

Medium Term Financial Strategy

Introduction

1. For a number of years as part of the Council's sound financial planning arrangements a four-year financial strategy has been prepared. This document allows a considered view to be taken of spending and resources. Without a medium term financial strategy finances would be managed on an annual basis leading to sudden expansions and contractions in services. Clearly such volatility would lead to waste and be confusing for stakeholders.
2. Managing this Council's finances has been made easier by isolating one off fluctuations (District Development Fund or DDF) from the ongoing core services (Continuing Service Budgets or CSB). This distinction highlights the differing effects in the medium term of approving different types of initiative.
3. A key part of the strategy is future rises in Council Tax and the Council has a stated ambition to remain a low tax authority in the long term. To achieve this over the long term it is important to avoid the gimmick of one-off reductions. For 2017/18 it appears that most authorities across Essex will be increasing charges to just below the referendum limit.
4. At its 14 July 2016 meeting the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee decided to recommend a 0% increase in the Council Tax. This recommendation was adopted by Cabinet on 1 September 2016.

Previous Medium Term Financial Strategy

5. The July meeting of the Cabinet Committee considered the annual Financial Issues Paper and an updated medium term financial strategy. At that time Members attention was drawn to a number of areas of significant uncertainty. Key amongst those were the structural reforms to the financing of local authorities through the local retention of NNDR and proposed changes to New Homes Bonus. The general state of domestic and European economies following the Brexit vote was a concern although most of the key income streams were now showing improvement. There were also questions over welfare reform, development opportunities and the Transformation Programme.
6. Against this background of risk and uncertainty a forecast was constructed that set a target of £13.11m for CSB expenditure for 2017/18 and maintained the requirement for annual CSB savings over the forecast period. At this time deficit budgets were anticipated for each year of the forecast, although these were reducing at the end of the forecast.
7. At that time the predicted General Fund balance at 1 April 2020 of £6.86m represented 55% of the anticipated Net Budget Requirement (NBR) for 2019/20 and was therefore somewhat higher than the guideline of 25%. It was also predicted at that time that there would be £1.3m left in the DDF at 1 April 2020.

Updated Medium Term Financial Strategy

8. In the period since the Financial Issues Paper the Government has provided the draft settlement figures for the period up to and including 2019/20. The reductions in grant are in line with what had been anticipated, with Revenue Support Grant going negative by the end of the period. However, the reductions in New Homes Bonus were surprisingly large and involved the imposition of a baseline that was significantly higher than the one that had been included as a possibility in the consultation. In constructing the forecast it has been necessary to make certain assumptions, these are set out below:
 - a) CSB Growth – the net savings required for 2017/18 have been found and the CSB figure is very close to the target established in July. Budgets will be re-visited during the course of 2017/18 to seek further reductions, particularly areas like waste management that have seen growth. In common with the earlier version of the strategy, target CSB savings are included for the period 2018/19 to 2020/21. Additional development control income, the new leisure management contract and the shopping park have helped achieve the savings required for 2017/18. However, on top of known predicted savings, net savings targets of £300,000 for 2018/19, £250,000 for 2019/20 and £150,000 for 2020/21 are needed.
 - b) DDF – all of the known items for the four-year period have been included and at the end of the period a balance of £0.38m is still available. This is only possible after the transfer in of £0.5m from the General Fund Reserve in 2018/19 due to the high level of expenditure on the Local Plan.
 - c) Grant Funding – the amounts included are those from the draft settlement, including the negative amount in 2019/20.
 - d) Other Funding – the amounts included for New Homes Bonus have been drastically reduced in line with the draft settlement. Only limited growth in funding has been anticipated from growth in the non-domestic rating list. It has been assumed that the allowance for losses on appeals will be adequate but there are hundreds of appeals still outstanding, including one against the largest item on our rating list. It has been assumed that the revised opening date for the retail park will be achieved.
 - e) Council Tax Increase – Members have indicated that they wish to freeze the charge for the length of the strategy.
9. This revised medium term financial strategy has deficits throughout the period, although these are reducing and the use of reserves in 2020/21 is only £113,000. The predicted revenue balance at the end of the period is £5.5m, which represents 43% of the NBR for 2020/21 and thus comfortably exceeds the target of 25%.
10. It is worth repeating that savings of £0.7m are still to be identified for the last three years of the strategy and that identified savings of £2.33m in 2018/19 and 2019/20 will have to be delivered. In approving the medium term financial strategy Members are asked to note these targets. The strategy will be monitored during the year and updated for the July 2017 meeting of the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee.