December 2008

Title: Financial Outlook

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Summary

General Fund

- The 2008/09 Revised Budget is close to the Original Budget, but there
 are some variable items which will affect the final position.
- There is evidence of wider economic issues impacting locally, causing pressure on all local authorities' budgets including Uttlesford's.
- Because of this economic climate, it is forecasted that the 2009/10 budget can be balanced, but it is likely that use of reserves will be required to achieve this.
- The medium term outlook is challenging, requiring strategic solutions to place the Council on a stable financial footing.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

- The 2008/09 Revised Budget shows a net adverse variance from Original Budget of £126,000 and an overall in-year deficit of £498,000.
- Balances are forecasted to be below a minimum safe contingency level.
- Income must be maximised and cost savings need to be identified.
 Strategic solutions are required to address structural financial issues in the HRA.

Capital Programme

 The Finance & Administration Committee gave approval to the draft capital programme on 27 November. This will now proceed to Council for final approval in February.

Next Steps

- Analysis of prioritisation exercise and public consultation results.
- Draft budgets to Committees in January and February.
- The Council will set the 2009/10 Budget and Council Tax on 19 February.

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Recommendations

The Council is recommended to:

- Approve the 2008/09 General Fund Revised Budget as shown in Appendix A.
- Note that variability exists which is likely to affect the 2008/09 General Fund outturn as described in paragraphs 5 to 8.
- Approve the 2009/10 General Fund Budget Strategy as summarised in paragraph 24.
- Authorise Officers to develop proposals to address longer term financial challenges as summarised in paragraphs 25-31.
- Approve the Housing Revenue Account Revised Budget as shown in Appendix D.

Background Papers

None.

Impact

Communication/Consultation	Public opinion is being sought via a questionnaire in Uttlesford Life and the website (link below) http://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/main.cfm?Type=CP C&MenuId=730
	Results will be reported to Members in January/ February.
Community Safety	No specific implications
Equalities	No specific implications
Finance	Detailed in the report.
Human Rights	No specific implications
Legal implications	The Council is legally required to set a balanced budget.
Sustainability	No specific implications
Ward-specific impacts	No specific implications
Workforce/Workplace	No specific implications

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General Fund

2008/09 Revised Budget

- Officers have produced a revised estimate of the budget requirements for the year, based upon variations arising and differences from assumptions used to set the Original Budget.
- Overall, 'day to day' spending is expected to be within £2,000 of the Original Budget, although various favourable and adverse variances combine to produce this overall position. This is summarised in the table below.

£m	2008/09 Original Budget	2008/09 Revised Budget	Variance Adverse/ Favourable (-)
Net Budget Requirement	8.432	8.456	0.024
Resources available	8.432	8.454	-0.022
Deficit for year	-	0.002	0.002

- It is proposed that the net adverse variance of £2,000 will be met by reducing the budgeted transfer to the General Fund Balance by £2,000.
- A detailed breakdown of the Revised Budget is shown in Appendix A, with a list of the individual variances given in Appendix B.
- Material uncertainties exist that are likely to change the budget position and produce a different outturn to that suggested by the Revised Budget.
- 6 The following issues could improve the overall position:
 - (a) The Revised Budget excludes outstanding investment income relating to the Landsbanki deposit (£135,000). It is possible that accounting guidance will be issued that will allow the unpaid interest to be credited to the General Fund, which will improve the bottom line. In addition, the Council has applied to DCLG for permission to capitalise investment income foregone as a result of the Landsbanki deposit not being available to reinvest (£68,000).
 - (b) The figures include £144,000 relating to the write off of a historical balance on the VAT account. £130,000 of this relates to errors made on a VAT return in 2002/03. Officers have written to HMRC to attempt to recover the money. Prospects of success are uncertain; if the money is recovered, this will improve the bottom line.
 - (c) The Revised Budget assumes that the 2008/09 budgeted amount of £250,000 for Stansted G2 will be retained and made available for use in 2009/10 as required. Clearly there is discretion around this which if used could improve the bottom line position.

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- 7 The following issues could worsen the overall position:
 - (a) When reviewing the 2007/08 Benefits Subsidy grant claim, the external auditor checked a small sample of benefits cases and found some accuracy errors. This may affect the Council's grant income. Robust and active measures are being taken to determine what possible exposure there may be, and what scope exists to minimise this.
 - (b) DCLG has issued a draft regulation which suggests that the Council will not be required to account for any losses relating to the Landsbanki deposit in 2008/09 (or 2009/10). However, until this is confirmed, there remains a risk that the Council's revenue and/or capital resources may be required to underwrite some or all of the outstanding sum.
 - (c) As reported to the Finance & Administration Committee, officers are investigating historical balances relating to NNDR (£0.231m) and Council Tax (£0.338m). There is a risk that part or all of these balances may have to be written off. If so, all possible avenues to avoid a charge to General Fund balances will be pursued.
 - (d) At time of preparing this report, the Council's liability relating to the G1 appeal costs claim was not known or included in the Revised Budget.
 - (e) Additional audit fees may be billed.
- 8 Members are recommended to approve the Revised Budget shown in Appendix A and to note that variability exists that is likely to change the position.

2009/10 Forecast and budget strategy

- 9 Officers have carried out a detail review of the budget requirement for 2009/10. This work is substantially complete, enabling a reasonably reliable picture to be reported, but it is possible that this could change.
- There is evidence that wider economic issues are having an impact on the Council's finances. These include:
 - A reduction in investment income due to reducing interest rates and nonavailability of the sum deposited with Landsbanki
 - Reduced income from land charges
 - Reduction in Housing & Planning Delivery Grant
 - Increased fuel and waste disposal costs.
- At this stage no new investment in services has been provided for, pending outcomes from the prioritisation exercise and public consultation. As Members will be aware the Council is not in a position to make new investment unless additional sources of income can be identified or reductions elsewhere within the budget are made.

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- On 26 November the Local Government Minister announced the provisional local government settlement for 2009/10. The settlement is unchanged from that announced in November 2007. The Council's share of the settlement shall be £4.086m, an increase of 0.5% (c. £20,000) on the 2008/09 figure. This compares with inflation which is currently 4.5% (CPI October 2008).
- The Minister has again made clear that the Government is prepared to take tough capping action next year, and that it expects that the average Council Tax increases will be substantially below 5%. This relates to the average increase for the country as a whole; there is no specific requirement or expectation that Uttlesford's Council Tax increase shall be substantially below 5%.
- In late December, the Council will determine the Council Tax base, expressed in "Band D equivalents", to be used when setting the 2009/10 Council Tax. At this stage, it is prudently estimated that any tax base growth will be offset by reduced collection rates, so the 2008/09 figure of 31,914 has been used for modelling purposes.
- The 2008/09 Uttlesford Band D Council Tax level was £136.62. The following table illustrates the effect on Council Tax of increases from 0% to 5%.

% increase from 2008/09 Council Tax	2009/10 Band D equivalent £	Increase on the 2008/09 Band D Council Tax £	2008/09 Increase per week £	Illustrative Council Tax Yield for 2009/10 £000	Increase on 2008/09 Council Tax yield
					£000
0%	136.62	0.00	0.00	4,360	0
1%	137.99	1.37	0.03	4,404	44
2%	139.35	2.73	0.05	4,447	87
3%	140.72	4.10	0.08	4,491	131
4%	142.08	5.46	0.11	4,534	174
5%	143.45	6.83	0.13	4,578	218

Each 1% rise in Council Tax provides additional Council Tax yield of around £44,000, and adds £1.37 to a Band D Council Tax bill.

An increase or decrease in the budget of £10,000 is equivalent to an increase or decrease in Council Tax of 0.23%.

- Due to the challenging financial outlook and substantially below inflation increase in central government funding, a council tax increase at or close to 5% is required given the Council's financial position.
- 17 The following is a summary of the 2009/10 forecasted budget requirement. Further details are provided in Appendix C.

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£m	2008/09 Revised Budget	2009/10 Forecast Budget
Net Budget Requirement	8.454	9.088
Resources available	-8.454	-8.686
Use of reserves to balance budget		-0.402
Deficit for year	-	-

- The forecast budget assumes that revenue funding from Essex County Council of £220,000 for waste services will be confirmed.
- By the time of the Council meeting the Strategic Management Board expect to have completed a review of all lines in the budget, working with Heads of Department, to ensure that all figures are realistic. The objective is to ensure that all salary and contractual commitments are reflected in the budget, income estimates are realistic and non-pay budgets based on the minimum amount necessary to deliver existing levels of service. This exercise will avoid the need to set a budget with unidentified savings targets, and should improve the robustness of estimates generally. The forecast budget figures in this report include assumptions about the level of adjustments that will result from the Strategic Management Board's review.
- The budget excludes any reduction in benefits grant subsidy that is likely to arise as a consequence of issues identified by external audit this year recurring during next year's audit. A reduction in income is therefore possible. There is a strong case for investing in the capacity of the benefits service to minimise error and maximise subsidy entitlement.
- 21 The General Fund Working Balance is forecasted to be c. £1.1m as at 31 March 2009. The Chief Finance Officer will carry out a detailed assessment of the robustness of estimates and adequacy of reserves and will report to the Council at time of final budget determination. This will include a recommendation for the minimum safe level of contingency reserves. A provisional view is that due to the high level of variability already identified, it will be prudent to ensure that the Working Balance is maintained at least at the forecasted level of £1.1m. This means that the Council should not budget to draw upon the Working Balance as means of balancing the 2009/10 budget.
- The Council maintains an earmarked PFI reserve with a balance of £1.1.m (coincidentally similar to the Working Balance). The reserve was established in 2001 to compensate for expected reductions in Government grant. However, since 2005 the grant has stabilised which suggests that the reserve need no longer be earmarked for this purpose. This is a technically complex subject and expert advice has been commissioned to determine whether the PFI reserve can be reallocated and made available for balancing the budget. This would need to be agreed with the External Auditor. This report assumes that this will be agreed.

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- Budget calculations will be completed in early January and each Committee will consider their budget in the January cycle, ahead of final determination by the Finance & Administration Committee on 10 February and Full Council on 19 February.
- Members are recommended to approve the 2009/10 budget strategy, summarised as follows:
 - In making final budget determination, to have consideration to the outcomes of the prioritisation exercise undertaken on 16 December, and the outcomes of public consultation being carried out in December/January
 - Investment in services must be funded by identifying additional sources of income and/or savings elsewhere in the Council's budget
 - Action will be taken to improve the capacity of the benefits service to maximise the council's financial position through subsidy maximisation, error prevention and overpayment recovery
 - The General Fund Balance must be maintained at or above the minimum safe contingency level recommended by the Chief Finance Officer
 - The PFI reserve to be reviewed and if legal and safe to do so to be reallocated and made available for budget equalisation on a prudent and targeted basis
 - Council Tax increase to be at or just below 5%.

Medium Term projections

- The medium term outlook for the Council is challenging. It is reasonable to expect that wider economic issues will continue to impact and possibly worsen e.g. reductions in planning income, increases in pensions costs.
- Below is an indicative model which shows that fundamental changes will be required to enable the Council to balance its budget in 2-3 years time.

Use of balances Revised deficit	-0.4	-0.45	-0.65	-
Council Tax increase (assumes 5%)	-	-0.2	-0.4	-0.65
Stansted G2 budget no longer required	-	-0.25	-0.25	-0.25
Additional pressures	-	0.5	1.5	2.0
Existing deficit	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Indicative forecast £m	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13

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- The table shows that the budget can be balanced by using reserves in the short term but this is not a sustainable position. The model assumes that by March 2012 the reallocated PFI reserve will be exhausted and the General Fund Balance will reduce to £0.7m, a level likely to be below minimum safe contingency levels.
- The model is indicative and a high degree of estimation has been used, nevertheless the principle that the Council must change significantly to sustain a stable financial position is in little doubt.
- The Council already works with partner organisations, for example in relation to car parking, community & leisure services, and Uttlesford Futures. However, the Council will need to reduce its cost base and/or generate more income by working in partnership with other organisations on a more significant scale.
- It can take upwards of 1-2 years for strategic change of this nature to be achieved and savings to be realised. The importance of sound financial planning and management has already been recognised by the Council, for example by placing Finance at the heart of the Corporate Plan and through its work with the Improvement Board. As there is an imperative for substantial cost reductions to be seen from 2011/12, rapid progress is needed.
- This poses significant capacity challenges to the Council. Applications to DCLG and Improvement East are being submitted to fund the capacity required to progress the strategic change agenda that the Council must embark upon.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

The Original Budget for 2008/09 was for an in-year deficit of £372,000. The Revised Budget shows a net adverse variance of £126,000 so that the in-year deficit is now forecasted to be £498,000. A summary is given below, together with a Forecast budget for 2009/10. Further details are in Appendix D.

£m	2008/09 Original Budget	2008/09 Revised Budget	2009/10 Forecast Budget
Income	-11.678	-11.553	-12.214
Expenditure	11.716	11.716	12.214
Other items	0.334	0.335	0.352
In year deficit	0.372	0.498	0.352
HRA working balance			
Balance at start of year	0.605	0.551	0.304
Transfer from Major Repairs Reserve	0.232	0.251	0.252
In year deficit	-0.372	-0.498	-0.352
Balance at end of year	0.465	0.304	0.204

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- The forecast level of HRA working balance is too low to provide a minimum safe contingency level. If the working balance was set at a level which allowed for a 2% margin for error in budget estimates, a minimum balance of £488,000 would be required. This compares with a forecast balance as at 31 March 2010 of £204,000.
- The above table assumes that the rent increase in 2009/10 will be 6%. This is subject to DCLG guidance and detailed calculations to be carried out by early January. Each 1% is equivalent to £108,000 of income and £0.74 on the average weekly rent.
- Housing repairs budgets are being reviewed, which may change the forecasted position.
- The Negative Housing Subsidy element of the 2009/10 budget is also under review, which could also alter the forecast.
- 37 Clearly, income must be maximised and opportunities must be identified to make cost savings. The stock options appraisal may identify strategic solutions to the structural financial problems within the HRA. Meanwhile, action will need to be taken to maximise the financial position in 2008/09 and 2009/10.

Capital Programme

- On 27 November the Finance & Administration Committee approved the Capital Programme for each committee for 2008/09 to 2011/12, consistent with decisions made previously by each committee.
- It was previously advised that approval could only be given in principle due to the risk that capital resources may be required to underwrite possible losses relating to the Landsbanki deposit. As mentioned above, DCLG have proposed a regulation which will remove this possibility until at least 2010/11. Capital resources can therefore be "unfrozen".
- A summary of the Capital Programme is below; further details are available within the relevant Committee papers.

£m	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
	Revised budget	Forecast budget	Forecast budget	Forecast budget
Community Committee (General Fund)	0.686	0.220	0.180	0.150
Community Committee (HRA)	1.996	1.886	1.906	1.930
Environment Committee	0.522	1.013	0.423	0.165
Finance & Administration Committee	0.495	0.577	0.325	0.020
Total	3.699	3.696	2.834	2.265

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Financed by				
HRA Major Repairs Allowance	-1.864	-1.886	-1.906	-1.930
Capital Receipts	-1.467	-1.754	-0.872	-0.279
External Funding	-0.368	-0.056	-0.056	-0.056
Total financing	-3.699	-3.696	-2.834	-2.265

- The level of available capital receipts is forecasted to run out by 31 March 2012; borrowing may be required if additions to the Capital Programme are made or if the level of incoming capital receipts is below the assumed amount.
- The Council will make final determination of the Capital Programme in February.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Variable items in the 2008/09 financial year could affect the Council's level of balances and undermine the budget strategy	3	3	Proactive work is being done to quantify the variable items and resolve issues before the budget is set
Assumptions used to prepare forecasts for 2009/10 may need to be refined. If this is significant a change to the budget strategy may be required.	2	2	Line-by-line budget review by Strategic Management Board and Heads of Department to ensure that underlying assumptions are realistic
The regulation proposed by DCLG, to defer any write off of Landsbanki- related losses until 2011/12, may not be confirmed. If so a major review of revenue and capital forecasts will be required.	2	4	We have explained to the Minister that uncertainty needs to be removed as soon as possible. We have asked for confirmation that capitalisation of losses will be permitted as a fallback position.
The Council does have sufficient capacity to progress a significant level of change, undermining prospects for resolving medium term financial challenges	3	4	We have applied to DCLG to fund some additional capacity. A similar application is to be submitted to Improvement East.

- 1 = Little or no risk or impact
- 2 = Some risk or impact action may be necessary.
- 3 = Significant risk or impact action required
- 4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.

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APPENDIX A

GENERAL FUND – 2008/09 ORIGINAL BUDGET AND REVISED BUDGET

£m	2008/09 Original Budget	2008/09 Revised Budget	Variance Adverse/ Favourable(-)
Service budgets – direct costs / income			
Community Committee	1.896	1.833	-0.063
Development Control Committee	0.490	0.405	-0.085
Environment Committee	2.134	1.963	-0.171
Finance & Administration Committee	4.754	4.653	-0.101
Licensing Committee	-0.097	-0.103	-0.006
Service budgets - Net direct costs	9.177	8.751	-0.426
Capital financing costs	0.000	0.266	0.266
Recharge to Housing Revenue Account	-0.898	-0.849	0.049
Investment income	-0.378	-0.420	-0.042
Pension Fund costs	0.553	0.586	0.033
VAT Write Off	0.000	0.144	0.144
Transfer from earmarked reserves	-0.059	-0.059	0.000
Transfer to General Fund	0.037	0.035	-0.002
Net Budget Requirement	8.432	8.454	0.022
Resources available			
Revenue Support Grant	-0.497	-0.519	-0.022
NNDR Pool	-3.569	-3.569	0.000
Council Tax	-4.360	-4.360	0.000
Collection Fund balance	-0.006	-0.006	0.000
Total Resources available	-8.432	-8.454	-0.022
Surplus (-) / deficit for year	0.000	0.000	0.000
General Fund Balance			
Balance at start of year	-0.507	-1.061	
Transfer to / from (-) General Fund	-0.037	-0.035	
Surplus (-) / deficit for year	0.000	0.000	
Balance at end of year	-0.545	-1.096	

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APPENDIX B 2008/09 GENERAL FUND VARIANCES BETWEEN ORIGINAL & REVISED BUDGET

	Variances Adverse / Favourable (-) £m
Historical VAT balance write off	0.144
Agency (Env)	0.103
Disposal costs	0.083
Land Charges income	0.063
Bulky Waste income	0.055
Diesel inflation	0.052
Concessionary contribution	0.051
HRA recharge	0.049
Pension Fund costs	0.033
HPDG	0.033
LAA grant (recycling)	0.031
Utilities inflation	0.018
Homelessness grant	-0.020
Area Based Grant	-0.022
Museum society donation	-0.025
ECC smart card grant	-0.025
ESA/LHA grant	-0.026
Staff turnover saving	-0.032
Pre-application planning charges	-0.038
Benefits (net)	-0.039
Border inspection fees	-0.041
Investment income	-0.042
Advertising (DC)	-0.044
Consultants	-0.075
Small Containers	-0.088
ECC Kitchen waste trial funding	-0.100
Concessionary travel grant	-0.147
Other items (net)	0.051
Net variance from Original Budget	0.002

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APPENDIX C
GENERAL FUND – FORECAST BUDGET 2009/10

£m	2008/09	2009/10
	Revised Budget	Forecast Budget
Service budgets – direct costs / income		
Community Committee	1.833	1.831
Development Control Committee	0.405	0.661
Environment Committee	1.963	1.897
Finance & Administration Committee	4.653	5.014
Licensing Committee	-0.103	-0.123
Service budgets - Net direct costs	8.751	9.280
Recharge to HRA	-0.849	-0.898
Investment income	-0.420	-0.130
Capital financing costs	0.266	0.266
Pension Fund costs	0.586	0.570
VAT Write Off	0.144	0.000
Transfer from earmarked reserves	-0.059	-0.402
Transfer to General Fund	0.035	0.000
Net Budget Requirement	8.454	8.686
Resources available		
Revenue Support Grant	-0.519	-0.499
NNDR Pool	-3.569	-3.587
Council Tax	-4.360	-4.576
Collection Fund balance	-0.006	-0.024
Total Resources available	-8.454	8.686
Surplus (-) / deficit for year	0.000	0.000
General Fund Balance		
Balance at start of year	-1.061	-1.096
Transfer to / from (-) General Fund	-0.035	0.000
Surplus (-) / deficit for year	0.000	0.000
Balance at end of year	-1.096	-1.096

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APPENDIX D

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

£m	2008/09 Original Budget	2008/09 Revised Budget	2009/10 Forecast Budget
<u>Income</u>			
Dwelling Rents	-10.906	-10.791	-11.452
Garage Rents	-0.198	-0.196	-0.196
Other rents	-0.006	-0.005	-0.005
Charges for Services & facilities	-0.463	-0.463	-0.463
Contributions towards expenditure _	-0.105	-0.098	-0.098
Total Income	-11.678	-11.553	-12.214
<u>Expenditure</u>			
Housing Repairs	1.887	1.876	1.892
Supervision & Management	2.476	2.488	2.664
Rents, Rates & Property Charges	0.025	0.030	0.030
Negative Subsidy Transfer	5.160	5.160	5.402
Depreciation - Dwellings	1.864	1.864	1.926
Depreciation – other	0.232	0.252	0.252
Deferred charges	0.040	-	-
Bad Debt Provision	0.032	0.045	0.048
Total Expenditure	11.716	11.716	12.214
Other items			
HRA share of corporate & democratic core	0.267	0.267	0.267
HRA share of pension fund deficit	0.103	0.103	0.103
Interest receipts	-0.036	-0.035	-0.018
Total Other Items	0.334	0.335	0.352
In year deficit	0.372	0.498	0.352

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