

Updated Medium-Term Financial Plan 2024/25 to 2028/29

GENERAL FUND*October 2023***1. Background**

1.1 The preparation of a Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) provides the cornerstone on which the Council can build and deliver services in accordance with the aims and objectives outlined in the Corporate Plan 2023-2027 (“Your Epping Forest”), which are grouped under the three corporate ambitions:

- Stronger Communities
- Stronger Place; and
- Stronger Council.

1.2 Through ‘horizon scanning’ and anticipating necessary change at the earliest opportunity, resilience, and the ability to react to and withstand ‘major shocks’, is achieved.

2. Introduction

2.1 This is the first iteration of the MTFP in the 2024/25 budget cycle. It is a forward-looking document which provides a tentative look at the Council’s General Fund financial picture over the next five years (2024/25 to 2028/29) and re-evaluates the position in the light of developments since the last MTFP (2023/24 to 2027/28) was adopted by the Council in February 2023.

2.2 This part of the MTFP focuses on the Council’s General Fund. The HRA Business Plan is being further refined and this underpins an updated MTFP for the HRA, which is presented in Appendix B.

2.3 The February 2023 MTFP revealed a projected deficit of £2.389 million in 2024/25; this assumed a contribution of £263,000 to the Council’s general contingency reserves. The full projections can be summarised as follows:

Financial Year	(Surplus)/Deficit	Comment
	£000’s	
2023/24	0	Assumed contribution of £263,000 to Reserves
2024/25	2,389	New Waste Management contract assumed with effect from November 2024.
2025/26	762	
2026/27	677	
2027/28	454	

- 2.4 The MTFP is deliberately concise, focussing on the most significant financial issues faced by Epping Forest District Council over the medium-term. As reported in the Financial Planning Framework 2024/25 to 2028/29 (Cabinet 18th September 2023) there are a range of major factors that are causing concern at the moment. This includes notable spending pressures on Staff Salaries, Contracts and Financing. In contrast, inflationary pressure is gradually receding, and the Government appears committed to providing a Settlement for 2024/25, which reflects – as a minimum – a marginal increase on that provided for 2023/24.
- 2.5 Members should also note the following potentially significant items that have *not* been included within the projections in this iteration of the MTFP:
- North Weald Airfield Asset Disposal – the Council has agreed to dispose of a section of North Weald Airfield, released under the Local Plan adoption process as employment land. Negotiations with a potential purchaser are ongoing at the time of reporting. If this matter concludes before the 2024/25 Budget is set, the resulting capital receipt could be used to generate investment income in the short-term. This has not been factored in to the MTFP assumptions as conclusion and receipt are not certain; and
 - Planning Applications Income – as reported to Cabinet on 18th September 2023, the income stream that the Council receives from processing Planning Applications has – so far – not met expectations in 2023/24 following the recent adoption of the Local Plan. It is unclear at this stage what the outcome for 2023/24 and beyond is likely to be, although there is some optimism that income could increase as the year progresses and Draft Regulations have been laid before Parliament that will see an increase in fees for Major Applications of 35% with effect from 1st April 2024. Given the current uncertainty, the expectations for income from Planning Applications assumed in the February 2023 updated MTFP remain unchanged.

3. Financial Projections

3.1 Current Spending Levels

3.1.1 The starting point for developing the MTFP is the current level of spending. The 2023/24 General Fund base budget was approved by the Council on 28th February 2023 and can be summarised as follows:

Description	2023/24 Budget
	£000's
Employees	22,550
Premises	3,649
Transport	171
Supplies & Services	9,034
Support Services	3
Contracted Services	9,513
Transfer Payments (Housing Benefits)	22,210
Financing Costs	3,589
Waste Contingency	400
Qualis Contingency	713
Gross Expenditure	71,832
Fees & Charges	(17,644)
Government Contributions (including Housing Benefit Subsidy)	(24,022)
Miscellaneous Income (including Qualis)	(3,500)
Other Contributions	(4,041)
HRA Recharges	(4,984)
Net Expenditure	17,641

3.1.2 Net expenditure is funded as follows:

Description	2023/24 Budget
	£000's
Council Tax	(8,899)
Business Rates	(5,766)
Collection Fund Adjustments	(645)
Council Tax Sharing Agreement (CTSA)	(615)
Revenue Support Grant	(129)
New Homes Bonus	(78)
2023/24 Services Grant	(129)
Other Grants	(929)
Contributions to/ (use of) Reserves	(451)*
Total Funding	(17,641)

*Net of £262,620 contribution to Contingency Balance

3.2 Increased/(Reduced) Budget Demand

3.2.1 Based on an initial high-level review of the current base budget, and anticipated budget demand in 2024/25 and beyond, several areas of changed budgetary demand have been identified and are summarised by subjective heading in the table below.

Medium-Term Increased/(Reduced) Budget Demand (@ October 2023)					
Description	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s
Employees	(67,540)	(13,000)	(20,000)	(20,000)	(20,000)
Premises	(31,750)	0	0	0	0
Transport	70,000	0	0	0	0
Supplies & Services	268,253	0	0	0	0
Support Services	(2,050)	0	0	0	0
Contracted Services	204,565	255,758	0	0	0
Transfer Payments	250,000	0	(1,110,510)	(1,054,985)	(1,002,235)
Waste Contingency	(238,000)	(162,000)	0	0	0
Fees & Charges	70,930	(84,335)	(20,447)	(20,856)	(21,273)
Government Contributions	12,269	11,655	1,121,583	1,065,503	1,012,228
Miscellaneous Income	(367,500)	(157,500)	0	0	0
HRA Recharges	311,050	0	0	0	0
Net Increased/(Reduced) Budget Demand	480,227	(149,421)	(29,374)	(30,337)	(31,280)

3.2.2 The table above reveals a Net Increase in Budget Demand of £480,227 for 2024/25. The most notable *increases* include the following:

- Supplies and Services (£268,253) – the largest cost pressures on Supplies and Services are IT related, most notably on software support and license costs including “Gamma/Omnichannel” Support/Licenses (£146,260) and a range of *Other* (software support and license related) items (£143,050)
- Contracted Services (£204,565) – an increase in costs is expected when the new Waste Management arrangements are introduced in November 2024, following the expiry of the current Biffa contract (£563,333 in 2024/25, followed by a further £1,007,500 in 2025/26), although offsetting savings are also anticipated from the purchase of the Waste Vehicle Fleet (£536,958 in 2024/25, followed by a further saving of £751,742 in 2025/26). It should be noted that the potential cost of the new Waste Management arrangements is under review at the time of preparing this report; updated estimates will be included in the draft budget presented to Cabinet in December 2023
- Transfer Payments (£250,000) – as previously reported to Cabinet (in May and September 2023), there is a budget pressure on Housing Benefits in respect of Housing Benefit Overpayments (HBOs); the resulting budget shortfall is estimated at £250,000; and
- HRA Recharges (£311,050) – the annual Net Recharge from the General Fund to the HRA includes an interest payment *from* the General Fund in respect of interest received on the HRA balance; the rise in interest rates has led to a net decrease in the overall Recharge.

3.2.3 The most notable *reductions* include the following:

- Waste Contingency (£238,000) – a Contingency of £400,000 was included in the 2023/24 budget to reflect the one-off costs associated with developing the new Waste Management arrangements. It is currently estimated that £238,000 of that contingency will be utilised in 2023/24, therefore this item represents a reversal of the previous provision (the remaining £162,000 is anticipated to be spent in 2024/25); and
- Miscellaneous Income (£367,500) – a substantial increase in rental income is anticipated from North Weald Airfield Market following the agreement of a new lease, effective from 1st January 2024 (a net increase of £367,500 is assumed for 2024/25, followed by a further £157,500 in 2025/26).

3.3 Inflation

3.3.1 Inflationary pressures have been reviewed based on latest available intelligence and are presented in the table below.

Medium-Term Inflation Assumptions (@ October 2023)					
Description	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s
Employees	899,287	467,141	476,224	485,348	494,655
Premises	32,209	74,814	80,310	81,917	83,555
Transport	8,420	4,980	5,079	5,181	5,284
Supplies & Services	326,645	189,947	193,746	197,621	201,573
Support Services	24	14	14	15	15
Contracted Services	324,525	102,676	103,703	104,740	105,787
Financing Costs	1,810,225	-524,797	-464,572	-126,066	-127,913
Fees & Charges	-503,746	-217,927	-220,788	-223,688	-226,627
HRA Recharges	-177,220	-97,010	-98,950	-100,930	-102,950
Net Increased/(Reduced) Budget Demand	2,720,368	-163	74,766	424,137	433,380

3.3.2 Stubborn inflation in the economy has led to the Bank of England (BoE) systematically increasing interest rates month-on-month up until August 2023. However, the BoE resisted increasing rates beyond the current 5.25% base rate in September 2023, following lower than expected inflation figures for August 2023. The CPI rate fell to 6.7% in August 2023, following a steady decline since peaking at 11.1% in October 2022. The BoE are forecasting CPI to fall to circa 5.0% by the end of this (calendar) year, with most economists forecasting a further decline to around 2.0% by the end of 2024/early 2025. It is against this backdrop therefore that the inflationary assumptions in this iteration of the MTFP have been developed.

3.3.3 A planning assumption of 3.5% in general inflation has been applied for 2024/25, falling to 2.0% in 2025/26, and settling at that level thereafter (the BoE's long-term inflation target is 2.0%). This has been applied to Supplies & Services and a range of other non-staff budgets. Exceptions to note include:

- **Employee Costs** – a 3.0% pay increase has been assumed for 2024/25, which follows on from (at the time of preparing this report) an anticipated pay settlement of approximately 5.0% for 2023/24. However, the current base budget for 2023/24 was prepared based on an assumed pay award of just 4.0% (a 1.0% shortfall). As a consequence, the base budget increase of £0.899 million for 2024/25 highlighted in the table above in Paragraph 3.3.1, represents an uplift of 4.0% (3.0% + 1.0%). A pay award of 2.0% has been assumed for 2025/26 onwards.

- Premises Costs – a tailored approach has been applied to Premises costs, although Energy cost estimates will be subject to further refinement before the draft Budget is presented to Cabinet in December 2023. All other costs are assumed to follow the general rate of inflation; and
- Contracted Services – the Waste Contract is subject to an annual uplift based on October CPI (payable from November each year). An increase of 6.7% (August 2023 CPI) has been assumed at this stage for 2024/25 (this will be the last year of the Biffa contract). There is some optimism that this assumption can be reduced prior to presenting the draft budget to Cabinet in December 2023 (in the light of updated CPI figures).

3.3.4 Given the current financial challenge that the Council faces, it has been assumed that (non-statutory) Fees and Charges will rise by an inflationary *average* of 6.7%, reflecting the August 2023 CPI (significant variations around the average can be expected). Car parking charges are non-statutory and potentially in scope. The level of Fees and Charges generally is something that Members will need to consider carefully, with the balance between generating additional revenue and maintaining service demand being a key consideration alongside the potential impact on local residents of rising prices.

3.4 Budget Growth

3.4.1 No discretionary Budget Growth items have been assumed in these projections. Given the Council's current financial position, it is assumed that any potential growth items – which are in line with Council priorities – will be prioritised and funded from budget reallocations/savings. The potential re-prioritisation of financial resources is matter for Members to consider.

3.5 Revenue Consequences of the Capital Programme

3.5.1 The assumptions on Qualis loans are those reflected in the Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24 presented to Cabinet on 18th September 2023. More refined estimates will be included in the initial draft Budget presented to Cabinet in December 2023. It should be noted by Members at this stage that, given the greatly reduced margins achieved by the Council on loan advances to Qualis (in the light of increased interest rates), this MTFP is less dependent on future advances to Qualis, thus lowering risk.

3.5.2 However, there has been a substantial increase in current and (anticipated) future net (capital) Financing costs, with the Summary Table below in Section 3.8 showing an increase from £3.590 million to £6.593 million. A substantial increase (of £2.042 million) was reported to full Council in February 2023, but the pressure has since increased as the rise in interest rates especially has exceeded the forecasts contained in the 2023/24 Budget (variance reported to Cabinet on 18th September 2023). The requirement to make/set aside "Minimum Revenue Provision" (MRP) payments is also expected to require a budget increase of £1.193 million (up from £1.261 million in 2023/24 to £2.454 million in 2024/25), which is driven by the planned purchase of the Waste Vehicle Fleet in (£0.959 million) and IT Equipment expenditure (£0.278 million) in 2023/24.

- 3.5.3 Members should note the impact on the Council's expenditure profile of purchasing an in-house Waste Vehicle Fleet. Waste Vehicle costs are currently absorbed within the contract price paid to Biffa, so the moving to new Waste Management arrangements – entailing the purchase of an in-house Fleet – delivers a substantial saving. This is reflected in Contracted Services expenditure in the Summary Table in Section 3.8 below; initial estimates are suggesting savings of £536,960 in 2024/25, followed by further savings of £751,740 in 2025/26 (resulting overall annual savings in the base budget of £1.289 million). This is a major factor in the apparent rise in Financing costs.
- 3.5.4 The Council's overall commitment to the new Epping Leisure is £33.1 million, which is clearly a substantial sum. However, it is a multi-year project with capital expenditure spread over 2021/22, 2022/23, 2023/24, 2024/25 and 2025/26. Most commentators are suggesting that interest rates have now peaked and are expected to gradually recede in the medium-term (which is reflected in the MTFP projections). MRP payments are spread over the estimated (45 year) life of the asset, with an initial payment of £323,000 anticipated in 2026/27.
- 3.5.5 The factors described above in Paragraphs 3.5.2 to 3.5.4 combined, interact to provide a very stable forecast on Financing costs from 2024/25 onwards, with the Summary Table below in Section 3.8 showing a slight decline (of £104,000) in 2026/27 and settling at around £6.5 million thereafter through to 2028/29.
- 3.5.6 All capital assumptions will be reviewed in detail, and revised as necessary, in preparing the draft budget and updated MTFP.

3.6 Savings

- 3.6.1 There are currently no Savings assumed within the projections. The views of Members are sought on the prioritisation of potential cashable savings in the context of the Budget Deficit and Council priorities, whether from spending reductions or increased income.

3.7 Funding

3.7.1 The Council's core funding streams have been reviewed based on the latest available intelligence. The relevant budget movements are summarised in the table below.

Medium-Term Funding Assumptions (@ October 2023)					
Description	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s
Council Tax	(9,235,230)	(9,350,670)	(9,444,177)	(9,538,619)	(9,634,005)
Business Rates	(6,595,000)	(6,792,850)	(6,928,707)	(7,067,281)	(7,208,627)
Collection Fund Adjustments	(225,000)	0	0	0	0
Council Tax Sharing Agreement	(338,480)	(438,480)	(488,480)	(488,480)	(488,480)
Revenue Support Grant (RSG)	(132,654)	(132,654)	(132,654)	(132,654)	(132,654)
New Homes Bonus	(80,525)	0	0	0	0
Other/Funding Guarantee	(1,300,000)	(1,300,000)	(1,300,000)	(1,300,000)	(1,300,000)
Reserve Contributions	262,620	262,620	262,620	262,620	262,620
Net Increased/(Reduced) Budget Demand	(17,644,269)	(17,752,034)	(18,031,398)	(18,264,414)	(18,501,146)

3.7.2 The key budget assumptions captured in the table above are as follows:

- **Council Tax** – there is a provisional assumption that the Council will increase the Council Tax by 3.0% (in line with the 2023/24 Referendum Limit) in 2024/25; Council Tax freezes are assumed from 2025/26 onwards. If a 3.0% increase is applied, the Band D charge for 2024/25 would rise from £162.15 to £167.01. Members of course have the option to vary this assumption.
- **Business Rates** – as reported to Cabinet on 18th September 2023, revenue from the Business Rates Retention (BRR) scheme has been performing strongly in 2023/24 following the April 2023 Revaluation (whereby the Business Rates base in Epping Forest increased in value by 14.0%, which is double the national average of 6.9%). On that basis, it is currently assumed that the funding expectation in the budget from this source will rise by £0.829 million; from £5.766 million to £6.595 million in 2024/25, with normal inflationary rises assumed thereafter. This is a highly complex area though, and Finance officers will be working with technical advisors in the coming weeks to further refine this initial estimate.

- Collection Fund Adjustments – the Collection Fund adjustment is difficult to estimate at this stage, although the planned distribution of surpluses from the Collection Fund in 2023/24 (determined in January 2023) have been compared to the Collection Fund year-end outturn, to provide some initial indication of the potential size of the adjustment. This results in an assumed net *positive* adjustment of £0.225 million for 2024/25; as at 31st March 2023, Council Tax had a *deficit* in the Collection Fund, whilst Business Rates had a *surplus* (outweighing the Council Tax deficit). A neutral adjustment is assumed from 2025/26 onwards.
- Council Tax Sharing Agreement (CTSA) – the Council is again committed to the Essex CTSA for 2024/25. Current projections (as at Quarter 1 2023/24) are suggesting that it would be prudent to reduce the current (2023/24) assumption by £0.276 million from £0.615 million to £0.338 million for 2024/25, although some recovery is anticipated from 2025/26 onwards, eventually settling at £0.488 million from 2026/27 onwards.
- Government Grants – the Government published its response to the Select Committee’s report on funding for Levelling Up on 10th August 2023. Within that response, the Government expressed a commitment to introducing a one-off funding guarantee to ensure that every council sees a minimum increase in Core Spending Power of 3.0% before any local decisions on Council Tax rates. This appears to be stronger intelligence than we would normally receive at this stage in the budget development process. Therefore, the Government grants receivable in 2024/25 assumed within this MTFP have been extrapolated on that basis. This results in an assumed Revenue Support Grant (RSG) of £0.133 million, New Homes Bonus (NHB) of £0.081 and a Funding Guarantee Allocation (FGA) of £1.300 million. It should be noted that, although the individual components of the Settlement may vary, the overall Settlement should still conform to the Government guarantee (of “Core Spending Power + 3.0%”). Future Settlements (from 2025/26 onwards) are assumed frozen at this stage, with the exception of NHB, which is assumed to cease with effect from 2025/26; and
- Contribution to (from) Reserves – in the light of the General Fund Reserve falling below its adopted minimum contingency balance of £4.0 million, in February 2023, the Council committed to – with effect from 2023/24 – annually contributing £262,620 to towards replenishing the General Fund Reserve. The Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24, presented to Cabinet on 18th September 2023, projected a further significant overspend on the 2023/24 General Fund revenue budget, which – if this materialises – would further deplete the General Fund Reserve balance. The pressure to contribute to the General Fund Reserve is therefore rising. For now, however, this iteration of the MTFP, retains the Council’s current annual commitment of £262,620. This will need to be kept under review as the 2024/25 budget is further developed.

3.8 Summary Position

3.8.1 After taking account of the projections made in Sections 3.2 to 3.7 above, the projected medium-term revenue position for the General Fund (2024/25 to 2028/29), is summarised in the table below.

Description	Opening Budget (2023/24)	Estimated Budget Requirement 2024/25	Estimated Budget Requirement 2025/26	Estimated Budget Requirement 2026/27	Estimated Budget Requirement 2027/28	Estimated Budget Requirement 2028/29
	BASELINE	BUDGET STRATEGY				
	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s	£'s
Employees	22,549,720	23,357,052	23,811,193	24,267,417	24,732,765	25,207,420
Premises	3,649,250	3,740,708	4,015,523	4,095,833	4,177,750	4,261,305
Transport	170,560	248,980	253,959	259,038	264,219	269,504
Supplies & Services	9,064,450	9,659,348	9,687,295	9,881,040	10,078,661	10,280,235
Support Services	2,730	704	718	732	747	762
Contracted Services	9,482,740	10,011,829	10,370,263	10,473,966	10,578,706	10,684,493
Transfer Payments (exclusively HB)	22,210,200	22,460,200	22,460,200	21,349,690	20,294,706	19,292,470
Financing Costs	3,589,630	6,592,855	6,489,058	6,493,486	6,498,420	6,512,507
Service Contingency (Waste)	400,000	162,000	-	-	-	-
Gross Expenditure	71,119,279	76,233,677	77,088,209	76,821,203	76,625,973	76,508,695
Fees & Charges	- 17,643,470	- 18,076,287	- 18,378,549	- 18,619,784	- 18,864,327	- 19,112,228
Government Contributions (90%+ HB Subsidy)	- 24,022,220	- 24,009,951	- 23,998,296	- 22,876,713	- 21,811,210	- 20,798,981
Miscellaneous Income (including Qualis)	- 3,499,680	- 3,890,810	- 4,036,455	- 3,787,315	- 3,526,120	- 3,276,120
Other Contributions	- 4,041,320	- 4,041,320	- 4,041,320	- 4,041,320	- 4,041,320	- 4,041,320
HRA Recharges	- 4,984,450	- 4,850,620	- 4,947,630	- 5,046,580	- 5,147,510	- 5,250,460
Net Expenditure	16,928,139	21,364,689	21,685,959	22,449,491	23,235,486	24,029,586
Funding:						
Council Tax	- 8,899,380	- 9,235,230	- 9,350,670	- 9,444,177	- 9,538,619	- 9,634,005
Business Rates	- 5,766,000	- 6,595,000	- 6,792,850	- 6,928,707	- 7,067,281	- 7,208,627
Collection Fund Adjustments	- 645,030	- 225,000	-	-	-	-
Council Tax Sharing Agreement (CTSA)	- 614,960	- 338,480	- 438,480	- 488,480	- 488,480	- 488,480
Non-Specific Grants:						
Revenue Support Grant (RSG)	- 128,790	- 132,654	- 132,654	- 132,654	- 132,654	- 132,654
New Homes Bonus	- 78,180	- 80,525	- 0	- 0	- 0	- 0
2023-24 Services Grant	- 129,370	-	-	-	-	-
Lower Tier Services Grant	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other/FGA	- 929,050	- 1,300,000	- 1,300,000	- 1,300,000	- 1,300,000	- 1,300,000
Credit Loss Adjustment	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contribution to/(from) Reserves	262,620	262,620	262,620	262,620	262,620	262,620
Total Funding	- 16,928,140	- 17,644,269	- 17,752,034	- 18,031,398	- 18,264,414	- 18,501,146
In-Year (Surplus)/Deficit	-	3,720,421	375,505	484,168	552,979	557,368
Cumulative (Surplus)/Deficit	-	3,720,421	4,095,925	4,418,093	4,971,072	5,528,442

- 3.8.2 The table above shows a deficit of £3.720 million for 2024/25. This reflects major spending pressures due to – a large extent – increasing Financing costs as explained in Section 3.5 above. The anticipated rise in Waste Management costs, upon the expiry of the current Biffa contract in November 2024, is undoubtedly a major factor. Estimated net expenditure in 2024/25 is £21.364 million, compared to available funding of £17.644 million. The Council is required to eliminate this deficit and set a balanced budget for 2024/25 in February 2024.
- 3.8.3 Further budget gaps are expected beyond 2024/25, with deficits projected in 2025/26 (£0.376 million), 2026/27 (£0.484 million), 2027/28 (£0.553 million) and 2028/29 (£0.557 million). However, it appears – at this stage – that 2024/25 presents the biggest challenge with both inflation (especially) and interest rates expected to decline as the MTFP progresses. The projected cumulative budget deficit by 31st March 2029 is £5.528 million.
- 3.8.4 It should be re-emphasised that these figures represent the first iteration of the MTFP in the 2024/25 budget cycle. Finance officers will now work on further refining these estimates in preparing the initial draft Budget proposals. The numbers presented can be expected to both increase and decrease in the coming months, and other factors could also potentially emerge that are not currently reflected in the figures and will have to be factored in.