

Committee: Cabinet

Agenda Item

Date: 16 February 2016

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Title: Medium Term Financial Strategy

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Howell

Summary

1. The purpose of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is to ensure the ongoing financial health and stability of the Council. The Strategy looks ahead in order to anticipate issues that may arise in the Council's finances. This enables measures to be taken and plans to be put in place ahead of the issues arising.
2. The Council is in a strong financial position, currently insulated from the widespread problems in local government due to a combination of prudent financial management and New Homes Bonus (NHB).
3. The Government has announced that NHB will continue for the foreseeable future however a consultation has started on a review of the scheme. The funding envelope for NHB is being reduced from about £1,460 million to about £660 million with the 'saved' £800 million being diverted to Social Care. Clearly the consultation is aimed at reducing the amount of NHB paid to local authorities and as this council was one of the best performing in terms of NHB reward it is at most risk of a substantial cut in the future. Any change to the scheme will most likely commence in 2017/18.
4. On the agenda tonight is the proposed response to the NHB consultation. The consultation closes in March and the outcome will be announced in June 2016. A revised MTFS will be brought to Cabinet in the autumn.
5. The Government has indicated that the preferred scheme is a 4 year one compared to the current 6 year. On the face of it this has a significant but manageable impact on the forecasts; however the 4 year scheme appears to also be unaffordable in terms of the new funding envelope. Accordingly this plan is based on what the council believes to be a realistic level of reward (£2million).
6. The way in which the Council prepares estimates for the Localisation of Business Rates has been reviewed; what is felt to be a realistic, rather than a minimum, level of income has been included in the model. However timing of release of the provision which is governed by accounting principles remains a challenge.
7. It is likely that the timing of the release of the provision will mean that the Council can have reasonable confidence that in the next two financial years (2016/17 and 2017/18) its total income will exceed the forecasted budget. This

gives opportunities to make meaningful investment in projects that benefit local communities and businesses.

8. During the next two years the Council should also give active consideration to investing in cost reduction and/or income generation schemes, ready for the challenges it may face from 2018/19 onwards.
9. The Scrutiny Committee reviewed the budget reports on 9 February. Comments from the Committee are in a separate item on the agenda.

Recommendations

10. The Cabinet is requested to approve, for recommendation to Full Council, the Medium Term Financial Strategy as attached.

Financial Implications

11. Detailed in the report.

Background Papers

None.

Impact

Communication/Consultation	None
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None
Human Rights/Legal Implications	The Council has a legal duty to set a balanced budget.
Sustainability	None
None Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	None

Forecasting the Council's Budget Requirement

12. It is relatively straightforward to forecast what the Council's costs and income will be, based on extrapolating the 2016/17 budget into future years, using prudent assumptions about inflation.
13. Where actual increases or reductions are not already known, the following annual inflation assumptions have been used:

Budget item	Annual inflation assumption used	Approx value of each 1% change
Salaries	1%	£90,000
Employer's pension	0.9% of salary	£85,000
Other staff costs	0%	£5,700
Members allowances	1%	£3,200
Utilities & fuel	3%	£6,500
Supplies & services (contractual)	3%	£33,000
Supplies & services (non-contractual)	0%	£16,000
Fees & charges income (except car parking)	2%	£33,000
Car parking income	0%	£8,600
Benefits case load	0%	£850
Benefits rent increases	5%	£850
Demand growth	£50,000 cumulative additional spend per year	n/a

14. The model also assumes that during the next few years, the Government will proceed with its policy intention to transfer Housing Benefit to the Universal Credit scheme. The model makes assumptions that benefits expenditure and related DWP subsidy grant income will be progressively removed from the Council's budget during the next few years. This has the effect of reducing gross expenditure and gross income, but the bottom line effect is slight because 98% of expenditure is met by grant.

15. Other assumptions:

- No changes to the Council's priorities; existing levels of service provision to continue.
- Capital financing costs based on the draft five year capital programme and allied financing strategy.

- Recharge of costs to HRA to remain at the current level.
- Investment income will remain constant at £120,000 per annum.

Strategic Solutions Workstreams

16. In 2009 the five workstreams were established and from 2010 a small corporate team was set up to secure the savings needed by the MTFs. The Workstreams are:

- Shared Services
- Devolution
- Income Generation
- Service Reduction
- Efficiency Savings

17. The workstreams have been successful to date, with cumulative annual savings of around £2.8 million delivered by the end of 2015/16.

18. There is more to do however. Because of the inherent volatility and conjecture in the MTFs projections, and in particular the risks highlighted for the post 2017/18 period, the Council must continue efforts to ensure it is well placed to meet future challenges.

19. The priorities for the workstreams in 2016/17 are as follows:

- Asset Management
- Review of grants
- Back office costs
- Online service delivery.

MTFs: Guiding principles

20. The Council will continue to exercise prudence and discipline in its financial management. Costs will be controlled and kept under review, and income will be maximised wherever appropriate. Work will continue to identify ways to deliver services at a lower cost.

21. Inevitably, resource allocation decisions will be required based upon changing circumstances and priorities. Some budgets will need to be increased, and some reduced. The Council will seek to safeguard those activities that it considers to be highest priority as stated in the Corporate Plan.

22. During the first two years of the plan the Council will endeavour to make savings in priority areas only if there is no significant adverse impact to quality and level of service provision. For example, the Council may find a more efficient means of delivering the service. Otherwise, the Council will not make savings that result in diminution in service quality in these areas unless there is no alternative e.g. inability to balance the budget.

23. The Council acknowledges the need to provide statutory services, and in many cases these will be consistent with Corporate Plan priorities. Where the link between the need to provide a statutory service and Corporate Plan priorities is not as strong, the Council will provide a level of service consistent with affordability. Efficiency gains and partnership working will be explored as means of providing statutory services to an acceptable level at a lower cost. In some circumstances, the Council will consider reducing the level of service in order to make savings and redirect resources to the Council's highest priorities.
24. Subject to the above, unavoidable and essential growth items will be funded by the making of savings from elsewhere within the Council budget, or the generation of additional income. The Council will not make ongoing revenue commitments from non-recurring funding sources
25. The Council will manage its budget as a corporate whole, if necessary transferring money from one activity to another if this is what is necessary to match limited resources to the highest priorities.
26. In ordinary circumstances the Council will not use reserves to fund any ongoing expenditure. In exceptional circumstances, the Council may use reserves for one-off items or to alleviate budget pressures within the context of an overall plan to achieve a balanced budget but will seek opportunities to replenish reserves consumed in this way.
27. The Council will ensure that all reserves are held for clearly defined purposes and the amounts kept under review as per the Reserves Strategy.
28. Investment in new initiatives and service improvements will be subject to a value for money assessment and a post-implementation review to assess whether the intended benefits were achieved.

Risk Analysis

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Actual experience differs from the assumptions in the budget and business plan	4 some variation is inevitable	3 sums involved are potentially significant	Ensure MTFS has element of flexibility Maintain adequate reserves Robust monitoring Half yearly review by Cabinet

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.